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Social comparisons and social order: issues relating to a possible re-study of 'W.G. Runciman's relative deprivation and social justice'

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SOCIAL COMPARISONS AND SOCIAL ORDER:  
ISSUES RELATING TO A POSSIBLE RE-STUDY OF W.G. RUNCIMAN'S  
*RELATIVE DEPRIVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE*

David Rose

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent literature relating to relative deprivation, reference groups and social comparisons and discusses some ideas for qualitative research which might assist in determining how one might replicate Runciman's *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (1966) in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. What sorts of social comparisons do people now make and are their reference groups as restricted as they appeared to be forty years ago? Following a brief review of the theoretical background on the importance of social comparisons, some key issues relevant to a re-examination of reference groups and relative deprivation are examined. This is complemented by a brief review of recent literature. Finally, there is an outline of some qualitative research designed to sensitise us to the problems which might be involved in a re-study of Runciman's seminal work and thus examines people's ideas about social comparisons, reference groups and views on social inequalities.

## NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This paper discusses some of the issues relating to a possible re-study based on W G Runciman's seminal book *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* first published in 1966. Runciman asked 'How does social order persist in the face of widespread social inequalities?' This is a question that has been at the heart of sociology from its beginnings. Moreover, it is the issue that gives the study of social stratification its central position within the discipline, given that stratification is concerned with the analysis of the unequal distribution of power in society and its potential for social conflict. On the basis of both historical and survey research, Runciman concluded that, in terms of levels of income satisfaction, individuals use only a narrow range of social comparisons. That is, they tend to compare themselves with others in similar situations. Because of this, they do not appreciate the full extent of the income range or of inequality more generally. Hence, income inequality is tolerated (and by extension so are other forms of inequality) and so does not become a source of social conflict or schism. The question is whether people still tend to make narrow social comparisons forty years on from Runciman's study and therefore whether this continues to be of importance in terms of social order.

**Social Comparisons and Social Order:  
Issues Relating to a Possible Re-study of W.G. Runciman's  
*Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*<sup>1</sup>**

**David Rose**

**September 2006**

***Introduction***

Why is it that the majority of people accept social and economic arrangements that give such a large share of income, wealth and other rewards to so few people? This is a question that has often been posed in the social sciences. One possible explanation of the acceptance of widespread inequalities derives from reference group theory. It has been argued that most people have a relatively restricted range of reference groups with which they compare themselves. Individuals tend to make comparisons with others like themselves and so, as a result, do not appreciate the full range of inequality. This was the conclusion drawn by Runciman (1966) in a seminal study. His findings were re-affirmed by further research in the 1970s.

However, more recently, it has been suggested that social change in the intervening period may have had effects on the range of comparisons people are able to make. In particular, it has been argued that the growth of the mass media has exposed people to a broader range of lifestyles and the expansion of the consumer society has created ever greater desires. This has led to a 'reflexive individualism'. In these circumstances, it is thought that people's horizons will have expanded so that they no longer have such restricted points of reference for their social comparisons.

Hence, we have an interesting issue that calls for empirical research. Are reference groups still restricted or not? And with what consequences for people's perceptions of society and social justice? This paper reviews some of the relevant literature on social comparisons and briefly discusses the type of initial research that is required before one could attempt a re-study of the macrosociological problems raised in W.G. Runciman's *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*.

***Theoretical Background***

Central to Runciman's study was the issue of how social order persists in the face of inequalities of class and condition. Of course, this is a question that has been at the heart of macrosociology from its beginnings (see, for example, Wrong, 1994). Moreover, it is the issue that gives social stratification its central position within the discipline, given that stratification is concerned with the analysis of the unequal distribution of power in society and its potential for social conflict. As Runciman (1966: 3) noted: 'all societies are inequalitarian. But what is the relation between inequalities in a society and the feelings of acquiescence or resentment to which they give rise?'.

In examining the problem of order in the face of social and economic inequalities, sociologists have discussed how privilege has been legitimated and wants have been regulated. References to these issues are central to the work of all three of sociology's founding fathers – Durkheim, Marx and Weber. From their work we can see how the idea of social comparisons and social evaluation provides one possible explanation of both social solidarity and schism (Lockwood 1992). That is, individuals have various ways in which they might evaluate their own position in the social hierarchy: they have both reference points and reference groups. For example, individuals may compare their current position in terms of their own biographies and future expectations: they may make *intra*-personal comparisons. Equally, however, they may make *inter*-personal comparisons. One immediate context for this is the family, comparing oneself with parents or siblings. Another potential source of comparison is friends, colleagues and workmates and a third would be members of any interactional status group to which one belongs. Whatever the source of social comparison, there can be little doubt, as Lockwood (*op.cit*, pp.88-89) notes, that individuals do invest time and emotion in such comparisons and that this is important in terms of self-esteem.

Wilkinson (2000: 52) has made a similar point in proposing a theory of social comparisons for explaining the consistent finding of a class or income gradient in health. He argues that because human beings are reflexive, they know themselves in part through the eyes of others and imagine themselves through others' eyes. This is part of the foundation of human social life and at the heart of "what we mean when we call ourselves 'social beings'".

The relevance of such activities for social order has often been commented on. In particular, it has been suggested that most individuals are much more interested in and aware of how other proximate individuals are faring compared to them than they are with those in different social situations. People do not see the world in terms of the abstract categories of class that concern the sociologists, although they may be very aware of status divisions and rivalries with family and friends. Reference to wider social horizons remains exceptional, while comparisons with those near to one are both normal and safer, as we shall see.

