I. Social Stratification

A. What is Social Stratification?

1. Social stratification is defined as a system by which society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy
   a. There are four fundamental principles of stratification:
      • Social stratification is a characteristic of society -- not just due to individual differences
      • Social stratification persists over generations
         • Yet, most societies allow some sort of social mobility or changes in people's position in a system of social stratification
         • Social mobility may be upward, downward, or horizontal
      • Social stratification is universal but variable (it changes)
      • Social stratification involves both inequality and beliefs

2. Social Stratification is patterned social inequality. It is also the unequal distribution of societal resources. Saying that inequality is patterned indicates that the differences occur:
   a. on a wide-scale basis
   b. with regularity
   c. and along lines of certain specific, identifiable characteristics (race, class, and gender)

3. Stratification is usually based on three major premises:
   a. Power: the ability to impose one’s will on others
   b. Prestige: the respect given by others
   c. Property: forms of wealth

4. Patterned: if we know whether a person or group possesses or does not possess certain traits, then we will be able to predict with reasonable accuracy how this person or group is likely to fare in the social hierarchy
   a. Social Hierarchy: A set of ranked statuses

5. Social Inequality: Some types of people systematically experience advantages in society while other types of people are systematically disadvantaged in our society
   a. Some members of our society are thought of as have, and others are thought of as have-nots.
   b. The determination of who is socially advantaged and who is included among the ranks of the socially disadvantaged is based, in part, on certain characteristics these individuals possess and, in part, on how society values or devalues these characteristics

6. Social stratification affects people’s lives and can be manifested in various ways in society.
7. Social Inequality is a **structured** and **systematic** phenomenon that affects people in various social classes throughout their lives.
   a. Because of this patterned inequality, social stratification affects people’s life chances:
      - **Life Chances**: Opportunities that individuals do or do no have to engage in certain activities, and the opportunities that they do or do not have to accomplish certain goals simply because of where they are located in the social hierarchy (ex. Smart children born into wealth vs. poor families)
B. Caste and Class Systems

- People are divided into different groupings and their lives are structured according to these groupings. There are certain things that some people cannot do, simply because their station in life prevents them from being able to do them.
- Other people, in a different social stratum, are able to do these things specifically because they occupy a more favorable position in the social hierarchy.
- Depending on how much individual mobility is possible; societies may be classified as either a caste system or a class system.

1. A **caste system** amounts to social stratification based on ascription
   a. A caste system consists of a fixed arrangement of strata from the most to the least privileged, with a person's position determined unalterably at birth.
   b. The most extensive contemporary example of a caste system is found in India, especially in rural areas.
   c. Caste discrimination is officially illegal but exists nonetheless. The traditional castes of India:
      - **Brahmans**: mostly priests and scholars.
      - **Kshatriyas**: warriors, rulers, and large landholders
      - **Vaishyas**: merchants, farmers, and skilled artisans.
      - **Shudras**: laborers and unskilled artisans.
      - **Harijans**: Sometimes called "untouchables," they are ranked so low that, technically, they are outside the caste system itself.
   d. Caste boundaries in India are reinforced further by the practice of *ritual pollution* or *ritual avoidance*.
   e. A caste system may be determined by many ethnic and cultural factors. European imperial powers in Africa imposed a caste system based on skin color: all whites were in a higher position or caste than any nonwhite
   f. Caste systems shape people's lives in four crucial ways:
      - **Caste system largely determines occupation**
      - **Caste systems largely mandate endogamy**
      - **Powerful cultural beliefs underlie caste systems**
      - **Caste systems limit outgroup social contacts**
   g. Although caste influences remains strong in India, the situation is changing due to communication, transportation, industrialization, and the growth of a middle class.
2. In a **class system**, social stratification is based on individual achievement
   
   a. **Class Systems.** People who can be considered peers in society because of their similar life chances, similar life circumstances, and similar opportunities, constitute a social class.
   
