

What are the problems associated with measuring class

Sociology



Class is a concept sociologists use to measure economic and cultural inequality within societies. For class to be understood and evaluated it first needs to be operationalized; proxies such as occupation, employment relations and conflict, to name a few, are what sociologists use for this task. This essay's main focus will be on the proxies used by the major theorists within the field of, 'relationship class stratification', 'occupational class stratification' and 'conflict class stratification'.

It will evaluate whether these proxies can in fact be a true measure of social inequality in a post-modern industrial society, or whether they have become outdated and insignificant. There are two main theorists of class upon which most current sociological paradigms are based upon, Marx and Weber. Marx believed that there existed only two major classes the 'proletarian' and the 'elite'. "The two main classes are those who own the means of production - industrialists or capitalists - and those who earn their living selling labour to them" (Giddens, 2001, P. 284).

Marx believed that the unequal structure of society led to a class conscience developing that in turn, led to revolution by the proletarians. Marx saw this unequal balance of power as the cause of any major problems that occurred within society. This theory may have some merits when attempting to understand the French and Russian revolutions, but in today's contemporary society, with its growing middle classes it is perceived as too rigid. In fact in Marxist conflict theory it would be a paradox in itself to conceive of a middle class "If one is concerned not with patterns of social stratification but with lines of conflict... then from the point of view of a theory of conflict there can be no such entity as a middle class" (Marsh, 1998, P. 159). Weber built from <https://assignbuster.com/what-are-the-problems-associated-with-measuring-class/>

the exploitation intrinsic of Marx's theory but created a stratification that allowed for a multitude of social positions. He believed that social inequality could be measured by three proxies; class, status, and party. The inequality that was reflected through class was concerned with exploitation and the individuals 'market position' by this Weber meant skills and qualifications that made the individual attractive to an employer. According to Weber, class divisions derive from economic differences... uch as resources including skills and credentials, which effect the types of jobs people are able to obtain" (Giddens, 2001, P. g 285). Weber believed that the more skilled the individual, the better the opportunity for social mobility or 'life chances' they had. Status and party, in Weber's stratification, was reflected in the material the individual owned and the manner in which they conducted themselves. Party was simply the group membership or political identity reflexive in the individual's ideology.

Weber's theory has been influential to modern ay thinking on class; because it allows for the complex interplay of class positioning that is so prevalent in post-modern society. " Most sociologists hold that Weber's scheme offers a more flexible and sophisticated basis for analysing stratification than that provided by Marx" (Giddens 2001, P. g 286) The Goldthorpe class scheme is an example of a neo-Weberian stratification of class. It is so called because it has taken certain elements of Weber's theory and embellished upon them.

Goldthorpe believed that there should be two main focuses or roxies for inequality, 'market position', and 'work situation'. Market position is similar in design to Weber's 'life chances' it focuses on the skills a person has in

relation to the power that gives them to negotiate for better working conditions and advancement opportunities. " Market situation... emphasises material rewards and general 'life chances" (Giddens 2001, P. g 288). Work situation focuses on the contract that exists between the individual and the higher authority.

He distinguished eleven categories of people who fall into three main classes. The service class have a high level of skill and either employee workers or are in similar hierarchical positions to the employer. The intermediate class have a reasonable level of skills and can exert some power over their employer, and the working class have little skills and are at the mercy of the employer. Goldthorpe's class scheme, although an occupational stratification, also focuses heavily on employment relations.

It has some merits when applied to contemporary society " It has been useful in highlighting class based inequalities, such as those relating to health and education, as well as reflecting class based dimensions in voting patterns, political outlooks and general social attitudes" (Giddens 2001, P. g, 288).

However it has come under criticism for three main reasons. Firstly it excludes a large number of people such as the unemployed, students, old age pensioners, and people who live off unearned income.

