



Review and critique of the main conceptions of social position, status, or situation

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Abstract

In sociological literature, very different conceptions have emerged regarding concepts that, in some sense, express the location of the given individual or group in society and that are typically referred to by the terms social position, social status, or social situation. In empirical sociological research, these concepts are often used as independent or dependent variables, and the different conceptions that apply to them partly determine the appropriate methodology for conducting the research. In this article, on the one hand, I review the main conceptions of the concepts of social position, status, or situation and, on the other hand, I point out the main interpretation problems of these conceptions. From the points of view of sociological perspectives, I distinguish (1) theoretically neutral or weakly structuralist, (2) traditional class theoretical, conflict theoretical in a narrower sense, centre-periphery theoretical, elite theoretical and capital theoretical conceptions, which are typical of the structuralist perspective, as well as (3) normativist, (4) creativist, (5) rationalist and rationalist-phenomenalist, (6) network theoretical and relationship conceptions of these concepts. I point out the main interpretation problems of these conceptions from a general sociological theoretical point of view and, in general, I regard the insufficiency and/or inadequacy of the theoretical grounding of these conceptions as the most significant problem.

Keywords Social position · Social status · Social situation · Class position · Occupational status

Introduction

In sociological literature, very different conceptions have emerged regarding concepts that, in some sense, express the location of the given individual or group in society, in the system of social relations and/or social inequalities. In the

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English-language sociological literature, the authors usually use the terms social position, social location, class position, social status, or social situation for the naming of these concepts. For the sake of simplicity, I will henceforth refer to these concepts in general with the term “social position” and I will put that term between quotation marks. However, while discussing the different conceptions, I will use the terms that the given authors apply.

It appears that the concepts to be discussed in the article can be regarded as concepts belonging to the same concept category because they typically serve to explain or describe certain phenomena (specified in the next sentence), and, in this respect, they are largely used as alternatives or complements to each other in various sociological theories and the empirical sociological research. In my view, the different versions of the concept of “social position” typically express the attributes and/or circumstances of the given individuals (or groups) or the interpretations of these factors by the actors that basically or to a large extent determine the social actions of the given individuals (or groups), as well as determine the reactions of others to the given actions; and/or they express to what extent the given individuals (or groups) can realize their interests, to what extent they possess social goods, and, through these goods, to what extent they can satisfy their needs. In empirical sociological research, these concepts are often used as independent or dependent variables, and the different conceptions that apply to them partly determine the appropriate methodology for conducting the research.

The different versions of the concept of “social position” usually belong to the most important concepts of sociological theories representing different perspectives, and the differences in perspective between the theories also appear in the different approaches to the concept or concepts of “social position”. As an example, according to the holist perspective, the “social position” is relatively constant, according to the individualist, it is contingent and variable; according to the structuralist perspective, the “social position” is objective or factual, according to the normativist, it is normative; in rationalist approach, the “social position” is in principle given for the individuals, in creativist approach it depends on subjective interpretation.

One reason for the large differences in the definitions of the concept or concepts in question is that different concepts may fit into the sociological theories representing different perspectives in a more or less consistent way. Thus, the various conceptions of “social position” can be classified into certain types, which are closely related to the different sociological perspectives. Here I just briefly refer to that, in my view, at the level of the main sociological perspectives, we can distinguish the normativist and structuralist perspectives within the holist perspective, the creativist and rationalist perspectives within the individualist perspective and the network theory represents a specific approach.¹

From the point of view of sociological perspectives, we can distinguish (1) theoretically neutral or weakly structuralist, (2) traditional class theoretical, conflict theoretical in a narrower sense, centre-periphery theoretical, elite theoretical,

¹ About the types of sociological perspectives see briefly: Farkas 2017a, pp. 13–18. This typification is perhaps the closest to Alexander’s (1987, pp. 10–12) and Hechter’s (1987, pp. 3–7) typifications.

and capital theoretical conceptions, which are typical of the structuralist perspective, as well as (3) normativist, (4) creativist, (5) rationalist and rationalist-phenomenalist, (6) network theoretical and relationship conception of the concept of “social position”. Apart from the individualist (creativist, rationalist and rationalist-phenomenalist) conceptions, from another aspect we can distinguish the categorical and gradational conceptions of the concept of “social position”; besides, within the categorical position conception, we can distinguish the categorical-relational and the categorical-nominal conceptions.

In the *categorical position conception*, the “social position” of individuals is defined on the basis of certain quality attributes or aspects (e.g., property, occupation, and place of residence) and not directly from the point of view of social inequalities. *Gradational position conceptions* grade or rank the given individuals or groups according to certain carrier or carriers of social inequalities (e.g., prestige, education, and income) along a scale. Thus, according to these conceptions, “social position” is the position according to the given scale or ranking of social inequalities (cf.: Connelly et al. 2016, p. 5; Ganzeboom et al. 1992, pp. 3–5).

As mentioned above, within the categorical position conception we can distinguish the categorical-relational and the categorical-nominal conceptions. In the *categorical-relational position conception*, the attributes or aspects (e.g., property and social power) that are considered as the components of “social position” in principle express the position occupied in the system or network of social relations. Thus, the categorical-relational position conceptions could usually be interpreted in a way that, in a certain sense, “social position” is the position held in the system or network of social relations. However, as the given authors or the representatives of the different conceptions interpret the concept of social relation in different ways, they also interpret the concept of “social position” in different ways if their theoretical approach is consistent. *Categorical-nominal position conceptions* classify individuals into certain categories, or into “social positions” according to these categories on the basis of attributes (e.g., gender, occupation and place of residence) that in principle do not express the social relations between the given individuals, and, in themselves, do not express social inequalities, either.

I have not included the individualist position conceptions in the categorical or gradational position conceptions. The position concepts in line with the individualist perspective (social situation as interpreted situation or as choice situation, as well as the phenomenalist position concept) can mainly be considered as alternatives to the categorical-relational position concepts in the explanation of social actions and interactions. Namely, according to the pure individualist approach, it is essentially the interpretations formed in the given specific circumstances, action-outcome connections and/or actions that determine social actions and social interactions, rather than the “social positions” in relatively constant, permanent social relations. As an example, in Blumer’s (1969, pp. 6–8) symbolic interactionist conception, the social position, status or prestige, as understood in connection with culture or social structure, actually exist as the results of the actions of the individuals rather than the determining factors of the actions. These actions, however, are shaped in interactions between individuals, in connection with the interpretation of the variable situations.

One of the purposes of this article is to review the main conceptions of the concept of “social position” in a wider sense. A wide range of sociological literature deals with the particular conceptions discussed in the article, or the survey of some of these conceptions, mainly that of occupation-based conceptions (e.g., Connelly et al. 2016; Grusky and Van Rompaey 1992; Lambert and Bihagen 2012; Nam and Boyd 2004; Rose 2005; Rose and Harrison 2010; Rose and O’Reilly 1997). In the present article, however, I attempt to survey the conceptions that evolved in the different sociological perspectives and are very different from each other. So far, we may have not, or only rarely, encountered such a comprehensive review of the conceptions in question. However, the disadvantage of the comparatively wide range of inquiry is that I can only present the particular conceptions rather briefly. The other purpose of the article is to point out the main interpretation problems of these conceptions from a general sociological theoretical point of view.

I deal with the main conceptions typical of the English-language sociological literature of the past two or three decades, which may be rooted in earlier (mainly classic) works, but which have mainly developed since the fifties of the last century. I refer to relatively early authors and works (e.g., Parsons and Schutz) in the case of concepts that are well highlighted by the relatively early theoretical definitions of the given concepts, which contemporary authors also rely on. I think that all the conceptions and concepts I have discussed have an effect on the present-day sociological literature and deserve attention from the point of view of what concept or concepts would be necessary to express “social position” in a wider sense.

Some conceptions of “social position” have mostly been elaborated in the sociological theory, and these conceptions possibly have a smaller impact on empirical sociological research. Other conceptions, however, have mainly been developed in empirical sociological research, and, from a theoretical point of view, these conceptions may be less elaborated. Nevertheless, we are now interested in the different conceptions of “social position” mainly in a theoretical approach, and it is from such a viewpoint that I point out the main problems of the typical conceptions.

The article is organized as follows. In the next (second) section, I review the main conceptions of the concept of “social position”. In the third section, I outline the main requirements for the concept of “social position”. In the fourth section, I point out the main theoretical interpretation problems of the different conceptions.

Review of the main conceptions

Theoretically neutral conception

The two main versions of the theoretically neutral or weakly structuralist conception are the multifactorial position conception and that concerning the socio-economic status. These conceptions could be classified as structuralist position conceptions on the ground that their representatives in large part accept the fundamental principles of the structuralist perspective. We can call them theoretically neutral conceptions after all, because they are, from a general theoretical aspect, almost completely unfounded.

According to the *multifactorial position conception*, “social position” can be defined by any categorical attribute, or by affiliation to any categorical group that, in some (theoretically unclear) sense, is important in social life. This is how we can interpret Blau’s conception, according to which the social position is any difference in attributes among people that they take into account in their social interactions. Accordingly, all individuals occupy numerous social positions: for example, they belong to some kind of religious group, are more or less educated, have an occupation, and earn a certain income (Blau 1976, pp. 221–222; 1987, p. 76). The position conception in question may be applied as a categorical-nominal conception and/or a gradational conception, as well, depending on the considered attributes. In empirical sociological research, we can often find such a multifactorial conception of social position. As an example, in Saperstein and Penner’s (2012, p. 691) research the respondents’ social position involves long-term unemployment, poverty, incarceration, welfare receipt, educational attainment, marital and parental status, and place of residence.

