

Social Stratification in Meaningful Work: Occupational Class Disparities in the United Kingdom

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Sociologists have long been interested in the meaning workers derive from their jobs. The issue has garnered increasing academic and policy attention in recent years with the concept of 'meaningful work', yet little is known about how access to it relates to social stratification. This paper addresses this issue by exploring how the meaningfulness of jobs—as rated by their incumbents—is stratified across classes and occupations in a national survey of 14,000 working adults in the United Kingdom.

KEY FINDINGS

- Employees in routine and manual jobs find their work less meaningful than those in managerial and professional jobs on average, although the differentials are rather modest.
- Small employers and own account workers tend to report similar levels of meaningfulness to those in higher managerial and professional occupations, implying a more nuanced class stratification than when it comes to economic advantage.
- Meaningfulness to a great extent depends on intrinsic job quality. Job complexity and development opportunities explain much of the differences in meaningfulness between classes and occupations, and much of the overall variance in meaningfulness.
- The main exception is the specific of how useful workers perceive their jobs to be for society, in which a handful of occupations relating to health, social care, and protective services which cut across classes stand out from all other occupations, suggesting that social significance needs not coincide with organisational significance or purpose.
- In conclusion, modest stratification between classes and occupations in meaningful work is largely due to disparities in underlying job complexity and development opportunities. The extent to which these aspects of work can be improved, and so meaningfulness, especially in routine and manual occupations, is an open, yet urgent, question.



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