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Abstract Over recent years a series of articles has appeared, the aim of which has been to demonstrate an unjustifiable neglect of women in social stratification theory and research and, in turn, to level charges of 'intellectual sexism' against sociologists active in this area. The central concern of the present paper is to address certain of the major substantive issues which are raised in this literature, and to argue that they have not so far been adequately treated from either a theoretical or an empirical standpoint. In Part I of the paper, an attempt is made to distinguish between two lines of theoretical argument on the position of the family within the system of social stratification which, in recent critiques, appear to have been unduly conflated. These are the arguments of (i) structural-functionalists of mainly American provenance, and (ii) mainly European exponents of class analysis. In Part II, empirical data are then presented, by reference to which the stance adopted by the *latter* can be illuminated and, moreover, substantially supported. In Part III, an attempt is made to show, on the basis of the foregoing, that certain conceptual and methodological developments that have been proposed in order to adapt class analysis to the increased labour market participation of women, and especially of married women, entail serious difficulties.

I

CRITIQUES which have alleged 'intellectual sexism' in stratification theory and research [1] appear generally to be directed against a 'conventional' view which maintains the following: (i) it is the family rather than the individual which forms the basic unit of social stratification; (ii) particular families are articulated with the system of stratification essentially via the position of their male 'heads' – which, in modern societies, can be most adequately indexed by reference to their occupational category or grade. This view is then typically attacked on two rather different levels. First, it is argued that such a view entails a disregard of certain increasingly important features of contemporary social reality: most obviously, the proportion of families which do not have a male 'head'; and the proportion of even 'normal' families in which the wife as well as husband is found in gainful employment – and perhaps in a different occupational category or grade to that of her husband. Secondly, though, and more fundamentally, it is held that the conventional view effectively precludes examination of what should be recognized as one major feature of the stratification system as a whole: that is, sexual stratification, which, of course, cuts directly through the conjugal family. It follows, then, that not only are women rendered largely 'invisible' within the study of stratification, but furthermore that the existence of sexual inequalities becomes more or less disregarded.

Taken at face value, such critiques may be thought cogent. However, they appear somewhat less impressive once more attention is given to their alleged target. For, on closer examination of the matter, it becomes clear that the conventional view which they seek to oppose occurs in more than one version. While it is true that most stratification theorists *have* treated the family as the unit of stratification and have seen the position of its members

as being crucially dependent on the location of the family head within the occupational division of labour, what needs also to be recognized is that this view has been arrived at through different and, in the two most important instances, sharply contrasting theoretical routes.

In the mainstream American literature the dominant theoretical influence has been that exerted by the work of Talcott Parsons. For present purposes, there are two features of Parsons' analyses of the position of the family within the system of stratification that are of particular significance. First, Parsons sees the dominant form of stratification of modern industrial societies as being stratification in terms of *social status:* that is, as resulting from the differential evaluations of family units that are made by the 'community' at large in respect of various attributes of family members and of their standard and style of living. Parsons then uses the term 'social class' where European writers would be more likely to use that of 'status groups': i.e. to refer to 'the groups of persons who are members of effective kinship units which, as units, are approximately equally valued'[2]

Secondly, Parsons' theoretical approach is, of course, a resolutely functional one: that is to say, his aim is to account for empirically observable regularities in social life in terms of their contribution towards the viability and continuity of the total 'social system' of which they form part. Thus, Parsons offers an explanation of the (alleged) universality of stratification by status which seeks to show that the two basic elements that are necessary and sufficient to produce such stratification – i.e. 'human individuals as units' and 'moral evaluation' – are both 'essential to social systems'.[3] However, what is here of greater relevance is the further account that Parsons offers of why, in modern societies, the unit of stratification should in fact be not the individual but the family. This account is likewise given in functional terms and, as developed in several different papers, refers to functional 'needs' at three distinct levels.[4]

(i) At the level of the conjugal family itself, a basic equality of status is required in order to preserve solidarity among family members. If husband and wife, through both participating in the labour market, were brought into competition for status, the stability of the family would be threatened and, in turn, its capacity to perform its major function in regard to the socialization of children. It is thus from this point of view that one must understand the separation of sex roles that typically exists within the family and which accords only to the husband-father 'a full and competitive involvement' in the occupational system. Indeed, Parsons further suggests that it is the functional value of this separation which chiefly explains 'why the feminist movement has had such difficulty in breaking it down'.