The most widely accepted position conception in the research on social inequalities and stratification is the occupation-based conception, according to which the “social position” can be characterized by occupational status. In an empirical approach, this conception is principally justifiable by the fact that for most adult people occupation is the most important determining factor or indicator of the amount of social goods individuals possess (Blau and Duncan 1967, pp. 6–7; Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996, p. 202; Hauser and Warren 1997, p. 179). However, practical reasons also played a role in the evolution of this conception, given either the relative availability of empirical data on occupation or the relative ease of collecting such information in large-scale surveys (Meraviglia et al. 2016, p. 126). Different versions of the measurement of occupation-based social position or status have emerged in the sociological literature (see e.g.: Connelly et al. 2016; Grusky and Van Rompaey 1992; Lambert and Bihagen 2012; Nam and Boyd 2004; Rose 2005; Rose and Harrison 2010; Rose and O’Reilly 1997). From this point of view, we can distinguish four kinds of procedures: measurement through socio-economic status, social class position, occupational prestige, and social relationships. In this section, while discussing the theoretically neutral conceptions, I deal with the concept of socio-economic status.

For the measurement of occupational status in the empirical research on social inequalities and stratification, the concept of socio-economic status is the most often applied. Certain authors use the term socio-economic status in a fairly wide sense following the multifactorial position conception. In such a broad meaning, socio-economic status is used as a shorthand expression for variables that characterize the placement of individuals or groups in a society. Accordingly, the socio-economic status may be indicated by educational attainment, income, wealth, occupational standing, class position, possession of houses and/or cars, participation in some activity, etc. (Hauser and Warren 1997, p. 178).

However, in the sociological literature, the term *socio-economic status* is mostly used in a narrower sense and henceforth I will also use it in this sense. In this narrower meaning, the concept of socio-economic status is a gradational position concept, the two components of which are education and average income. Originally

Duncan (1961, pp. 116–117) developed the index of socio-economic status (SEI) for the measurement of occupational prestige, and he based his calculation on the education and average income of the given occupational group. This index, however, has been widely used mostly as the independent index of occupational status in the research on social inequalities and stratification (Hauser and Warren 1997, p. 194; Hodge 1981, pp. 403–408). The socio-economic index (SEI) has been elaborated and updated in several ways, and other, partly different conceptions have also been developed, which consider education, income, and/or prestige as the components of occupational status (Hauser and Warren 1997, pp. 190–195).

To measure occupational status, Ganzeboom and his co-workers have constructed a standard International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI), which is intended to best express the correlation between education and income (Ganzeboom et al. 1992; Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996). In their view, the index of socio-economic status (SEI) measures the attributes of occupations that convert an individual's main resource (education) into an individual's main reward (income) (Ganzeboom et al. 1992, pp. 8–10). Hauser and Warren (1997, pp. 200–224) constructed new indexes of socio-economic status for all workers and, separately, for men and women, based on education and earnings. However, these authors finally questioned the value of the traditional socio-economic indexes for the measurement of occupational status (p. 251). Besides education, some scholars used earnings instead of total income in elaborating the Occupational Status Scale (OSS) (Nam and Boyd 2004, p. 333).

The index of job desirability (IJD) elaborated by Jencks and his co-workers can also be looked upon as an occupational status index. Besides earnings, this index also involves 13 further non-financial characteristic features of jobs (e.g., work hours and vacation days, educational requirements, supervision, job security, and variety) considering the extent to which these features affect the desirability of the jobs in the opinion of the employees (Jencks et al. 1988, pp. 1333–1343). The occupational status measured by the job desirability index can also be regarded as a theoretically neutral gradational position concept.

Structuralist position conception

According to the conception typical of the *structuralist sociological perspective*, the comprehensive and relatively constant social environment basically determines social phenomena. The social environment is of a factual and objective nature and exists independently of the particular individuals. The social actions of individuals and groups and the interactions between them are determined by factual interests and powers, factual social relations, as well as the social positions occupied in these relations.

In the *structuralist position conception*, which is accepted in the sociological theories representing the structuralist perspective, the concept of “social position” is defined by specifying one or more categorical distinctive features or by classifying individuals into categories by one or more distinctive features. In these theories, we can typically meet *traditional class theoretical, conflict theoretical in a narrower sense, centre-periphery theoretical, elite theoretical and capital theoretical versions*

of the structuralist position concept. In the theories in question, this concept or these concepts are usually referred to as social position, class position, social location, social status, or even social situation.

Researchers of traditional class theories represent the categorical-relational conception, and they seek to support the aspects that they take into consideration when defining the class position from a more general theoretical point of view, as well. According to the *traditional class theoretical conception*, social class position expresses the main features of “social position”. Contemporary class theories largely differ from each other from the point of view of what aspects they emphasize when defining class position. In this respect, the neo-Marxist and the neo-Weberian conceptions are usually distinguished. Representatives of the neo-Marxist conception define social class positions regarding exploitation (Wright 2005, pp. 5, 23). The representatives of these conceptions mostly agree that the two basic class positions in the advanced capitalist society, that is, the positions of the capitalist and the worker, can be distinguished by property relations. When distinguishing intermediate class positions, the particular conceptions consider partly different factors, for example, occupation, managerial or inferior position, vocational qualification, etc. As an example, according to Wright’s class theory, class position or class location has three components: the position in property relations, in organizational hierarchy and qualifications; or (in other words) the possession of the means of production, organizational assets, and skill assets (Wright 1987, p. 283; 1989, pp. 24–25).

The representatives of the neo-Weberian conception define social class positions concerning the explanation of life chances. The EGP-class scheme elaborated by Goldthorpe and his co-authors can be looked upon as a typical representative of this conception, in which they make a distinction between class positions on the basis of employment relations. First, they distinguish employers, self-employers, and employees. Then, within the last group, they make further distinctions according to the type of the contract (service relationship or labor contract) signed by the employees and their employer (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992, pp. 37–47; Goldthorpe 1980, pp. 39–42; 2007b, pp. 101, 103–104).

The definition of social class positions based on the EGP class schema is widely used in empirical research on structure and stratification. As an example, the EGP class schema constitutes the theoretical foundation for the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC or ONS-SEC) in Britain (Rose et al. 2005, pp. 14–15). Besides, the new European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) is also based on the EGP class schema (Harrison and Rose 2006; Rose and Harrison 2010). According to Tählin (2007), however, the classification according to the skill requirements of occupations expresses real life chances better than the classification explicitly based on employment relations or the type of the contract.

According to the *conflict theoretical conception* in a narrower sense, which represents the structuralist perspective, the main concern of social position is the position according to the distribution of social power and authority (Dahrendorf 1976, pp. 136–139, 165–166, 169–170, 174, 176, 216; Rex 1961, pp. 122–124). From this point of view, an authority or dominating position and a subjected position can be distinguished, which, concerning interest relations, are in principle contrary positions. Although the representatives of the conflict theoretical

conception in a narrower sense do not explicitly define the concept of social position in the sense that the social position is the position in social power relations and interest relations, they emphasize the significance of these concerns of the social position, and in this sense, they represent the categorical-relational conception.

The conception dividing centre and periphery, as well as the elite theoretical conception, can be regarded as categorical-relational conceptions and are mostly similar to the conflict theoretical approach in a narrower sense. The conception concerning the division of *centre and periphery* has emerged mostly in the field of industrial sociology and the world-system theory. According to this approach, we can basically distinguish two or three social positions: central position, peripheral position, and semi-peripheral position. In the field of industrial sociology, I would like to refer to Friedman (1977, pp. 109–111), in whose conception the central or peripheral position of the employees of the firm can be distinguished from each other on the basis of special skills, contribution to the exercise of managerial authority and collective power. According to the conception represented by the world-system theory, concerning the relations between the countries of the world, and the positions of these countries, we can distinguish three zones from each other: core, periphery, and semi-periphery. The countries in a core-like position have domination over the countries in peripheral and partly semi-peripheral positions in the field of production and international trade, which is determined by the degree of monopolization of the production processes (Wallerstein 2004).

In recent years, for example, Cattani et al. (2014) examined the effect of the core or peripheral position/location of cultural producers (directors, writers, actors/actresses, editors, cinematographers, etc.) on the recognition of their creative work by their peers and critics in the Hollywood feature-film industry. In their view, in principle, the individuals in a core position are connected to all other individuals of both the core and the periphery; the individuals in a peripheral position are not connected to each other but only to the individuals in the core.

