



Chapter 4: Research Questions, Concepts & Operationalisation

Discussion

If you read the responses to the **Progress Questions** then you will have begun to get an insight into the difficulties posed by this discussion point. Your discussion may have created a lively debate. The concept of 'social class' is one of those areas of social science where there is not universal agreement about a single definition. This discussion will not provide you with one, either.

However, this discussion paper will highlight some of the issues that arise when attempting to define concepts that some people may consider to be somewhat artificial. Perhaps two generations ago, the concept of 'social class' was easier to define. There was much less social and economic mobility, and certainly less volatility in the labour market. Here are some of the difficulties that arise today when attempting to categorise a person's 'social class'. On what criteria do you base the decision to categorise an individual: parental status, occupation, personal wealth, social habits and values?

Parental Status & Background

Once upon a time, if your parents were of a particular class, so were you. A relatively small number of people moved out of one class into another, and few married out of their class. As a result there was a continuity of social attitudes and values that appeared to characterise each social class. There are great difficulties with this approach today where social and economic mobility ensures that there is a migration of attitudes and values throughout society.

Occupation

This means of grouping individuals is regularly used and several classification systems are in current use. The **Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)** system is based on the level of education and training required for particular groups of occupations. Status is therefore assigned to the degree of complexity, skill and knowledge, and degree of autonomy and so is a hierarchical system based on nine major groups, each with a number of sub-groups.

The problem with this system of classification occurs with respondents who do not work. Students and non-working spouses cannot be classified. It used to be the practice to classify non-working spouses (women in particular) by the occupation of their partners. Juveniles and students would be classified according to parental occupations. What about an unemployed respondent or one who is retired? The common device used to classify such people is to ask for their last occupation.

Personal Wealth & Social Habits

Of course, in the past there was a clear relationship between social status, occupation and personal wealth. This is perhaps less clear cut these days. However, many questionnaires associated with market research or people's social habits contain questions about occupation and household income. There are often questions about leisure activities and other social habits that are used as a means of attempting to categorise individuals into some form of socio-economic grouping.

There are many problems with trying to stereotype individuals in this way, and the best way of tackling the issue with any survey is to identify particular dimensions that are important to your research rather than attempt to use some universal classification system. You may find that using two or more dimensions (e.g. occupation, income and reading habits) are more appropriate as a way of identifying respondent groupings.