This was the conclusion that Runciman arrived at in his study of *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (1966). Examining levels of income satisfaction, Runciman suggested that individuals used only a narrow range of reference groups with which to compare themselves. Because of this, they did not appreciate the full extent of the income range or of inequality more generally. There was little evidence of relative deprivation (RD) and few people thought others were doing better than themselves, especially among those at the lower end of the income distribution. Subsequent research in the 1970s, and at a time when incomes policies were at the heart of political debate, confirmed these findings (see Daniel 1975, Harrop 1979). Hence, income inequality (and by extension other forms of inequality) are not simply tolerated but matters about which most people remain ignorant. This, it is argued, is a major reason why inequality does not become a source of social conflict or schism.

Runciman's findings have become an accepted wisdom, although the fact is that his study was undertaken over forty years ago. Indeed, it is part of the conventional wisdom of sociology in general that people make comparisons on the basis of family, colleagues and friends rather than with society as a whole or abstract groupings within it (see, for example, Evans *et al*, 1992).

For a number of reasons, therefore, it would be interesting to inquire whether limited reference groups remain a major factor in the toleration (or ignorance) of inequality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More than forty years on from Runciman's study, is it still likely that reference groups are restricted and what relevance does this have for a theory of social order?

### ***Some issues relating to a re-study of Relative Deprivation and Social Justice***

If undertaken, a re-study of the issues raised by Runciman would be no straightforward matter. Re-studies never are, of course (see, for example APSA 1996). To begin with the obvious, we now live in a very different world from that of the early 1960s. For example, Runciman's survey assumed that most married women were housewives and husbands were breadwinners and thus that there was a single source of household income. Equally, the class structure of Britain was very different, with a large, male manual and muscular working class and a smaller, less differentiated middle class. Distinctions between manual and non-manual work were manifest and were clearly reflected in status structures both in the workplace and more widely. Hence, again, Runciman could ask questions which assumed people had this knowledge and he could also assume class-based reference groups. Also, the consumer society was just coming into being. It was the new age of the 'affluent worker'. Consumer goods which had once been the privilege of the few were now becoming more widely available. Thus, Runciman was able to tap people's consumer aspirations using very simple questions, some of which would now be outdated and/or meaningless (e.g. aspirations for one's wife to have a fur coat; the family to take a foreign holiday; etc. – see Annex 1, Qs 12 and 13). Affluence is now far more widespread and this may have led to an increasing awareness of consumer over producer as the basis for social identity (see Ransome 2005).

We might also ask whether other recent developments such as 'globalisation' and 'the information society' have in any way altered the basis on which people make social comparisons. In other words, have people's comparative reference groups altered? Some would argue that the growth of the mass media has expanded people's horizons. For example, 'reality' television and lifestyle programmes expose us all to the possibility of making comparisons beyond the smaller worlds in which we live our lives. Similarly, the internet could have broadened horizons and understandings. Most especially, the insatiable creation of wants generated by modern consumer capitalism may also have changed the basis of people's evaluations and expectations.

Some support for this kind of view comes from recent research by Hamilton (2003). His data show that '61 per cent of Britons believe that they cannot afford to buy everything they really need'. Even more startlingly 46 per cent of households with incomes over £35k pa and 50 per cent of those with incomes over £50k pa say this, too. It appears that there are the suffering rich as well as the suffering poor in



contemporary Britain! It is clear from Hamilton's study that the definition of what constitute the necessities of life goes way beyond those simply required to reproduce daily life. Making ends meet appears to have taken on wholly new dimensions. Yet at the same time, 87 per cent of Hamilton's sample agree that British society is too materialistic.

Hamilton suggests that there is a new kind of relative deprivation in Britain which is related to 'luxury fever'. People increasingly desire to emulate the lifestyles of the rich and famous. These lifestyles are both more apparent to more of the population and thought to be more attainable than in the past. Whatever the reality of this may be (and there are plenty of reasons for doubting such claims), the suggestion is that reference groups are no longer so restricted, but nor do these wider reference groups lead to increased resentment and feelings of relative deprivation. Rather they appear to generate aspirations, 'a scaling up of desire' and a 'relentless ratcheting up of standards' to the extent that we have all caught 'affluenza' (*op. cit.* p. 5).

Interestingly, given Hamilton's apparently contradictory findings regarding increasing wants alongside too much materialism, Wilkinson (1999a: 44) has asked whether 'each individual's desire for more income is more a desire to improve his (*sic*) relative standing in society than it is a desire for a higher level of material consumption'. This returns us to the heart of the debate within social stratification discussed at the beginning of this paper.

In the USA, Schor (1998) has suggested that social comparisons have indeed moved beyond the restricted reference groups of the past and that both television and other media are implicated to the extent that they reveal to us, for example, the luxurious lifestyles of others well above the average in terms of both income and consumption. These lifestyles may not be possible for most of us, but it appears that many approve of them and take some vicarious pleasure from them, too. Even if we cannot all consume at a rarefied level, the growth of consumer credit has ensured that we can all live beyond our incomes and take the waiting out of wanting. (Credit card debt in the UK has risen from £14 billion in 1996 to over £50 billion today). Nevertheless, it may be doubted whether awareness of celebrity lifestyles has significant effects for reference groups or any sense of relative deprivation. To be sure there are celebrity effects in terms of issues such as fashion and dieting and there is the lottery fantasy. These effects presumably vary greatly by class, life-cycle stage and age, but do celebrities really constitute reference groups that lead people into any sense of deprivation?