According to the *elite theoretical approach*, the population of a given society can be divided into two parts, the elite and the population outside the elite (non-elite, crowd, or public). In Pareto's (1935, pp. 1422–1423) classic conception, we can make a distinction between elite and non-elite on the basis of any significant attribute of the individuals. According to the most widely accepted elite theoretical conception, however, the elite is made up of the individuals who have comparatively the largest social powers in the given society (see e.g.: Carroll 2008, p. 47; Etzioni-Halevy 1993, pp. 94–95; Field and Higley 1980, p. 20; Mills 2000, pp. 3–9, 18–20; Scott 2008, pp. 28, 32–33). The traditional elite theoretical approach distinguishes two groups of individuals: the elite and the non-elite or the crowd. Mills, however, does not distinguish between two, but rather three levels according to the size of the social power. On the top is the relatively unified elite with the most significant social powers (Mills 2000, pp. 3–9, 18–20), right under it is the less organized middle level with powers less significant than those of the elite (pp. 4, 28–29, 290–291), and at the bottom can be found the unorganized and powerless crowd (pp. 28–29). Similarly, Etzioni-Halevy (1993, p. 95) suggests taking the threefold division of power into consideration and she distinguishes elites, sub-elites, and the public. Thus, the

elite theoretical conception distinguishes the elite position and the non-elite position, and perhaps also the position between these two positions.

The *capital theoretical conception*, according to which social position can in principle or mainly be characterized by what kind and what amount of capital the individual in the given position disposes of, also basically represents the structuralist perspective. This conception is mostly linked to Bourdieu's (1986a) theory, according to which we can distinguish three main forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. According to the mentioned author, the social position based on the distribution of capital has three dimensions; the first one being the total volume of capital, the second one the composition of capital, or the relative dominance of economic and cultural capital, and the third one is the change or stability of the position according to the amount and composition of the capital (Bourdieu 1986b, pp. 114–115).

The Bourdieusian approach toward social position, sometimes more or less reinterpreted, is widely used in the sociological literature. As an example, this conception is applied in the research on social structure (e.g., Savage et al. 2013), social mobility (e.g., Flap and Völker 2008), lifestyle (e.g., Flemmen et al. 2017), and health inequalities (e.g., Pinxten and Lievens 2014). Here I highlight the Great British Class Survey, in which social class positions are distinguished on the basis of the three types of capital distinguished by Bourdieu (economic, cultural, and “social” capital). Income, house price, and savings were regarded as the three components of economic capital; cultural capital was measured by cultural interests and cultural activities; and social capital in a narrower sense (relationship capital) was measured by the number and occupational status of people the respondents knew (Savage et al. 2013, pp. 225–228).

Normativist position conception

According to the conception typical of the *normativist sociological perspective*, the comprehensive and relatively constant social environment basically determines social phenomena. The social environment is of a cultural and normative nature, and its most important elements are values and norms. In the course of socialization, individuals build the values and norms from the culture into their personality, and these factors determine their social actions and interactions directly.

In the normativist approach, the concept of “social position” is usually denoted as status and is defined in connection with the concept of role. This concept can be regarded as a categorical and normatively relational concept. The characteristic theoretical representative of the *normativist position conception* is mainly Parsons, in whose view the social status is a position in the social system to which specified rights and duties, specified expectations or norms, and the roles made up by them apply (Parsons 1951, pp. 25–26; 1964, pp. 393–394). Goffman (1961, p. 85), in his symbolic interactionist theory representing the normativist-creativist perspective, defines the concept of status in a similar sense. The concept of social position or status defined in connection with the concept of role is relatively frequently and partly evidently used in contemporary sociological literature.

In the stratification research relatively closely related to the normativist perspective – more exactly, to the normativist-functionalist approach—occupational prestige has been regarded and is still regarded as the main characteristic feature of the occupational status and, in general, of the position in the society (Grabb 1984, pp. 97–98). The researchers of *occupational prestige* measure occupational status by the prestige of the given occupation, asking respondents to evaluate the occupations according to their prestige or “social standing”, and the ranking of occupations is based on the measurement of the prestige of occupations. Therefore, this concept can be looked upon as a gradational concept. Based on the occupational prestige scales of several countries, Treiman (1977) created the Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale (SIOPS). In the research on social inequalities and stratification, this scale has become widely accepted as a valid measure of occupational prestige (Ganzeboom et al. 1991, p. 283).

As long as researchers would like to use the concept of occupational prestige as a theoretically properly established concept in empirical prestige research, they can mostly rely on the prestige concept developed in the theories representing the normativist perspective, especially on Parsons’ concept. According to Parsons, prestige, on the one hand, is an expressive reward immediately contributing to gratification, which in itself is significant for individuals; prestige is the relative esteem in which an individual is held based on the value system of the given society (Parsons 1951, pp. 78, 132). Prestige, on the other hand, is an expressive capacity to exercise influence, which makes the individual suitable for influencing other people’s actions in a way that he or she does not hold out the prospect of any positive or negative consequence (Parsons 1967; 1971, p. 14).

Thus, in normativist conception, the identification of the occupational status with the prestige of the given occupation can, on the one hand, mostly be confirmed by the idea that the sanctions in the occupational system of modern society that are important for individuals, are basically or mostly the sanctions that Parsons calls expressive sanctions rather than instrumental sanctions. According to Parsons, in the occupational system the basic sanction as a reward is success showing the level of approval and esteem of the assessed achievement; and the approval and esteem constitute the sources of direct gratification (Parsons 1951, pp. 185–186). On the other hand, it can be confirmed with the conception that the abilities that make individuals suitable for influencing others are, basically or decisively, also “expressive” abilities.

Some authors accept the above-mentioned normativist conception, according to which occupational prestige scales measure the attributes of the occupational status like respect, honor, and reputation (e.g., Nam and Boyd 2004, p. 332). Zhou (2005, p. 95) accepts the normativist approach of prestige, but—as opposed to the functionalist conception—he follows an “institutional logic” in the research on occupational prestige. In his view, prestige expresses the legitimacy and appropriateness of the given social position, role, or behavior evaluated in reference to the shared values and beliefs, and this evaluation is not influenced by self-interest. According to MacKinnon and Langford (1994, pp. 231–232), the occupational prestige scores express the moral evaluation of occupations to a lesser extent than their evaluation by income and education.

In other authors' view, the measured occupational prestige partly or mainly expresses social power. According to Treiman (1977, pp. 5–6, 19–22), the evaluation expressed by prestige reflects the values and norms collectively accepted by the members of the society. These values and norms, and consequently the differences between occupations in prestige, however, reflect the differences in social power and “privilege” (degree of access to social goods). To put it differently, occupational prestige at least partly serves as an indicator of those resources that are converted into privilege and exclusion (Ganzeboom et al. 1992, p. 8). The representatives of the structuralist conception think that the prestige measured empirically actually measures social power; and/or the prestige evaluations of individuals are determined by the ideologies and values that are shaped by the groups that have prominently significant powers (about this e.g.: Lenski 1966, pp. 45–46, 75, 431; Vanfossen 1979, pp. 230–231).

In Goldthorpe's and Hope's (1974, pp. 11–12) view, prestige scales actually measure the “general goodness” or “general desirability” of occupations, concerning the pure return (e.g., rewards and requirements) that the individuals with the given occupations can obtain. According to the conception that Hope (1982, pp. 1015–1016) calls liberal, the prestige of occupations, as it is ordinarily measured, is a simple average of prestige in accordance with the normativist conception and the desirability of occupations.

Thus, it would be misleading to identify the very different conceptions of prestige with the normativist or normativist-functionalist conception (Grabb 1984, p. 98; Wegener 1992, p. 273). It seems that empirical prestige research can mostly be characterized by an eclectic prestige conception that regards occupational prestige as partly expressive and partly instrumental.

Besides other components of inequalities, contemporary researchers of social stratification pay relatively little attention to prestige, whereas some authors emphasize the importance of status concerning prestige. According to Ridgeway's (2014, p. 1) approach, to understand the mechanisms behind social inequalities, we need to consider the effects of status based on differences in prestige more thoroughly, alongside those based on resources and power. As a motive for behavior, prestige is as significant as money and power; and status (as prestige) is a central mechanism behind durable patterns of social inequality. According to this conception, firstly, inequalities based on status (as a marker of prestige) stabilize resource and power inequalities; secondly, they deepen these inequalities. Thirdly, inequalities based on status (as a marker of prestige) constitute an independent dimension of inequalities that generate further material inequalities between people (pp. 3–4).

Some authors trace back the use of the term social status in the meaning of status as a marker of prestige to Max Weber's conception. Weber's German expression “ständische Lage” was translated as “status” by the translators of *Economy and Society* (Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 187; Weber 1978a, p. 305), and – in this conception – Weber makes a distinction between the concepts of class situation and social status. Using the term social status, the three characteristic features of “social status” in Weber's classic definition are as follows: (1) the specific honor or prestige, (2) specific lifestyle, and (3) positive or negative privileges of the individuals in a given status (Weber 1978a, pp. 305–306; 1978b, pp. 932–938).

Of the above-mentioned characteristic features, contemporary researchers usually emphasize the first or the first and second characteristic features. Thus, in this conception social status is a position or status according to prestige or according to prestige and lifestyle (e.g., Crompton 2012, pp. 34–35; Grabb 1984, pp. 55–56; Hechter 2004, p. 404; Martin 2009, pp. 242–243; Phillips and Zuckerman 2001, p. 386; Ridgeway 2014, p. 2; Scott 2002, pp. 29–30; Waters and Waters 2015, p. 37; Wegener 1992, pp. 256–257; Zhou 2005, pp. 92–93). In Chan and Goldthorpe's (2007, p. 514) view, social status, as Weber uses it, is the perceived and accepted social superiority, equality, or inferiority of the given individual among given individuals and is linked not to the personal qualities of the individual but rather to the social positions that he or she holds or to certain attributes ascribed to him or her (e.g., birth or ethnicity).