(ii) At the level of the local community, a basic status equality of family members is required in order that the status position of one family relative to another may be unambiguously defined. If members of the same family were to hold widely different positions within the status hierarchy, problems would be recurrently created in everyday sociability, and serious threats would thus be posed both to the stability of community relations and to the psychological security of the individuals involved.

(iii) At the level of the total society, the fact that typically only one member has a full commitment to participation in the occupational system, and through this determines the status of the family as a whole, helps meet the requirement that exists within a modern industrial economy for a high degree of mobility of labour. For if both husband and wife had the same commitment to engaging in paid employment, then mobility would be restricted in that job changes which entailed residential relocation would tend only to occur

when favourable opportunities arose for both spouses simultaneously.

In the case of some of the authors of the critiques earlier referred to – Americans in particular – it would seem that such a functionalist account of the position of the family within the stratification system is the only one with which they are familiar. In the case of others – mainly European – there has been an apparent failure to recognize not so much that other accounts exist, but rather the extent to which these may diverge from the functionalist one, even though still maintaining that the family is the unit of stratification. Such divergence is of particular significance in the accounts that have been offered by exponents of class analysis.[5]

In attempts to understand the stratification of modern western societies in terms of class rather than of social status (in the sense of Parsons and other American theorists), the primary concern is not with the subjective evaluations that individuals and groups may make of each other. It is rather with certain social relationships in which individuals and groups are daily involved and which are believed to exert a pervasive influence in their lives. More specifically, one could say that class analysis begins with a structure of positions, associated with a specific historical form of the social division of labour, which is usually seen as being constituted in two main ways:

(i) by basic employment relationships which differentiate employers, self-employed workers and employees; and

(ii) by varying employment functions and conditions of employment which differentiate categories of employee – most importantly (a) those in subordinate positions who, via a labour contract, exchange more or less discrete amounts of labour for wages on a short-term basis and (b) those in positions involving some exercise of authority or expertise, whose conditions of employment imply the exchange of 'service' for 'compensation' in a more diffuse and long-term fashion. For any such structure of positions, the empirical question can then be raised of how far classes have in fact formed within it, in the sense of specific social collectivities: that is, collectivities that are identifiable through the degree of continuity with which, in consequence of patterns of class mobility and immobility, their members have been associated with particular sets of positions over time; and, in turn, the further issue may be pursued of the degree of distinctiveness of members of identifiable classes in terms of their life-chances, their life-styles and patterns of association, and their socio-political orientations and modes of action.

It is, moreover, in no way the aim of class analysis to account either for a structure of class positions or for the degree of class formation that exists within it in functional terms. While class structures are recognized as having a considerable degree of stability and resistance to change, this is on account not of their functional value but rather of the fact that they represent the past product and current expression of inequalities in social power and advantage. At the same time, though, it is not supposed that such structures are immutable, or that they could be changed only with serious threat to societal viability. On the contrary, since the relationships they embody are ones in which interests and values come recurrently into opposition, class structures are seen as an inevitable source of social conflict which, in interaction with processes of class formation and mobilization – the emergence of class-based socio-political movements – has served historically as a major vehicle of change.

Consistently, therefore, when class theorists subscribe to the view that it is the family that forms the basic unit of stratification, they do not seek to claim that this must be so in order

