

## CHAPTER 8: STRATIFICATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE UNITED STATES

### Module 26: Systems of Stratification

- **Social inequality** denotes a condition in which members of a society have different amounts of wealth, prestige, or power.
- **Stratification** is a structured ranking of entire groups of people that perpetuates unequal economic rewards and power in a society.
- **Income** refers to salaries and wages, earned interest, stock dividends, and rental income.
- **Wealth** is an inclusive term encompassing all of a person's material assets.
- Ascribed status is a social position assigned to a person by society without regard for that person's unique talents or characteristics.
- Achieved status is a social position attained by a person largely through his or her own efforts.

#### A. Four Forms of Stratification

##### 1. Slavery

- Slavery is a system of enforced servitude in which enslaved individuals are owned by other people.
- Slaves in ancient Greece were captives of war or piracy, but their status was not necessarily permanent or passed on to the next generation. In the U.S., slavery was an ascribed status, and racial and legal barriers prevented slaves from being freed.
- More people are enslaved today in the world than at any point in human history.

##### 2. Castes

- A caste system is a hereditary system of rank, usually religiously dictated.  
**Example:** There are four major castes, or *varnas*, in India.
- Urbanization and technological advancement have brought more change to India's caste system in the past decade or two than the government was able to effect since formally outlawing the practice in 1950.
- The term *caste* can also be applied in recent historical contexts outside India, such as to the system of stratification that characterized the southern U.S. after the Civil War.

##### 3. Estates

- The estate system, also known as feudalism, is associated with feudal societies in the Middle Ages, where peasants worked land leased to them by nobles in exchange for military protection or other services.

##### 4. Social Classes

- A class system is a social ranking, based primarily on economic position, in which achieved status can affect or influence social mobility.
- One can move from one stratum to another.
- Daniel Rossides's five-class model of the class system in the U.S. differentiates among the upper class, the upper-middle class, the lower-middle class, the working class, and the lower class.

**Upper class:** They have great wealth, holds more political power

**Lower class:** They lack wealth and income and are politically weak

**Upper-middle class:** Includes professionals. Focus is on education

**Lower-middle class:** Includes less wealthy professionals

Not all members of the middle class hold degrees, but they share the goal of sending their children to college.

**Working Class:** People who hold regular manual or blue-collar jobs. Some may have income above those of the lower-middle class but identify with manual workers

**Class Warfare** also called Class conflict is the political tension and economic dislike that exists in society resulting to socio-economic competition among the social classes or between rich and poor.

## **B. Sociological Perspectives on Stratification**

- Karl Marx viewed class differentiation as the crucial determinant of social, economic, and political inequality. Max Weber was critical of Marx's emphasis on economic factors and argued that stratification had many dimensions.

### **1. Karl Marx's View of Class Differentiation**

- Differential access to scarce resources shapes the relationship between groups. Controlling the primary mode of economic production is key.
- Capitalism is an economic system in which the means of production are largely privately held; profit is the major incentive for economic activity.
- The bourgeoisie—the capitalist class—owns the factories and machinery and controls most production.
- The proletariat—the working class—are exploited by the capitalist bourgeoisie.
- Marx predicted the exploited proletariat would eventually revolt and destroy the capitalist system. First, they must develop class consciousness, a subjective awareness of their plight and of the need for collective action to effect change. Often, this means overcoming false consciousness, an attitude held by members of a class that does not accurately reflect their objective position.
- Marx failed to anticipate the emergence of labor unions and did not foresee individual workers striving for improvement within free societies offering substantial mobility.

### **2. Max Weber's View of Stratification**

- Weber was a critic of Marx's class model. He identified three distinct components of stratification: class, status, and power.
- Weber argued that the actions of individuals and groups could not be understood solely in economic terms; the level of income or wealth is not the only dimension along which persons may be stratified.
- Weber used the term *class* to refer to a group of people who have a similar level of wealth and income.
- A status group consists of people who have the same prestige or lifestyle; but status is not the same as economic class standing. **Example:** A successful thief might achieve the same income level as a college professor, but the college professor has a much higher status.
- Power is the ability to exercise one's will over others. Individuals gain power through membership in a desirable group.

