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Tracing the roots back to Plato and Aristotle, it can be argued that “Differences among men have been the subject of speculation and investigation for thousands of years” (Bendix & Lipset 1964 [1953], p. 7). All known societies have been characterized by inequality in the distribution of resources, and social stratification analysis aims to describe and explain these differences. There are several ways in which this topic can be analyzed (see Grusky, Ku, and Szelenyi, 2008). Theoretically, one may argue that social and economic inequality is produced by two types of matching processes in the labor market: Employers match social positions (jobs, occupations) with unequal rewards (earnings); and, looking for jobs, individuals are matched with these positions, thereby receiving unequal rewards (Sorensen & Kalleberg, 1994). The degree of inequality in access to resources such as earnings varies across time and place, and comparative analyses have revealed cross-national differentiation in stratification processes, partly related to welfare state arrangements and national policies (Birkelund, 2006).

Social stratification research has occupied a prominent place in sociology for a long time, and as new groups have entered the labor market (such as women and immigrants), their outcomes of the matching process, in particular their access to prestigious and awarding positions, have also been important topics for modern stratification research (Birkelund, 1992; Heath et al., 2007). Thus today, social stratification analysis comprises a range of topics, including social mobility, economic inequality, labor market inequalities, ethnic stratification, gender inequality, family patterns, educational attainment, health inequality, the stratification of cultural consumption, lifestyles, values and attitudes.

This volume of Comparative Social Research includes 12 papers discussing unsolved issues and new developments within class and stratification analysis. One section addresses theoretical and conceptual definitions of social class, another section includes papers elaborating different research designs, a third section contributes by decomposing social class and empirically looking at co-variates, and the last section includes discussions on methods and measurements.
THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSIONS

The three papers in this section include theoretical and conceptual discussions, such as the definition of social class, how social mechanisms can be elaborated and tested, and a discussion on occupational segregation by cognitive ability.

Theoretical Definition of Social Class

Carl Le Grand and Michael Tåhlin provide a theoretical discussion of contemporary class theory, followed by empirical investigations and constructive suggestions to improve our understanding of social class in modern capitalist societies. Using data from 11 European countries they find tight links in the labor market between social class, occupational prestige, and wages which are strongly associated with skill requirements of jobs, and only weakly tied to other positional assets, such as power relations at work. The authors therefore argue that the "iron law of inequality" in modern labor markets contradicts the usual theoretical definitions of social class, be it Goldthorpe or Wright's. Contemporary class theory might improve, they suggest, by reforming the theoretical and operational definition of social class, emphasizing skill requirements of jobs, economic efficiency, and social equilibrium.

Social Mechanisms: Agent-Based Modeling

Inspired by his former teacher, Raymond Boudon, Gianluca Manzo develops an agent-based model to test social mechanisms involved in educational attainment. Instead of just describing these patterns, Manzo wants to come closer to a theoretical understanding of stability and changes in the social reproduction of educational inequality. Using French data, the paper starts by describing the strength of the origin effect on educational attainment. Manzo then develops a micro-founded formal model of the observed macro-level educational outcomes in which educational choices are modeled as a result of subjective ability/benefit evaluations and peer-group pressures.

Occupational Stratification by Cognitive Ability

A central psychometric thesis argues that occupations are cognitively stratified because some occupations require higher intelligence than others for successful performance. Therefore, the argument goes, occupations are increasingly stratified over time by cognitive abilities. Using cross-sectional and longitudinal data containing information on IQ tests of individuals and their occupations, Min-Hsiung Huang explores the correlations of occupational mean IQ scores, occupational minimum IQ scores, and occupational prestige, arguing that occupational segregation by cognitive ability is less intensive than the psychometric argument suggests.

RESEARCH DESIGNS

The papers in this section in various ways discuss alternative research designs, looking at the impact of demography, selection processes and utilizing an explorative design.

