

Not being able to see the ‘ones’ for the ‘threes’! To what extent do socio-economic categories aid our understanding of students’ family backgrounds and class experiences in the context of widening participation? (0248)

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Since the early 2000s, the system of choice for measuring social class in the UK has been the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) of seven occupational categories, plus an eighth category for the long-term unemployed. This replaced the previously used Registrar-General’s ABC1C2DE system, and was intended to provide a scientific approach that reflected contemporary occupational patterns in the UK more accurately.

The NS-SEC system has also been applied to higher education as a means of recording students’ social class to enable the demographic monitoring of entry profiles. For students aged below 21 on entry, it is their parents’ occupations that are classified using information provided on their UCAS application form. This has routinely revealed the existence of a social class gap in higher education participation rates between students whose parents fall into the highest (professionals and managers) and lowest (routine manual workers) categories.

This gap has been the basis for considerable policy developments over the last 10 years, including the ‘widening participation’ and ‘fair access’ agendas (DFEE 2000; DfES 2003; HEFCE 2007). Significant sums of public money has been invested to attempt to narrow this gap, both across the sector as a whole and within elite universities but progress has been limited and a substantial gap persists.

This has led some researchers to question the validity of the NS-SEC system (Harrison & Hatt 2010) as a policy and practice tool, finding that around a quarter of students’ do not have a social class defined on entry due to difficulties with data collection and processing. Doubts have grown since the publication of data showing radical improvements in participation from less affluent neighbourhoods (HEFCE 2010) that are not reflected in social class mix by NS-SEC (DBIS 2009). This mismatch suggests that prevailing approach based on parental occupation is simply not capturing radical social change.

This paper relates to a small-scale research project at a large multisite urban university in England with a mix of ‘recruiting’ and ‘selecting’ courses and a diverse student body. All first year young UK undergraduates were e-mailed inviting them to attend an interview about “their student experience”. From the responses, 65 students were selected on the basis of a quota sample representing all seven NS-SEC categories (as determined from their UCAS application form), as well as from the ‘unknown’ group who either hadn’t provided parental occupation information or whose information could not be categorised.

The sample students were interviewed by a member of the research team on a semi-structured one-to-one basis for an average of 45 minutes. The questions focused on:

- Their family background; including parental occupation and education, home life, siblings' educational history, familial wealth and values.
- Their educational background; including school attended, work experience, peer attitudes and parental support.
- Their entry into higher education; including application process, course and institutional choice, career aspirations and long-term goals.
- Their initial experiences of higher education; including finance, accommodation, social life and overall happiness.

The interviews were transcribed and work is on-going to analyse the data using a grounded theory approach. At the time of writing, preliminary findings can be reported, but more detailed work will be reported at the conference.

The principal finding is that the NS-SEC categorisations made for the students on the basis of their UCAS application forms did not reliably reflect the reality of their parents' occupations. In fact, it was often difficult to determine how the categorisation had been made on the basis of the students' circumstances as reported in the interviews.

Furthermore, there was commonly a disjuncture between the occupations of the student's parents and the other facets of social class in terms of income, wealth, education, values and media choices. Students who described some typical middle class occupations for their parents then also described a working class family environment or one that was in class transition – and *vice versa*.

An important component of this disjuncture was the relationship history of the student's parents. Around a third of those interviewed had grown up in a 'fractured family' of one type or another, with divorces, deaths and remarriages. These changes affected the recorded socio-economic data as there were inconsistencies over whether data was recorded for birth parents or step parents. Family restructuring also appeared to have an unpredictable effect on the student, providing positive educational benefits in some instances, but a strong distraction and disruptive effects in others.

In a notable minority of cases, the student was part of a family that had relatively recently settled in the UK and this added a further component to the social class realities in which the student was living, whether this meant that there were atypical values driving their educational aspirations (e.g. to escape poverty) or that their parents were working below the status that they had done in their country of origin, artificially suppressing their NS-SEC categorisation.

The interviews revealed the complexity of attempting to measure social class through the crude categorisation of students' parents' occupations. The interviews have led the research team to

estimate a possible high error rate in the categorisations, even allowing for the 'unknown' group; this would suggest that as few as one in four students are correctly assigned to an NS-SEC category.

This prompts strong questions about the appropriateness of using the current NS-SEC system for policy development, institutional monitoring, targeting interventions and the allocation of resources. The in-built error means that tracing the results of a policy initiative would be prove very challenging and this may explain the apparent lack of progress on the 'widening participation' and 'fair access' agendas. It is questionable whether it is even possible to build a robust system of categorisation without a more purposeful approach to data collection and processing.