# 5.2 PROBLEMS OF DEFINING AND MEASURING CLASS

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

> Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of social class and the difficulties of defining and measuring it (AO1).

> Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the distinction between subjective and objective ways of measuring class and of different class schemas (AO1).

> Apply knowledge and understanding of problems of measuring class (AO2).

> Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different class schemas (AO3).



## INTRODUCING THE DEBATE

Social classes were defined in the previous chapter as "groups of people who share a similar economic position in terms of occupation, income and ownership of wealth". As we saw, sociologists disagree about whether social classes still exist in societies such as present-day Britain. This is partly because different sociologists focus on different facts and/or interpret the same facts differently, but it's also because they define class differently. This chapter will therefore seek to clarify the different meanings that the term can have and the associated problems of measuring class.

## WHAT ARE (SOCIAL) CLASSES?

'Class' derives from the Latin *classis* referring to any of the six orders or ranks into which the Roman people were divided on the basis of their wealth for tax purposes. The origin of the term points to the two key features that characterise it and on which all sociologists agree:

> Class is concerned with economic differences between groups of people.

> These groups are arranged in some kind of hierarchy.

Beyond this, however, things get more complicated. This is because classes are multi-faceted. Four aspects of class are typically distinguished:

> a shared economic situation

> shared attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviour ('class subcultures')

> awareness of membership ('class consciousness')

> action to promote their shared interests ('class action').

---

**Do you think that all four aspects need to be present before one can validly talk about a collection of people as a 'social class'?**

---

It follows that people could, objectively, be in the same or a similar economic situation, yet, subjectively, be unaware of this. This was what Marx was referring to in his distinction between a 'class-in-itself' and a 'class-for-itself'. (In sociological terms, this is the distinction between a 'social category' and a 'social group'.) It also follows that people could think and behave in similar ways because of their shared class position yet not recognise this influence. Similarly, people could belong to a class and, on the one hand, feel that this was an important aspect of their identity, or, on the other hand, see it as insignificant. Hence, class consciousness is not inevitably associated with

## FOCUS ON SKILLS: SUBJECTIVE CLASS IDENTITIES



*Semi-structured interviews were used by Savage et al. to study class identity.*

Mike Savage and his colleagues carried out semi-structured interviews between 1997 and 1999 with 178 people living in four areas in and around Manchester. They identified three groups of people in terms of subjective class identity:

> First, there was a small minority of their sample who strongly identified themselves as belonging to a specific class. These were often graduates who had the cultural confidence to express their class position in an articulate fashion.

> The second group was also well educated, but did not like to identify with a particular class position. Rather, this group tended either to reject the notion of social class, because they saw themselves as individuals rather than a product of their social-class background, or they preferred to debate the nature of social class rather than acknowledge their belonging to any particular group. Some felt happier differentiating themselves from other social classes rather than focusing on their own membership of a particular social class.

> The third group, which made up the majority of the respondents, actually identified with a social class, but did so in an ambivalent, defensive and uncommitted way. Some of this group prefaced their 'belonging' with remarks such as "I suppose I'm …" or "Probably, I'm …" Savage and colleagues suggest that identification with the concepts of 'working class' and 'middle class' for this part of their sample was based on a simple desire to be seen as normal and ordinary, rather than any burning desire to be flag-wavers for their class.

They conclude as follows: "We have argued that class identities are generally weak. However, this should not be taken as evidence that class does not matter. For, in sustaining and articulating the kinds of individualised identities that do matter to people, reference is made to external benchmarks of class as a means of 'telling their story' … We see then, in people's accounts of class, a highly charged, but complex ambivalence in which classes and individuals are held to be different yet also inherently related." (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst, 2001).

### Questions

1. **Explain** what is meant by 'subjective class identity'.

2. **Identify** how the majority of interviewees responded to the question of what class they saw themselves as belonging to.

3. **Analyse**. The authors report that the interviewees saw the concept of class as 'highly charged'. What do you think they mean by this?

4. **Evaluate** what the findings of this research suggest about whether class still matters.

class action. Consequently, when sociologists argue about whether class still matters, part of the difficulty in arriving at an answer lies in the fact that the term 'class' carries a number of distinct yet interrelated associations.