      • In a class system social standing is determined by factors over which people can exert some control, and some mobility does take place.
   
   b. In a class system, **status inconsistency**, the degree of consistency of a person's social standing across various dimensions of social inequality, is lower than in a caste system.
   
   c. **Structural social mobility**: a shift in social position of large numbers of people due more to changes in society itself than individual efforts *(Ex. Computer Industry)*
   
   d. Stratification persists because it is backed up by an **ideology**: cultural beliefs that directly or indirectly justify social stratification.
   
   e. **Ideological support for inequality.** An ideology or pattern of beliefs justifies social inequality in the United States, which legitimizes or justifies a particular societal arrangement.
      
      • **Ideological Hegemony**: Refers to the control over the production of cultural symbols.
      
      • One of Karl Marx’s famous quotes is: “the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class because they control the **mental means of production**.
      
      • Thus, the elite has many weapons at their disposal in order to keep society and the lower classes under control. Two of the main ways are the use of force, and the **mass media**.
      
      • **Force**: use the police, military, National Guard, FBI, etc.
      
      • In the long run, it depends on **legitimacy** in order to maintain stratification.
      
      • This is the belief that existing social and political institutions are the best one's for society.
      
      • All ruling elite uses their position at the top of society to create an **ideology**.
      
      • This is a complex set of beliefs, values, and norms, which rationalize and support the elite's power and privileges.
      
      • The dominant or most important and valued ideas in history have been the ideas of the ruling class.
• The Government or big corporations do not necessarily control the mass media, but the ruling class does influence what kind of information we get and what kind of ideas we listen to.

• Anti-government and Anti-business views are rarely expressed, and Hollywood gives us its share of who are enemies are: both foreign and in this country.

• Most of the media gives the same messages of free enterprise, equality of opportunity, individualism, hard work, and consumerism.

• This ideology, taught through the mass media, is used by the elite to confuse, distract, and divide the lower classes.

  • Marx argued that the class in power imposes its ideology on the entire society, and that false consciousness occurs when people in a class accept an ideology that is contrary to the best interest of that class.

  • Marx argued that false consciousness will exist until the exploited stratum develops a sense of class consciousness, at which time the stratum will become a true social class and begin challenging the ruling class.
C. The Functions of Social Stratification

1. The **Davis-Moore thesis** is the assertion that social stratification is a universal pattern because it has beneficial consequences for the operation of society.

2. This thesis implies that societies become more productive as they approach **meritocracy**: a system of social stratification based on personal merit.

3. **Criticisms of Davis-Moore**:
   a. It is difficult to specify the functional importance of a given occupation.
      - Some are over/under rewarded (EX. Baseball player, entertainer vs. teacher, garbage collector).
   b. Davis-Moore ignores how social stratification can prevent the development of individual talents.
   c. The theory also ignores how social inequality may promote conflict and revolution (instability).
D. Stratification and Conflict

1. Karl Max: Class and Conflict
   a. Marx saw classes as defined by people's relationship to the means of production
      • Capitalists (bourgeoisie) are people who own factories and other productive business
      • The proletariat are people who sell their productive labor to the capitalists
   b. Critical evaluation:
      • Marx's theory has been enormously influential
      • His work has been criticized for failing to recognize that a system of unequal rewards may be necessary to motivate people to perform their social roles effectively

2. Three reasons suggested why Western Capitalism has not experienced a Marxist revolution:
   a. The capitalist class has fragmented and grown in size, giving more people a stake in the system
   b. The proletariat has also changed
      • Blue-collar occupations, lower prestige work involving mostly manual labor, have declined
      • White-collar occupations, higher prestige work involving mostly mental activity, have expanded
   c. Workers are better organized than they were in Marx's day - their unions have been able to fight for reform
   d. The government has extended various legal protections to workers
   e. Supporters of Marxist thought have responded:
      • Wealth remains highly concentrated
      • White-collar jobs offer no more income, security, satisfaction than blue-collar jobs did a century ago
      • Class conflict continues between workers and management
      • The laws still favor the rich
3. **Max Weber** identified three distinct dimensions of stratification: **Class**, **status**, and **power**
   a. Max Weber argued that social standing consists of three parts or dimensions: **class**, which he regarded as determined mainly by economic standing or **wealth**; **party**, which was equivalent to political power; and **status**, or social prestige and honor.

