

Social Stratification and Inequality

Stratification and social inequality are central concerns of empirical and theoretical work within sociology and are at the heart of the sociology curriculum. The importance of this specialization has increased as the racial, ethnic, gender, and economic diversity of our society have increased, and as social inequality in many instances has increased. It is ever more necessary to understand how these forces shape society as well as to prepare students to work and live as constructive citizens in such a society.

Employers throughout the private and public sector increasingly demand professionals who are sensitized to the diversity of our complex society, and students considering careers in fields such as social services, health care, law, or politics will benefit from a deeper understanding of the structures and dynamics of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, and age.

What is social stratification and social inequality?

SOCIAL INEQUALITY refers to a lack of social equality, where individuals in a society do not have equal social status. Areas of potential social inequality include voting rights, freedom of speech and assembly, the extent of property rights and access to education, health care and other social goods.

Inequality is socially created by matching two different kinds of processes. “The social roles in society are first matched to ‘reward packages’ of unequal value and individual members of society are then allocated to the positions so defined and rewarded”

Social inequality is different from economic inequality but the two inequalities are linked. Economic inequality refers to disparities in the distribution of economic assets and income. While economic inequality is caused by the unequal distribution of wealth, social inequality exists because the lack of wealth in certain areas prohibits these people from obtaining the same housing, health care, etc. as the wealthy in societies where access to these social goods depends on wealth. “The degree of inequality in a given reward or asset depends, of course, on its dispersion or concentration across the individuals in the population

In sociology, SOCIAL STRATIFICATION is the hierarchical arrangement of social classes, castes and strata within a society. While these hierarchies are not universal to all societies, they are the norm among state-level cultures (as distinguished from hunter-gatherers or other social arrangements).

According to Peter Saunders, in modern Western societies, stratification depends on social and economic classes comprising three main layers: upper class, middle class, and lower class. Each class is further subdivided into smaller classes related to occupation. The term stratification derives from the geological concept of strata, or rock layers created by natural processes.

Example: The Caste system in India.

Understanding of social stratification and social inequality

The grouping of people together is as old as the society itself. Racial grouping is one way that societies have done this; the example is the American South before the US civil war. Religion is another way if parts of Northern Ireland until the 1960s are meant. One common way is through the caste system to be found in India. Here, social differentiation is stressed by the caste that each individual is born into, for instance, the Brahmin caste is the top caste and the untouchables are the bottom caste. Caste membership in this life is the result of good or bad conduct in the previous life. In any medieval country, the feudal system of land ownership meant that the nobility of land owners, with its sense of family tradition, privilege and knightly conduct became the dominant ruling group.

Social stratification is the dividing of a society into levels or strata based on wealth or power. It is regarded quite differently by the principal perspectives of sociology. Proponents of structural functionalism suggest that since social stratification exists in all societies, a hierarchy must be beneficial in helping to stabilize their existence. Conflict theorists emphasize the inaccessibility of resources and lack of social mobility in many stratified societies. Anyway, all theorists share the opinion that social stratification has to do with inequality.

Social inequality refers to the distribution of material wealth in a society. For instance, the current level of inequality is as follows: the richest 1% of people (with an average income of US \$24,000) earns more than the poorest 60% of households in the world combined. Another illustration of this difference is the fact that the world's three richest people alone possess more assets than 600 million least wealthy people combined.

Although there appears to be a consensus of what constitutes social inequality, there is far less agreement over the causes of it. Many theorists accept inequality as a given, but some of them see inequality as the natural consequence of Social Darwinism, proved by gender, age, IQ or the wealth of nations. Others argue that inequality is in large part the negative consequence of destructive state policies (such as capitalism) and wars.

Some modern economic theories, such as the neoclassical school, have suggested that functioning of economy requires a certain level of unemployment; other theories, such as Keynesianism and socialism, dispute this alleged positive role of unemployment.

However, sociologists share the opinion that as soon as the society was reaching a higher economic and cultural level, social inequality between people was getting more and more obvious. Historically, inequality in a group might have been caused by division of labor: the more skilled the person was, the more and better products he could produce and exchange for more wealth. If the person was wealthy, he could impose his will on others and acquire more wealth that entailed professional, territorial, religious and other differentiations.

More important is the fact that wealth always entails power in the political sphere. In his famous work, *On the Origins of Inequality among Men*, R. Dahrendorf asserts that "the system of inequality which we call social stratification is only a secondary consequence of the social structure of power" and modern Russia is a good example to prove of.

