

# “A” Level Sociology

## A Resource-Based Learning Approach

**Module:**  
**Social Differentiation, Inequality and Stratification**

**Unit S3a: Measuring Social Class**

### Introduction.

In previous Units in this series we have referred, at various times, to a number of different **dimensions** to **social stratification** and **social inequality** (for example, social **class**, **gender**, **ethnicity**, **age** and **nationality / region**). In this Unit we need to look more closely at the various ways it is possible to **define** these dimensions, since such definitions will be useful to us if we want to **measure** how ideas like an individual's social class, gender or ethnic background relate to that person's **life chances**.

In this respect, the focus of this Unit is on two things:

**Firstly**, the various ways we can **operationalise** the concepts of class, gender, ethnicity and age.

That is, the different kinds of indicators we can use to help us measure each dimension of social stratification.

**Secondly**, since **social class** is more difficult to define than other dimensions of stratification (for reasons that will be made clear in a moment), it's necessary to spend the bulk of this Unit looking at the various ways sociologists and others (such as governments) have suggested class membership can be defined and measured.

The concept of "**life chances**" is a very important one in the context of social stratification and it is one we will develop more clearly in the next Unit. For the moment, however, all we need to note is that the concept of life chances was originally developed by **Max. Weber** and he expressed the it as:

**"A person's power to obtain a supply of goods, external living conditions and personal life experiences".**

**Haralambos** ("Themes and Perspectives") puts this more simply when he notes that life chances relate to:

**"... a person's chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable and avoiding those things defined as undesirable in their society".**

Haralambos continues with a quote from **Gerth and Mills**, who argue that life chances in Western society involve,

**"Everything from the chance to stay alive during the first year after birth to the chance to view fine arts, the chance to remain healthy and grow tall, and if sick to get well again quickly, the chance to avoid becoming a juvenile delinquent and very crucially, the chance to complete an intermediary or higher educational grade".**

- In terms of these ideas, therefore, the first thing that strikes us in relation to dimensions of stratification such as **age**, **gender** and **ethnicity** is that they are relatively easy to define, mainly because they tend to reflect **observable biological attributes**. For example:
  - In our society it is only possible for people to be classified as **either** biologically **male** **or** biologically **female**. Although this is not always true of every society (some societies recognise a "third sex" (**hermaphrodites** - people born with both male and female sexual organs)), this type of sexual classification is the norm in most societies.
  - In terms of **age**, people are assigned various classification positions (baby, child, youth, adult, elderly and so forth) on the basis of a chronological system - the idea that, as you become biologically older your status in society changes.
  - In terms of **ethnicity**, **skin colour** is often used as a way of classifying people, although other **cultural factors** might include things like **religion**, **country** or **region** of origin, **language** and the like).

**Social class**, on the other hand, is not so easy to define (although there may be certain **observable indicators** of a person's class, such as the way they talk, the way they dress and so forth), which is one reason why we are going to look at this dimension of stratification in more detail (the other reason is that it is such an important dimension of stratification and inequality that we need to be sure we understand its implications).

- **What Is Social Class?**

The concept of social class is a wide-ranging one that has a number of related dimensions, the **three** most significant of which are:

- An **economic** dimension - this can be measured in terms of **indicators** such as **wealth, income** and **occupation**.
- A **political** dimension - this can be measured in terms of **indicators** such as **status** and **power**.
- A **cultural** dimension - this can be measured in terms of **indicators** such as **lifestyle, values, beliefs, norms, level of education** and so forth.

Of the above dimensions, the **economic** is usually seen to be the most socially (and sociologically) significant, mainly because an individual's economic position is also an important source of **social status** and **power** (a **professional** worker such as a doctor or accountant tends to have **higher status** and **more power** than a **manual** worker such as a road sweeper, for example) and also influences the development of certain **cultural lifestyles** (for example, the type of **status symbols** you are able to acquire, the kinds of **leisure pursuits** you are able to afford and so forth).

- From the above it should be clear that the concept of social class is likely to be extremely difficult to **operationalise** since it involves a large number of **variables** (for example, the relationship between **income** and **wealth**, **power**, **status** and **lifestyle**, not to mention further **status factors** such as **gender, age** and **ethnicity**).
- For the sake of **simplicity** - if not the sociologist's sanity - if we can identify a **single most important** and useful **indicator** of social class, it would have to be **occupation**.