Individualist position conception

Within the position conceptions typical of the individualist perspective or those which correspond to it, we can distinguish *creativist*, *rationalist*, and, (mainly in compliance with the *rationalist* approach), *phenomenalist* position conceptions.

According to the conception typical of the *creativist sociological perspective*, in the explanation of social phenomena, the essential determining factors are the factors directly determining the actions of individuals. The social environment exists in the consciousness of individuals, and individuals create their own social reality in the course of their everyday interactions in a common interpretation process. The social actions of individuals and the interactions between them are motivated by personal motives and by the jointly developed interpretations, which, however, are only valid for the given cases.

In theories representing the *creativist perspective* and the *normativist-creativist perspective*, the concept in question is typically referred to as *situation*, *action situation*, or *social situation*. According to the *creativist position conception* typical of the theories representing these perspectives, the individuals participating in the given interactions develop their relevant social situations in a joint interpretation process.

The *creativist position conception*, that is, the conception of “the definition of the situation” has a long history in sociology (see e.g.: Egloff 2015; Manterys 2000, mainly pp. 98–171). One of the typical theoretical representatives of this conception is Schutz. In his view: “Man finds himself at any moment of his daily life in a biographically determined situation, that is, in a physical and socio-cultural environment as defined by him...” (Schutz 1962, p. 9). The situation involves his/her position in space, time, and society, and his/her experience that some of the elements of the world taken for granted are imposed upon him/her, while others are within his/her own control (p. 76). In Blumer's (1969, pp. 81, 85) *symbolic interactionist conception*, the action takes place in a situation, and the individual shapes his/her action by interpreting the situation. As the components of the situation, the individual has to consider the tasks, demands, expectations, opportunities, means, obstacles, prohibitions, threats, discomforts, dangers, and the like that may arise in the situation

in which he or she is acting. In his approach, the most important components of the situation are the actions and expectable actions of others. Besides those mentioned above, the considered aspects also involve the actor's own wishes and wants, objectives and the means to achieve them, his or her image of himself or herself, and the likely result of a given line of action (pp. 8, 15–16).

As opposed to the purely creativist position conception, the representatives of phenomenological sociology and symbolic interactionism mostly acknowledge that action situations are largely determined by the given circumstances, but their inquiry is focused on the definition of the situations by actors. As an example, Smith (2011) examined the definition of the situation by the actors in the interactions between urban welfare workers and their clients on the streets of a town. However, he does not prove a clear creativist approach according to which participants are free to create a situation for themselves. He argues that in action they may accomplish a definition of the situation within certain institutional and structural constraints.

According to the conception typical of the *rationalist sociological perspective*, in the explanation of social phenomena, the essential determining factors are the factors directly determining the actions of the individuals. The social environment exists in the actions and interactions of individuals, or as the result of these factors; the given social environment is incidental and can only be interpreted as related to the individual actors. The social actions of individuals and the interactions between them are mostly determined by the rational motives, i.e., the subjective interests of individuals, and, in connection with these, by their preferences and alternatives.

The position concept corresponding to the rationalist perspective the best is the concept of the *situation of choice*. It involves all the alternatives for the given individual in correlation with his or her preferences, taking the alternatives and probable choices of other relevant individuals into consideration when assessing the probable consequences of the alternatives on that individual (e.g., Elster 1986, p. 4; Hechter 1987, pp. 30–31; Hechter et al. 1990, pp. 2–3; Heckathorn 2001, pp. 275–276). For example, Lubell et al. (2002, p. 150) define the concept of action situation in connection with the situation of choice, but partly in a different sense. In their view, “the action situation includes the nature and distribution of resources, existing institutional arrangements, and action-outcome links”.

According to the *phenomenalist position conception*, social position is the position occupied in the pattern of more or less regular social interactions among individuals in a given society. As an example, in Collins' (2019, p. 71) view, the term position means the collection of observable behavioral patterns that are reserved for the given individuals under particular circumstances. Although the phenomenalist position conception is one corresponds to the individualist (and mainly to the rationalist) sociological perspective, authors basically representing other perspectives, and other position conceptions also apply the phenomenalist interpretation of the concept of social position. As an example, I have mentioned above that Wright is a typical representative of the structuralist position conception. Nevertheless, he writes that class location designates the social position occupied by the individual within a particular kind of social relation. In his view, the social relation is “the inherently structured interactive quality of human action”, and a location within a class relation is the individual's position within such structured patterns of interaction (Wright

2005, p. 14). In this sense, the social position as class location is the position occupied in the pattern of regular social interactions. Thus, Wright already seems to represent the phenomenalist position conception.

Network theoretical and relationship position conception

Social network analysis, which attempts to combine the holist and individualist, and mainly the structuralist and the rationalist perspectives, represents a specific approach. According to the representatives of this approach, the most typical feature of social network analysis is that the network analysis places the emphasis on the analysis of social relations or relationships between the actors, as well as the patterns of these relationships. This analysis explains the social conduct of actors and, in general, social phenomena from the social relations or relationships (e.g., Crossley and Edwards 2016, par. 3.4–3.5; Degenne and Forsé 2010, pp. 2–3; Freeman 2004, pp. 2–3; Singh 2019, pp. 765–768; Wasserman and Faust, 1994, pp. 4–11; Wellman 2002, p. 82).

In the network analysis, *network position* is the equivalent of “social position”, which expresses the position of the given individual within the network of social relationships. This concept can be regarded as a categorical-relational position concept. In the network analysis, some authors distinguish the relational and the positional approaches. The relational approach surveys the social relationships between the actors, taking the relationships of both or all of the actors into consideration, whereas the positional analysis surveys and analyses the social relationships of one particular actor. In the positional analysis, an individual is one of many in a system of interconnected actors in the sense that all relationships of the given individual in which he or she is involved must be considered. The network position of the given individual is mostly shown by the so-called ego-network, which involves the direct relationships of the given individual and all of the individuals with whom he or she has a direct relationship, as well as the relationships between these individuals. However, the network position is different from the ego-network, because the ego-network consists of existing relationships, but the lack of relationships can also be an important feature of the network position (Burt 1982, pp. 30–32).

In the network analysis, two approaches and procedures have mainly been developed for the placement of individuals into identical or similar network positions. According to one of these conceptions, those individuals are in an identical network position who are linked with direct relationships. According to the other conception, those individuals are in an identical network position or similar network positions whose relationships are structurally equivalent (Knoke and Kuklinski 1982, pp. 19–21). We can distinguish the narrower and wider interpretations of structural equivalence. In a narrower sense, structural equivalence means that the structurally equivalent relationships of two or more individuals link them to the same individual or individuals. However, in the network analysis structural equivalence is mostly interpreted in a wider sense. In this approach, the structurally equivalent relationships of two or more individuals can also exist referring

to different other actors (Burt 1982, pp. 42–49; Friedkin and Johnsen 1997, pp. 209–210; Knoke and Kuklinski 1982, pp. 19–20, 59–60; Scott 2009, p. 126).

The approach of “social distance” is similar to the network theoretical conception from the point of view that the representatives of the former approach also specify the social location of individuals—as incumbents of given occupations—on the basis of the measurement of “social relationships”. Cambridge researchers developed the so-called Cambridge scale (CAMSIS), and by using it they categorized and ranked occupations according to their “social distance” (Bottero and Prandy 2003; Prandy 1990; Prandy and Lambert 2003). The Cambridge scale is based on the presupposition that incumbents of occupations that are socially similar tend to interact more than incumbents of those that are dissimilar. They took two types of “social” interactions or relationships into consideration, that is, friendship and marriage relationships (Prandy 1990, pp. 630–631). Thus, they specified the social distances between the occupations and ranked the occupations on the basis of how typical friendship and/or marriage relationships are among the incumbents of the given occupations. According to the representatives of this approach, such an arrangement of occupations, in theory, expresses the distance between the occupations and the ranking of occupations from the aspect of material and social advantage (p. 635). Meraviglia et al. (2016) have elaborated an International Cambridge Scale (ICAMS) to measure social distances, taking husband-wife relationships into consideration. Thus, according to the conception of social distance, the “social position” of the individual is the location of the occupation he or she pursues in the ranking of occupations and the social distance of the given occupation from other occupations, measured on the basis of friendship and/or marriage relationships. Accordingly, the position conception in question can be regarded as gradational conception.

Requirements for the concept of “social position”

In the second (previous) section of the article, I reviewed the typical conceptions of the concept of “social position” that has evolved in sociological literature. In the fourth section, I will deal with the main interpretation problems of the conceptions and concepts discussed in the previous section. I will point out these problems from a general sociological theoretical aspect and, naturally, on the basis of a theoretical conception that I consider appropriate, which is partly in accordance with and partly different from the conceptions of other scholars. My conception, relevant from this point of view, fits into a general sociological theory, which I call the theory of institutional sociology. In the frame of this article, however, it is not possible to review this theory (in outline see: Farkas 2017a; 2017b). I only highlight the principles of the institutional perspective in the following four points, as well as below I will outline the main requirements for the concept of “social position” that can be imposed on the basis of the given theoretical conception.