Wilkinson's (e.g. 1996; 1999a and b; 2000) work on relative deprivation and health, suggests another view. He argues that the more hierarchical and unequal a society is, the more this 'increases a sense of inferiority, shame and incompetence' (1999b: 496). This might also imply that social comparisons are in some way made across a wider spectrum of society. For example, he has stated that 'it is hard to believe that relative income is related to health unless those affected have some perception of their relative income or social position' (2000: 11). And he has referred to the Whitehall Studies as lending support for the idea of social comparisons as health determinants. Elsewhere he has argued that 'the fact that health seems to be influenced more by differences in income than by average levels of income suggests that cognitive processes of social

comparison are involved' (1999a: 42). Nevertheless, Wilkinson is less forthcoming on how social comparison occurs and who the reference groups might be. Those who have tried to explore this issue have found that social comparison groups in terms of income are difficult to identify; only the effects can be detected (e.g. Hagerty, 2000).

Other research suggests that our most important comparisons are still with those proximate to us, while accepting that the real range of rewards is just or at least an unalterable fact. This was the conclusion of the Essex class project in the 1980s (Marshall *et al*, 1989). In discussing the moral order of a capitalist society, we argued that most of our respondents appeared to be instrumental in their collectivism, pursuing self-interest rather than collective improvement. We saw this as a pragmatic response to a distributional order that was perceived to be in many ways unjust but equally unalterable. We described such views of the world as 'informed fatalism', an idea that was taken from Lockwood's discussion of Durkheimian theories of social order (*ibid*: Ch. 6 and see also Marshall *et al* 1985 and 1987). In this latter context, of course, the undoubted link between Durkheim's views on social disorder and the idea of relative deprivation should be recalled. As Lockwood has observed, the definition of relative deprivation as unfulfilled but *proper* expectations effectively underlies Durkheim's concept of anomie: the intolerable gap between wants and their satisfaction (see Lockwood, 1992: 72-75). The relevance of the nature of reference groups in this context hardly needs emphasising. One might argue that if there is a widening of reference groups to embrace the rich and famous, this ought to result in anomic dissatisfaction and be a threat to social order unless the reward system *is* somehow seen as legitimate or unalterable.

Of course, there are other potential explanations of the links between reference groups and social order. For example, Bradley (1996) has suggested that the cumulative effect of mass media, the information society, the expansion of worldwide consumer brands and various other processes associated with globalisation have led to the development of what she calls 'fractured identities' and 'reflexive individualism'. In Waters' (1995) terms, the world has become a single place. People may be more aware than in the past of the extent of inequality; the basis of their social comparisons may have altered and expanded, yet this has no effects for social order. Perhaps capitalism needs no moral legacy but only has to deliver the goods.

Another factor that undoubtedly needs to be considered is the effects of people's experience of social mobility, both their own and that of other's they know personally. Relative rates of mobility may be unchanging but absolute mobility rates are quite large. And it is absolute mobility that people witness in their everyday lives. We should therefore ask about the effects of inter-class mobility both on relative deprivation and on the relationships people shed and acquire as a result of mobility.

Indeed, Runciman himself has recently reflected on this and other relevant issues in considering the differences between the UK of 1945 and now. In a perceptive essay on what has happened to the Labour Party in the past sixty years, he identifies affluence as the single most important difference between society immediate post-war and that of today. In particular, he wishes to draw attention to 'first, the difference between then and now in what money can actually buy; and second, the difference in the shape of the distribution across the British population of the capacity to buy it'

(Runciman 2006: pp.19-20). What used to be regarded as luxuries for the few are now staples for the many. The class structure is no longer a triangle but a diamond, with a large middle class between small upper and lower classes. This has led to less interest in inequality as a political issue in the UK. In part, Runciman suggests, this is a consequence of changed attitudes towards social mobility. Relative mobility rates may still be such that middle class children are more likely than their working class counterparts to achieve the best middle class positions. However, absolute rates of mobility have ensured that far more people from working class backgrounds have come to fill middle class positions. Does this mean that more working class people today will identify with the mobile than with the immobile? Will they therefore tend to identify more with a middle class lifestyle? Or are other factors at work?

‘Perhaps...it is enough for people to believe that they and their families are becoming on average better-off year on year, and therefore no longer excluded from the access to goods and services which their parents and grandparents were. Or perhaps the difference is that the ownership of at least some property, of whatever kind, is now far more widespread...among those who traditionally had nothing but their labour to sell. Or perhaps the change of attitude is a symptom of a wider change in what used to be called, in a phrase now rarely heard, “class consciousness” and the old sense of collective identity of “us” against “them” is cross-cut by differences of lifestyle, ethnicity, gender and party allegiance.’ (*ibid*, p.21).

All these considerations suggest that any proposed re-study could not be achieved by simply replicating Runciman’s survey. First we have to take account of social and economic change over the last half-century; second we have to consider whether and how such change has affected issues related to social identities and comparisons; third, we would need to design new questions to tap the same conceptual issues as those addressed by Runciman. At the same time, we have to consider how social scientific understanding of relative deprivation, reference groups, social comparisons and social identity has developed.

### ***A Summary of Runciman’s Theory***

Before pursuing these issues further, let us recall what Runciman (1966 and 1989) argues.