As we will see, simply because occupation is a very handy way of defining and measuring social class it doesn't follow that there is anything but a very broad level of agreement amongst both sociologists and other interested parties about the nature and extent of the scales we use in order to group various occupational types in terms of social classes. Again, this is something we will examine in more detail at a later point.

- **Why Is It Important To Define Social Class?**

The simple reason for the importance of social class is the fact that it can be **objectively** linked to an individual's **life chances**. As with any sociological concept, in order to test whether or not social class is related to an individual's life chances it is necessary to both **define** it clearly and develop some means of **operationalising** it. In this respect, once class has been defined we need to develop an indicator or **indicators** of class that can be used as the basis of measurement and testing.

- How can we operationalise the concept of Social Class?

On a **commonsense** level ("what everybody knows"), definitions of social class do not seem to present us with too many problems. Most of us, for example, would recognise the idea that, in Britain, there are three basic social classes, namely:

- An **upper** class
- A **middle** class and
- A **working or lower** class.

However, for our purposes, this simple classification immediately raises a number of questions and, of course, problems. For example:

- How do we assign people to each class (what **criteria** do we use)?
- Is class membership **objective** (based on what you are) or **subjective** (based on what you believe you are)?
- Is class just a "**statistical category**" (a simple counting exercise to see "who fits where" in society) or does it affect people's **life chances** (and, if so, what does this tell us about the **relationship** between **objective** and **subjective forms** of classification?)?
- Do we focus on **individuals** (giving people a class position on the basis of a range of personal / social factors) or do we focus on **large groups** (people who share a number of basic characteristics like occupation)?

In the light of these - and potentially many other - questions we can do a couple of things:

1. We can distinguish between **objective** and **subjective** forms of class measurement and deal with each category separately.

2. In terms of ~~objectively~~ classifying people we can consider a range of criteria (**indicators** of class) and a range of different **class measurement scales**.

We can, for example, argue that **social class is an objective category**. This is because classes are part of the **social structure** of society and they exist **independently** of the **consciousness of individual social actors**. In this respect, you can be assigned a class position regardless of whether you accept that position or believe you belong to a different class or even no class at all.

While an individual's **subjective** sense of class position is, in certain contexts, important (because it will affect the way they behave), this idea relates to the concept of **status** (a dimension of class), not to class itself. This is a distinction we will develop in more detail in a moment.

An easy way to understand this idea is to think in terms of an individual's **biological sex** (which we'll assume can't be changed). If you are born a biological male then, in a gender structure, you are classified as male. You are male whether you want to be or not. You may, for example, decide to call yourself "Shirley" and adopt the style, mannerisms and dress of the opposite sex; presupposing you are free to do this, this behaviour does not make you female - it simply makes you a male who is pretending to be a female...

### Social Class: Objective Forms of Measurement.

Over the course of this century in Britain there have been a number of **official** and **unofficial** attempts to measure social class \_\_\_\_\_ and in this section we can look at a few examples of the different types of classification scale it is possible to use.

As I've suggested, this is not intended to be an exhaustive list of examples mainly because:

- Most major textbooks have a section of some description that focuses on "measuring class" and it's probably easier to review some of the major scales from this source.
- Although the details of each scale differ (for example, there are usually differences in the **number** of classes defined, the \_\_\_\_\_ **occupations** that go into each category and so forth), the **broad principles** involved tend to be quite similar.
- The basic format for this section, therefore, will be to introduce an example of the various scales that have been used to measure social class in Britain, followed by an outline, in diagram form, of the basic scale. Finally, we can then briefly consider some of the **strengths** and **weaknesses**, (or **uses** and **limitations** if you prefer) of the particular scale under discussion.

"**Official**" scales are those recognised by governments and their statistical agencies for the purpose of measuring social class.

"**Unofficial**" scales are those that have been produced by sociologists, psychologists, market researchers and the like.

That is, although there tend to be arguments over "who goes where" on the scale, the basic principle that social class can be measured in terms of "occupational groupings" is shared by all of these types of scale.

