

What problems are associated with trying to measure social class?

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The main problem with trying to measure social class is that the term social class is most controversial. Therefore the way in which it is measured will vary according to how it is defined. Many theorists argue that the question of how to measure social class cannot be separated from the question of class-consciousness. Thompson believed that social class would only exist if there were class-consciousness. By this he meant "class is only class if you believe that you belong to a certain class".

What this meant was that individuals in the same class situation share a sense of their common interest, and thus think or behave in a similar manner. Whereas Marx believed that class was identified according to an individual's relationship to the dominant mode of production. He believed that the "two great classes" of a capitalist society were the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie were those who were the owners and controllers of the means of production and the proletariat were those who only had their own labour power, which they were forced to sell in order to survive.

This then leads to class inequalities, as the bourgeoisie will aim to maximise production with minimum costs. This would mean that the bourgeoisie make the proletariat work exceptionally hard and pay very little. Marx would argue that these economic inequalities lead to class inequalities. The main way in which individuals are allocated to their "social class" is via their employment position and the structure of employment has been divided up in various ways in order to generate them. This is known as the employment aggregate approach to class analysis.

There are many ways in which class schemes that are available. One of the main schemes is the register general. This scheme has six categories, ranging from professional occupations to unskilled manual workers, which clearly show the hierarchy of occupations advantages and disadvantages. The register general's class scheme show support for Marxist theory of class inequality on the bases of economic factors. As he argued that class division does occur on the bases of the type of employment you are in and the register general's class scheme clearly reflects this.

Marx would also go on to argue that those in the lower professions are unable to move up the class structure as it is not in the interest of the bourgeoisie, also they are not given the same life chances as the bourgeoisie, for example the education that those in the top professions receive is argued to be better than those in the lower professions. It has also been argued that even if social mobility does occur its is much harder for the working class to get to the top professions as they are faced with more difficult along the way.

However there are a number of problems with using the register general's class scheme to define which social class an individual belongs to. This is because in order to gain the information to categories individuals into their social class the Government produce a census form, which the public must complete. However because it is a questionnaire there are many methodological problems associated with it. The main one being that the public may not be completely honest when completing the form, in fear of being judged or not wanting others to know their personal information.

Also the census only requires a simple job description and not detailed information, this can not then be a reliable way in which to categorise people's occupational status. Another problem with using occupational scales to measure social class is that although a certain job may come under the heading of a manual worker the actual job itself may be highly paid and involve a lot of skill, but due to the fact the individual is doing manual work they would still be classified as working class.

An example of this would be a builder, their job involves a lot of skill and is highly paid but it is still a manual job, therefore you would be considered working class. Another main problem with using the register general's class scheme is that there are many people who don't classify to any of the categories provided. For example domestic workers and employers don't figure in the scale therefore how can they be allocated to a certain class. Another method for measuring social class is on cultural and political factors.

What is meant by this is that the type of lifestyle you lead is a measure for what social class you fit into. For example if an individual wears designer clothes such as Gucci and drives a fashionable car then they would be considered to be middle or even upper class, due to their lifestyle. However if an individual was to elect Labour in the public election then they would be considered to be working class as they are believed to be a working class political party.

The problem with using this measure of social class is that it is very subjective and to what one individual would define as middle class another may define as working class. Also another problem is that although a person

may have the lifestyle of a middle class person e. g. expensive clothes etc they may have a working class job and therefore work extremely long hours in order to live a life similar to the middle class.

Another problem with class measurement is the gender factor, although many theorists consider the topic of class to be gender neutral, it has been argued by many that this is not the case. It has been argued that the class structure for men differs from women's due to employment opportunities. It was not until recently that women were actually able to do the same jobs as men and get equal pay. Therefore this would cause problems when measuring women's class position, because although they were working their income was fairly low compared to men doing the same job.

Therefore a man and women who doing similar jobs were unlikely to be measured at the same social class if the cultural method was being used. However if they using the employment aggregated method they would be the same social class. This therefore shows the some of the problems with the different methods available. The other gender problem is that until recently women were not able to get the highly professional and powerful jobs therefore would not have been considered as middle class unless there husbands job was middle class.

However once women were able to get the higher positioned jobs their employment still had little effect on the families social position because it was always the males employment that was used even if it was lower than the women's. Therefore having considered the different measures that are available to measure social class I believe that it very difficult to measure a

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persons class position on just the bases of either their occupation, cultural or political factors. This is because I don't believe a person occupation does necessarily indicate which class a person belongs to.

This is because although a person may have a professional job there wealth in terms of assets may be very low. Also an individuals may have a classification of a professional job but their status within that job may be low, that's why I feel that Goldthorpe's class scheme is a more accurate than the register generals. Having brought this discussion to an end I believe that in order to accurately measure an individuals social class position all three dimension should be measure (economic, political and cultural) as this would give a more valid social class position.