that certain functional requirements are met. Rather, they give an account that again emphasizes inequalities in power and advantage which are found within modern western societies, and which prevail not because of the general functional advantages that they confer but because of their fairly evident self-sustaining properties. Thus, class theorists would agree with functionalists that the position of the family as a whole within the system of stratification as they view it derives from that of the family 'head', in the sense of the family member, typically the husband-father, who has the fullest commitment to participation in the labour market. But they would not then resort to the argument that the separation of sex roles within the family that is here entailed emerges as a 'response' to functional 'needs' – such as those of protecting family solidarity, allowing a clear definition of family status, or facilitating labour mobility. Rather, they would see this separation as being itself the expression of a major form of inequality existing between the sexes. Specifically, married women are required by conventional norms to take major responsibility for the performance of the work that is involved in maintaining a household and rearing children. This requirement then in various ways restricts their opportunities and prospects in regard to paid employment and, moreover, forces them to a greater or lesser extent into a situation of economic dependence on their husbands, so that the possibility of any effective challenge to the prevailing norms is in turn greatly reduced. Thus, for instance, when Giddens, in a passage that is frequently cited with disapproval in 'feminist' critiques, argues that even those women who are found in paid employment 'are largely peripheral to the class system', it is important to note – though critics have often failed to do so – that this argument derives directly from a premiss which feminists would presumably not wish to deny: namely, that within western capitalist societies 'women still have to await their liberation from the family'.[6]

From the standpoint in question, then, the family is the unit of stratification primarily because only certain family members, predominantly males, have, as a result of their labour market participation, what might be termed a directly determined position within the class structure. Other family members, including wives, do not typically have equal opportunity for such participation, and their class position is thus indirectly determined: that is to say, is 'derived' from that of the family 'head'. However, in addition to this, class theorists would also contend that the basic relationship of dependence of wives on husbands which they postulate carries with it a number of other implications that are of further relevance to their case.

To begin with, it would be argued, it follows from this relationship that a whole range of life-chances which vary with class have their impact on women to a large extent via their husband's position. Thus, for example, Parkin has stressed that in modern society it is the family that is 'the major unit of reward' and hence that 'for the great majority of women the allocation of social and economic rewards is determined primarily by the position of their families – and in particular, that of the male head'.[7] Similarly, Westergaard and Resler maintain that 'it is still men's occupational positions far more than women's that set the essential circumstances of life for most households, however much one may deplore this'.[8] A notable empirical illustration of the point here being made would be that mortality rates among married women vary far more sharply with their *husband's* occupational level than with their own.[9]

Moreover, the authors in question would not regard their case as being basically affected by the increase in the numbers of married women engaged in paid employment. They

would emphasize that although the degree of women's economic dependence on their husbands may in this way be somewhat mitigated, such employment typically forms part of a family strategy, or, at all events, takes place within the possibilities and constraints of the class situation of the family as a whole, in which the husband's employment remains the dominant factor. In other words, the timing, duration and character of wives' work is powerfully conditioned both by the phasing of their conventionally imposed domestic and family responsibilities and by their 'derived' class. In turn, then, it may be expected that the employment of married women is unlikely to have any great impact on the degree of class inequalities in society at large. From a review of the British evidence, Westergaard and Resler conclude that 'the inequalities of the female labour market – internally and in relation to the male labour market – in no sense take away from or cut across the general pattern of class inequality'. Indeed, they suggest that, if anything, the increase in participation rates among married women in Britain has tended to sharpen class divisions.[10]

Finally, class theorists would wish further to claim that, as a result of the basic dependence of wives on husbands, the conjugal family is not only the unit of, so to speak, class 'fate' but also of class formation and class action. In fact, two rather different arguments are involved here, though both leading to the same conclusion that lines of class division and potential conflict run between, but not through, families.

On the one hand, it would be held that while the existence of marked sexual inequalities implies that women as a collectivity have interests which stand opposed to those of men, the restricted and conditional nature of women's participation in the labour market means that they cannot be usefully thought of as themselves constituting a class. For as well as their own life chances being to a large extent mediated via their husbands' class position, they are also, as Parkin has cogently argued, for the most part deprived of the most basic capacity for class action, namely, that of being able to cause serious disruption of the productive process. This is why women, in the same way as other exploited groups that lack this capacity, 'are forced to rely far more heavily upon collective mobilization of a purely social and expressive kind in order to press their claims. . . .'[11] On the other hand, it would be argued that while the family does not have to be solidary to the extent that functionalists would wish to suppose, the fact that it is the major unit of reward and of class fate generally must itself create some large area of shared interest between husband and wife. This then not only serves to offset any sexually-based divisions of interest within the family, but further ensures that within the wider society lines of class division will rather systematically cut across the sexual division. Thus, as Westergaard and Resler insist, while one may well expect an increasing awareness of the extent of sexual inequalities and of the case for women's liberation, this 'in no way justifies a diagnosis that women share essentially the same condition, because all are the victims of conventional definitions of sex roles'. On the contrary, what needs to be recognized is that very significant differences exist in the demands that are made, and that are likely to be made, by women from families in different class situations.[12]