Before we begin, we need to note that most, if not all, attempts to produce **objective measures** of social class focus on a (relatively small) number of **indicators** that can be used as the basis for measurement. In general terms, these have tended to be things like:

- **Occupation.**
- **Housing / property ownership.**
- **Income.**
- **Family background.**
- **Educational background.**
- **Voting behaviour.**
- By and large, **occupation**, as we have noted, has tended to be the main indicator used, for the reasons already noted (see page 2). This produces a scale that largely measures **economic class**, although occupation does, of course, give us some indication of the likely social aspects to an individual's class position (power, status, lifestyle, etc.).
- Some forms of measurement, as we will see, have tried to create a class scale that is less heavily biased towards economic factors by using a combination of indicators and weightings for their significance in terms of social class.

#### 1. The Registrar-General's Model of Social Class.

- From 1911 to 1980 this was the standard classification system used by government departments in Britain. It consisted of the following categories:

Social Class	Example occupations
1. Professional	Accountant, doctor, clergyman, university teacher
2. Intermediate	Pilot, farmer, manager, Police officer, teacher, mar
3N. Non-manual skilled	Clerical worker, sales rep., shop assistant, secretary.
3M. Manual skilled	Butcher, bus driver, electrician, miner
4. Semi-skilled	Bus conductor, bar person, postal worker, packer .
5. Unskilled	Labourer, office cleaner, window cleaner.
<b>The Registrar General's scale had the following characteristics:</b>	

- A basic **two-class model** was used, in which the population was divided into **middle** and **lower** classes.

- Each broad class** was subdivided into three further categories. Although five sub-divisions were used, category three was split into two "equal" categories. The scale, therefore, consisted of **three categories** to describe **non-manual / middle class occupations** and **manual / lower class occupations**.

In simple terms, the **middle classes** were defined as those involved in **non-manual work**, whereas the **lower classes** were defined as those involved in **manual work**.

- The basis for the ranking of occupations was their "**relative standing in the community**"; occupations were assigned to the different class categories by assessing and comparing their **status**, relative to each other. Occupations were, therefore, arranged **hierarchically**, with the most important at the top.

### Strengths / Uses

1. A basic strength of this type of classification is it's relative **simplicity** (it's easy to **understand** and **apply**). It also roughly accords to **commonsense** notions of class categories.

2. As an **official** system of measurement, **government statisticians** used this classification. This meant:

- a. It was possible to **compare** changes over time (in areas such as **health, work, poverty** and **family life**) using this basic scale (useful, amongst other things, for **longitudinal studies**) although we need to be aware of reclassifications of occupations that have taken place over the years.
- b. The huge **amount of data** on social class generated by government departments made it difficult for researchers to adopt a different form of class measurement if they wanted to use official statistical data on class in their research.

1. The scale groups **occupations**, rather than individuals and, while this is not necessarily a problem, it does mean that an **unknown number of people** effectively disappear from the class structure, both at the top and the bottom. For example, in order to appear in the scale you must have a job and this excludes:

- The very **wealthy** who may live off investments.
- The **unemployed / never employed** (the latter category is significant for the young),
- The “**non-employed**” (in the sense of paid work). This would include substantial numbers of people (mainly women) who work within the home, caring for children, the elderly and so forth.

2. Although the scale claims to be objective, it uses an essentially subjective assessment (“relative standing in the community”) of both the broad class groupings and the status of different occupations within such groups. In addition, it was never really made clear what the criteria were for **measuring** “relative standing in the community”.

4. The use of **status** to determine class position (in terms of **manual / non-manual** work and “**relative standing**”) means that a **basic assumption** underpinning the scale was the idea of **shared values** - in effect, the idea that a broad level of **agreement** about the status of different occupations exists in our society. An alternative way of seeing it is to suggest that the scale represents the particular way **powerful social groups** view the class (or, more correctly, **status**, structure of Britain).

3. The categories are **too broad** and fail to really take account of status differences that exist within occupations (**intra-occupational status**). For example, the occupation “teacher” covers a wide range of different statuses - from the probationary teacher to a head teacher...

