

# **The Class(less) Society**

## **A Comparative Analysis of Interpretations of Social Class in Austria and the UK**

While social class has been marginalized as an explanatory variable throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, it has become popular again in the recent years. Nevertheless, there is little consensus on what social class actually is, which seriously hinders the debate of its importance in today's societies. Today's most prominent social classification schemes are either based on theoretical deliberations. To generate a broad understanding of social class and its effects within societies, qualitative research is desperately needed.

The aim of my research is to fill up a bit of this gap and to inform research on social class and aid in policy generation to tackle social inequality. To do so, I will conduct a qualitative research project that is based on focus groups. In these focus groups, the participants will discuss what social class means to them and how it influences one's life. Two focus groups will be conducted in the UK and two in Austria. In each country one group will be recruited from university students and one from industrial workers.

The focus groups will be moderated by the researcher and the size will be between 5-10 people. A second researcher is included in the focus group who takes up the role of the observer and does not interact with the participants but takes observation notes. Additionally to the recording and the observation notes, the participants are asked to fill out a short survey at the end of the discussion. In this survey they are confronted with different academic definitions of class (see below) and are asked to rate them on how accurate they explain the division of the societies they live in. The recording of the discussion, the observation notes and the survey allow for triangulation of data.

University students were mainly chosen because of their accessibility by the researcher and the fact that in both countries university students over-proportionally come from higher strata of society. The second group investigated are industrial workers. Not only are they chosen because of their contrary socio-economic position to most university students but also because of an expected high awareness of issues regarding social class.

The recruitment of the two groups will require different channels. The researcher has direct access to university students in both countries. Channels that will be used to recruit them are handouts hung in relevant location (e.g. common rooms in university buildings and cafés and bars frequently visited by students), posts in relevant social media groups (e.g. 'Cambridge Graduate Students' and 'Politikwissenschaften Uni Wien'), own social media wall and personal contacts.

To recruit industrial workers, the social media and personal contacts will be used as well, but in comparison to recruiting university students, they will be less effective. To tackle this problem, the

researcher will also approach relevant labour organisations (e.g. industrial trade unions and workers' councils) as well as the management of relevant companies.

When recruiting, the researcher will aim at a 'diversity of voices', meaning that we will try to recruit people from different nationalities, genders, age, companies/subjects... etc. It is important though that this is not misunderstood as aiming for representativeness.

The focus group discussions will be transcribed and then analysed, both individually and in comparison to each other. This analysis will be conducted with a social constructivist approach. The interpretation of social class is viewed as being a contested content within the 'social stock of knowledge' and through their interaction, the participants negotiate the meaning of social class. Additionally, the moderator and even the observer are part of this negotiation of meaning. The interpretations of social class are therefore not 'discovered' in the focus group, but rather 'created'. Charmaz (2014) created a research concept that takes up these considerations by combines the Grounded Theory programme with a social constructivist approach which is embraced in this research. The analysis will be supported by atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software.

The final step is to compare the 'patterns of interpretation' of social class with popular academic definitions of class. Four different definitions of social class were chosen: Marx' concept of class, an occupation based concept (ILO, 2007), a social class concept based on lifestyle (Savage et al. 2013) and on based on the position within a political struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

These definitions of social class and their classification systems were chosen because of their prominent position within the academic field.

## **Key literature**

Charmaz, K., 2014. Constructing grounded theory / Kathy Charmaz., 2nd edition. ed., SAGE: Los Angeles.

International Labour Organisation (2007): ISCO-08 Structure, index correspondence with ISCO-88 <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco08/> (Access: 1/12/2018)

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Savage, M., Devine, F., Cunningham, N., Taylor, M., Li, Y., Hjellbrekke, J., Le Roux, B., Friedman, S., Miles, A., 2013. A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment. *Sociology* 47: London, 219–250.