This exclusion is particularly problematic when taken in context to post-modern society. " Longer periods in education, rising unemployment and lower retirement ages mean that the individuals spend less of their lifetime in 'work'" (Crompton, 1996, Pg 19). Secondly the scheme takes the family as unit, and classifies it in context to the major breadwinner. However this

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definition does not account for situations where the lower wage earner can be a higher rank within the Goldthorpe scheme.

Similarly the idea that an individual should be classified as a part of a unit has been disputed " class position of an individual should be determined without reference to the household" (Giddens, 1996, pg 299). The third criticism of Goldthorpe's scheme is that it does not take account of the upper classes. Goldthorpe argues that the upper classes are unimportant because they are proportionally insignificant, the focus should be on the service sector " The rich are so few in number they can be excluded from schemes detailing class structure" (Giddens 2001 P. 289). This view has been criticised by both John Scott and John Westergaard. Westergaard argues that although the upper classes are few they still have enormous control over the proletarians and thus there is still an element of Marxist exploitation, " It is the intense concentration of power and privilege in so few hands that makes these people top" (Giddens 2001 P. g, 289). Scott believes the upper classes are changing, but this change does not effect their hierarchical position.

Paradoxically these changes could be used as a counter argument to Scott, " The increasing prominence of corporate, rather than individual patterns of wealth holdings, has led to suggestions that the very rich (or 'upper class') have declined" (Crompton, 1996, Pg 20). The core problem with theorising about the upper class or the elite rich is the inaccessibility of reliable data collection; the rich do not often publicise information about their wealth, and even if they do it is not always reliable.

However, there are certain trends that are occurring that can be used as a tool for class analysis " Noteworthy trends have arisen in Britain in recent years, many of the wealthiest members of society are quite young... and ethnic minorities are increasing their presence among the super rich" (Giddens 2001 P. 291). An interesting alternative to Goldthorpe's stratification, and one that incorporates the upper classes, is Erik Olin Wright's theory of class.

Wright believes that class can be operationalized by using the individual's access to economic resources as a proxy. He suggests that there are three elements to these economic resources; control over capital, control over means of production, and control of labour, " According to Wright there are three dimensions of control over economic resources in modern capitalist production, and these allow us to identify the major classes that exist" (Giddens 2001 P. 286). The capitalists or upper classes have access over all three economic dimensions and the proletarians or working classes have access to none. The middle class Wright terms the 'Contradictory class location' and this is where ninety percent of the population fall into " Wright calls them contradictory class locations because they are able to influence some aspect of production, but are denied control of others" (Giddens 2001 P. 286).

To further distinguish between these contradictory classes Wright, as with Goldthorpe's stratification, depends on two factors, relationship to authority, and possession of skills. The main ideology behind both Goldthorpe and Wright's class scheme is that through occupational positioning and an in-

depth analysis of the relationship to authority, the stratification can correctly evaluate the individual's life chances or overall standard of living and their opportunities for social advancement.

However this ideology raises a number of questions. Firstly can occupation really be a true measurement of everyone's life chances? Giddens believes not " Class schemes based upon occupational distinctions are unable to reflect the importance of property ownership and wealth" (Giddens 2001 P. g 289). Secondly occupation does not account for other inequalities such as racism and gender.

This problem, compounded by globalisation and thus a higher numbers of ethnic minority migrants, is becoming an increasing challenge to the concept of class " Since the early 1970's sociologists have become more aware of the relative importance of gender and race" (Marsh, 1998, P. g 149). Thirdly some sociologists have argued that the very structure of contemporary society is moving more towards a 'meritocracy' therefore the concept of class is outdated, " Clark and Lipset suggest that there has been a decline in the importance of social class as a determinant of lifestyle and life chances" (Marsh, 1998, P. 52). In counter to this some sociologists would argue that although the structures of society are changing, the inequalities that are displayed through a class scheme are still inherent in society " Changes in the distribution of reward, social welfare, social mobility and education have simply blurred class boundaries and created an illusion of equality. Whatever the case may be one thing is for certain, that the increasing division of

labour, coupled with the rise of individualism, is going to bring about an ever increasing sociological challenge to the concept of class.