5. This type of scale should, more-accurately, be seen as a measure of **social status** (a subjective interpretation) rather than **social class** (an objective category).

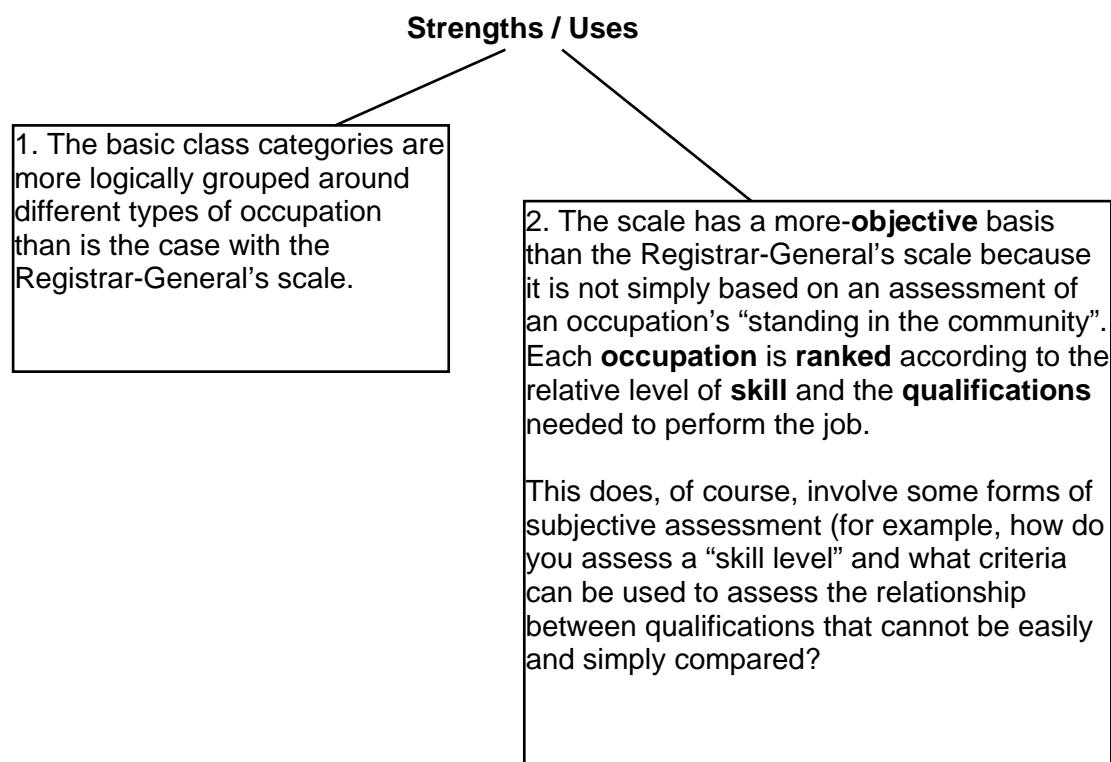
7. **Feminists**, among others, have criticised the **sexist assumptions** that underlie this type of occupational scheme. In particular, it is based on the idea that “a family” is the basic unit in society and that its members all share a common class position based on the “head of the household’s occupation), which begs a number of questions:

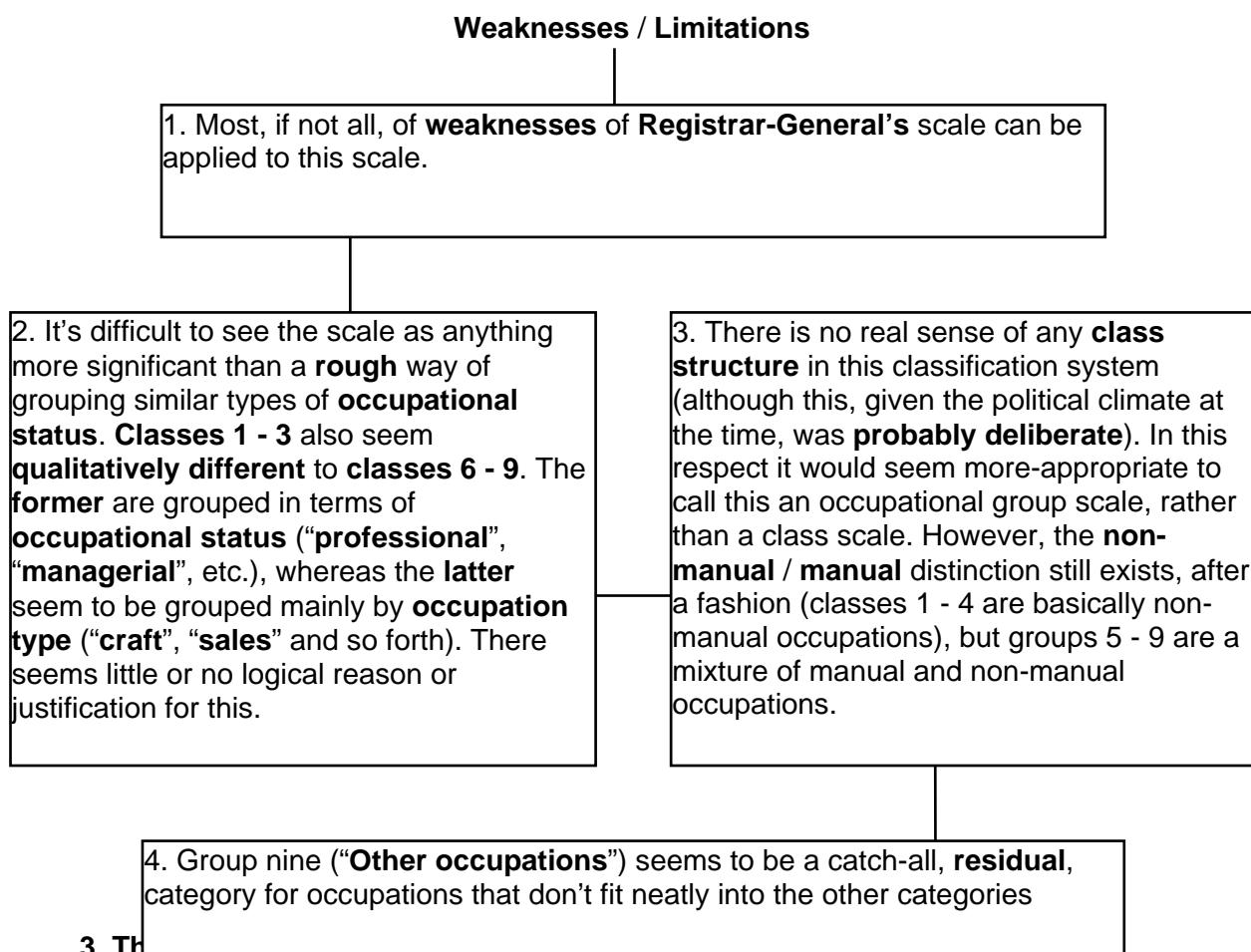
- a. Do women, for example, have the **same life chances** as their (male) partner?
- b. In a household where both partners (**dual-income families**) work, which occupation counts in terms of class position?
- c. Dual-income families may have greater life chances than **single income families**, even though they may, occupationally, be placed in a lower class.

## 2. The Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)

In the 1980's the (Conservative) government changed the way "class" was officially measured. In place of the Registrar-General's scale a nine category scale was introduced.

