**What is the relationship between social class and inequality?**

**Summary of Key Points**

Social class is one of the oldest and most persistent inequalities in British society. In the past, people were very aware of their social class and their expected roles and responsibilities. People would have worn different clothes, behaved in different ways and had a very different culture from each other and they would have accepted this as a perfectly normal element of behaviour.

We are still aware today of some of the cultural differences between the social classes so that rich people and poorer people have different accents, are educated differently and wear different styles of clothes from each other. These cultural differences that separate the classes are known as indicators of class. In the past, many people also believed that people of the highest social classes were better than other people and should be respected because of their social position. This idea is known as deference.

People nowadays are less willing to admit that social class is important. Poorer people may imitate the styles and behaviour of wealthy people by buying copies of their expensive clothes in cheaper shops or buying replicas and fakes. However, rich people often copy the 'street style' of the working class people and their fashions.

The differences between the classes seem to be blurred to such an extent that many people would not define their social class in the same way that sociologists might. Sociologists mostly believe that despite the way that people reject the idea of social classes, it is still important in our society. We are just less aware of it than people were in the past. It affects our life chances and our life styles, with high earning people enjoying a superior standard of living and better life chances than those from more deprived backgrounds.

**Subjective class** can be measured by attitudes, beliefs and political opinions. This generally consists of the vague notions upper, middle and working class and most people would identify themselves as belonging to one of these groups. This type of description does not explain the full range of differences between these groups. People may be middle class and have access to huge wealth, whereas others have the education, lifestyle and manners of the middle class but are relatively poor. Equally, people from a working class background who achieve very good professional jobs may well still feel themselves to be working class.

In contrast, sociologists are concerned with **objective class**. This refers to our occupations, education, possessions and our wealth. It can be measured in the data put out by the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys such as mortality lists.

Sociologists have had limited success in attempts to measure social class objectively. There are two

Generally used scales of social class, though a very wide number have been devised by sociologists in the past. The Registrar General's Index of Social Class was used by government statisticians till 2001, and is still widely used as a rough indicator of people's background. It uses occupation as the basis of differentiation.

People are placed in a five point scale. This is still used by advertisers and manufacturers who target products to certain markets. There are weaknesses with this class indicator because it does not take into account people's income or their job security. In addition, women take their class from their male relatives.

Most people are in class C or class 3. Since 2001, the class structure has been amended to take into account employment conditions including: job security, promotion opportunity and the ability and opportunity to work on their own and make own decisions about tasks. This new scale is known as the NS-SEC.

Goldblatt suggested alternative measures of class including home ownership, access to a car and educational status and he has shown that all of these can be correlated to inequalities in health. One of the most recent attempts to define the class system in a new and radical way was by Will Hutton (18995).

Hutton is a critic of the New Right. He argues that social inequality, in the form of low wages, low skill and high unemployment, has resulted in a clearly divided and economically unstable society. Hutton has put forward the 30-30-40 thesis to show the three-way split in contemporary British class relations. He says our society can now be seen to consist of: 30% - unemployed, low paid, insecure work; 30% with some job security and quality of life; 40% - privileged workers in secure and regular employment.

In addition, the nature of work which is a traditional measure of a person's class position is changing so the debates have become complex and theoretical. Certainly, inequality is an important social dynamic, but there is a question mark over whether this is related to social class or whether people even recognise class as significant in their lives. Marxists argue strongly that it is but that people do not recognise it for reasons related to deskilling and proletarianisation; feminists suggest other dynamics influence inequality and post-modernists suggest that the important dynamic is not class but the ability to spend money.

**What is the link between class and occupation?**

Traditionally class has been linked to the type of work a person does. The debate as to the nature of class has therefore become more complex as the nature of work has changed. The upper classes are able to live off unearned income such as rents from land or property. There are so few of the upper classes that they are more or less invisible to sociologists. Very little research has been done on these people. Upper class people usually keep themselves to themselves and are not willing to participate in studies.