Intergenerational Mobility: The Importance of Demography

There is a long tradition in sociology describing intergenerational patterns of social mobility. Studies of social origin effects on educational attainment as well as studies of origin effects on social destination are usually based on data comprising families with at least one parent alive and at least one child. Thus, mobility is seen from the children's generation, asking where they come from and where do they arrive. An alternative approach, discussed by Steffen Hillmert, starts with the parent's generation, including partner choice and fertility in addition to the status attainment (educational attainment, occupational attainment, as well as family formation) of their children, thereby turning mobility analysis up-side down.

Modeling Selection Processes: Including Minorities into Class Analysis

Comparing the United States and the United Kingdom, Yaojin Li analyzes the assimilation of immigrants and second generation immigrants into labor market positions. Using long-term illness as an instrument variable to condition labor market position on access to work, she includes five minority groups in the United Kingdom and seven in the United States. The study documents interesting group differences over time in labor market positions in the two countries, leading to new topics of investigations, such as why are the outcomes so different for the Pakistani/Bangladeshi in the
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United Kingdom compared to the United States. Overall, the findings are more supportive to a revised straight-line perspective than the segmented assimilation theory.

The Dimensionality of Social Stratification and Lifestyles

Comparing France and Norway, Birkelund and Lemel design an explorative study to empirically measure if social stratification is best conceptualized as a one- or a two-dimensional social space. The analyses reveal a strong first latent dimension of social stratification, supporting a gradational stratification perspective rather than a two-dimensional approach. Mapping lifestyles clusters onto social space; separate for each country, the analysis reveals a more common pattern than might be expected, and the authors discuss the relevance of these analyses for the way we conceptualize lifestyles and social stratification.

OPENING BLACK BOXES

Opponents to class analysis have argued that class analysis can be compared to botanic, a descriptive classifying exercise where items (people) are grouped by a classification device, presumably because they belong to similar categories. The papers in this section open the “black box” of social class, by decomposing social class and/or including co-variates to social class.

Decomposing Social Origin Effects

Comparing the United States and Norway, with different educational institutions and financial risks associated with higher education, Liza Reisel analyses social origin effects on the likelihood of dropping out of higher education. By decomposing aggregated occupational class categories into measurements on parent’s educational and income resources, Reisel comes closer to a theoretical and empirical understanding of which aspects of socioeconomic origin matters most, in different national contexts.

Educational Attainment: Co-variates

Martin D. Munk analyses social origin effects on completion of upper secondary education, including more variables than usually found in educational attainment analysis. The Danish PISA data comprises a rich set of family background variables in addition to information on cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Including these variables, Munk argues that in addition to parents’ education and occupation, non-cognitive capacities, such as having drive and strong beliefs, are important for educational outcome.

Hidden Disadvantage: Non-Manual Workers

Classification schemes are vital for the outcomes of social research, and Delma Byrne and Selina McCoy critically discuss the implications of a new Irish classification of socioeconomic groups. Studying social origin effects on access to higher education in the Republic of Ireland, they show that the new classification scheme has leveled out the disadvantage of a specific group of children, namely those who grow up in the “other non-manual” occupational group.

MODELING TECHNIQUES AND MEASUREMENTS

This part includes three papers addressing modeling techniques and measurement problems.

Measuring Social Inequality

Ottar Hellevik has criticized the use of log-linear methods in social stratification and mobility analyses, arguing in favor of other measures of inequality, such as the Gini coefficient. In his paper, Hellevik summarizes his critique, claiming that methodological choices also have political implications, as when researchers using log-linear models conclude that egalitarian reforms have proven ineffective, whereas other measures of inequality would conclude opposite.

Measurements of Income Inequalities

Gary N. Marks discusses measures of income elasticity’s across countries. Income elasticity seems generally to be higher in the United States and United Kingdom than other so-called Western countries, and Marks
discusses these figures critically. Comparing economic and sociological research, Marks asks if the estimates of intergenerational income elasticity and correlations for the United States and United Kingdom are too high.

A New Educational Classification

Silke L. Schneider introduces the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011, covering almost all countries worldwide, maintained and documented by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. We may expect this classification to be particularly important in future comparative analysis of educational attainment, and Schneider also explains how the new classification can be adapted to existing data and cross-national surveys.

Gunn Elisabeth Birkelund
Editor

REFERENCES