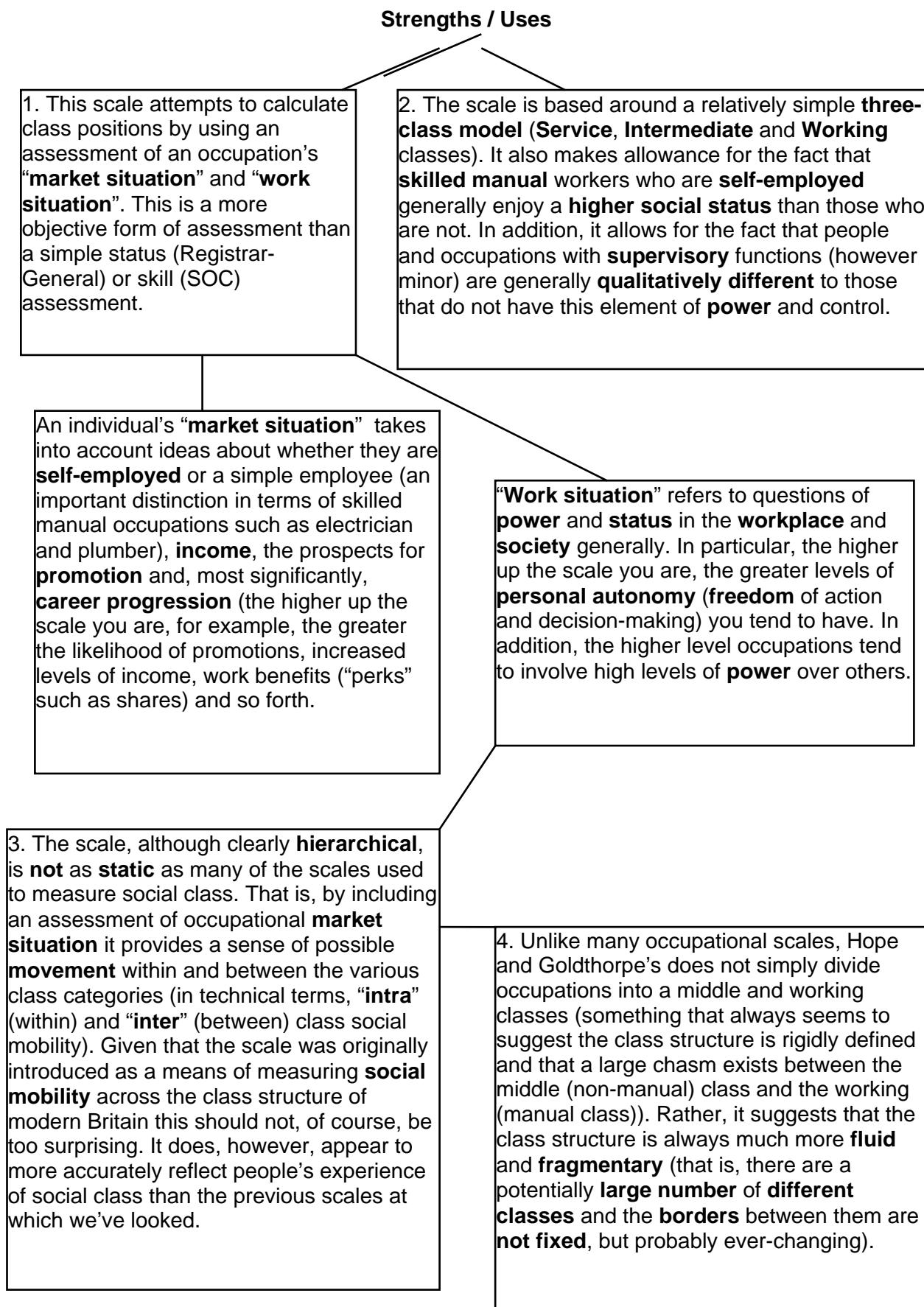
Social Class	Examples of Occupations
<b>1. Managers / Administrators</b>	Managers / administrators (large companies)
<b>2. Professional</b>	Teachers, solicitor, vicar, social worker.
<b>3. Associate professional / Technical</b>	Computer programmer, nurse, journalist, youth worker
<b>4. Clerical and Secretarial</b>	Clerical worker, secretary, receptionist.
<b>5. Craft and related</b>	Electrician, bricklayer, mechanic.
<b>6. Personal and Protective services</b>	Hairdresser, traffic warden, nursery nurse, police officer (sergeant and below)
<b>7. Sales</b>	Sales rep. / assistant, check-out operator.
<b>8. Plant and Machine Operative</b>	Bus conductor, bus / lorry / taxi driver, packer, assembly-line worker.
<b>9. Other Occupations</b>	Miner, postal worker, cleaner.