Recent work by Adonis and Pollard (1998) stresses the significance of the upper class in modern British society and they consider that there is an emerging 'superclass' that consist of an elite of extremely high paid managers and professionals. According to Adonis and Pollard, this new superclass is linked financially to the City of London, a male and upper class world that has many links with the traditions and heritage of public school and Oxbridge elites of the past. This superclass emerged from the financial changes of the 1980s and is composed of people who benefited from low taxation and privatisation of industry to become significant in international trading with global companies. They earn multi-million salaries and have large financial bonus packages. Papers tend to refer to them as Fat Cats.

The middle classes live off professional work such as law, medicine or the ownership of a business. Generally they earn more and have better working conditions than the working class. Working class people work with their hands as tradesmen or labourers. Work with the hands is known as manual work. We still call professional people who sell knowledge rather than skills, non-manual workers. This is the basic social class division in society - between manual and non-manual work.

Middle class work requires educational qualifications and skills. Most people who are members of the middle classes will have been to university and gained higher level professional qualifications as well.

Generally, middle class professional work is well paid or has good conditions and terms of service. In the past, there would have been quite serious differences in pay between professional workers and manual workers though these differences have been eroded.

C Wright Mills (1956) and others have seen the middle classes as divided into two groups. The higher professions have the potential for high earnings and who are self-employed or employed by large corporations. These are people such as judges, accountants, lawyers, dentists, doctors. These people tend to control entry into their occupations. The lower professions are often, though not exclusively, feminised and work in the public sector. They have limited access to high earnings and include teachers, nurses, and social workers.

The lower middle classes have become more like the working class according to the Marxist, Braverman (1974) who points out that many of the professions, such as architects, have become vulnerable to redundancies. He also claims that skills are being lost (de-skilling) because mechanisation means that individuals are now being taken over by technology. People are no longer required to undertake tasks that traditionally required talent. Tradesmen have lost their skills to machines, and architects' plans can be created by computer programmes. Others, such as teachers or opticians who are unable to control entry into their professions are no longer able to claim high rates of pay as there is always demand for work and people who are willing to accept low rates in return for employment. Oppenheimer (1973) has also suggested that the middle classes have lost power and authority in work.

Working class work may require high levels of skill and effort: however, because it is manual work, it is not generally well paid and often is of relatively low status. In addition, although years of on-the-job training may be involved in such work, people will not have been to university or college. Hairdressing, for example, is one of the worst paid occupations on average. Unskilled work is very low value, low status work and there are few openings for people who have no educational qualifications. Work which once was done by people is now done by one person with a qualification who operates a machine. In the 1930s, digging was done by teams of men with shovels. We would be surprised to see people do work of this kind today. Even much check-out work is now done by machine alone.

In the 197Os, it was commonly believed by many commentators that the working class were becoming more middle class as their incomes were higher than previously earned by the working class. This theory was known as the affluent worker thesis or embourgeoisement and was supported by Galbraith. This theory was disproved by Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechofer and Platt (1968) who conducted detailed research on car workers in Dagenham. They found that that the workers worked longer hours and had different attitudes to work from middle class management. Fiona Devine (1992) repeated the work and found that redundancy and unemployment were a real concern for working class families. The gap between professional work and working class work was widening.

Another debate has opened up in terms of occupation and class in the last thirty years. Unemployment and benefit dependency has become more common in British society. This has led to the development of a significant underclass of people who have never earned their own money. In the early 1970s, the term was used sympathetically by Giddens and other members of the developing New Left (1973) to describe those who faced massive deprivation and social inequality with working conditions and income levels below even those of the working class. At the same time, other social commentators from the New Right were using the term underclass negatively to describe a class of people who have little self-sufficiency but rely on social security benefits to survive. The term 'dole scrounger' was widely used in the press to describe those who lived on benefit.

What is the relationship between work, class and income? There is a common belief that those who earn more money have worked harder for it. In reality, the low paid are often extremely hard working but unable to gain an acceptable income from the work that they do. One of the reasons is to do with the changing nature of the work that is available.

The structure of the British economy has undergone radical change since the end of World War 2. There has been a massive move away from employment in primary industries such as agriculture and coal mining.