To revert now to the criticisms directed at stratification theory and research for its neglect of the position of women, it should be evident enough that in the case of exponents of class analysis, as distinct from functionalists, the charge that sexual inequalities are disregarded is quite unwarranted. It has been shown that while functionalists and class theorists largely concur in treating the family as the unit of stratification, the argument for so doing advanced by the latter is one which in fact *stems from* a clear recognition of major sexual inequalities,

especially in regard to opportunities for labour market participation, and of the consequent relationship of dependence that generally prevails between married women and their husbands.[13] If, then, the criticism of class theorists is to be sustained, it follows that this must be on grounds not of sexist bias implicit in their theory but rather of the actual sociological inadequacy of the position that they take up. As was earlier noted, it has indeed been contended that the conventional view of the articulation of the family with the stratification system is undermined by two current social tendencies: the increasing number of families without a male 'head', and the increasing number of married women who are in paid employment and, possibly, in different types of employment to their husbands.

As regards the first of these tendencies, it is in fact the case that no serious problems are created so far as class analysis is concerned. This is fairly apparent once care is again taken to distinguish its claims from those that may be found in functionalist accounts. To repeat, what is essential to class analysis is the argument that family members share in the same class position, and that this position is determined by that of the family 'head' in the sense of the family member who has the greatest commitment to, and continuity in, labour market participation. That this member is usually a male is then an independent empirical observation which is accounted for in terms of the dependence imposed on women by the conventional separation of sex roles within the family. There is no suggestion – as there is in at least some functionalist analyses – that this separation, according 'instrumental leadership' to the husband-father and 'expressive leadership' to the wife-mother, derives ultimately from their differing biological capacities or from sex-linked differences in temperament or personality.[14] Thus, in the case of families where no male, or no economically active or employed male, is present, or where the family 'head' in the above sense is female, no difficulty arises in principle for class analysis in recognizing and accommodating these circumstances.[15] A truly problematic situation would be created only if it could be shown that the extent and nature of female participation in the labour market is now such that in the more 'normal' conjugal family it is increasingly hard to say whether husband or wife could better be regarded as the family 'head' and that in many cases there are in effect two 'heads' with, quite often, different class positions. In other words, it is the second of the two tendencies referred to, that towards an increase in the employment of married women, which for present purposes is of by far the greater import.

II

Whether or not a situation of the kind referred to above does actually prevail is the issue which must in fact be seen as lying at the centre of current controversies on the family and social stratification. Against the arguments of those theorists who would stress the generally intermittent, limited and conditional character of the employment of married women, critics have held that to treat such employment as being irrelevant to determining the stratification position of a family is likely to be highly misleading, and all the more so since the extent to which wives are in different, and indeed often superior grades of employment to their husbands *is* now quite considerable. However, what will here be maintained is that in this respect the empirical, as well as the theoretical basis of the debate has thus far been a good deal less than satisfactory.

Very largely, the data that have been utilized have come from official statistics collected for the purposes of demographic and economic rather than sociological analysis. Thus, for example, in the British case, those who have claimed that wives' employment should now

be regarded as a significant influence on the class position of the conjugal family have based their arguments on Census and national employment statistics from which may be derived conclusions such as the following:

(i) the proportion of married women economically active increased from just over a fifth in 1951 to a half in the mid-1970s;

(ii) the proportion of women of working age who have *never* been in paid employment steadily decreased over the same period to something only a little over a tenth;

(iii) the occupational distribution of married women in the active labour force differs widely from that of their husbands, so that in not much more than a quarter of all cases will a husband and his working wife be allocated to the same one of the OPCS's six 'Social Classes'.