The other main problem with the meaning of class has to do with how the classes that are identified are seen as relating to each other. For some sociologists they are seen simply as occupying different *levels* in terms of income and wealth (the 'gradational' approach), but for others they are seen as involved in an antagonistic relationship or relationships, meaning that they have opposing interests. This distinction is sociologically important. If classes are simply categories of people enjoying or suffering different standards of living, then that is one thing; but if the higher standards of living of some classes are the result of an exploitative relationship with lower classes, then that is something else.

## COMPETING VIEWS OF THE CLASS STRUCTURE

Given the complexity of the concept of class, it is perhaps unsurprising that sociologists have produced a range of competing views about the class structure of the advanced industrial societies. Four influential assessments are briefly described below.

### Giddens

Anthony Giddens (1973) endorsed the widespread conventional view that society can be divided into an upper class, middle class and lower (or working) class. Drawing on Weber, he argued that class position is determined by 'market capacity' (in simple terms, the way people make a living) and distinguished three different types of market capacity, detailed below:

| Class | Market capacity |
|---|---|
| Upper class | Capital ownership |
| Middle class | Educational credentials |
| Working class | Labour power |

**Table 5.2.1** *Giddens's view of the British class structure*

Giddens acknowledged that one can identify subdivisions within each of these classes, for example, between graduates and non-graduates among the middle class, but nevertheless saw these three divisions as fundamental.

### Wright

As we saw in Chapter 1, Erik-Olin Wright's main concern was to 'rescue' the Marxist framework in light of the growth of 'middle' classes between the **bourgeoisie** and the proletariat. To do this he added to the concept of ownership of economic resources the additional concepts of organisational assets and skills/credential assets. The resulting matrix generated ten 'contradictory class locations' between the bourgeoisie (owners of large enterprises) at the top and the proletariat (unskilled manual workers) at the bottom. (See Table 5.1.2 in Chapter 1 for a full description of Wright's (1985) 12-class schema.)

### UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT

**Bourgeoisie** is a French word that translates as 'middle class', yet the section above on Wright talks about his concern to explain the growth of 'middle classes' between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat! The explanation of this conundrum is that the bourgeoisie were indeed 'in the middle' between the aristocracy and the peasants when feudalism was giving way to capitalism, but as capitalism developed they became the new ruling class – merging with the aristocracy in Britain, sending the aristocracy to the guillotine in France! So, although bourgeoisie does translate as 'middle class', it is used by Marxists to refer to the dominant class in capitalist societies.

### Runciman

Another influential attempt to map the contours of the class structure, in this case relating specifically to British society, is provided by Gary Runciman (1990). For Runciman, classes are "sets of roles whose common location in social space is a function of the nature and degree of 'economic power' [quotes added] attaching to them". He identifies three sources of economic power: that deriving from ownership of the means of production, that deriving from control of labour or capital and that deriving from 'marketability' – the possession of an attribute or capacity that is of value in the labour market.

On this basis, Runciman claims to identify seven classes occupying qualitatively different locations in terms of economic power. These are shown in Table 5.2.2, with his estimate of the approximate size of each at the time he was writing.

| Class | Estimated size in 1990 |
|---|---|
| Upper class | 0.1–0.2% |
| Upper middle class | <10% |
| Middle middle class | 15% |
| Lower middle class | 20% |
| Skilled working class | 20% |
| Unskilled working class | 30% |
| Underclass | 5% |

**Table 5.2.2** *Runciman's view of the British class structure*

Those at the top – the upper class – are distinguished by their considerable wealth, their positions as senior executives, or their possession of scarce and highly valued knowledge and skills. Those at the bottom – the underclass – are seen as lacking in any economic power and as "more or less permanently at the economic level where benefits are paid by the state".

### Bourdieu

Giddens, Wright and Runciman were all concerned with mapping the contours of the class structure of modern societies. Pierre Bourdieu (1984), a French conflict theorist who drew heavily on the work of both Marx and Weber, had a different concern. He wished to explain how the class structure was reproduced across space and time and how the privileges of those at the top came to be seen as just and fair – in Marxist terms, how they were 'legitimated'.

