The Great British Class Survey: calculating economic, social and cultural capital in order to analyse social class

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The largest ever study of class in the UK, the Great British Class Survey, is set to release results next month. **Mike Savage** *explains that the novel approach, which measures an individual's resources in economic, social and cultural terms, provides a more accurate depiction of social class.*

In April 2013, the first results of the BBC's Great British Class Survey (GBCS) will be launched, in a simultaneous publication in the British Sociological Association's (BSA) journal Sociology, and in a plenary address at the BSA's annual Conference. The BBC are anticipating that the results will be a very important social science story and plan to feature them on their news channels, including radio, television and the web.

The Great British Class Survey is one of the most exciting ventures in digital social science which has yet been attempted. Launched in January 26th 2011, more than 161,000 people have completed a 20 minute web survey, which makes this the largest ever study of class in the UK, with unusually detailed information on how social class maps onto specific occupations, geographical locations, and even the particular university which respondents went to. In a period when there is an intensifying interest in the accentuation of social inequality, this project promises to deliver the most sophisticated and detailed understanding of 'the state of the nation' that we might posses.

Economic, social and cultural capital

The aim of this project was to develop a new approach for analysing social class. Traditionally a person's class was defined by their employment situation, notably their job, but myself and Fiona Devine are at the forefront of a new group of sociologists who are seeking a more culturally sophisticated approach to class, influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. I was part of the team that wrote the influential study; Culture, Class, Distinction, which has attracted international interest and led to duplicate studies in several nations in Europe and South America. The approach argues that a person's social class should be seen as the amalgam of three separate dimensions: economic, social, and cultural. To measure an individual's 'resources' in each of these dimensions, sociologists look not only at economic capital (income, savings, house value, etc), but also social capital (the number, and status of people one knows), and cultural capital (the extent and nature of cultural interests and activities). In the GBCS we designed a web survey with measures of all three of these forms of capital, to see how they contribute to a person's overall class.

The survey is still live and is an enjoyable experience to complete. It includes some innovative questions, including one asking you to indicate whether you know someone socially from no less than 37 different occupations, allowing us to explore social networks in unusual depth. There are also numerous questions on cultural tastes and interests, which have allowed us to unpack a more complex and age differentiated understanding of cultural capital than was evident from previous studies. At the end of the survey you are given an indication of how you compare with others and what your relative stocks of cultural, social and economic capital are.

A nationally representative class system

The use of web surveys is controversial, and indeed it transpired that the GBCS web survey suffered from a strong selection bias, with participants being predominantly drawn from well-educated social groups. To overcome this we ran a second identical survey (with survey company GFK) with a sample of people that represent the population of the UK as a whole. We have used the data from the two surveys in parallel. We are able to define nationally representative class groups using the GFK survey and through linking this to the web survey were able to uncover

detailed information from the GBCS for each class group about education, cultural/leisure activities, jobs/income/savings and geography. This offers unparalleled insights into the organisation of class inequality today.

How the class groups were identified

We asked a series of questions about income, house value, savings, cultural and leisure activities and what jobs your friends do. From the answers we were able to determine a person's economic, social and cultural capital scores. We did latent class analysis using these scores to determine the shape of the British Class system. The results of this latent class analysis will be published on April 3rd and those interested are encouraged to follow this blog. Based on its results, the BBC will be launching a new questionnaire on its web site which will allow respondents to quickly gain a sense as to which of the new classes they belong to.

Although we expect the initial launch of these findings to attract great interest, the data set is very rich and will form the basis of numerous papers and a book length study written by the team. I have been awarded an ESRC Professorial Fellowship from April 1st, supported by a post-doc which will provide resources for further analysis. In addition, at some point in 2014, the data will be made publicly available through the UK Data Archive, who have already given great support in cleaning the data.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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