Although there are numerous examples of **sociological** (or **unofficial**) class scales, this is an example of a fairly simple, straightforward way of attempting to measure social class sociologically. The basic characteristics of this scale are:

Social Class	Example Occupations	
<b>1. Higher Grade Professional</b>	Company director, senior manager.	
<b>2. Lower Grade Professional / administrator</b>	Manager in small business, higher level supervisor.	Service Class
<b>3. Routine non-manual</b>	Clerical, sales.	
<b>4. Small proprietor / self-employed</b>	Small farmers, electrician, plumber	Intermediate Class
<b>5. Lower grade technician / supervisor</b>	Lower level supervisor (of manual workers).	
<b>6. Skilled manual</b>	Electrician, butcher.	
<b>7. Semi-unskilled manual</b>	Farm labourer	Working Class

**Weaknesses / Limitations**

1. The use of terms such as “**service**” and “**intermediate**” classes appears unnecessarily **confusing**, given that these class-related terms are **not in everyday use**. The **service class** seems to roughly equate to an **upper middle class** and the **intermediate class** to a **lower middle / upper working class**.

2. Although understandable in the sense that the scale was designed primarily to measure **social mobility** (a concept we will examine in more detail in another Unit), the fact that it **excludes** people without paid employment (such as the **very rich**, the **unemployed** and those who work **(unpaid)** within the home) distorts our picture of the class structure in modern Britain.

3. The placing of routine non-manual workers (such as clerks and sales assistants) above skilled manual workers seems hard to justify in terms of both “market” and “work” situations. This seems to reflect a judgement about status (any kind of non-manual work being seen as superior to manual work) rather than things like income, power and autonomy.

4. **Feminists**, amongst others, have argued that this type of occupational-based scale does not accurately reflect the lives and experiences of women (who tend to be either ignored or lumped-together under their (male) partner’s occupational class). **Goldthorpe**, in return, has argued that there is much **empirical evidence** to suggest that in **dual-parent families** women, by-and-large, adopt the class identity of their male partner...

- Thus far we have looked briefly at a **sample** class and from this we can note:

1. **Occupation-based** scales could perhaps be more-accurately seen as measuring some forms of **status groupings**, rather than social class.

2. The focus on **occupation** as the **basic unit of class measurement** tends to divide society into **middle** and **working class** sections while ignoring an **upper class** characterised not only by **occupation** (managing directors, etc.) but by **ownership** (large-scale share-holding and the like). As we have seen, **Marxist** sociologists argue that this is a crucially important dimension of social class that is largely (if not totally) ignored by most class scales.

It seems odd that when people generally talk about social class, they recognise the idea that **upper**, **middle** and **lower** classes seem to exist in our society (without necessarily being able to define these in any theoretically-useful way), whereas most class scales rarely, if ever, recognise the concept of an upper class...

3. Questions of **gender** and **ethnicity** (as **status** considerations) are largely excluded from scales of the type we’ve just assessed. This is something we need to consider in more detail in the

To complete this overview of measurement scales, we can look at two examples, both of which, in their separate ways, take a slightly different approach to the question of class measurement.

#### 4. Will Hutton: The 30 - 30 - 40 Society.

<p>1. The scale is <b>not occupation-specific</b>, thereby avoiding some (if not all) of the problems associated with measurement scales that attempt to relate specific occupations to particular class positions. In this respect it is a <b>less static</b> form of measurement than traditional methods of measuring class.</p>	<p>2. It describes some forms of gender and ethnic inequalities, mainly because women and ethnic minorities are more likely to feature, for a variety of reasons, in the disadvantaged and insecure groups.</p>
<p>have created deep, long-lasting and profound <b>changes</b> in the class structure.</p> <p>In basic terms, <b>Hutton</b> suggests that the class structure in modern Britain can be characterised in terms of three major groupings.</p>	<p>effective industrial action (limits on actions that could be taken against an employer, secret ballots of workforce, massive fines for "illegal" industrial action); <b>Tax Law</b> that reduced the amount of taxation paid by the rich; The <b>privatisation</b> of State-owned companies (Telecoms, Utilities, Mining, etc.) that resulted in massive job-losses / increased unemployment.</p>
<p><b>Social Class</b></p> <p><b>1. The Advantaged</b></p>	<p><b>Selected characteristics</b></p> <p>Full-time / self-employed who have held their job for 2 years.</p> <p>Part-time workers who have held their job for 5 years.</p> <p>Strong / effective Unions / Professional Associations.</p> <p>Range of work-related benefits. Mainly male workers.</p>
<p><b>2. The Newly Insecure</b></p>	<p>Part-time / casual workers.</p> <p>Declining employment protection / few benefits.</p> <p>Large numbers of female workers.</p> <p>Self-employed (especially manual workers)</p> <p>Fixed-term contract workers.</p>
<p><b>3. The Disadvantaged</b></p>	<p>Unemployed (especially long term)</p> <p>Families caught in poverty trap (e.g. single parents)</p> <p>Zero-hours contract workers</p> <p>People on government employment schemes</p> <p>Casual part-time workers</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hutton's analysis, like that of <b>Hope and Goldthorpe</b>, reflects a <b>Weberian</b> ("centre-left") approach to class measurement. In basic terms, social class is considered mainly in terms of an individual's <b>market</b> and <b>work</b> situation. It also has a close parallel with <b>Dual Labour Market theory</b>.</li> </ul>	<p>Top 40%</p> <p>Intermediate 30%</p> <p>Bottom 30%</p>

