

6. Social Stratification and Class

Objectives

- Understand social stratification and social mobility
- Learn about class structure in the United States
- Study the many aspects of poverty

Vocabulary

castes	downward mobility	open system	strata
class	horizontal mobility	poverty line	upward mobility
closed system	intergenerational mobility	social mobility	
continuum		social stratification	

Background

In this chapter, students will learn about social stratification, class, and poverty in society. Students are aware of and deeply affected by these issues. They will find that equality and social mobility are not as widespread in society as they might have imagined. In reality, great wealth, power, and prestige are enjoyed by only a small percentage of the American population.

They learn that social stratification is society's way of ranking members. Social classes group people with common economic and social factors, somewhat determining how they view themselves and relate to others and society.

Students also study the two prevailing theories for the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and prestige in society: functionalist and conflict. Functionalists hold that some members of society are rewarded when they acquire the skills to do society's most important tasks. Conflict theorists offer a different explanation that is based on: "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." In their view, the fight for limited economic resources creates "winners" and "losers" in society, leaving the winners in a strong position that they will not surrender

easily. Conflict theorists believe this situation is unfair, creating working class resentment.

Students also study particular systems of stratification, such as an open system that allows more social mobility and a closed system that allows little mobility. They read about the main types and patterns of social mobility and focus on social mobility in the U.S.

Students next learn about the five American social classes: lower class, working class, lower-middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class. They learn that one's class is a strong factor in a person's "life chances," i.e., a person's ability to enjoy good health care, education, housing, and a good relationship with law enforcement. The chapter breaks each class into five main identifying elements. Finally, the chapter addresses poverty in society. Students gain an in-depth understanding of the poverty line, poverty rate, and the five factors related to poverty levels.

Further Resources

Burton, C. Emory. *The Poverty Debate*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992.

Newman, Katherine S. *Falling from Grace*. New York: Free Press, 1988.

For Discussion

Review

1. According to Weber, what are the three independent dimensions of ranking people in a social stratification system?
2. Describe the main forms of social mobility.
3. What are the five classes in American society?
4. What are the five factors strongly related to poverty levels?

Critical Thinking

1. If you could rank high in only one of Weber's three stratification dimensions, which would it be and why? Support your answer.
2. Review the "Two Theories of Social Stratification" chart on page 107. Which theory best reflects your viewpoint on the issue? Detail your personal perspective.
3. Why do you think India's caste system has been outlawed in urban areas, but remains common practice in rural areas?
4. Discuss your view on Karl Marx's theory of a two-class society (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat). What is your opinion of his assertion that the lower class should overthrow the upper class?
5. Ask yourself (and answer here) the questions asked of black and white interviewees: "Do you think America is a land of opportunity?" and "Does a poor boy have the same chances as a rich boy to make a given amount of money?" How would you explain the different perceptions between races in the first question and between classes in the second?

Activities

1. Debate: Explaining Social Stratification

Divide students into two main groups. Ask one group to represent the functionalist perspective and the other group to represent the conflict theorists. Give each side fifteen minutes to prepare and discuss its presentation and then allow each side five minutes to argue its case. Afterward, ask each group to prepare a list of five questions for the other side to answer. Finally, ask students to discuss what they've learned.

2. Interview: Class Perspectives

Ask each student to interview a member of a class that is different than his or her own. Guide the class in preparing a common list of questions that might shed light on the interviewees' social

perspective, economic standing, education, and lifestyle issues. Have students summarize their interviews with the class, offering their reactions and conclusions.

3. Internet: Status Symbols

Ask students to use the Internet to search for the ultimate status symbols for a fantasy persona. Ask each student to find the ultimate house, car, watch, and outfit of clothing. Have them print out their dream status symbols and present these to the class with a brief fantasy character profile. Have the class discuss the nature and purpose of status symbols. What do these symbols do for a person? How do they make others feel? In what senses can they be deceptive?

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As you read Chapter 6, write an answer to each question below.

1. According to functionalist theory, people acquire skills because they are rewarded. Discuss the factors that determine the size of the reward.