A person is viewed to show that he belongs to a certain stratum by using both objective and subjective criteria. The objective criteria are those to describe the level of education, income, property, power or occupation, the subjective ones are those to describe the level of somebody's honor, reputation or prestige in the eyes of other people. Theories differ in numbers of criteria but they agree in understanding that each stratum includes only those people who have approximately equal income, power, education, prestige etc. seeing them as the basic criteria of social stratification.

In other words, social stratification has to do with ranking of people as individuals or groups in the society. All societies everywhere show some degree of stratification. Some societies are egalitarian, some are highly stratified. For instance, in the primitive communal society inequality was insignificant, and social stratification did not exist, so the society was egalitarian. All complex societies are stratified societies with a high level of inequality.

Inequality gave birth to castes, then to classes. But the principal sociological perspectives interpret this concept differently. M. Weber spoke of a class as an entity comprising people who are covered by economic interests in acquiring goods or getting income and who interact in the labor or goods market. In the society, classes as well as strata have a certain social status which is determined by a corresponding way of life. That's why some theorists define social stratification as the hierarchical arrangement of social classes, castes, and strata within a society.

The idea of stratification had primarily a distinct ideological shade because it appeared as a counterbalance to the idea of a class society suggested by K. Marx. Social strata showing objective distinctions of various groups of the population within a certain class were differentiated with regards to social mobility that lead to the erosion of class boundaries. For instance, a worker after he has got a higher education can work as a manager, a citizen can move to the countryside to start up agro-business etc. In other words, the previous, clear-cut boundaries existing, for instance, between peasants and landlords to differentiate their class distinctions for many generations ahead, do not exist in a modern society. It means that class boundaries have lost their sense keeping only their theoretical character while the concept of a social stratum has a definite meaning. It shows that social strata or layers do fix various groups of people differentiating from each other by their income, role, status and other social qualities.

Social strata can be as large as to be close in meaning to social classes, for example, the bourgeoisie in its division to very wealthy and petty ones, or the working class including the working aristocracy and the proletariat, or the peasantry etc. Other strata may represent intra-class or inter-class layers, for example, representatives of intelligentsia, service workers etc. At the same time within a certain stratum some substrata can exist, so the intelligentsia can be differentiated according to the area of activities as industrial, managerial, scientific etc. Some castes, marginal layers such as the homeless, criminals or lumpens can also be viewed as social strata.

How are social inequality created?

Social inequality refers to a lack of social equality, where individuals in a society do not have equal social status. Instances that may involve being socially unequal include property rights, voting rights, freedom of speech and assembly, access to health care, and education as well as many other social commodities.

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Social Inequality is also linked directly to racial inequality and wealth inequality. The way people behave socially, whether it's discrimination, racism, etc, it tends to trick down on the opportunities and wealthy individuals can generate for themselves. A perfect example of this is in Thomas M. Shapiro's book, "The Hidden Cost of Being African American." Shapiro strives to demonstrate how unequal the "Playing Field" is for Blacks and Whites. For instance, middle class families, one black and the other white, are giving different opportunities in the housing market. The black family is denied a loan from the bank for housing, while the white family is approved. This is a noticeable incident, considering that homeownership is one of the main ways Americans acquire wealth.

Social inequality refers to the ways in which socially-defined categories of persons (according to characteristics such as gender, age, 'class' and ethnicity) are differentially positioned with regard to access to a variety of social 'goods', such as the labor market and other sources of income, the education and healthcare systems, and forms of political representation and participation. These and other forms of social inequality are shaped by a range of structural factors, such as geographical location or citizenship status, and are often underpinned by cultural discourses and identities defining, for example, whether the poor are 'deserving' or 'undeserving'. Understanding the changing patterns, causes and consequences of social inequality in the post-Socialist countries of Eastern Europe, both within and outside of the borders of the European Union, is central to the CEELBAS agenda. This is because comparative evidence from Western Europe and elsewhere in the world suggests a strong link between social inequality and a variety of socio-economic and political 'ills'. In the sphere of health, for example, high death rates and stress-related illnesses all appear to be closely correlated with high levels of income inequality, as does violent crime. With regard to democratic development, deepening inequalities within and between different groups in society are associated with low levels of social cohesion and participatory citizenship. In addition, social inequality can impede democratic consolidation by stimulating social conflict and political instability, and in turn may act as a support for the establishment of authoritarian regimes. For these reasons, if we are to understand the nature of the societies which are emerging in Eastern Europe, as well as the directions in which they are moving, it is essential that we understand the changing patterns of inequality experienced within those societies.