TABLE 1

Brief descriptions of the subsamples of respondents to the 1972 national social mobility inquiry, age 25–49, selected for the 1974 follow-up inquiry

Subsample(s)	Sampling ratio	Number married and living with wife, 1974
1. Men intergenerationally stable in Class I of a seven class schema[a] (higher-grade professionals, administrators and managers, large proprietors)	1 : 2	65
2. Men intergenerationally stable in Class III (routine nonmanual employees in administration, sales and services), Class IV[b] (small proprietors, self-employed workers without employees) and Class V[c] (supervisors of manual workers). These subsamples are combined	1 : 1	92
3. Men intergenerationally stable in Class VI (skilled manual workers) and Class VII (semi- and unskilled manual workers). These subsamples are combined	1 : 4	134
4. Men upwardly mobile intergenerationally to Class I from origins in Classes III-VII as above[d]	1 : 1	231
5. Men downwardly mobile intergenerationally from Class I origins to Classes III-VII as above[d]	1 : 1	56

Notes

(a) For further details, see Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Class Structure*, Ch. 2. Note that this schema is not intended to have a consistently hierarchical form.

(b) Excluding farmers and small proprietors with employees.

(c) Excluding lower-grade technicians.

(d) Because of a concern to identify men who had experienced relatively long-range mobility, individuals found in, or originating in, Class II (lower-grade professionals, administrators and managers) were not subsampled. This same consideration lay behind the exclusion, indicated in Notes (b) and (c); of certain occupational groupings from Class IV and Class V which have relatively high values on the Hope-Goldthorpe scale of general desirability.

At first sight, this may perhaps appear evidence of a rather impressive kind. But in regard to the purposes for which they are being used, the data in question have at least two major shortcomings: first, they are of a cross-sectional nature and thus tell one little about the actual histories of employment or non-employment of particular women; and second, to the extent that they are socially categorized, rather than simply aggregate data, the main categorization applied, the OPCS 'Social Classes', is one of very dubious validity.

It is therefore of interest to see what further may be learned from data which do not share in these particular defects – even though they have a number of rather evident limitations of their own. These data come from the 1974 follow-up to the 1972 national social mobility inquiry carried out from Nuffield College, Oxford. They take the form of detailed work and family histories of the wives of several subsamples of men, numbering 578 in all, who were respondents to the 1972 inquiry and who, in 1974, were between the ages of 25 and 49. The subsamples were selected – following procedures which are fully set out elsewhere[16] – in order to be representative of men with certain fairly distinctive experiences of class mobility or immobility. A brief description of each subsample is given in Table 1. It is clear that data deriving from these subsamples do not form a basis on which national population estimates concerning the employment patterns of married women may appropriately be made. However, what they do provide is some indication of the extent and nature of the main cross-class similarities and variations that prevail in this respect.

In Tables 2, 3 and 4 information is presented on several different aspects of the work-force participation of the wives of men included in the 1974 study. In Tables 2 and 3, as can be seen, a threefold division is introduced according to length of marriage. It should be noted that those women who are classified as having been married for 20 years or more had in fact almost all been married for between 20 and 25 years. Two further points of importance to the interpretation of all three tables are the following. First, no distinction is in any respect made between full- and part-time employment. It should not be overlooked that the increase in the proportion of women in paid employment since 1951 is attributable *entirely* to the growth of part-time working. None the less, it was decided that, in view of the issues of chief concern here, it would be fairest to accept the argument that what is chiefly significant is whether or not married women are involved at all in an employment relationship, rather than the number of hours they work per week. Secondly, the data are intended to relate, as is stated, to work-force participation rather than to employment *per se*. Thus, periods when women were unemployed or 'between jobs' or on maternity leave were not taken as implying a break in their participation. Women were only reckoned as being out of the work-force when, by their own account, they had left paid employment and were not actually seeking a return to it.

With these points in mind, then, it would seem reasonable to say that the findings reported in Tables 2, 3 and 4 – while in no way inconsistent with the official statistics earlier referred to – do at the same time lend considerable support to the claims of class theorists to the effect that the labour market participation of married women is typically of an intermittent and limited kind, and is moreover conditioned by the class context in which it occurs.

The data of Table 2 relate specifically to the degree of continuity of the work-force participation of the wives of men in the several subsamples. It can be seen that it is only among the wives of men stable in Class I that those who have *never* been in paid employment amount to more than a negligible minority: at this level of the class structure.

