What’s wrong with socio-economic status?

David Blane.
ESRC International Centre for Life Course Studies in Society and Health (ICLS).
Origins of measure.

- USA 1950s.
- Lay persons asked to sort 20-30 index occupations according to their prestige (undefined). Broadest consensus identified.
- All other occupations assigned to nearest index occupation on the basis of similarity of education and income.
Socio-economic status.

• Until recently socio-economic status was the most widely used concept in quantitative social studies; operationalised by education, occupation, income and, at its more sophisticated end, their relations to an underlying latent variable.

• The main exception was UK Registrar General’s social class.
Registrar General’s classification

• Used 1911-2000, in one form or another, in UK official statistics.

• Individual assigned to a social class on the basis of their occupation or, for family dependents, head of household’s occupation.

• Criticised for lack of conceptual clarity (general social standing in the community; level of skill) and lack of empirical validation.
Socio-economic status: my take.

• SES has same problems as RG classification plus its vague generality makes in a blunt analytic tool.

• Think of the advances made when the idea of body size was fragmented into its dimensions: height, weight, waist circumference & so forth.

• Perhaps something similar is happening with crystalline and fluid intelligence?
Kreiger’s critique of the term *socio-economic status*.

- The concept of socio-economic status obscures the distinction between a person’s position within the social structure (*social class*) and the honour and prestige given to them by their community and culture (*social status*).
- Better to use the general term *socio-economic position* and to aim for precision about the dimension of interest.
SEP base model: my take.

Dimensions of socio-economic position:
• Social class.
• Social status.
• Material circumstances.

Probabilistic indicators of socio-economic position:
• Deprivation index of area of residence.
• Education (length or qualifications).
Social class.

- Social class is an occupation’s place within the social division of labour, conceptualised as the balance between service contract and labour contract.
- Operationalised as the terms and conditions of employment: payment by the hour, week, month or year; chances of promotion; level of autonomy & supervision and so forth.
Office for National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC).

- Measure of social class used in UK official statistics since 2001 decennial census.
- Theoretical basis explicit (previous slide).
- Validated against UK Labour Force Survey.
- Several forms, with progressive aggregation into most commonly used seven class version.
- Features include: not hierarchical; no manual/non-manual split; self-employed.
Social status.

- Think: mediaeval *estates*, Hindu *castes*, USA *race*, Ulster *religion*, British *honours*.
- Explicitly hierarchical, but only within its wider culture.
- Involves the anthropologists’ indicators of eating together, worshipping together and marrying together.
- Best operationalised within contemporary Britain by Cambridge Scale which ranks people by the occupations of their closest friends.
Material circumstances.

• Conceptualised as income & wealth; measured as such or by indicators like housing tenure, Council Tax level or motor car ownership.

• Measurement problems include: peasantry; tax avoidance & evasion; market fluctuations (value of houses & shares); household equivalence & assumption of sharing.
Class, status & material circumstances.

• Social class, social status and material circumstances tend to vary together, but they have some independence of each other: the penniless aristocrat or priest; the rich arms-dealer or brothel-keeper; members of parliament during the expenses scandal.

• Such independence can be used to investigate the pathways by which the social becomes biological.
Siegfried Geyer.

• Worked within the socio-economic status tradition.

• Showed that the three components of socio-economic status (education, occupation, income) relate differently to the different measures of health.

• Worth watching current work on German health insurance data.
Mel Bartley and Amanda Sacker.

Distinguished between class, status, material circumstances to show that each dimension, after controlling for the other two, had different pathways to health & disease:

- Social class through work stress & HPA axis.
- Social status through behaviour.
- Material circumstances through social support (no data on hazards).
Future challenges.

• Some one-third of life and most deaths now take place after the State Pension Age, making problematic social class allocation on the basis of occupation.

• New datasets containing high quality social and biological data (UKHLS, NCDS, ELSA) will allow investigation of social-biological transitions.

• Developing a life course perspective.
References.