Bourdieu's crucial innovation was to suggest that capital was not just a matter of money, but also of the possession of valued cultural attributes and social connections. He identified three different types of capital that people could possess:

> *economic capital*: income, wealth, inheritance and other money assets

> *cultural capital*: attitudes of mind, tastes, educational qualifications and so on

> *social capital*: the range and depth of people's contacts based on their social networks.

Once any of these are perceived and recognised as legitimate they provide their possessors with what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic capital', that is they come to represent high status in the eyes of others (wearing an Armani suit, say, or visiting the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden). Hence, for Bourdieu, it is not just wealth that those at the top of the class structure possess, but specific kinds of tastes and cultural preferences

as well as useful contacts which enable them to resist downward mobility.

---

**Post-modernists argue that the former distinction between high ('highbrow') culture and low (popular) culture no longer exists. Do you agree?**

---

Dale Southerton (2009) draws on a Bourdieuian perspective to analyse how different groups use consumption practices to mark themselves off from each other in a new town – Yate, near Bristol. Against the post-modern view that consumption increasingly reflects individualisation and personal choice, he argues that class continues to structure consumption practices and displays. For example, for working-class groups the kitchen is seen in functional terms (as a place to prepare and consume food), but for middle-class groups it was a place to display one's identity and 'taste' through its design, layout, decoration and choice of kitchen equipment.

## PROBLEMS OF MEASURING CLASS

It might appear that, if sociologists wished to establish the class structure of a society, there is a straightforward way to do this: simply ask a representative sample of people what class they belong to and map the results! However, there are a number of reasons why, in practice, things are more complicated.

First, in asking people about their class position there is the danger of unwittingly prompting a positive response when the respondent does not in fact identify with a class, but feels that it might reflect badly on them or that they would be seen as uncooperative if they were to admit this. In other words, how do you ask people about their 'class identity' without using the word 'class' and thereby leading their response?

Second, even if people genuinely identify with a class, the class they feel they belong to may not coincide with the class that they objectively belong to. If the sociologist's goal is to establish how people's objective class location relates to, say, their life-chances, classifying people on the basis of their self-ascribed class would not be helpful. (Subjective measurements of social class are considered in more detail below.)

Third, if an objective approach is followed, there is the problem of how to operationalise class. That is, how to turn what is an abstract concept into something that can actually be measured. This requires the identification of variables

that can act as indicators of class, such as wealth or income. Yet people are notoriously cagey about telling strangers what they earn, let alone how much money they have in the bank! Consequently, sociologists have tended to use occupation as their principal indicator of class, as this can be readily and – usually unproblematically – established.

## Scales of social class

### The Registrar General's scale

This occupational scale was used by government from 1911 until 2000 and involved the ranking of thousands of jobs into six classes, based on the occupational skill of the head of household:

> Class I: Professional – for example, accountants, doctors

> Class II: Lower managerial, professional and technical – for example, teachers

> Class IIINM: Skilled non-manual – for example, office workers

> Class IIIM: Skilled manual – for example, electricians, plumbers

> Class IV: Semi-skilled manual – for example, agricultural workers

> Class V: Unskilled manual – for example, labourers, refuse collectors.

This scheme differentiated between middle-class occupations (non-manual jobs were allocated to classes I to IIINM) and working-class occupations (manual jobs were allocated to classes IIIM to V). The Registrar General's scheme has underpinned many important social surveys and sociological studies, particularly those focusing on class differences in educational achievement and life expectancy.

### Criticisms of the Registrar General's scale

The Registrar General's scale was the main way in which class was measured in official statistics. Most sociological research conducted between 1960 and 2000 uses this classification system when differentiating between different classes. However, it does have disadvantages:

> Assessments of jobs were made by the Registrar General's own staff – hence, there was a bias towards seeing non-manual occupations as having a higher status than manual occupations.

> Reliance on occupation meant that those whose economic position was based on wealth and unearned income disappeared from view.

> Feminists criticised the scale as sexist – the class of everyone in a household was defined by the job of the male head of household. Women were assigned to the class of their husbands (or their fathers, if unmarried).

> It glossed over the fact that workers allocated to the same class often had widely varying access to resources such as pay and promotion.

