LIFE CHANCES

In what ways does class and status affect life chances ?

Status is a term that has many uses, especially sociological. R. Linton (1936) defined status simply as a position in the social system, for example: 'child' or 'parent'. This definition implies that status just refers to what a person is.

Status is also understood as the unequal distribution of prestige or social standing and is analytically distinct from class. It is to do with one's common life-style and focuses more on life-style rather than economic position. In recent sociology status is being increasingly associated with lifestyle and distinctive patterns of consumption. Bourdieu, for example, approaches status hierarchy from the perspective of culture. Weber used status group as an element of social stratification distinct from class. This was to describe how certain collectivities differed from other social groups using things such as caste or ethnicity, parts of status.

Class is another central term in sociology. Marx defines class as an economic relationship based on production relations. He stated that class action is inevitable (although contained) and class struggle is a motor of history. He also stated that class relationships are grounded in exploitation.

'…in discussing classes we are not just talking about identifiable groups of individuals, but about a structured relationship between collectivities which embody different functions within a specific method of production,' (Bradley 2002: 195).

Weber however defined class as an economic category related to a market situation.

'amount and kind of economic power or lack of such, to dispose of goods or skills for the same or income in a given economic order'

A 'social class' makes up the totality of those class situation s *within which* individual and generational mobility is easy and typical
(Max Weber [1920] 1978: 302; emphasis added).

We may speak of a 'class' when a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances . This component is then represented *exclusively by economic interests* in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. This is known as 'class situation'. (Weber 1978: 927; emphasis added). According to Weber, a social class is not a class at all unless mobility takes place within its borders.

Measures of social class can be grouped according to three single indicators; occupation, education and income.

Weberian sociology often refers to the chances an individual has of sharing in the economic and cultural goods of a society as 'life -chances'. Life-chances also include things such as the chance to grow tall and strong, remain healthy and become educated. Cultural goods and material rewards are in most societies distributed unequally and this inequality reflects the access that different social classes have to the benefits of society. It has been pointed out that life-chances include the chance to survive; this is obviously associated in some way with the economic stratification of one's country.

Occupation is seen as the major source of wealth and incomes for the majority of the population. It is also seen as being synonymous with class. A man's occupation generally deter mines the amount of eco nomic return he will have. Previously it has been stated that education is closely related to income and economics. Education is also closely linked with occupation; therefore many differences have been found in the lifetime

earnings of people with none, little, some and great education. Individuals with no education have lifetime earning s of approximately $58,000, whereas college graduates have life earnings of $268,000. There are also big differences when it comes to the level of education, for example, compared to the earnings of college graduates, high school graduates have a lifetime earning of only $165,000.

Therefore, if a child can stay in education long enough, he increases the life chances for himself and his family. Education provides links to be tter jobs, and as earning power increases, so do life chances.

In 1925, in a study conducted by the United States Children's Department, a relationship was found between infant mortality and family income. As family income decreased, infant mortality inc reased. For example, fathers whose incomes were $450 per year or under showed infant mortality rate of 167 per thousand as compared to 59 per thousand of the fathers who had an annual income of $1,250. It has also been found that income has a relationship with mental illness. It has generally been the case that the higher the income, the lower the mental disturbance rate. More mental illness is found in low-wage earners rather than high-wage earners. A study in Connecticut found that the wealthiest class i n a certain city only made up one percent of the disorders under psychiatric care, whereas the labouring class (unskilled and semi -skilled labourers) made up thirty seven percent of patients under psychiatric care. This supports the notion that chances for mental health are greatly determined by finances.

Life expectancy (1997-99) for professional males was 7.4 years more than unskilled manual males. For women, the expectancy was 5.7 years more for professional women. Smoking rates (1998-99) was lower in male professionals (13%) than in unskilled manual males (44%). Infant mortality (2001) was found to be 3.6 per 1000 births for professional compared to 6.7 for unskilled manual workers.

Social class is an important variable in studies of health and is fre quently included in epidemiologic studies. In 76 studies concerned with chronic

diseases reported in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* in 1982 and 1985, almost 40 percent included some measure of social class.

As it has been established, education is very closely linked with occupation which in turn affects life -chances. It has been found that there are significant differences in academic achievements relating to the ethnicity and gender of one. These are the figures for pupils achieving five or more GCSE's grade A* to C or a GNVQ (2003), 57 per cent of White girls compared to 46 per cent of White boys. 70 per cent of Indian girls compared to 60 per cent of Indian boys. 79 per cent of Chinese girls compared to 71 per cent of Chinese boys, and finally, 4 0 per cent of Black Caribbean girls compared to 25 per cent of Black Caribbean boys. In 2002/3 it was also found that Whites have higher employment rates than ethnic minorities (76 per cent compared to 58 per cent).

- Participation rates in higher education (2001/2): I–III (non-manual) 50%; III (manual)–V 14%
- Infant mortality (2001): Professionales 3.6; unskilled manual 6.7 per 1000 births
- Life expectancy (1997-99): professional males 7.4 years more than unskilled manual males; for same groups of women, 5.7 years
- Smoking rates (1998-99): male professionals 13%; unskilled manual males 44%

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