

Social Class

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Learning objective: Understanding the concept of social class, how it is modelled and some of the problems attached

Social class

Until the 1980s the concept of social class, linking economic role, social identity and political affiliation, was almost unanimously seen as central to sociological study, particularly in the UK. The class model of society is two-fold, working on both the level of social structure and of the individual.

On a structural level, the organisation of society into economic classes leads to it being experienced from separate compartments, with differing interests. When their interests clash, classes may come into conflict.

On an individual level, the experience of a particular position in the class structure leads the individual to understand themselves as, in part, defined by that position and to ally themselves with those who share their position and have similar interests.

This model often uses the widely understood categories of Working, Middle and Upper Class.

Class definitions

Just why these inequalities have been so persistent has been a matter of continuing debate. A number of explanations have been offered:

In Britain, for statistical purposes, class has been defined using the Registrar General's scale of Social Class and Socio-economic groups. This consisted of six major classes, ranging from 'Professionals' in class one to 'Unskilled' and 'Other' in classes 5 and 6. Class 3 was sub-divided into manual and non-manual skills.

I)	Professional
II)	Managerial/Technical
IIIa)	Skilled (non-manual)
IIIb)	Skilled (manual)
IV)	Partly Skilled
V)	Unskilled
VI)	Other

It has been argued that the level of skill at work may not be the best way of measuring access to social resources. The Registrar General's scale contained absurdities like equating small tenant farmers and major land owners.

Some of these arguments have been addressed by the introduction of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC). This is based on the concepts of employment relations and conditions rather than skill.

Class 1. Higher managerial and professional occupations.

- 1.1 Large employers and high managerial occupations
- 1.2 Higher professional occupations

Class 2. Lower managerial and professional occupations.

Class 3. Intermediate occupations.

Class 4. Small employers and own account workers.

Class 5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations.

Class 6. Semi-routine occupations.

Class 7. Routine occupations.

Class 8. Never worked and long term unemployed.

(Source: Office for National Statistics)

What class would you say you are in?

(According to the Office of National Statistics, full time students are in class 8)

Other measures

Goldblatt has offered alternative measures including: home ownership, educational status and access to a car and has shown that all of these can be correlated to inequalities in mortality rates.

During the last twenty-five years a number of writers, including Offe and Beck have questioned whether class still has relevance in a modern, pluralist welfare state. They have argued that class is not so important in defining who we are, how we behave or where our loyalties lie.

Yet there is considerable evidence that people in Britain still often identify themselves as members of a class and that significant correlations between class inequalities in health and life-chances continue to exist.

Other definitions

Social class is an 'umbrella' category. Being of a different class may involve differences in culture, economic circumstances, educational status, dietary preferences, housing conditions, property ownership and power. There will always be 'fuzzy edges' with people who could be counted in more than one category and people who move between classes over time. While it is a useful statistical and heuristic tool it should be applied with caution and not seen as a simple explanatory factor in itself.

In what ways might people define themselves apart from social class?*

Assessment:

1. Which three elements are linked in the sociological concept of social class?
2. How many classes are defined in the NS-SEC?
3. What alternatives to occupation did Goldblatt suggest as measures of social position?
4. List some of the differences that may lie beneath the 'umbrella' of social class.
5. In which class does the Office of National Statistics place full time students?

* You might have included: Ethnicity or Race; Sex, Gender or Sexuality; Religion; Political Affiliation or Pressure Group; Membership of Clubs or Organisations; Ability, Skill or Educational Status etc.

1. Economic role, social identity and political affiliation
2. 8
3. Home ownership, educational status and access to a car
4. Culture, economic circumstances, educational status, dietary preferences, housing conditions, property ownership and power.
5. 8.