Manufacturing or secondary industry has also experienced a drop in employment. There has been a reduction in traditionally male heavy industry and a growth in light industry and assembly work that can be automated and which employs more females. The real growth sector in the economy has been in service sector jobs. Many of these are middle class jobs in management and training; however, more are jobs which offer long hours, low pay and casual part time work in restaurants and pubs.

Ivan Turak (2000) points out that the actual number of manual jobs fell by 11% between 1981 and 1991 while non-manual jobs have expanded. Certain sectors of the workforce have been more vulnerable to unemployment, and he points to the older male manual worker as being particularly vulnerable. Paul Gregg (1994) has claimed that one of the main causes of poverty in Britain is unemployment and that the UK had a third more families out of work than other developed countries. Statistics suggest that in a fifth of households, there is no adult in employment and although in the rest of Europe, 80% of single parents work, in Britain the figure is closer to 40% of single parents in work.

Figures based on social class alone are difficult to access, as emphasis is placed on other forms of inequality in official data. However, there is a clear link between a person's social class and the opportunities or life chances that they may experience. As Wilkinson (1996) identified, people at the bottom of the stratification system in the UK have severely reduced life chances:

In 1994, it was established that 2.2 million workers in the UK earned less than 68% of the average gross weekly wage that stood at less than £6.00 per hour in that year. These low paid workers tended to be female, the young, the disabled, single parents and members of ethnic minorities. Their work was part- time, homework or casual labour and they tended to be found in certain areas, and in smaller firms.

After much pressure on government, National Minimum Wage legislation was introduced by the Labour government with effect from April 1999. It is currently set at £5.73 (2009). Employers' organisations had predicted a massive increase in unemployment following the introduction of a minimum wage, but this did not occur. Even so, people still resort to desperate measures to obtain satisfactory income. Evidence presented to the Low Pay Commission by the Greater Manchester Low Pay Unit (2000) described one woman who had taken on three low paid jobs at one time in order to 'make ends meet'. Wadsworth (2007) suggests that around 10% of British households rely on minimum wage income. He also points out that many minimum wage earners take a second job to supplement income. Bryan and Taylor (2006) suggest that those who earn National Minimum Wage (NMW) tend to stay in NMW work jobs when they change employment. In addition, low pay workers spend time out of work. More than 80% of NMW workers are female, and many are over the age of 50. Most of these workers had no qualifications. There is also some evidence that employers can evade minimum wage legislation through a variety of semi-legal tactics and pay their workers less than they are entitled to. Migrants are very vulnerable to this kind of abuse.

We are clearly a long way from Tony Blair's claim in 1999 'we are all middle class'. Where class convergence has been greatest it has been at the margins of the classes with a blurred area between the upper working class and lower middle class. The term embourgeoisement is less discussed than it used to be, but Goldthorpe et al's conclusion that the working class has fragmented into a new and traditional working class commands general support to this day. Another factor worth remembering when considering the embourgeoisement debate is what is happening at the other end of the working class. At the bottom of society many see an impoverished underclass of those living on the minimum wage or in receipt of long-term welfare. This impoverished group has seen their living standards deteriorate relative to the rest of society.

**How does social class affect educational attainment?**

As the ESRC point out, British sociologists all tend to agree that qualifications are the best predictor of whether a child will gain a high earning middle-class job. However they also point out that there are unequal success rates between social classes at school and unequal entry and success rates in post- compulsory education.

Government data reveals significant differences between the educational attainments of the differing social classes. In 2008, 35% of the working class pupils obtained five or more good-grade GCSEs, compared with 63 per cent of children from middle class families. While the proportion of poorer children getting degrees has risen by just 3 per cent, the increase among those from wealthier backgrounds is 26 per cent.

The reasons for the development of this pattern are complex. It could be to do with home or schools, or it could be related to cultural or material deprivation. Sociologists, Bynner and Joshi (2002) used longitudinal birth cohort data and discovered that the link between class and educational underattainment is clear and years of government policy have had little impact on this inequality.