The most fundamental connections or principles of the institutional perspective are as follows:

- Social phenomena are ultimately determined by social institutions (as norm systems) through their factual functions. Through these functions, social institutions create or determine factual interests, social powers, social relations, and positions.
- The social actions, the conduct of individuals, and the interactions between individuals are basically determined by interests, social powers, social relations, and positions. The direct determining factors of social actions transmit the effects of these factors.
- The elementary social actions are individual rational actions, and the behavior attributed to groups is also made up of such actions. The subjects of social actions can be individuals and specific institutional groups called social unions.
- The macro-level social phenomena are basically determined by the factual social relations as social structure. However, the validity of the given social institution system and thus the orderedness of modern society are, after all, ensured by the institutional centralization of the ability of physical coerciveness.

In my view, we can distinguish between the abstract, concessionary, and eclectic levels of a theory (see briefly Farkas 2017a: 23), and these principles apply to the abstract level of the given theory. According to these principles, the so-called institutional perspective also involves, in a certain sense, a relational and rational sociological conception.

It is to be noted that in the theory in question, in a certain sense I make a distinction between two concepts that, on the one hand, I denote with the term social position and intend for a categorical-relational, as well as explanatory concept and, on the other hand, I denote with the term social status and intend for a gradational and descriptive concept (Farkas 2022). However, I mainly look upon the definition of the former concept as a problem, and in this article, I point out the main interpretation problems mostly from this point of view.

I recognize the usefulness of empirical sociological research, partly regardless of at what level and to what extent this research is grounded from a theoretical point of view. In the present article, however, I take it for granted that sociology requires, or would require, the general sociological theoretical grounding of empirical research. Thus, before the specific requirements, on the one hand, I emphasize as a general requirement that can be set out based on any sociological theoretical conception that, like every significant theoretical concept, the concept of “social position” can effectively fulfill its explanatory or descriptive function within a general or relatively more general theory. According to this, a given position concept is mainly justified by its consistently fitting into a general or relatively more general theory, and within the given theory it can be applied effectively in the explanation or description of social phenomena. On the other hand, I highlight as a general requirement that abstraction is necessary in a theory, and concepts expressing entities that, compared to each other, are related to very different presuppositions and consist of elementary components that are of a very different nature cannot be used in the explanation of social phenomena consistently. Though compared to theoretical concepts, the reality is usually much more complex, it has to be made clear in empirical research as well, in what sense the given concepts are used from a theoretical point of view.

Compared with the abstract theoretical concepts, we have to point out what concessions we make in empirical research in consideration of the complexity of reality and the limits of empirical research.

One of the main requirements imposed on the concept of “social position”, partly on the bases of my theoretical conception, refers to the idea that the social position is an entity of social nature. This requirement might sound obvious, but it is very far from that, since the most significant theoretical problem of sociology, that is, that there is no agreement in sociology on the question of what kind of entities social entities are, arises in the course of defining all sociological concepts (see e.g.: Pyyhtinen 2010, pp. 22–28; Wickham 2016). In my view, Wallace’s (1988, p. 35) statement, namely that „an explicit DANGER sign must be posted over the unfortunately long-standing ambiguity that tradition in sociology has assigned to the term social” is still valid. However, if the researchers do not have a clear conception of the nature of the phenomena they are investigating, they are unlikely to develop the right methodology and the right theoretical apparatus for conducting the investigation (Searle 2008, pp. 443–444).

According to the most widely accepted conception in contemporary sociological literature, social entities are “interhuman” entities or entities related to the interactions between people. I do not regard such a wide conception of social entities as acceptable, since the entities “between people” are not homogeneous; such entities are mostly of a different nature. According to my conception, direct social entities are the means and conditions of need satisfaction created or determined by institutions. (To be less precise, but using commonly used terms, direct social entities are instrumental entities created or determined by norms.) However, the entities that are not of a social nature themselves, but can be available to individuals as the consequences of direct social entities can also be regarded as social entities in an indirect way (briefly Farkas 2017a, pp. 62–63). Thus, one of the main requirements imposed on the concept of “social position” is that the given concept should express an entity that can be regarded as an entity of social nature in reality.

The other main requirement, which is in close connection with the first one, regards the different spheres of human life. According to my conception, we can distinguish four main spheres of human life: the spheres of private life, community life, social life, and coercive life (briefly Farkas 2017a, pp. 80–81). I assume that in the modern forms of human coexistence these spheres exist in close connection with, but separately from each other. With the separation of the mentioned spheres, we mainly aim to circumscribe the area within human life (the sphere of social life) in which the so-called social lawnesses prevail. In the present article, there is no possibility of discussing these spheres in detail, below I will only point out the distinction in question very briefly.

By the sphere of private life I mean the sphere of human life in which the natural (value-neutral) need-motivated actions and the technical actions related to them are typical, and the interactions between the individuals are, in principle, incidental. This sphere involves first of all activities aimed to directly satisfy physical needs, (e.g., eating, drinking, personal hygiene, relaxing). However, we can also include most free-time activities in this sphere, (e.g., entertainment, hobby, reading, and watching television), as long as these activities are exercised individually

and separately. By the sphere of community life I mean the sphere of human life in which, within the need-motivated actions, the value-motivated actions – and the community interactions comprising such actions – are typical. In this sphere, the different entities are important for individuals mainly as the objects of mental needs.² Activities exercised together with friends, partly with family members, members of charity organizations, or members of an amateur drama circle or band, may belong to the sphere of community life. (The intimate life sphere can be interpreted at the boundary of the spheres of private life and community life, and it is not separated from these spheres in reality, either.)

We are mostly interested in the sphere of social life. By the sphere of social life, I mean the sphere of human life in which the social actions — as well as the social interactions comprising such actions — are typical. In this view, social actions are characteristically interest-motivated actions, but they may be social coercion-motivated actions too.³ The sphere of social life typically includes, for example, organized work activity, organized education, and learning, scientific research, public administration, political activity, etc. According to my conception, in the sphere of social life—and within this, in the sphere of organized work—acting individuals in principle seek to produce the social preconditions of need satisfaction, instead of directly satisfying their needs (in a narrower sense). In this context, in the sphere of social life, the different entities are important for individuals as the means and conditions of need satisfaction, and not as the objects of needs. In the sphere of coercive life the direct coercion-motivated actions—and the interactions comprising actions applying physical coerciveness and direct coercion-motivated actions—are typical. This sphere typically includes, for example, the circumstances of prisons, jails, and psychiatric closed wards, as well as the activities typical of them.

Thus, the other main requirement set out for the concept of “social position” is that it should be made clear that the given concept exclusively or primarily refers to the sphere of social life. As I have already mentioned, I make a distinction between social position and social status. It is to be noted that, in my conception, the entity I call social position exists in the sphere of social life, but the entity I call social status is in a certain sense, (in the form of material life circumstances), also present in the sphere of private and community life.

The third main requirement refers to what role we assign to the concept of “social position” in the explanation or the description of phenomena. It needs to be clarified that the concept of “social position” is only meant to describe the given phenomena or an explanatory concept that is a determining factor in the explanation of certain phenomena. Also, if the given entity can be regarded as a phenomenon from a certain aspect determined by other entities, from another aspect, however, as the determining factor of further phenomena, in principle a clear-cut distinction has to be made between the different components or concerns of the given entity.

² In the theory I have elaborated, I introduce the concept of the components of need satisfaction, and, within the components of need satisfaction, I distinguish the objects and negative objects of needs, as well as the means and conditions of need satisfaction (briefly Farkas 2017a, pp. 36–37).

³ About the main types of actions (see briefly, Farkas 2017a, pp. 69–71).

As mentioned above, I mainly regard the definition of the explanatory concept of “social position” as a problem. If the concept of “social position” is meant to be an explanatory concept, the fourth main requirement is that within the more comprehensive theory the mechanism of how the “social position” determines the social actions and social phenomena, in general, should be clarified. Within this, I emphasize two aspects. On the one hand, concerning the nature of social actions, I accept the conception according to which social actions—putting it less precisely but using the terms widely used in sociology—are instrumental rational actions. Therefore, the concept of “social position” has to be suitable for explaining such actions. On the other hand, partly in accordance with the relational sociological conception (i.g.: Dépelteau 2018; Emirbayer 2002), in my conception, social actions and, in general, social phenomena are basically determined by social relations. Thus, in so far as we mean the concept of “social position” to be an explanatory concept, this concept has to express the position occupied in the system or network of social relations.

If, by some position conception, social power, authority, or (social) capital is regarded as the main component of “social position”, this conception corresponds to the structuralist perspective. In my view, and also in the structuralist perspective, we have to take account of the fact that social power relations determine social phenomena in connection with interest relations. Thus, in general also, but especially against the conceptions in question, I also set out the fifth requirement according to which in the definition of the concept of “social position”, besides social power relations or authority relations, interest relations should be taken into consideration to a similar extent.

Next, I will present the critique of the conceptions discussed in the previous section, putting the main emphasis on the deficiencies of these conceptions. While discussing the given conceptions, I do not go through all the above-mentioned requirements, but considering these requirements, I only highlight the most significant deficiency or deficiencies.