   b. Following Weber, many sociologists use the term **socioeconomic status**: a composite ranking based on various dimensions of social inequality -- education, occupation, income
   - **Socioeconomic status.** Following Weber's lead, contemporary sociologists often use the broader concept of socioeconomic status to refer to a person's ranking along several social dimensions, particularly education, occupational prestige, and income
   - **Education.** Education can lead to income attainment, but the benefits are not equally shared by racial and ethnic minorities, or by women.
   - **Wealth** consists of the total amount of money and valuable goods that a person or family controls
     - It is more unequally distributed than income
     - **assets**, such as real estate and jewels, and
     - **income** consists of occupational wages or salaries and earnings from investments
       - In the United States less than 1 percent of the population has $1 million or more in assets; and over 50 percent of the total family income in the United States goes to those 25 percent of families with the highest incomes
   - **Occupational Prestige**: Occupation serves as a key source of social prestige since we commonly evaluate each other according to what we do
     - Because there are so many specific occupations, sociologists often categorize occupations into a smaller number:
       - **White-Collar**
         - Professional, manager, and administrator
         - Technical
         - Clerical
       - **Blue-Collar**
         - Craft, precision production, and repair
         - Operative
         - Labor (excluding farm)
         - Farm worker
• If this scheme is too unwieldy, sociologists often divide occupations into two categories: white-collar and blue-collar.
• The pink collar is a category that reflects the segregation of women into certain occupations, such as kindergarten teachers and secretaries.
• High incomes usually are associated with high-prestige occupations, but there are exceptions.
• Sociologists sometimes use the term prestige to mean the honor associated with an occupation or other position in the social system, and esteem to mean the honor that accrues to the individual filling the position.

c. **Critical evaluation**: Weber's views have been widely accepted in the United States although hard economic times may lead to a renewed emphasis on the importance of economic classes.
E. Inequality in the United States

- US society is highly stratified, but many people underestimate the extent of structured inequality in US society
- **Power** is also unequally distributed
- **Schooling**
- **Ancestry, race, and gender**

1. Sociologists usually conceptualize American society as consisting either of three or nine distinct social classes:
   a. In the **three-class model**, society is divided into a lower class, a middle class, and an upper class
   b. In the nine-class model, each of these classes is further divided into three subclasses: lower-lower, middle-lower, lower-middle, middle-middle, etc.

2. **Measurement of class.** To measure social class standing, sociologists have developed three main methods:
   a. The **objective method** ranks individuals into classes on the basis of measures such as education, income, and occupational prestige;
   b. the **reputational method** places people into various social classes on the basis of reputation in the community class; and
   c. **Self-identification** allows people to place themselves in a social class.

3. **Description of the American Classes.**
   a. The **upper classes.** These are elite families with great wealth who dominate the economic system of the United States.
      - Elite status is ascribed and many of this group's members are friends who have been socialized into a upper-class world.
      - Ranking below the elite is the lower upper class, a group of people who recently have achieved success and wealth, but whose lack of an established family name may preclude them from full acceptance into the upper-upper class.
   b. The **middle classes.** The upper third of the middle class forms the upper middle class, a group that consists mostly of professionals and others with well-paying, respected occupations.
      - The upper-middle class collectively exerts power because its members participate in political affairs and support various causes, but they do not have as much direct access to powerful individuals, nor do they have the time and the wealth for extensive political activity.
      - The other part of the middle class consists of the lower middle, a group that is less educated and have relatively few assets.
The lower classes.

- The upper-lower class, also called the working class, consists of service personnel, semiskilled operatives, and other blue-collar workers who do not earn enough to accumulate substantial savings. These people are vulnerable to disruptions in their income.
- The lower-lower class is made up of people who lack education and live in the most dilapidated sections of the community and in substandard housing.
- The lower-lower class may be divided into two subgroups:
  - The working poor are lower-lower-class people who have jobs but who simply cannot earn an adequate income; and
  - The chronically poor are mostly unemployed or work only occasionally.