> It failed to distinguish between the employed and self-employed – this distinction is important because evidence shows that these groups do not share similar experiences. For example, the shadow economy is much more accessible to the self-employed: they can avoid paying tax and VAT by working at a cheaper rate 'for cash', which cannot be traced through their accounts, or by not fully declaring all the work they do.

### The Hope-Goldthorpe scale

Sociologists were often reluctant to use government-inspired scales as they lacked sufficient sociological emphasis. In order to study social mobility (see Chapter 9), in the early 1970s John Goldthorpe – working with Keith Hope – created a more sociologically relevant scale that has proved very popular with social researchers. Goldthorpe recognised the growth of middle-class occupations – and especially the self-employed – and based his classification on the concept of market position: income and economic life-chances, such as promotion prospects, sick pay and control of hours worked. He also took account of work or employment relations: whether people are employed or self-employed, and whether they are able to exercise authority over others. The Hope-Goldthorpe scale also acknowledged that both manual and non-manual groups may share similar experiences of work and, for this reason, Goldthorpe grouped some of these together in an intermediate class. Instead of the basic non-manual/ manual divide used by the Registrar General's scale, Goldthorpe introduced the idea of three main social divisions into which groups sharing similar market position and work relations could be placed: he referred to these as the **service class**, the intermediate class and the working class (see Table 5.2.3).

## UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT

The term **service class** refers to those employees whose employment relationship is based on a code of service and so involves trust as a key element. It is also associated with relatively high levels of autonomy (people are trusted to get on with the job without close supervision). The term can be misleading since it is easily confused with work in the 'service sector' or service industries (such as hairdressing or care work). Consequently, the term 'salariat' is sometimes used instead.

| Class | Occupation |
|---|---|
| **Service class** | |
| 1 | Higher professionals |
| | High-grade administrators; managers of large companies and large proprietors |
| 2 | Lower professionals |
| | Higher-grade technicians; supervisors of non-manual workers; administrators; small-business managers |
| **Intermediate class** | |
| 3 | Routine non-manual (clerical and sales) |
| 4 | Small proprietors and self-employed artisans (craftspersons) |
| 5 | Lower-grade technicians and supervisors of manual workers |
| **Working class** | |
| 6 | Skilled manual workers |
| 7 | Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers |

**Table 5.2.3** *The Hope–Goldthorpe Scale*

Source: Goldthorpe (1980)

Goldthorpe's scale was first used in studies conducted in 1972, published in 1980. The scale more accurately reflected the nature of the British class system, but it was still based on the male head of household. He defended this position by claiming that, in most cases, the male worker still determined the market situation and lifestyle of a couple, because the male was still the main breadwinner. However, many feminists remained unconvinced by this argument. They argued that scales based on the idea of a male 'head of household':

> overlook the significance of dual-career families, where the joint income of both partners can give the family an income and lifestyle of a higher class

> ignore situations where women are in a higher-grade occupation than their husbands

> overlook the significance of the increasing number of single working women and single working mothers, who were classified by Goldthorpe according to the occupation of their ex-partners or fathers.

### A feminist alternative: the Surrey Occupational Class Schema

This scale was developed by the feminist sociologists Dale, Gilbert and Arber (1985) in an attempt to overcome what they saw as the patriarchal bias inherent in the Hope–Goldthorpe scale. In this scheme, women are classified on the basis of their own occupations, whether they are married or not. The gendered nature of work in contemporary society, especially the growing service sector of the economy, is also taken into account. This is most evident in class 6 which is divided into 6a (sales and personal services – female dominated) and 6b (skilled manual – overwhelmingly male) (see Table 5.2.4).

| Class | Occupation |
|---|---|
| 1 | Higher professional |
| 2 | Employers and managers |
| 3 | Lower professional |
| 4 | Secretarial and clerical |
| 5 | Supervisors, self-employed manual |
| 6a | Sales and personal services |
| 6b | Skilled manual |
| 7 | Semi-skilled |
| 8 | Unskilled |

**Table 5.2.4** *The Surrey Occupational Class Schema*

Source: Dale, Gilbert, & Arber (1985)

However, the inclusion of women in such occupational classifications does present some difficulties because women's relationship to employment is generally more varied than that of men. More women work part time or occupy jobs for short periods because of pregnancy and childcare. It is therefore difficult to know whether the class assigned provides a meaningful insight into their life experience as a whole or whether it merely reflects a short-term or temporary experience that has little impact on lifestyle and life-chances.