In 1999, West et al found that there was a 66% correlation between free school meals and low school attainment. Levacic and Hardman in 1999 also pointed out the relationship between free school meals and poor GCSE grades. O'Keefe found that there was a measurable relationship between free school meals and higher levels of truancy. Jefferis (2002) found an unarguable link between class and attainment. She studied nearly 11,000 children born from March 3 to 9, 1958. Maths, reading and other ability tests measured the educational attainment of the children at ages seven, 11 and 16. At the age of 33 their highest educational achievement was recorded. Her research team found the gap in educational attainment between children of higher and lower social classes widened as time went on - it was greatest by the age of 33.

At university level, social class inequalities still have an effect. Wakeling suggested in 2002 that a lower class degree and rich parents are more likely to lead to a student taking up post-graduate studies than the highest level university degrees and a modest background. Boliver (2006) found that only 35% of candidates from semi/unskilled manual class origins applied to a Russell Group university (one of the top 100 universities in the UK), in contrast to 65% of those from professional backgrounds. Machin and Vignoles (2005) conducted research on links between higher education and family background, focusing particularly on the experiences of two cohorts of individuals born in 1958 and 1970. They claim that links between educational achievement and parental income / social class strengthened during this period.

The Social Mobility Commission, reporting in 2009, found that social class accounts for much of the gap in attainment between higher and lower achievers. They reported that the gap widens as children get older.

In addition, it was claimed that increased spending on education has favoured the middle classes. In other words division between the social classes is widening.

**What is the relationship between social class, criminality and inequality in the UK?**

Maguire points out that the prison population tends to consist of young, male, poorly educated people who are likely to have experienced difficult or deprived childhoods and many of whom come from ethnic minority or mixed ethnic backgrounds. In 1992, 40 % of male prisoners had left school before the age of sixteen. People from lower social class backgrounds are significantly more likely to appear in victim and conviction statistics than people from wealthier backgrounds and it is a matter of argument as to whether they commit more crime, or they are more likely to be convicted if they do commit crimes.

In the past, much analysis of criminal behaviour worked on the false assumptions that crime statistics were an accurate representation of crime and that conviction rates gave a fair representation of criminal behaviour. Self report studies show that the majority of the population have broken the law and that middle class crimes can often be very serious indeed. For example, Murphy et al (1990) showed that football hooliganism is not limited to the working classes and Pearson (1987) found that drug offences occur in all social classes. White collar crime and corporate offences receive very little attention from the news media in comparison with youth crime such as knife crime. Levi (1993) pointed out that official statistics do not include tax fraud cases as these are rarely prosecuted by the police or followed up by the criminal justice system. Snider points out that capitalist states are unwilling to pass laws that regulate business or challenge the rights of the rich to make money. Karstedt (2004) estimates that middle class crimes such as car tax avoidance, tax fraud and damaging items once worn in order to return them to shops may cost the UK something in the region of £14 billion each year. Braithwaite, as early as 1979, concluded that working class children and adults commit the types of crime that are targeted by the police and do so at higher rates than middle class people.

There is also research evidence to show that some forms of crime are linked to poverty and deprivation. Gang crime is especially prevalent in areas of deprivation where there are fewer opportunities for work. Brodie et al (2000) and Hope and Shaw (1988) found disadvantaged communities to be vulnerable to youth crime. It is estimated that 40% of crime takes place in about 10% of local authority areas. Stratesky (2004) links this phenomenon to the concentration of power and social exclusion in post industrial communities. Willott and Griffin (1999) found that working class men in prison justified their criminal behaviour by claiming that they were supporting their families. Furthermore, because they were effectively excluded from society, they could not then be expected to follow its rules. It could be argued that these accounts are self- serving because the victims of crime are often the very weakest in the community. Living in a poor and deprived community is also to live at risk of being a victim of crimes such as car theft, vandalism, anti-social behaviour, burglary and violence. Hughes et al (2002) suggest that more than half of victims of crime have already previously been victimised. This acts as evidence that some types of crime are more likely to be associated with working class status than others, particularly crimes against property and the person.