Relative deprivation (RD) occurs when

1. A does not have X
2. A sees some other(s) (even himself at some past or future time) as having X
3. A wants X
4. A views it as feasible that s/he should have X

Crucially, RD necessarily involves a comparison with the imagined situation of another person or group – the reference group (RG), what Runciman calls ‘the comparative reference group’. For Runciman the ‘groups’ are social classes. Only comparative RGs are necessarily and ineluctably bound up by definition with RD.

There is also the ‘membership reference group’. This is ‘the starting-line for the inequality with the comparative RG by which a feeling of relative deprivation is engendered.’ Crucial to RD, therefore, are inequalities between and only between the MRG and the CRG.

So when we ask what RGs people might have, we need to know

1. what is their membership group?
2. what is their comparative group?

If (1) and (2) are the same or similar, RD is not felt, i.e. RGs are restricted.

### ***Classes and reference groups***

We need to discover whether reference groups remain restricted or whether they have become extended as affluence, the consumer society, consumer credit, home ownership, space for private lives, etc. have expanded (see Ransome 2005, Aldridge 2003, Slater 1996) and the mass media have developed. Is culture now more important than structure for an understanding of these issues? What about intra-personal, temporal comparisons? How important are these? What about temporal comparisons across generations? All these questions arise when we contemplate a re-study of Runciman’s *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* over forty years on.

Runciman deliberately avoided explicit hypotheses and only used his survey as a test of the evidence he drew for a historical analysis of the relationship between inequality and grievance in England between 1918 and 1962. He was also clear in taking a multi-dimensional approach – class, status and power inequalities were each examined in relation to issues of justice.

Harrop (1979) did have rather clearer hypotheses but also worked with class, status and power dimensions. In respect of RGs, Harrop hypothesized that because of the networks they have, but also because of lower social and cultural capital (not the terms he used, but what he meant) inequality induces limited comparisons among the ‘have nots’. The more limited comparisons are, the more satisfied people will be with their situation. The more satisfied they are with their situation, the less likely they will support egalitarian policies.

What he discovered was that there was no evidence of a relationship between RGs and satisfaction levels: that is, limited RGs did not produce relatively high satisfaction levels. He attributed this to the misplaced emphasis in RG theory on spatial comparisons (such as networks) compared with temporal comparisons as measured by whether people thought their own financial position had improved over the last few

years. In other words, people may be more likely to compare themselves with their own situation at an earlier time than with that of others at the same point in time.

Of course, it has always been accepted in the literature that there is an enormous range of possible RGs. The real question is which particular RGs are important for the context of our problem. Here we have to face the fact that, for any argument in relation to the problem of social order, RGs must be in some sense *macro* – classes or status groups. Runciman accepted that people might give a range of answers when asked to say who were people like themselves or who they compared themselves with, depending on the context. However, he argued that in the case where social inequality is the issue, answers would give a more stable pattern.

Thus Runciman, as well as Daniel (1975) and Harrop (1979), assumed that the most salient reference groups relate in some way to classes, hence the use in all these studies of the manual/non-manual divide in both questions and analysis. This assumes that class is the most important basis for social comparison but, if we are to believe many contemporary sociologists, this is increasingly unlikely to be true.

However, in another sense comparisons might be regarded as class based because of the relative homogeneity of the worlds in which people live i.e. in neighbourhoods of people who are generally like themselves, in contact at work with people like themselves, friends like themselves and family members like themselves – people who are likely to share the same ‘habitus’. In any case, if class is still the most salient membership RG, it might be at least disguised (‘misrecognised’ as Bourdieu might say) by networks.

Mention of Bourdieu is to introduce the single most influential class theorist of recent years. The ‘cultural turn’ in class analysis is in the ascendant and it is Bourdieu’s ideas that are being exploited by it. Clearly Bourdieu’s work is relevant to the problem of order. For this reason, a consideration of his work (e.g. 1984 and 1987), that of his critics (e.g. Swartz 1997, Weininger 2005, Jenkins 2002) and some of the work of cultural class analysts (e.g. Devine et al 2005, Lawler and Byrne 2005) is required. However, I share the reservations of others such as Crompton and Scott (2005) and Bottero (2004 and 2005) regarding the ‘cultural turn’.

It is true, of course, that underlying Bourdieu’s work is some kind of a theory of social order. Certainly, his main concern is with how stratified inequalities of hierarchy and domination both persist and get reproduced without powerful resistance - and indeed without the conscious recognition of actors. There may be some Durkheimian element here in terms of what produces social solidarity, although Bourdieu is clear that the social order is first and foremost a stratified one. In this respect his re-working of Weber’s ideas on class and status are very important to his overall concern with the legitimation of power (what he terms *symbolic violence*).

In explaining how social order is maintained, Bourdieu pays greatest attention to culture, its processes, resources and institutions (especially the educational ones). All cultural symbols and practices, through tastes and religion to science, are seen to embody interests and enhance social distinctions. It is the struggle over distinction

that is fundamental: the power to impose and legitimate lifestyles. In this sense, status struggles are the real issue, not that he calls them that.

This is because, in trying to come to terms with Weber's distinction between classes and status groups, Bourdieu annihilates the difference between the two by arguing that 'class' not only has an economic form but also a symbolic and social one. Class includes lifestyle, tastes, credentials, even at times, gender, etc. In other words classes are constellations of stratifying factors rather than having their basis in any one element such as the economic. Class is an expression for all forms of power and thus does not seem to have any difference in meaning from 'stratification'. This fusion of stratification concepts into the one class concept seems to be shared to some degree by all proponents of the 'cultural turn'. It is as if they are saying 'because it is difficult to see the separate effects of different stratifying factors in the world we immediately comprehend, let's not bother with having separate concepts either' (see also Bottero 2004 and 2005 for insightful comments along these lines). Lenin's view that 'everything is connected with everything else' has never seemed to me to be the basis for doing social science: it denies the role of theory as I understand it and thus makes the construction of hypotheses more difficult.