### A new scale for the 21st century: the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)

The NS-SEC scale, which essentially is a variation on the Hope–Goldthorpe scale, fully replaced the Registrar General's scale for government research and statistics, and was used for the first time to classify data from the 2001 census (see Table 5.2.5).

Like the Hope–Goldthorpe scale, the NS-SEC is based on:

> employment relations – whether people are employers, self-employed or employed, and whether they exercise authority over others

> market conditions – salary scales, promotion prospects, sick pay, how much control people have over the hours they work, and so on.

| Occupational classification | % of working population | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| 1 Higher managerial and professional | 11.0 | Company directors, senior civil servants, doctors, barristers, clergy, architects |
| 2 Lower managerial and professional | 23.5 | Nurses, journalists, teachers, police officers, musicians |
| 3 Intermediate | 14.0 | Secretaries, clerks, computer operators, driving instructors |
| 4 Small employers and self-accountable workers | 9.9 | Taxi drivers, window cleaners, publicans, decorators |
| 5 Lower supervisory, craft and related | 9.8 | Train drivers, plumbers, printers, TV engineers |
| 6 Semi-routine | 18.6 | Traffic wardens, shop assistants, hairdressers, call-centre workers |
| 7 Routine | 12.7 | Cleaners, couriers, road sweepers, labourers |
| 8 Long-term unemployed or the never-worked | | |

**Table 5.2.5** *The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)*
Source: Rose and Pevalin (with K. O'Reilly) (2001)

## Strengths of the NS-SEC

› It no longer divides workers exclusively along manual and non-manual lines. Some categories contain both manual and non-manual workers.

› The most significant difference between the Hope–Goldthorpe scale and the NS-SEC is the creation of Class 8, the long-term unemployed and never-employed unemployed. Some sociologists, most notably from New Right positions, have described this group of unemployed as an 'underclass'.

› Feminist arguments have been acknowledged and women are now recognised as a distinct group of wage earners. They are no longer categorised according to the occupation of their husbands or fathers.

## Weaknesses of the NS-SEC

› The scale is still based primarily on the objective criterion of occupation. This may differ from what people understand by the term 'social class' and their subjective interpretation of their own class position.

› Those who do not have to work because of access to great wealth are still not included.

› Some argue that the scale still obscures important differences in status and earning power, for example, headteachers are in the same category as classroom teachers.

## The Great British Class Survey (GBCS)

The most recent attempt to map Britain's class structure (Savage *et al.*, 2013), draws on Bourdieu's view that class is not just a matter of economic inequalities, but also of two other forms of 'capital': social and cultural.

Working with the BBC, Savage and his colleagues devised an on-line questionnaire that people were invited to fill in. It asked questions designed to establish the amounts and types of economic, cultural and social capital participants possessed. Economic capital was assessed by questions about household income, household savings, whether people lived in rented property or were owner-occupiers and, if the latter, the value of their house. Cultural capital was measured by questions about people's leisure interests, musical tastes, use of the media and food preferences. Finally, social capital was measured by asking people whether they knew anyone in 37 different occupations, ranging in status from cleaner to chief executive.

The web survey was launched in January 2011 and, by July that year, 161,400 completed responses had been submitted. However, analysis of these responses revealed a strong selection bias, with the sample significantly skewed towards more affluent and well-educated social groups. In order to compensate for this problem, a further nationally representative face-to-face survey of 1,026 adults was carried out by a market research company called GfK, using the same questions. Results were analysed by applying a statistical technique that searched for patterns in the data in order to determine classes. The resulting class map is detailed in Table 5.2.6.