TABLE 2

Degree of continuity of work-force participation of wives of men in subsamples with differing class mobility experience, by length of marriage

Years married	Subsample[a]	% of wives *never* employed	% distribution of those ever employed by frequency of subsequent departures from work force			
			never	once	twice or more	N
Less than 10	Stable in Class I	17	55	40	6	24
	Stable in Classes III–V	0	35	55	10	31
	Stable in Classes VI and VII	5	18	72	10	41
	Upwardly mobile to Class I	0	30	62	7	69
	Downwardly mobile from Class I	3	29	64	7	29
10–19	Stable in Class I	19	0	76	24	31
	Stable in Classes III–V	0	9	81	9	32
	Stable in Classes VI and VII	4	9	66	25	56
	Upwardly mobile to Class I	3	8	75	17	114
	Downwardly mobile from Class I	(0)	(0)	(88)	(12)	16
20 or more	Stable in Class I	(20)	(0)	(75)	(25)	10
	Stable in Classes III–V	3	7	61	32	29
	Stable in Classes VI and VII	0	5	54	41	37
	Upwardly mobile to Class I	0	10	58	31	48
	Downwardly mobile from Class I	(0)	(9)	(91)	(0)	11

Note: (a) It will be noted that some further collapsing of the subsamples described in Table I is undertaken.

ne would suggest, the idea of 'marriage as a career' has a residual persistence. However, hat has then further to be noted in the case of the large majority of wives who *have* at some me been employed are the clear indications, first, that few indeed will remain ntinuously in the work-force throughout their married lives and, second, that a sizeable

proportion will withdraw from participation – that is, as distinct from being unemployed for some period – on more than one occasion. It is often implied that a standard pattern prevails according to which married women leave the work-force as their period of most active motherhood begins and then return once their family responsibilities have diminished somewhat. But while this is no doubt a quite frequent sequence of events, it is fairly evident from Table 2 that for women in all subsamples other sequences, and ones which imply a greater degree of discontinuity in employment, become increasingly common as married life extends.[17]

TABLE 3

Duration of work-force participation of wives of men in subsamples with differing class mobility experience, by length of marriage

Years married	Subsample	% distribution of wives by proportion of years married spent in work-force			Total years in work-force as % of total years of marriage	N
		0–24%	25–74%	75–100%		
Less than 10	Stable in Class I	21	34	46	53	24
	Stable in Classes III–V	26	33	42	55	31
	Stable in Classes VI and VII	29	37	34	47	41
	Upwardly mobile to Class I	10	39	51	65	69
	Downwardly mobile from Class I	14	52	34	56	29
10–19	Stable in Class I	48	45	7	29	31
	Stables in Classes III–V	31	47	22	45	32
	Stable in Classes VI and VII	30	50	20	48	56
	Upwardly mobile to Class I	28	56	16	44	114
	Downwardly mobile from Class I	(31)	(56)	(13)	41	16
20 or more	Stable in Class I	(50)	(40)	(10)	36	10
	Stable in Classes II–V	24	52	24	50	29
	Stable in Classes VI and VII	19	62	19	55	37
	Upwardly mobile to Class I	38	42	21	43	48
	Downwardly mobile from Class I	(36)	(27)	(36)	50	11

By collating work- and family-history data, it is in fact possible to ascertain that for wives in all subsamples except that of men stable in Class I, around 70 per cent of all withdrawals from the work-force occurred within the same twelvemonth period as – and, of course, usually preceding – the birth of a child. But it may further be noted that in 15–25 per cent of cases, such withdrawals could likewise be associated with a change in the husband's place of work. And for the stable Class I wives, these proportions shift to 65 per cent and 40 per cent respectively (there being, of course, instances in which *both* the birth of a child and a relocation of the husband's work occurred in the same period as the withdrawal). In other words, while the family responsibilities conventionally imposed upon married women are no doubt the major source of discontinuity in their participation in the labour market, they are not the only one; and, in particular, one should not overlook the fact that in the labour market wives are, geographically speaking, in 'joint supply' with their husbands and not usually, one may suppose, as the dominant partner.