**Are there class inequalities in the experience of health?**

The over-arching factor affecting health inequality in the UK is social class. Study after study shows that people born in poor families are low birth weight, are more likely to die as babies, grow up with poor health, are vulnerable to disabling disease and impaired development and they die early. Their children will experience poor life chances so health inequality runs in families. Some of these health inequalities are due to patterns of poor life style so that obesity and smoking related illnesses are also diseases of poverty and deprivation. Children born in poverty and deprivation are also vulnerable to high risk behaviour such as drug abuse, binge drinking and sexual transmission of disease. Furthermore, in 2002, the Office for National Statistics said that inequalities of health and life expectancy between social classes were widening.

Spicker points out that figures from the UK show that people in lower social classes, including children, are more likely to suffer from infective and parasitic diseases, pneumonia, poisonings or violence. Adults in lower social classes are more likely to suffer from cancer, heart disease and respiratory disease. He also underlines the point that there are inequalities in access to health care according to social class, so that the poorest people live in areas with fewer doctors, more difficult access to major hospitals and poorer services. Wheeler et al, working on 2001 Census data also found that areas with the highest levels of poor health tend to have the lowest numbers of doctors and other health professionals (other than nurses).

They also discovered that areas with high levels of poor health tend also to have high numbers of their population providing informal care for family and friends. There is lower take-up of preventative medicine such as vaccination and routine screening for disabling conditions among working class people. This called the inverse care law.

Discounting theories that suggest the working class are genetically weaker, then the unavoidable conclusion is that poverty leads to ill health through poor nutrition, housing and environment. This is exacerbated through cultural differences in the diet and fitness of different social classes, and in certain habits like smoking. Tim Spector (2006), an epidemiologist found that social class has an impact on how the body ages, irrespective of diet and bad habits. In a study of 1,500 women, he discovered that there is a link between class and poor health. He claims that the cause is that people from lower social backgrounds are more likely to feel insecure, especially at work, and suffer low self-esteem and a sense of lacking control over their lives. He claims that the stress this causes creates damage at a cellular level that accelerates ageing. Support for this theory can be found in the fact that studies consistently show that people from lower social classes experience higher levels of mental ill-health, with particularly high rates of depression and anxiety. There is additional health risk from many working class jobs. Males in manual jobs are more than twice as likely to get occupational lung cancer. Bladder cancer is also work-related, associated with work in industrial settings. For nearly all conditions the risk of heart disease, cancer, stain injury and stress is higher for those in working class occupations rather than managerial jobs in the same industry.

**Class change and sociological theory**

Social class is undoubtedly changing significantly and this has prompted a number of debates as to the meanings of these changes and the impact that they have on class. Marxists have a problem because Marx suggested that people would develop a class consciousness and overthrow capitalism. Clearly, this has not happened, in fact people are less aware of class as a social dynamic. There are different explanations for this.

**What is proletarianisation?**

Proletarianisation is a Marxist concept that sees the middle-class as identifying increasingly with working- class identity. Applied research has focused upon using case studies to examine whether non-manual work is becoming increasingly similar to manual work. Neo-Marxists like Erik Wright or Harry Braverman claim that proletarianisation is progressing at a reasonable pace. In contrast, neo-Weberians like David Lockwood and John Goldthorpe have always vigorously argued against it. One reason for this conflict of views is that different meanings of proletarianisation are adopted in order to measure it.

Neo-Marxists such as Wright and Braverman argue that routine white-collar workers are no longer middle class. They consequently see such jobs and even some 'professions', such as nursing and teaching, as particularly prone to proletarianisation. Braverman argues that deskilling in the workplace affects both manual and non-manual work, causing him to argue that routine white-collar workers have joined the mass of unskilled employees. As such they are part of the working class, they are 'proletarianised'. Braverman argues that deskilling and the loss of the social and economic advantages non-manual jobs enjoyed over manual work, are the key factors behind the growth of proletarianisation. In addition, many workers have lost the control and autonomy they enjoyed 20 years or so in the workplace. A good example is the university lecturers Wright cited as example of 'semi-autonomous workers' in a contradictory class location. Many university lecturers are very poorly paid and on short term contracts. Many earn less than primary school teachers. In addition they are subject to performance scrutiny and time monitoring. Many professionals in education are now subject to clocking in and out like factory workers.