Of course, this is not to suggest that the recent work of, for example, Savage, Devine and their colleagues can be dismissed. They are also sceptical of some of Bourdieu's claims, seeing his approach as tending to economic determinism (see for example Devine and Savage 2005). Moreover, Savage (2000) makes clear that he is concerned to understand how the brute inequalities of class get 'effaced', an issue clearly of relevance to my project. However, he is less clear about why people tolerate inequalities. He argues that class identities are weak but that class still matters as a form of 'individualised awareness' (Savage et al 2001). Class may not determine identity but it is one resource with which it is constructed. People are seen as ambivalent about class and defensive when they discuss it. Above all people stress their 'ordinariness'. Savage's approach and interpretation of evidence in this respect has not gone unchallenged (see for example Payne and Grew 2005), although it does have echoes with the findings of some comparative survey analysis by Evans and Kelley, discussed below: the tendency for people to place themselves in the muddle of the middle of society.

### ***Recent evidence on social comparisons and social justice***

Other recent work does offer some clearer insights of value. For example, Wegener (1991) has suggested that views of macro justice and micro justice don't converge, indeed are opposed. Macro justice relates to beliefs about the justice of inequality in a society (most people think there is too much inequality) and is formed by ideological and political beliefs, whereas micro justice relates to the individual's belief about whether what s/he gets is just. Wegener argues that the majority do believe that their shares are just; and that beliefs about 'fair' and 'actual' income differ very little. Market determined distributions are seen as more just than politically determined ones, because the former are seen as reflecting what the individual deserves. This fits with some key findings of Sennett and Cobb (1972) that show that the most profound effect of the lowly position of manual workers in Boston was their belief that they were inherently less capable than those above them. It also recalls Michael Young's

account of the implications of meritocracy, as well as some of Harrop's observations discussed earlier. So do people think largely in terms of market-determined distributions in respect of their own situation but politically determined ones in their estimations of macro justice? And is it true that people really do think that there is too much inequality in general – i.e. macro injustice?

Here the evidence is mixed. For example, Kelley and Evans (1993) argue that in respect of macro justice, when people in nine countries were asked how much eleven particular occupations should be paid, there was remarkably widespread agreement about the hierarchy of rewards – but not about the amount of income differences between higher and lower paid occupations. Variations in this pattern exist between countries but these seem to be due to ideological/political factors rather than the structural ones Kelley and Evans try to control for. Thus there is a qualified acceptance of the overall distribution of income, varying by society (Austria being the most inegalitarian, Australia the least).

We also know something about people's limited perceptions of income inequality and its extent in the UK as a result of investigations conducted by the *British Social Attitudes Survey* (see Bromley 2003, Taylor-Gooby 2005) and some analysis of *BSAS* data has been undertaken for this paper (see Annex 2).

Both Bromley and Taylor-Gooby show that people generally underestimate the extent of inequality because they underestimate the incomes of top occupations, though they have a good idea of the earnings of the lower and middling ones. Here is the *BSAS* table on perceptions of gross annual earnings for six occupations in 1999:

	£k		
	Does earn	Should Earn	Actual figure
Shop assistant	9	12	10.3
Unskilled factory worker	10	12	13.1
Skilled worker	15	18	18.0
G.P.	35	40	50.8
Appeals Court Judge	80	50	139.9
Chairman of Large Corporation	125	75	555.0

People's estimates of the first three (lower) occupations are not too far out; but they grossly underestimate the second three (higher) occupations. The likely explanation for this is fairly obvious. The vast majority of respondents aren't anywhere near the top three occupations. Their estimates are more accurate for the bottom three, which are their more proximate points of reference. However, as with the findings of Kelley and Evans (1993), although people do not dispute that there should be a hierarchy of earnings, they do not agree with its magnitude. As the table shows, people think the actual ratio of earnings from top to bottom is 1:14; that it should be reduced to 1:6; yet in fact it is 1:55.

Nevertheless, Taylor-Gooby argues that, even though a majority believes that there is too much inequality, doing something about it is not a high priority. Referring to replies to the question ‘what are the important issues facing government?’ he finds that income redistribution is ‘not at all foremost in peoples’ minds’. It is public services – most especially the NHS, and then the educational system – that come top of the list. He also refers to the *European Social Survey*, which revealed that the number of UK respondents ‘definitely agreeing’ with the statement ‘Government should reduce differences in income’ was fewer than 15 per cent - one of the two lowest figures within the EU.

Perhaps reducing income inequality isn’t seen as a serious priority because it doesn’t have a focus. It is not something that is perceived as confrontable independently of taxation, welfare spending, full employment, etc. In other words, it is an ideal that is easy to agree with, but one that is inextricably bound up with and constrained by all the other demands generated by a very complex, highly interdependent system. Whatever people want and expect, their actions are always constrained by a complex system of institutional rights and resources.

This serves as a reminder of David Lockwood’s (1996) arguments concerning the importance of citizenship and how this fits with and might be incorporated into our thinking. Lockwood argues that research on social comparisons and social order raises a basic question: Does civic stratification’s ‘particularization’ of citizens from the top coincide with, and reinforce, the micro-reference group ‘particularization’ of individuals at ground level? Those who argue, like Beck (2002), that we are all individualized now by market forces, tend to ignore the individualising effects of citizenship and its consequences for life chances.