Since, then, discontinuity is so characteristic a feature of the employment histories of the women represented in the subsamples, the question of the overall duration of their work-force participation becomes one of evident importance. Here the data of Table 3 are chiefly relevant, and again a feature that is apparently common to the experience of the wives in each subsample alike may be recognized: namely, that in the course of their married lives up to the time of the 1974 inquiry, they had, broadly speaking, been no more likely to be in the work-force than out of it. It could of course be rightly observed that the data relate to women who for the most part either were passing through, or had only recently emerged from, their period of most active motherhood, in which the difficulties of staying in paid employment may be reckoned to be at their greatest. And in turn, therefore, it might be argued that if one had available similar data to those of Table 3 for married women at later stages in the life-cycle, or better, perhaps, updated information for the women who were studied in 1974, then a substantially altered picture of the overall amount of work-force participation would be created. However, there are good reasons for doubting if the difference would in fact be all that dramatic.

On the one hand, from a specifically life-cycle standpoint, it should be noted that official statistics suggest that married women's work-force participation reaches its peak somewhere in the age-range 45–50 – which most women will enter after around 25 years of marriage – but then falls off, and rather sharply so as the retirement age of 60 is approached.[18] And if, on the other hand, a secular perspective is adopted, then it has to be kept in mind that the increase in the number of working wives characteristic of the post-war years has not, in the British case at least, been a sustained one: the proportion of married women economically active levelled off in the mid-1970s and from 1977 onwards has, if anything, tended to decline.[19] Thus, having regard to the general pattern of the results reported in Table 3, and in particular to those in the third panel relating to women married for 20 years or more, it may reasonably be supposed that even among women who have been married *30* years or more, still something less than half would be found in the category of those who had spent upwards of three-quarters of this time in the work-force. In other words, it is not only the case, as was indicated by Table 2, that no more than a very small minority of women remain in the work-force continuously throughout their married lives: it would further seem safe to say that still only a minority come at all close to participation at this level.

In so far then as the data of Tables 2 and 3 serve to reveal the intermittent and limited

nature of the employment of married women, it is the degree of similarity displayed acro the different subsamples that is of major interest. At the same time, though, it is als possible to draw on the data presented, and especially those of Table 4, in order to bring ou the degree of variation that occurs in wives' employment in relation to the class position c their husbands.

TABLE 4

Timing of first withdrawal from work-force, birth of first child, and first re-entry into work-force i relation to marriage for wives of men in subsamples with differing class mobility experience.

Subsample	Mean number of years after marriage of (1) first with-drawal	(2) birth of first child	(3) first re-entry	(3)–(1): i.e. mean number of years between first withdrawal and first re-entry	(3)–(2): i.e. mean number of years between birth of child and first re-entry	N
Stable in Class I	3.0	3.8	8.3	5.3	4.5	23
Stable in Classes III–V	3.1	3.1	10.3	7.2	7.2	43
Stable in Classes VI and VII	2.5	3.0	8.6	6.1	5.6	67
Upwardly mobile to Class I						
– direct	3.4	3.5	10.0	6.6	6.5	28
– indirect	3.6	4.0	10.8	7.2	6.8	72
Downwardly mobile from Class I	3.6	3.4	10.1	6.5	6.7	20

Note
(a) Women with at least one child who withdrew from work-force at least once.

The form and possible significance of this variation may perhaps best be traced out if on considers first the differences that are evident among the wives of men in the thre intergenerationally stable subsamples, and specifically in the timing of their first withdraw from and return to the work-force. It is indicated in Tables 2 and 3 (first panels) an confirmed in Table 4 that the wives of men stable in Classes VI and VII – or 'working-clas wives if they may be so called – tend to withdraw from the work-force more quickly aft marriage than do the wives of men stable in Class I or in Classes III–V, that is, the wives c men stable either in the higher levels of the 'service class' of professionals, administrator and managers or in the lower levels of the 'intermediate classes' of routine nonmanu employees, self-employed workers, supervisory personnel, etc. However, it can further b seen from Table 4 that as regards re-entry the pattern changes: in this case, the workin class and service-class wives are alike in tending to return to employment at an earlier poi