Critique of the main conceptions

Critique of the theoretically neutral conception

As we have seen, the two main versions of the theoretically neutral conception are the multifactorial position conception and that concerning the socio-economic status. The main problem inherent in the multifactorial position conception is that in this conception, the essential social content of “social position” is theoretically unclear. We cannot know what the essential common aspect is on the basis of which for example qualifications, occupation, sex, age, place of residence, payment, housing conditions, etc. can all characterize the “social position”. According to this conception, it is theoretically unclear how these factors play a role in the determination of social actions and, in general, social (and partly other human) phenomena. Mainly from this point of view, we can refer to the critiques according to which—to put it briefly—making a list of the statistically relevant determining factors is not suitable for the explanation of social phenomena (Emirbayer 2002, pp. 127–129;

Goldthorpe 2007a, pp. 118–127; Hedström 2005, p. 23; Seeman 1981, p. 407; Wellman 2002, pp. 92–94). The other main problem, connected with the one mentioned above, is that the representatives of the multifactorial position conception typically regard both the entities that can be considered social phenomena as consequences (e.g., payment, housing conditions, and degree of supply with durable consumer goods), and the entities that can be considered the determining factors of the given social phenomena (e.g., qualifications and occupation) as the components of “social position”.

As a kind of operationalized concept, the concept of socio-economic status has generally proved to be useful in empirical sociological research. This concept meets the requirements mentioned above from the point of view that it expresses entities of social nature, among which education, in principle, exists in the sphere of social life, and income, however, besides the sphere of social life, also on its border areas. However, from a general theoretical aspect, the main question is the operationalized version of which theoretical concept can the concept of socio-economic status be considered. As mentioned during the review, Duncan originally elaborated this concept for the measurement of occupational prestige, but—as I will discuss in the critique of the normativist position conception—in my conception, occupational prestige is not suitable for the characterization of social position or status. However, if we disregard prestige, the theoretical concept that fits into a general or relatively more general sociological theory properly, and the concept of socio-economic status would be its operationalized version, is unclear. In the absence of such a systematic theoretical position concept, the concept of socio-economic status can be regarded as a fairly simple, theoretically neutral gradational position concept. In this conception, it is theoretically unclear how the two components of socio-economic status determine certain aspects of social (and partly other human) phenomena.

The above-mentioned problem is also typical of the concept of socio-economic status, that is, on the one hand, its index expresses an entity (education) that can usually be regarded as a cause or determining factor in the explanation of social phenomena; on the other hand, it expresses an entity (income) that we mostly examine as a consequence (Ganzeboom et al. 1992, pp. 8–10). According to the representatives of class theories, income can be regarded as a consequence rather than a component of the social position or class position (Parkin 1972, pp. 40–41; Poulantzas 1975, p. 20; Wright 1979).

Regarding the index of job desirability (Jencks et al. 1988), in my view, by the goodness of jobs in a social sense, we can mean at what expense and to what extent they make feasibly possible the production or acquisition of social goods. The job desirability index in question refers to the entity of social nature and is probably suitable for expressing the goodness of jobs in such a sense. However, there is no a more general concept and a general or a relatively more general theory in connection with which this concept could have significant explanatory power.

Critique of the structuralist position conception

I have distinguished traditional class theoretical, conflict theoretical in a narrower sense, centre-periphery theoretical, elite theoretical and capital theoretical versions of the structuralist position concept. As mentioned in the review, researchers of traditional class theories represent the categorical-relational position conception, and they seek to support the aspects that they take into consideration when defining the class position from a more general theoretical point of view, as well. However, for the lack of a systematic general sociological theory that would be suitable for the establishment of class theories, this ambition of theirs has not led to satisfactory results. As an example, Wright (2005, pp. 9–10, 18) claims that he theoretically distinguishes the class locations, which are also considered different in reality, by the rights and powers people have concerning productive resources. However, the main problem with this conception, on the one hand, is that Wright does not distinguish class locations in terms of rights and powers, but in terms of entities (property, qualifications, etc.) that are in close but theoretically unclear connections with rights and powers. On the other hand, in Wright's class theory, the concepts of rights and powers are basic concepts that the author uses as a matter of course, and they are not supported by a more comprehensive and systematic theory. As we have seen, in the EGP class schema classes are distinguished from each other according to employment relations. However, the employment relation as a social relation and the employment position as a social position are theoretically unclear, and the given concepts do not fit into a more general sociological theory. Accordingly, as also Breen (2005, p. 47) points out, there is a lack of a theoretical explanation of what mechanism connects the different types of employment relations with the different life chances. Goldthorpe (2007b, pp. 107–124) seeks to establish the aspects of the circumscription of classes from a general theoretical point of view, especially from the point of view of the rational choice theory and transaction cost theory, as well, but – in my view – his ambition has not led to satisfactory results.

The researchers of the conflict theory in a narrower sense, centre-periphery theory, and elite theory make a distinction between the typical (dominant and subjected, central and peripheral, elite and non-elite) social positions mainly from the point of view of social power relations or authority relations. In my view, one of the main deficiencies of these conceptions is the ambiguity of the concepts concerning social power and power relations. Their other main deficiency is that, besides the social power relations, they do not sufficiently take the interest relations into consideration.

In my view, social powers and power relations, as well as interests and interest relations are entities of social nature existing in the sphere of social life. The representatives of conflict theories in a narrower sense, however, partly extend the validity of the concepts expressing the entities in question also over the sphere of coercive life or physical violence (e.g., over the explanation of the direct determinedness of riots and armed conflicts). Besides, the problem with the conflict theoretical position conception is, firstly, that the concepts of social power, authority, and interest in conflict theories (in a narrower sense) are theoretically unfounded and not properly elaborated concepts. Secondly, this conception simplifies the real social relations and real social positions to a large extent, when it assumes as a matter of course

that the interests of the group having authority are contrary to the interests of those in authority dependence. Thirdly, according to my conception, the theorem of the conflict theory that the authority relations and the contrary interest relations together determine a social conflict between the members of the two social classes is logically a misconception and, in general, it does not reflect reality, either.⁴

The conception dividing centre and periphery, as well as the elite theoretical conception, are mostly similar to the conflict theoretical approach in a narrower sense. The central and peripheral positions, as well as the elite and non-elite positions, are essentially distinguished on the basis of social (or economic) power relations. In this context, one of the main deficiencies of the conceptions in question is that the concepts concerning powers and power relations have not been made clear; the other main deficiency is that these conceptions do not take the interest relations properly into consideration, either. A typical problem of the elite theoretical approach is that it does not pay sufficient attention to the population outside the elite, to the differentiation of the non-elite. These deficiencies are in connection with the overall problem that these conceptions do not fit into a systematic general sociological theory, either.

According to the capital theoretical position conception, the characteristic feature of social position in principle is what kind and what amount of capital the individual or group in the given position disposes of. In my view, Bourdieu's capital concept is a very significant contribution to the sociological theoretical utilization of the concept of capital. However, Bourdieu's concept of capital – in accordance with the nature of inductive concept-construction – is logically a rather unelaborated concept, like a basic concept, and the connection of capital with other entities, especially with social power is unclear. In connection with this, a very extensive explanatory function is largely unfoundedly attributed to the concept of capital or social capital (capital of a social nature) in the sociological literature.⁵ In the widely accepted and used concept of capital or social capital, the entities that can be regarded as action abilities and those that cannot be regarded as action abilities from the point of view of explaining the given social phenomena, as well as the social and non-social components are partly mixed. Apart from these problems, the distribution of individuals according to social capital (capital of a social nature) can satisfactorily reflect only the distribution according to social powers in general and cannot express the complex social power relations and, in particular, cannot express interest relations.

As an example for the application of Bourdieu's capital concept, I mentioned the Great British Class Survey (Savage et al. 2013) in the review. Regarding the

⁴ The social relation that can be characterized by authority relation and contrary interest relation, in principle, determines social oppression and submission – in favor of the party possessing authority – between the given individuals (briefly Farkas 2017b, pp. 72–73).

⁵ Some authors use the term capital to denote the total of the different types of capital that are directly significant from the social point of view, and, within this, they determine the social capital as a specific type of capital. Other authors use the term social capital to denote the total of the different types of capital directly significant from the social point of view, and they call the specific capital called social capital by the representatives of the former terminology, for example, relationship capital. I use the term social capital in the latter sense.

given research only from a theoretical point of view to demonstrate the above-mentioned problems, I partly agree with Mills' (2014, p. 437) opinion. The reference to Bourdieu's capital theory might misleadingly create the impression of a satisfactory theoretical grounding of the research in question. Using the term social capital to denote capitals of social nature, the measurement of the economic (property) capital as social capital (capital of a social nature) in the given research is, in my view, largely wrong. In my conception, possessing money (income and savings) that the individual spends on buying goods to be used in the spheres of private and community life (food, clothing, durable consumer goods, etc.), and possessing such goods (e.g., a house or furnishings) do not constitute a social capital for the given individual. Similarly, I consider wrong the interpretation of cultural capital as social capital (capital of a social nature) that regards the cultural interest (inquiry) and activity within the spheres of private and community life as interest (inquiry) and activity of a social nature. In my conception, social capital is made up of action abilities of social nature, and, in principle, it only exists in the sphere of social life, and in a certain sense at the boundary of the sphere of social life and other life spheres. Regarding relationships, it is also undefined to what extent the given individuals have interpersonal relationships with the acquaintances surveyed in the given research, and to what extent these relationships are relationships of social nature.