| Class | %GfK | %GBCS | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| Elite | 6% | 22% | Very high economic capital (especially savings), high social capital, very high highbrow cultural capital. |
| Established middle class | 25% | 43% | High economic capital, high status of mean (average) contacts, high highbrow and emerging cultural capital. |
| Technical middle class | 6% | 10% | High economic capital, very high mean status of social contacts, but relatively few contacts reported, moderate cultural capital. |
| New affluent workers | 15% | 6% | Moderately good economic capital, moderately poor mean score of social contacts though high range, moderate highbrow but good emerging cultural capital. |
| Traditional working class | 14% | 2% | Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable house price, few social contacts, low highbrow and emerging cultural capital. |
| Emergent service workers | 19% | 17% | Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable household income, moderate social contacts, high emerging (but low highbrow) cultural capital. |
| Precariat | 15% | <1% | Poor economic capital and the lowest scores on every other criterion. |

**Table 5.2.6** *Summary of GBCS social classes*

Source: Savage et al. (2013)



*Does the type of concert you attend reflect your social class?*

### Evaluation of the GBCS

One strength of the GBCS is that, because it does not use occupation as an indicator of economic status, it takes account of both income and wealth. This allows it to identify a distinct 'elite' class at the top of the class structure, which would simply be subsumed into the highest paid category when using occupation-based scales. It also avoids accusations of being sexist.

Another strength is that, by measuring cultural and social factors, it acknowledges that class is not just a matter of economic position. However, it is doubtful whether the people who are allocated to these 'classes' are likely to identify with them, let alone engage in collective action to promote their 'class' interests.

Rose and Harrison (2013) are critical of the inductive methodology used to identify the seven classes, arguing that if the authors had chosen different key criteria "then very likely different classes would have emerged". They are also critical of the fact that Savage et al. assign an average age to each class grouping, arguing that age should be irrelevant to class.

Finally, sociologists who see classes as existing in antagonistic relationships with one another – because the advantages enjoyed by higher classes are dependent on the exploitation suffered by lower classes – are critical of the gradational basis of the GBCS model. Standing (2013), for example, argues that Savage et al. confuse socio-economic groups with social classes, adding that "classes exist in tension with one another".

## SUBJECTIVE MEASUREMENTS OF SOCIAL CLASS

Social surveys suggest there is often a discrepancy between how objective measurements of social class classify jobs and how people who actually occupy those jobs interpret their social status or class position. For example, many teachers like to describe themselves as working class despite the fact that both the Registrar General's classification of occupations and the NS-SEC objectively class them as middle class. This is because many teachers have experienced upward mobility through

educational qualifications from working-class origins and feel that their perspective on the world is still shaped by working-class values and experience. This subjective awareness of class position often conflicts with official objective interpretations.

More importantly, it is the subjective interpretation of class position that is responsible when it comes to social interaction, for the sharp boundary lines that exist between the social classes in the UK. In other words, there is some evidence that those people who interpret

themselves as, say, 'working class' or 'middle class' have very clear ideas about what characteristics people who 'belong' to their class should have. Moreover, they tend to have very strong views about the characteristics of other social classes. These subjective interpretations may have little or nothing in common with official and objective attempts to construct broad socio-economic classifications based on employment.

The 'Focus on Skills' exercise provides an example of research exploring subjective social class identities.

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Explain what is meant by saying that 'class' is multi-faceted.

2. Distinguish between a gradational and a relational view of classes.

3. What are the four kinds of capital distinguished by Bourdieu?

4. Identify three difficulties in measuring class.

5. Why has occupation been the most widely used indicator for measuring social class?

6. Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the Registrar General's scale.

7. How does the NS-SEC scale address the weaknesses of the RG scale?

8. How might the NS-SEC scale still be said to be lacking?

9. Identify one difference between the NS-SEC and GBCS scales.

10. Identify one strength and one weakness of the GBCS.

## TAKE IT FURTHER

We have seen above that, in order to measure a concept, sociologists usually have to identify something that will act as a valid and reliable indicator of it. For example, many sociologists have used occupation as an indicator of class position.

Assess the validity, reliability and practicality of each of the following possible alternative indicators of people's economic position. You'll need to think about such considerations as: is the information visible or will you have to ask people about it? If the latter, are they likely to be happy to provide the information? Are they likely to be honest?

> Type of housing lived in

> How someone dresses

> Visible tattoos

> The neighbourhood they live in

> Which supermarket they shop in

> Whether they own a car and, if so, the make and model