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This theory argues that the labour market in modern economies consists of **two sectors**:

- A **Primary or Core** sector that consists of full-time, well-paid, employees with high levels of job security job status and
- A **Secondary or Periphery** sector that consists of part-time / casual employees, low pay and with little or no job security and low job status.

3. The scale can be used to empirically identify individual market and work situations to describe the class structure of modern Britain (although this is extremely limited precisely because it is a simple, descriptive, scale).

1. The three groupings used are **too broad** in their scope - each contains a wide range of people who may have little, if anything, in common. The "Advantaged" group, for example, could include everyone from the **Super Rich** (people like Richard Branson or Rupert Murdoch) to relatively **minor Civil Servants, teachers** and the like.

2. Related to this idea, the scale doesn't really address issues of **ownership, power** and so forth, mainly because it focuses on individual market situations to the exclusion of these (very important) ideas

3. There is no real sense of **class**, as opposed to **market, status** in this scale. The latter is a significant aspect of social class, but in this scale it is presented as the only aspect of any importance

4. The fact that the groupings focus on **individual class positions** means that this scale can tell us little or nothing about class positions based on **family groups**. For example, someone in part-time / casual employment with a partner in secure, full-time employment is considered to be "disadvantaged" in this scale - yet clearly this is unlikely to be the case. Given that a significant proportion of the workforce will consist of married / cohabiting partners, this should be a significant consideration in any calculation. This idea casts doubt on the concept of a 30:30:40 society...

### 5. The Runciman Scale.

The final example we are going to consider is one which attempts to combine both **Marxist** and **Weberian** forms of class analysis. Running throughout this section has been the notion that there are two main things:

- Firstly, a sense of **class structure** based around concepts of **economic power, ownership, control** and so forth (which roughly equates to **Marxist** themes).

1. Class position is calculated using a number of different **indicators, factors** and **weightings**. For example, an **individual** would be ranked in terms of such things as:

This is important because it gives us a more detailed picture of people within very broad class groupings.

In simple terms, therefore, Runciman's scale is based on the concept of social power which, he argues, has three significant dimensions:

- Ownership** - whether or not, for example, an individual owns a company (large or small).
- Control** - the extent to which, for example, an individual directs and controls others within the workplace.
- Marketability** - this refers to the ability of individuals to "sell themselves" in the market place and relates to the possession of skills, qualifications and other marketable resources.

On the basis of the above, Runciman identifies 7 broad social classes:

Social Class	Examples of occupations / statuses
1. Upper	Corporate owner, senior manager, people with exceptional marketability
2. Upper middle	Higher grade professional, senior Civil Servant, manager
3. Middle middle	Lower professional, middle manager, medium-size owner
4. Lower middle	Routine white-collar (clerical, etc.)
5. Skilled working	Electrician, plumber, skilled self-employed
6. Unskilled working	Shop assistant, check-out operator
7. Underclass	Long-term unemployed, benefit dependent
<b>Strengths / Uses</b>	
Working Class	
Underclass	