2. Why do conflict theorists believe social stratification is "inherently unfair"?

3. Describe how relatively closed social systems like slavery, the caste system, and feudalism vary in terms of social mobility.

4. What determines a person's social mobility in an open system? Do most open systems allow the socially mobile to climb to the top?

5. How do "life chances" impact the lives of the upper and lower classes?

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Find the best answer for each item. Then circle the correct answer.

1. What are the "layers" or levels of a society of people with similar social, cultural, or economic status?
 - a. stoic
 - b. scruff
 - c. strata
 - d. stasis
2. What is partially defined as "continuous" and "uninterrupted"?
 - a. consortium
 - b. continuum
 - c. caste
 - d. crescendo
3. What word describes lifelong statuses determined by the status of one's parent?
 - a. crust
 - b. crepe
 - c. crest
 - d. caste
4. What is the structured ranking of entire groups of people within a society based on differences in power, prestige, and wealth?
 - a. social stratification
 - b. social inhibition
 - c. power politics
 - d. super socialization
5. What is the word that best describes a group of people who share economic and social position in society?
 - a. rank
 - b. occupation
 - c. class
 - d. stratum
6. What is the measure used by the United States Census that divides people into poor and non-poor groups on the basis of income?
 - a. income factor
 - b. average indicator
 - c. poverty line
 - d. horizontal mobility
7. What is the system that allows little or no social mobility?
 - a. downward system
 - b. closed system
 - c. class system
 - d. poverty system
8. Which term describes the ability of individuals to change their social status in their lifetimes?
 - a. upward mobility
 - b. social spiral
 - c. social stratification
 - d. social mobility
9. Which term describes the stratification system that allows some significant degree of social mobility?
 - a. open system
 - b. open mobility
 - c. social change
 - d. continuum
10. Which term describes movement from a lower to a higher rank of the social strata?
 - a. intergenerational mobility
 - b. intragenerational mobility
 - c. social upheaval
 - d. upward mobility

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Read each description, and write the letter of the correct term on the line.

1. In most societies, large assets and income are held by _____.
 - a. a large percentage of the population
 - b. a small percentage of the population
 - c. entrepreneurs
 - d. gifted individuals in the society
2. The idea that society needs stratification to function efficiently is a ____ perspective.
 - a. Marxist
 - b. conflict theorist
 - c. functionalist
 - d. proletariat
3. The idea that stratification is a "selfish" struggle among individuals is a ____ perspective.
 - a. proletariat
 - b. conflict theorist
 - c. functionalist
 - d. bourgeois
4. Davis and Moore proposed that stratification wouldn't be necessary if all tasks were _____.
 - a. unimportant and easy
 - b. meaningful and challenging
 - c. diverse and interesting
 - d. equally important, pleasant, and required the same skills
5. Which vocation has higher prestige than the others?
 - a. reporter
 - b. farm owner
 - c. scientist
 - d. bookkeeper
6. The personal identification with one's status group is called _____.
 - a. mid-life crisis
 - b. class distinction
 - c. class mobility
 - d. class consciousness
7. A middle class worker can be called _____, while _____ refers to the lower working class.
 - a. blue shirt, white shirt
 - b. white collar, blue collar
 - c. black tie, casual
 - d. blue collar, white collar
8. _____ is the new class in America in which families make more than \$100,000 a year.
 - a. Mega middle
 - b. Lower upper
 - c. Quasi middle
 - d. Ultra middle
9. According to the chart on pages 114–115, which class is depicted as "Powerless, can barely provide for their needs; face multiple problems"?
 - a. working class
 - b. lower-middle class
 - c. lower class
 - d. upper-middle class
10. While more _____ are poor, you are more likely to be poor if you are _____ or _____.
 - a. African Americans, Latino, White
 - b. Latinos, White, African American.
 - c. Whites, African American, Latino
 - d. Asians, Whites, African American

Essay Question

Discuss the decline in poverty rates noted in 1999. What changed and what do you think brought on those changes? Support your answer.