However, another possible explanation of these findings relates to reference group theory. Perhaps what Wegener refers to as the hiatus between macro and micro beliefs about social justice simply reflects the fact that although people are not unaware of inequality, they don’t appreciate its extent because of their own objective position in the hierarchy. People subjectively sample their own setting and derive their picture of society from a small and biased sample. They thus have reference groups that are homogeneous in class and status terms and tend to think of themselves as middle class or, at least, ‘in the middle’ of society. Generally people think they get what they deserve. If other family members, or neighbours’ children do better, there must be an individual reason for this, given everyone is in the same boat.

This type of explanation of why people think their shares are ‘just’ is put forward by Falk and Kell (2000 and also 2004). Commenting on their findings that the majority think their earnings are about average (and think of themselves as middle class) they argue that this is because the higher paid mix with the higher paid and thus overestimate the ‘true’ level of average earnings and thus underestimate their own rank in the distribution, whereas the lower paid underestimate ‘true’ average earnings and thus overestimate their own position. This is a clear reference group argument coming from economists. Indeed, there is a burgeoning economics literature which seeks to incorporate social comparison into economics (e.g. Frank 1985 and 1999, Oswald, 1997, Clark and Oswald, 1996, Layard, 2005).



It is also a view stated more explicitly by Evans and Kelley (2004: 6-7 and see also 1995). They have advocated a hypothesis that brings together reference group and materialist arguments, the 'reference group and reality blend' hypothesis. That is people are aware of the fact of income inequality, of the material realities, but they generalize on the basis of their reference groups: 'perceptions...reflect the respondent's subjective sampling of his own social setting...mentally draws a sample of their own social world – family, friends and co-workers – and derives their picture of society from that small and biased sample.' Again 'reference groups are fairly homogeneous with respect to social class. This means that most people are objectively towards the middle of their reference groups. This objective centrality encourages people to see themselves as middle status...thereby weakening the link between objective social location and subjective perceptions of social strata.'

### *Can social psychology offer other insights?*

We should briefly refer to the voluminous social psychological literature on social comparison processes, reference groups and relative deprivation (see, for example, Olson et al 1986, Masters and Smith 1987, Suls and Wheeler 2000 and Walker and Smith 2002). Much of this literature is more concerned with the egoistic rather than fraternalistic or group forms of RD with which this paper is concerned (see Runciman 1966), but some useful insights can be gleaned. Additionally, as Kawakami and Dion (1995) note, there has been a failure to specify how and why people choose certain comparison others as referents, although one strong finding of many social psychological studies is that people are understandably reluctant to make comparisons which are unfavourable or threatening to them. They compare down and across but not up.

Ellemers (2002) considers the complementarities between RD and social identity theory (SIT), regarding the former as a sociological approach and the latter a psychological one. That is, SIT is concerned with the cognitive and motivational determinants of personal and social identification, RD with the behavioural consequences of individual and group identification in order to account for collective action. One obviously important issue that Ellemers raises is the salience of comparison groups. This point is discussed at length by Gartrell (2002) in a paper on the embeddedness of social comparisons. He observes that who compares with whom depends on who is in contact with whom. Comparing is a matter of social networks. It affects not only who we compare with but also who we don't compare with. This insight is also present in one of the seminal papers in the field (Pettigrew 1967). In this paper, Pettigrew discusses the significance of friends and work colleagues in comparison processes, especially in relation to what people in other occupations earn. Here there is a clear connection to the sociological literature we have considered.

Hogg (2000) has provided an excellent overview of the relationships between social identity and social comparisons. He notes the importance of people's subjective belief structures about groups in terms of their relative status, the overall stability of status relations, their legitimacy and the permeability of group boundaries. Whether downward or upward comparisons are made depends on subjective belief structures

about these issues. Nevertheless, given the tendency for group boundaries (such as those of status groups) to be both legitimated and impermeable, people are more likely to make downward comparisons.

However, as already noted, other researchers (e.g. Schor 1998, Hamilton 2003) argue against the conventional view that networks provide the most important reference points. Beyond personal networks, the media – especially TV and some magazines – provide regular views of alternative lifestyles, they suggest. It has been suggested that media ‘friends’, as well as those we work with, may be more important sources of comparison than, say, neighbours. If this and the extension of such arguments are true, then less well-off people should be quite dissatisfied; RGs will no longer be so restricted. Who is right?

### *Next steps: the need for qualitative research*

The literature may be voluminous but it is also indeterminate. In this final section, I discuss briefly some ideas for qualitative research which might assist with the problems posed by a Runciman re-study forty years on. On the basis of the argument so far, there are a number of issues that have to be addressed.

First, if (as many critics suggest) class in a macro sense is no longer likely to be the basis for reference groups, what is? It would be vital to investigate this before attempting a re-study in which the manual/non-manual divide is so crucial to Runciman’s questions and analysis. Is this still a meaningful division? In the 1960s, 60 per cent of the employed population were in jobs classified as manual. This is now true for only about one-third of employees and the nature of manual work itself has also changed. For that matter, so has non-manual work. There is now a large group of non-manual workers whose employment relations resemble those of the working class. Even so, the manual/non-manual divide may still have some folk meaning. If not, what other groups have meaning? Or are we all, as some sociologists (e.g. Bauman 2001, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) would have it, simply individualized?