Apart in part from the capital theoretical conceptions (and to a lesser extent from the conflict theoretical conceptions in a narrower sense), the social position according to the structuralist position conceptions is in reality an entity of social nature, and this position exists in the sphere of social life. However, the main deficiency of the structuralist position conception typical of the sociological theories representing the structuralist perspective is the lack of consistent theoretical foundation and, in connection with this, that the mechanism of how the social position determines the social phenomena is unclear. Some representatives of the conception in question attempt to deduce from a more general theory and place within a more general theory the aspects of classifying the individuals (or families) into certain social positions or class positions. These aspects, however, do not fit consistently into a general sociological theory, within which the concept of social position or the concept of social class position would be suitable for the theoretical explanation of the consequences attributed to this position.

Critique of the normativist position conception

In the sociological theories representing the normativist perspective, the concept of "social position" is usually denoted as status and is defined in connection with the concept of role. The major problem with the position concept in question lies in the normativist perspective, which does not make a clear-cut distinction between the sphere of social life and the sphere of community life, and largely looks upon the sphere of social life as if it were the sphere of community life. According to my conception, in social life individuals act in a way that they are not directly conforming to the norms and roles of a cultural nature, therefore, in principle, their actions do not necessarily—and in reality their actions in a large measure do not—comply with

the relevant norms and roles (briefly Farkas 2017a, pp. 57, 59). Thus, the analysis of norms and roles, in principle, does not provide a satisfactory explanation of social actions and social phenomena in general. Consequently, the concept of social position or status that is defined in connection with the role cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of these phenomena.

As mentioned in the review, in the stratification researches relatively closely related to the normativist perspective—more exactly, to the normativist-functional-ist conception—occupational prestige has been regarded and is still regarded as the main characteristic feature of the position in society. Since the 1950s, the concept, measurement, and suitability of occupational prestige for expressing social position or status have been subject to much criticism (e.g.: Guppy and Goyder 1984; MacKinnon and Langford 1994; Vanfossen 1979, pp. 222–224, 229–231; Wegener 1992; Zhou 2005). The concept and measurement of occupational prestige are especially debated in the sociological literature from the point of view of what is actually measured by the variable called prestige in empirical prestige research. Does the measured occupational prestige express the evaluation of achievement, honor, esteem, charisma, or merely the desirability of an occupation (Wegener 1992, pp. 255–258; Hauser and Warren 1997, pp. 188–190)?

I accept the normativist conception of prestige, according to which prestige itself is important for individuals, that is, prestige is an “expressive” or personal reward and ability to influence. In accordance with the normativist conception, but using the concepts I have introduced, we can state that prestige, on the one hand, is a personal reward constituting the object of mental need for the subject, and on the other hand, it is a community power constituting the object of mental need for the object of the power (briefly Farkas 2017a, pp. 37, 46; 2017b, p. 36).

In my conception, however, the concept of prestige is not suitable for expressing social position or status. I do not agree with the conception according to which prestige in the above sense has decisive significance in real social life. As long as we conceive the concepts of prestige and occupational prestige as interpreted in accordance with the normativist conception, prestige is of community nature and, in principle, exists in the sphere of community life; in the sphere of social life, in principle, prestige is of no importance. In comparison, reality is, naturally, more complex. In reality, prestige also has some significance in the sphere of social life; however, on the one hand, its significance is relatively little, and on the other hand, prestige in social life is mostly apparent (not real).⁶ In the sphere of social life, if the advantageous social position, considerable social power, and privileged position of the given individual come to an end, his or her apparent prestige also disappears. Considering the concepts of prestige and occupational prestige in accordance with the normativist conception, empirical prestige researchers are, in fact, able to apprehend social inequalities concerning occupations comparatively well, because decisively they do not measure prestige.

⁶ Exceptions to this statement are mostly the occupations—e.g. actors/actresses, professional sportsmen, medical doctors—that are typically pursued on the dividing line between the sphere of social life and the sphere of private and community life.

As I have mentioned, empirical prestige research can mostly be characterized by an eclectic prestige conception that regards occupational prestige as partly expressive and partly instrumental. According to this conception, but using the concepts I have introduced, prestige constitutes partly the object of mental need and partly the means or condition of need satisfaction for individuals; in this view, prestige is partly a community and partly a social entity. In my view, however, using the concept of prestige as an eclectic concept that expresses both prestige according to the normativist conception, the social power and the so-called privileges (degree of access to social goods) is unsuitable. I emphasized above that the concepts expressing entities that, compared to each other, are related to very different presuppositions and consist of elementary components that are of a very different nature cannot be used consistently in the explanation of social phenomena. A concept expressing the desirability of occupations could also be useful, in my view; however, it is not advisable to call this concept prestige, either. Nevertheless, I regard as usable the concept of prestige in the research on human (and not social in a narrower sense) inequalities, but I will deal with this issue in the section Conclusions.

As I have mentioned above, some authors trace back the use of the term social status in the meaning of status as a marker of prestige to Max Weber's conception. Here I only point out briefly, that, in my conception, the three main components of Weber's "ständische Lage" concept, that is, honor, lifestyle, and positive or negative distinction, should be expressed in three different concepts in general sociological theory (and in the theoretical foundations of empirical sociological research); and these three concepts should not be summed up in one comprehensive concept, since the given components, regarding their elementary components, are of very different nature. I have already mentioned that I regard the concept of status as a marker of prestige usable in the research on human inequalities, but I regard this concept in principle as valid in the sphere of community life. However, it is advisable to make a distinction between this concept and, on the one hand, a concept that expresses the typical lifestyle or way of life of the given circle of individuals, and, on the other hand, a concept that expresses the positive or negative distinction of the given circle of individuals. In the section Conclusions, I will point out that I call the concept expressing the positive or negative distinction of individuals order position.

Critique of the individualist position conception

Within the position conceptions typical of the individualist perspective or those which correspond to it, I distinguished creativist, rationalist, and phenomenalist position conceptions. As we have seen, according to the creativist position conception, the individuals participating in the given interactions develop their own relevant social situations in a joint interpretation process. The above-mentioned problem is partly also typical of the creativist perspective, that is, it does not make a clear-cut distinction between the sphere of social life and the sphere of community life, and largely looks upon the sphere of social life as if it were the sphere of community life. According to my conception, in the sphere of social life, there are circumstances that are stable and exist beyond the human mind and are relatively independent of

the observable actions and interactions and basically determine the social conduct of the given individuals (and groups), as well as other concerns of social phenomena. The most important deficiency of the creativist conception of social position is that it does not express or explicitly denies these circumstances. The pure creativist conception regards certain circumstances of the given individual as the components of the situation only in respect to what meaning the individual attributes to these circumstances through subjective interpretation in the course of the given social interaction. Nevertheless, the conception in question deserves attention since we have to define the explanatory concept of “social position” in such a way that it can also be translated into the language of everyday thinking.

Although certain authors extend the validity of the rationalist perspective also over the sphere of community life, this perspective is typically applied for the explanation of social phenomena in a narrower sense. The rationalist position conception, that is, the concept of the situation of choice is suitable for the explanation of the direct determinedness of social actions (as instrumental rational actions). However, I think that the problem with the position concept in question is that in the theories representing the pure rationalist perspective the situations of choice consisting of alternatives are regarded as given, and the decisions and actions of individuals are explained on the basis of the given situations of choice. In my conception, however, the fundamental question in the explanation of social actions, interactions, and, in general, social phenomena is what kind of factors and in which way determine the alternatives and the theories reflecting the rationalist perspective do not provide a satisfactory answer to this question.⁷

If based on our own experience, we presume that there are connections as social relations between individuals (and groups) that are stable and beyond the human mind, as well as that exist relatively independently of the observable social interactions and that basically or largely determine social phenomena, then we cannot regard the phenomenalist position conception as satisfactory. The main deficiency of the phenomenalist position conception is that it does not make a causal explanation or a relatively demanding explanation of social phenomena possible, only their dispositional explanation or description.

Critique of the network theoretical and relationship position conception

As we have seen above, in the network analysis, network position is the equivalent of “social position”, which expresses the position of the given individual within the network of social relationships. The concept of structural equivalence can considerably contribute to the proper interpretation of “social positions”, but, from a theoretical point of view, I do not regard the network theoretical position conception as satisfactory. It is typical of network analysis also in general that the theoretical

⁷ According to the relatively new conception of rational choices, rationality is “context-bound”. In this sense, social actors pursue their subjective interests, but the alternatives and their probable consequences, as well as thereby the actor’s choices, are ultimately determined by social institutions (e.g.: Ingram and Clay 2000, p. 526; Ménard and Shirley 2014, p. 557; Nee 2005, pp. 60, 63–64).

foundation of the network approach lags far behind the advancement of empirical research techniques (Azarian 2010, pp. 323–325). In my conception, the main problem of social network analysis or network theory is the ambiguity of the concept of social relation or relationship. The ambiguity of this concept is also indicated by the fact that the terms relation, relationship, connection, contact, and tie are often used in the network analysis alternately and in an arbitrary way. Although, for example, Azarian (2010), for the most part, theoretically elaborates the concept that he calls social relationship and that I partly also call social relationship (as well as community and corporality relationship), but he does not clarify the connections between people that I call social relation (briefly Farkas 2017b, pp. 58–80). Thus, in connection with the ambiguity of the concept of social relation, in network analysis, it is not clear, either, that the network position is a position occupied in the network of what kind of relations or relationships.