It has been argued by some feminists, such as Rosemary Crompton, that women are more prone to proletarianisation than men, in the sense that they experience poorer promotional opportunities. In examining the work of clerks (Crompton and Jones) they found that only a low level of skill was required and that computerisation seemed to accentuate proletarianisation. However, Marshall et al have challenged the idea of proletarianisation. They found both male and female routine white collar workers reported greater levels of autonomy than those in the working class. They found that it was mainly manual workers who felt their work had been deskilled. In contrast, the perceptions of over 90 per cent of male and female non-manual workers were that neither skill levels nor autonomy had significantly diminished. However, they did find that personal service workers such as receptionists, check-out operators and shop assistants lacked a sense of autonomy in a manner similar to the working class. Since this group is composed primarily of female workers, this supports the idea that women are more prone to proletarianisation.

Recent research by Clark and Hoffman-Martinot (1998) has highlighted a growing number of casual or routine workers who spend their working day in front of a VDU and/or on the telephone.

**How have contemporary models of class developed?**

As we have seen a range of neo-Marxist and neo- Weberian models of class have developed in the past 50 years or so adapting and interpreting the ideas of Marx and Weber. There is a consensus that the size and make-up of the working-class is shrinking as we move to a post-industrial society, however, there are markedly different interpretations about the meanings and consequences of this change.

• Neo-Weberians such as John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood have focused upon occupational categories within a market power context.

• Neo-Marxists argue that the critical issue is whether the working-class are 'falsely conscious'.

• A third group, the postmodernists have argued that class is dead; having lost its significance as asource of identity. Consumption, they argue, has become the main definer of people in society.

**What do postmodernists say about class changes?**

Postmodernists would question whether class and class identities are meaningful concepts anymore,arguing it makes more sense to speak of a fragmented society with identity increasingly derived from consumption rather than issues associated with production, such as occupation. According to a Postmodern vision, people are seen to acquire their identities as consumers rather than as producers. Status differences (now based on consumption) were seen no longer as sharp and divisive, but loose and cross-cutting. People's consumption became home-centred in the post-war period, rather than communal, and their identities as consumers became constructed from images that came into their homes through the rapidly expanding media. The mass popular culture that resulted seemed more 'real' than experiences outside the home and at the workplace.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu researched the relationship between consumption and class. He found that consumption patterns varied not only between classes but within them too. He argued that people thus use consumption to both establish and express their social difference. Bourdieu draws from both the work of Marx and Weber in his analysis that consumption and class are interrelated influences on identity. He argues social divisions are not shaped by economic capital alone but introduces his important concept of cultural capital that he sees as shaping lifestyle including promoting education success, sports and leisure activities. However, he argues that cultural capital has to have symbolic status and be recognized within the society as having high status.

***(Source J Griffiths)***

**Key concepts**

**Pair Up and use the 4 B’s to define the key concepts and ideas**.

Affluent worker

Class

Class indicator

Deference

Deskilling

Embourgeoisement thesis

Health inequality

Inverse care law

Life chances

Low pay workers

Manual workers

National Minimum Wage

NS-SEC

Professional people

Redundant

Registrar General's Index of Social Class

Risk behaviour

Stratification system

Subjective

Underclass

**Rally Coach** 

1. Outline and explain two areas of life where there are social class inequalities. For each, give two different types of evidence to support the view that inequality is significant.

2. What is meant by objective and subjective views of social class?

3. Give some examples of ways of measuring social class and evaluate them

4. What is the proletarianisation thesis and what evidence is there to support it?

5. What evidence is there of a growing underclass and how has this been interpreted?

6. How does class impact on educational achievement, health and criminality?

7. What evidence is there of greater wealth inequalities in the UK today?

8. How do postmodernists interpret class and inequality in Britain today?