Second, what do people believe about the shape of British society – diamond, triangle or onion - and where do they think they and others fit in it? What determines someone’s social position?

Third, who are ‘people like us’? Who do people compare themselves with? Who do they think is doing better than them and who worse? How do they feel about this?

A fourth reason for doing qualitative work relates to consumption behaviour. In turn this connects to the lists of Runciman’s consumption items in his questionnaire (see Annex 1, Qs 12 and 13). What lists might we construct today? What do people think of as luxuries and necessities? What sorts of things do people want but cannot afford? Who do they think can afford these things? What sorts of consumer items do people expect to have?

The first phase of the qualitative research required to explore these sorts of issues has been completed. It used a mixture of individual interviews and focus groups with

people in a variety of social situations, but all in the child-rearing phase i.e. at a critical point in terms of their lives and, one assumes, the comparisons they make.

In summary, the individual interviews were designed to:

1. Identify how people approach and discuss social comparisons;
2. See how people assess how well they are doing (and thus more about comparisons);
3. Learn more about who people compare with about what;
4. Ascertain what, if any, groupings people do identify in society and whether class still has any salience. If not, what else does?
5. Explore what people think are the main contemporary social divisions, if any, and how salient these are.

Focus groups, again across the social spectrum but internally homogeneous in class terms, built on the foundations laid by the individual interviews. They were designed to allow us to explore in greater detail and depth how people view social divisions. In both groups and interviews, the idea was to be challenging about inequality, how it is viewed and perceived. In a future paper (Rose et al 2006) we shall report on our findings from this research and how they relate to other work reported in this paper.

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## **Annex 1      The Runciman Questionnaire Summarised**

- Q1a    How long have you lived in the district?  
Q1b    Where did you move here from?
- Q2a    Are you married?  
Q2b    How many children do you have?
- Q3a    How many children under 15 do you have?  
Q3b    At what age do you expect them to leave school?  
Q3c    How many children over 15 do you have?  
Q3d    [IF CHILDREN OVER 15] Did they leave school as soon as they could or did they stay on longer than they needed to?  
Q3e    Did any attend (or do you expect them to attend) a fee-paying school?  
Q3f    Do or did any of them have any education beyond school?  
Q3g    If so, what kind?
- Q4     Where was your mother (or wife's mother) living when your first child was born?  
       [Question inserted at the request of Michael Young and not related to purpose of the study]
- Q5a    What is the job of the head of household? Occupation, Industry.
- Q6a    How many members of the household are there?  
Q6b    How many of these are in full employment?  
Q6c    [IF HOUSEWIFE] Do you work? Full or part-time?  
Q6d    Does the housewife in your family work?
- Q7     What was your first job?
- 
- Q8     Would you say that, generally speaking, you and your family were financially better off, worse off, or the same as a year ago?
- Q9a    Do you think there are any other sorts of people doing noticeably better at the moment than you and your family?  
Q9b    If yes, what sort of people?  
Q9c    What do you feel about this, I mean, do you approve or disapprove of this?
- Q10a   Some people say that manual workers are doing much better nowadays than white-collar workers. Do you think this is so or not? [respondents offered 'Yes', 'Qualified Yes', 'No', 'Qualified No']  
Q10b   Do you think that manual workers ought to do as well as they are doing compared with white-collar workers?
- Q11a   What about foreign immigrants to this country such as the Irish or West Indians – some people think they are doing too well at the expense of British people. Do you think this is so or not?

- Q11b If YES, has this affected you personally in any way?  
Q11c If YES, in what way would you say it has affected you?

[Q11 set only asked of Non-Irish and Non-West Indian respondents]

- Q12a Does your household have a TV, telephone, car, fridge, washing machine, record player, central heating?  
Q12b [FOR ANYTHING NOT OWNED] Would you like one?  
Q12c [FOR ANYTHING WANTED] Do you expect to get one in the next 2-3 years?  
Q12d Do you think other people are managing to afford...?  
Q12e If YES at d, what sort of people are you thinking of?  
Q12f Is there anything I've not mentioned which you or your household particularly need?

- Q13a Could you tell me which of the things on this card you already have?  
Q13b Would you like to have a....  
Q13c Do you think other people are managing to afford a....  
Q13d What sort of people are you thinking of?

LIST:

- i) a house you own (inc mortgage)
- ii) a fur coat for your wife
- iii) foreign holiday travel
- iv) spare bedroom for visitors
- v) first class train travel
- vi) private education for children

- Q14a Would you like to move out of your present district?  
Q14b Is this anything to do with the sort of district you think it is?
- Q15a Would you say you were satisfied with your husband's present position as far as income is concerned?  
Q15b Is that more because the job he is doing is worth more pay, because you need more money or for some other reason?  
Q15c Would you say you were satisfied with your own position as far as income is concerned?  
Q15d Repeat reasons from Q15b.
- Q16a Would you say you were satisfied with your husband's present position as far as prospects for getting ahead are concerned?  
Q16b Would you say you were satisfied with your present position.....?  
Q16c [IF RETIRED OR UNEMPLOYED] Would you say you were satisfied with your previous position....  
Q16d Would you have preferred to be in a job where you did have a chance of getting ahead?
- Q17a What income do you think is necessary for you (your husband) in order to maintain a proper standard of living for *people like yourself*?