According to the conception of social distance, the “social position” of the individual is the location of the occupation he or she pursues in the ranking of occupations and the social distance of the given occupation from other occupations, measured on the basis of friendship and/or marriage relationships. I do not agree with this conception, I do not regard the Cambridge scale as suitable for measuring “social position”. I emphasized above that one of the main requirements for the concept of “social position” was that the “social position” was an entity of social nature. In contrast with this, friendship relationships are in principle (and in reality overwhelmingly) not social, but community and/or intimate relationships that constitute the objects of mental needs for the given individuals. Marriage relations and relationships are, in principle, mixed relations and relationships, that is, they are partly social relations (mainly in connection with the ownership relations and the division of labor within the family), and partly community and/or intimate relationships.⁸ However, even if marriage relations are of a social nature, they are not the most significant social relations in modern society. Thus, in my conception, it is a conceptual failure to define “social position” (and to survey social stratification) on the basis of friendship and marriage relationships.

Whether a “social position” (as an explanatory variable) is advantageous or disadvantageous, we may also estimate empirically by measuring certain determining factors of “social position” (e.g., education) or factors that can be regarded, to a certain extent, as its consequences (e.g., income or marriage relationships). As an example, Meraviglia et al. (2016) have concluded that the international scales of socio-economic status, occupational prestige, and social distance (ISEI, SIOPI, and ICAMS) are in close correlation with each other and, after all, they measure the same latent dimension. Nevertheless, we should see what entity we would like to measure in the end, what concessions we have made during the measurement from a theoretical aspect, and in connection with this, to what extent we can regard the measurement results as valid.

⁸ On the concepts of community relation and community relationship see briefly, Farkas 2017b, pp. 59–60, 78.

Conclusion

In this article, on the one hand, I reviewed the main conceptions of the concept of “social position”; on the other hand, I pointed out the main interpretation problems of these conceptions. From the points of view of sociological perspectives, I distinguished (1) theoretically neutral or weakly structuralist, (2) traditional class theoretical, conflict theoretical in a narrower sense, centre-periphery theoretical, elite theoretical and capital theoretical conceptions, which are typical of the structuralist perspective, as well as (3) normativist, (4) creativist, (5) rationalist and rationalist-phenomenalist, (6) network theoretical and relationship conceptions of the concept of social position. I pointed out the main interpretation problems of the concept of “social position” from a general sociological theoretical aspect and mainly on the basis of my own social theoretical conception. I took this conception into consideration in the form of the main requirements outlined in the third part of the paper.

In my view, the main problem inherent in the theoretically neutral position conceptions is that the essential social content of “social position” is theoretically unclear in this conception. A further problem is that, according to these conceptions, the components of “social position” can equally be entities that we regard as phenomena to explain and entities that we take into consideration as determining factors of these phenomena.

Representatives of the partly different structuralist position conceptions significantly seek to support the aspects that they take into consideration when defining the social position or class position from a more general theoretical point of view. Nevertheless, the main deficiency of these conceptions is the lack of a consistent theoretical foundation and, in connection with this, that the mechanism of how the social position determines the social (and partly other human) phenomena is unclear. In connection with social position or class position, the representatives of these conceptions usually emphasize the importance of social power relations and/or authority relations, however, besides the power relations, they do not take the interest relations properly into consideration.

In my view, the normativist perspective is not suitable for research on social phenomena. Thus, the concept of social status that is defined in connection with the role cannot serve the satisfactory explanation of social phenomena, and the concept of prestige is not suitable for expressing social status, either. However, on the one hand, social position is closely related to the role-based (institutional) position, and, on the other hand, from a certain point of view, prestige is also important, as we will see below.

According to my conception, there are circumstances that are stable and beyond the human mind, as well as that exist relatively independently of the observable actions and interactions and that basically determine the social conduct of the given individuals (and groups) and, in general, social phenomena. The most important deficiency of the creativist conception of “social position” is that it does not express or explicitly denies these circumstances. In the rationalist position conception, I regard it as a problem that in the theories representing the pure rationalist perspective the situations of choice consisting of alternatives are regarded as given, and they

Table 1 Concepts regarding position and status in the theory of institutional sociology

Term designating the concept	Content of the concept
Institutional position (social)	Position in the validity scopes of social institutional norms
Social position	Position in social relations as interest relations and social power relations
Social status	Position in the inequality system of the degree of interest realization
Order position	Deviation of the real institutional position from the institutional position assumed on the basis of expressed values
Prestige (community) position	Position in the community power relations according to prestige within the community

do not analyze the determinedness of these situations consistently. The main deficiency of the phenomenalist position conception is that it does not give a causal explanation or a relatively demanding explanation of social phenomena possible, only their dispositional explanation or description.

In my view, the main problem of social network analysis or network theory is the ambiguity of the concept of social relation or relationship. In connection with this, in network analysis it is not clarified, either that the network position is a position occupied in the network of what kind of relations or relationships. Finally, speaking of the “social distance” approach, considering the nature of such relationships, in my conception, it is a conceptual failure to define “social position” on the basis of friendship and/or marriage relationships.

Partly the problems mentioned have been and are the focus of my inquiry while developing the theory of institutional sociology. In this theory, I introduce three main concepts to express the different sides of the position or status in society: the concepts of social position, social status, and (social) order position. In Table 1 I present these concepts, completed with the concept of (social) institutional position, and with the concept of prestige position (expressing an entity of a community nature).

In a largely similar sense to the concept developed and called social status in normativist sociological theories, I speak of institutional position. *Institutional position* is the position of an individual or a group in the validity scope of the institutional norms of the given institution or system of institutions, which is marked out by the norms determining the validity scope of institutional norms (briefly Farkas 2017a, p. 50). In principle, in the sphere of social life, social institutions are valid, and social institutional positions are significant.⁹ In my conception, the institutional position is not the social position itself, but the social institutional positions of the given individual largely determine his or her social position.

⁹ About the concept of institution in the sense used in the present paper see, Farkas 2019. In the overall theory, I make a distinction between community, social and corporality institutions (briefly Farkas 2017a, pp. 58–61).

A clear-cut distinction must be made between two concepts that, on the one hand, we take into consideration as an essential or important determining factor in the explanation of certain social phenomena, and that, on the other hand, we regard as a social phenomenon to explain.¹⁰ I mark the former concept with the term social position and the latter concept with the term social status.

The concept of social position is a relational concept that can serve as the determining factor or cause of phenomena in the explanation of social phenomena. In short, *social position* means the position of the given individual or group in the system of social relations as interest relations and social power relations. The concept of social status, however, denotes an entity mainly regarded as a phenomenon (we look upon an entity as a phenomenon if we examine it as determined by factors that exist outside it). The concept of *social status* expresses to what extent the given individual (or group), in general, realizes his or her (or its) interests, and to what extent the social goods are available for the given individual (or group) (Farkas 2022).

It is worth noting that in the analysis of social position, I regard the attributes which in the traditional class theoretical conception are expressly taken into consideration (like property, occupation, qualification, etc.) as the determining factors of social position or as factors that are, to a certain degree, correlated with the factors determining social position. As well as, in connection with social power, an important feature of social position is social capital (capital of a social nature). Thus, the possession of social capital is in close connection with the social position as understood in my conception.

Compared to the concepts already mentioned, I introduce the concept of order position as a newer concept, which is of a normative nature and refers to the institutional position. In short, *order position* is the deviation of the real institutional position of the given individual or group from the institutional position assumed on the basis of expressed values (Farkas 2021). It is to be noted that, in this sense, the concept of order position expresses the real entity that is mainly expressed by the concepts of privilege and discrimination in the literature of social science.

As mentioned above, I do not think the eclectic conception of prestige is acceptable, but I accept the normativist conception of prestige, according to which prestige is an “expressive” or personal reward and ability to influence. That is, to put this in my terms, prestige constitutes the object of mental need and, in principle, exists in the sphere of community life. Thus, in my conception, it is misleading to call the status concerning prestige social status, because prestige is not of a social nature. We would denote the concept of status concerning prestige by the term prestige position (or prestige status), distinguishing this concept from other concepts usually denoted in the sociological literature by the term status, as well as from the concepts of social position, social status and order position as used in my conception.

Although occupations are, in principle, entities of a social nature, also according to my conception, there is the prestige of occupations. Accordingly, the prestige of occupations is the result of the evaluation of occupations spanning life spheres or

¹⁰ In other respects, the former may also be a determined phenomenon, and the latter may also be a determining factor, but I do not discuss this issue here.

between life spheres. In the sphere of community life, personal attributes other than those in the sphere of social life are of utmost importance for individuals. However, there are personal attributes that, basically from another point of view, are important both in social life and in community life. Thus, individuals associate specific personality types (and perhaps, partly, specific body types) with the different social positions, social-institutional positions, and roles within the sphere of social life, as well as with the social statuses that are important partly in the sphere of social life and partly in the spheres of private and community life. In my view, the prestige of occupations, in principle, expresses to what extent the attributes of the personality type (and perhaps body type) looked upon as typical of the given occupation are equivalent to the ideal personality type (and perhaps body type) according to the community values valid in the sphere of community life. Accordingly, as an example, the prestige of a general manager, an engineer, or an economist acquired through his or her manager position or occupation has significance, for example, in the circle of the friends of the given individual; however, in the office or factory it is his or her social power, rather than his or her prestige that matters.

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