4. Class, race, and gender. These three dimensions often interact to produce a person's place in society, the manner in which people are treated, and their self-identify.

F. The difference class makes

a. Class and health
b. Class and values
c. Class and politics
d. Class, family, and gender
G. The Myth and the Reality of Mobility in the United States

- **Amount of mobility.** Sociologists frequently focus on the inter-generational mobility of individuals: upward and downward movements in socioeconomic status measured between the standing of children compared to that of their parents.

1. **Myth versus reality**
   a. Four general conclusions
      - Social mobility, at least among men, has been high
      - The long-term trend in social mobility has been upward
      - Within a single generation, social mobility is usually incremental, not dramatic
      - The short-term trend has been stagnation, with some income polarization
   b. Mobility varies by income level
   c. Mobility also varies by race, ethnicity, and gender

1. **Determinants of mobility**
   - **Social Mobility:** The movement of persons and groups within the stratification system.
     a. **Steepness of the socioeconomic pyramid:** that there are not enough high status jobs to satisfy everyone.
     b. **Starting position on the socioeconomic ladder:** some people begin closer to the top than others.
     c. **Structural mobility:** the movement of entire categories of people due to changes in society itself.
   d. **Types of mobility**
      - **Upward** and **downward**
      - **Intragenerational** social mobility is a change in social position occurring during a person's lifetime
      - **Intergenerational** social mobility is upward or downward social mobility of children in relation to their parents

2. **Social stratification can be determined** by a number of variables, each of which can cause someone to be advantaged or disadvantaged compared to others in society.
   a. It is not necessarily the impact of any one variable in U.S. society that leads to stratification – it is a unique combination of stratification-related factors that determines how one succeeds in society.
   b. Some of these traits are within our control, others we have little control over (ascribed vs. achieved) Who can tell me which is which?
      - Major ascribed social stratifiers: race, sex, and age
      - Major achieved social stratifiers (education, income, occupation, religion, etc.)
   c. Achieved stratifiers are those traits:
      - That affect our position in the social hierarchy
      - Over which we have some degree of control
3. **Waking up from the "American Dream"**
   
   a. For many workers, earnings have stalled
   b. Multiple job holding is up
   c. More jobs offer little income
   d. Young people are remaining at home
H. Poverty in the Land of Riches
1. Currently, the poverty rate tends to vary from about 11 percent to 15 percent; however some people are falling into poverty while others are climbing out and therefore at some point in their lives one-fourth of all people in the United States will be poor.

2. What Is Poverty? Poverty may be defined in two ways:
   a. Relative poverty: people are poor only in comparison to others, therefore there will always be some group at the bottom of the hierarchy.
      - Relative poverty refers to the deprivation of some people in relation to those who have more
   b. Absolute poverty: the inability of people to maintain a certain standard of living.
      - Absolute poverty: a deprivation of resources that is life threatening

I. Explaining Poverty
1. The poor are primarily responsible for their own poverty (culture of poverty)
   a. Culture of poverty. Some sociologists believe that the culture of poverty "blames the poor" for their plight when, in fact, the causes of poverty lie in society.
2. Society is responsible for poverty?
   a. Most evidence suggests that society rather than the individual is responsible for poverty
   b. The working poor
3. The truly disadvantaged. This group consists of people who live predominantly in the inner city and who are trapped in a cycle of joblessness, deviance, crime, welfare dependency, and unstable family life.
   a. William Wilson argues that poor economic conditions are the main problems facing the truly disadvantaged.
   b. Other sociologists note that only some people drift into a life of dependency or deviance because they cannot find work.

J. Who are the poor?
1. Age
2. Race and Ethnicity
3. Gender and Family patterns
   a. The feminization of poverty is the trend by which women represent an increasing proportion of the poor

K. Class and welfare, politics and values