[Salary post-coded to income groups, but options not shown to respondents]

- Q17b What sort of people are you thinking of when we talk about people like yourself?
- Q18a If a son of yours was actually choosing a job at the moment, would you rather he chose a manual or a non-manual job?
- Q18b If he had the choice of a foreman's job at £20/w or a schoolteacher's job at £15, which would YOU prefer him to choose?
- Q19a Would you like any son of yours to have a university education?
- Q19b Suppose you had a son who was able to pass the exams, would you expect him to be able to go to Oxford University?
- Q20a What social class would you say you belonged to?
- Q20b If you HAD to say middle or working class, which would you say?
- Q20c What sort of people do you mean when you talk about [respondent's self-chosen class]?
- Q20d What sort of people do you mean when you talk about [alternative class]?
- Q21a What was your father's occupation?
- Q21b What social class would you say he belonged to?
- Q22/4 Questions about politics
- Q25 Questions about government provision for 'people like us'.
- Q26 House of Lords abolition
- Q27 Support for welfare state
- Q28 Questions on state provision
- Q29 Religion/church attendance
- Q30 TU, club, association membership
- Q31a Age
- Q31b Age finished FT education
- Q32 Net household income
- Q33 Head of household's Net income

## Annex 2: Analysis of BSAS Data

The British Social Attitudes data on attitudes to inequality are not without their problems. A brief reanalysis of the 1999 data illustrates this.

The questions asked tap into different aspects of social inequality. Some deal with the extent and scale of inequality; others cover issues of fairness and social justice; others approach the issue through policies towards redistribution. Periodically respondents have been given a set of specific occupations and asked to provide estimates of what people in these earn, and also to give an opinion of what they should or deserve to earn. These questions are very useful as they allow two types of comparative analysis. First, one can obtain a measure of ‘income knowledge’ by assessing how accurate the estimates of occupational earnings are. It also provides a perceived income distribution from low-paying to high paying jobs. This range is theoretically important as it stands as a proxy for awareness of the overall extent of inequality. Second, by computing the discrepancy between ‘perceived earnings’ and ‘deserved earnings’ one can measure the degree to which respondents believe particular occupations to be over- or underpaid. It seems logical that major mismatches of this type would indicate a general dissatisfaction with the current income distribution. This is, however, not the same thing as disapproving of a level of inequality in society as a whole.

These questions on fact are supplemented by a battery of questions about the equity of the income distribution. Four questions attempt to gauge whether respondents feel inequalities are necessary incentives and functional for the working of economy and society, or whether they are arbitrary and perpetuated by those who benefit most. There are also questions concerning whether the state should intervene to ameliorate these inequalities and whether they should use progressive taxation to achieve this.

Initial reanalysis at the individual level showed a number of interesting results. First, the items on the incomes of individual occupations produce high non-response (more than 10 per cent on average) and very broad ranges. Estimates of the annual earnings of a skilled factory worker ranged from £1,900 to £35,000 pa. Those for a GP were wider still, from £13,000 to £200,000 pa. So while the average respondent’s estimate can be said to be not too far out, this masks an enormous variance in people’s knowledge.

Subtracting the ‘deserved’ from the ‘perceived actual’ earnings of these occupations produces a variable measuring a ‘normative income gap’. If this is positive then it refers to the degree to which the occupation is considered overpaid; if negative it indicates underpayment. Substantial numbers of respondents match the two figures, implying that they judge such individuals to be getting what they deserve. Here is a table summarising this information in relation to five occupations in the 1999 BSA.

Occupation	% underpaid	% paid correctly	% overpaid
Shop assistant	85.0	12.8	2.2
Unskilled factory worker	75.1	21.4	3.5
Skilled factory worker	69.5	26.2	4.3
General Practitioner	43.0	37.5	19.5

Solicitor	9.7	28.3	62.0
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Taken at face value, these judgements would suggest that there is widespread acknowledgement that those at the lower end of the distribution are paid too little, and those near the top too much. We could infer from that a belief that inequalities are therefore too wide. Indeed the *BSAS* frequently shows that high numbers of respondents feel this way about British society. What is of more relevance to the study is whether these judgements of occupational desert are consistent between groups. The following two tables break the data down by first self-reported income group, and then by social class.

**Mean perceived over/under payment for five occupations by income group (£)**

Self-rated income	GPs	Skilled factory workers	Solicitors	Shop assistants	Unskilled factory workers
High	-2800	-2900	10500	-3725	-2850
Middle	-4476	-2804	13643	-2992	-3277
Low	-3828	-3569	15299	-6665	-1899
All	-4149	-3129	13286	-4557	-2686

**Mean perceived over/under payment for five occupations by social class (£)**

Social class (Goldthorpe)	GPs	Skilled factory workers	Solicitors	Shop assistants	Unskilled factory workers
Salariat	-5341	-2871	14832	-3236	-2235
Routine white collar	-5816	-2925	11857	-3066	-5439
Petty bourgeois	-683	-3378	11738	-3298	-2024
Foreman/supervisors	-1991	-3639	19409	-337	-978
Working class	-3068	-3398	11269	-9215	-1287
All	-4266	-3123	13189	-4694	-2668

The first observation to make is that the variance within groups is very large, and in most cases outstrips that between different groups. However, it is interesting that in all five cases there is no dispute about over/under payment along class lines. Only the average magnitudes are different.

Bivariate analysis of this kind cannot take into account demographic factors, occupational differences within classes, and individual ideological stance. However it is a starting point and indicates fruitful channels for future multivariate analysis. Is it one's personal circumstances or one's 'inequality knowledge' that is the driver for feelings of injustice about inequalities in earnings?

Note: I am grateful to my colleague, Eric Harrison, for undertaking this analysis on my behalf.