### **3. Interactionist Perspective**

- Marx and Weber examined stratification primarily from a macrosociological perspective; interactionists are interested in microsociology as well.
- Interactionists want to understand how social class influences a person's lifestyle.
- Thorsten Veblen's concepts of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure can still be applied to the behavior of wealthy people today.

## **Module 27: Stratification by Social Class**

### **A. Objective Method of Measuring Social Class**

- Class is viewed largely as a statistical category. Researchers assign individuals to social classes on the basis of criteria such as occupation, education, income, and

residence.

- While **prestige** refers to the respect and admiration an occupation holds, **esteem** refers to the reputation a person has earned within an occupation. A person may have esteem but lack high levels of prestige. Prestige rankings of occupations are commonly used for class position.

### 1. Gender and Occupational Prestige

- There has been debate over how to judge or assess class or status for women in dual-career families. New methods include a focus on the individual (rather than the family or household) as the basis for categorizing a woman's class position.
- Feminists therefore argue that that virtually all measures of stratification need to be reformed.

### 2. Multiple Measures

- Sociologists use the term *socioeconomic status*, or SES, when describing class based on income, education, and occupation.
- Criteria such as value of homes, sources of income, assets, years in present occupation, neighborhoods, and dual careers have been added to income and education as objective determinants of class.

## Module 28: Poverty and Social Mobility

- About 15 percent of people in the U.S. live below the poverty line.  
A contributing factor is the large number employed at minimum wage.

### A. Studying Poverty

- **Absolute poverty** refers to a minimum level of subsistence that no family should be expected to live below.
- The poverty line serves as an official indicator of which people are poor.
- In 2014, a family of four with a combined income of \$24,008 or less fell below the poverty line.
- **Relative poverty** is a floating standard of deprivation by which people are judged to be disadvantaged when compared to the nation as a whole.
- There is debate over the federal government's measure of poverty, which has remained unchanged since 1963. In 2010 the government launched a statistic called the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), used to estimate economic hardship.

### 2. Feminization of Poverty

- Since World War II, an increasing number of poor people have been women.
- Households headed by single mothers are more likely to be living in poverty, as compared to married couples. About half of all women in poverty are dealing with an economic crisis resulting from the departure, disability, or death of a husband.
- The feminization of poverty is not just a U.S. phenomenon, but a worldwide one.

### 3. The Underclass

- William Julius Wilson and colleagues describe the long-term poor as the *underclass* who lack training and skills.
- The recent economic downturn may swell the ranks of the underclass.
- The overall composition of the poor changes continuously, as some move above the poverty line and others slip below it. African Americans and Latinos are more likely than Whites to be persistently poor. Both Latinos and Blacks are less likely than Whites to leave the welfare rolls as a result of welfare reform.

### 4. Explaining Poverty

- Using functionalist analysis, Herbert Gans suggests that poverty serves a number of social, economic, and political functions. In his view, the poor actually satisfy positive functions for many non-poor groups in the United States.

### B. Life Chances

- Max Weber saw class as related to life chances—opportunities for people to provide

themselves with material goods, positive living conditions, and favorable life experiences.

- Poor people spend a greater proportion of their limited resources on the necessities of life.
- In times of danger, the affluent and powerful have a better chance of surviving.
- Class position affects people's vulnerability to natural disasters. **Example:** Hurricane Katrina's impact on the poor of New Orleans

### C. Social Mobility

- *Social mobility* refers to the movement of individuals or groups from one position of a society's stratification system to another.

#### 1. Open versus Closed Stratification Systems

- Open systems encourage competition and imply that a person's position is influenced by achieved status.
- Closed systems, such as slavery or caste systems, allow little or no possibility of moving up. Social placement is based on ascribed status.

#### 2. Types of Social Mobility

- *Horizontal mobility* refers to a person moving from one social position to another of the same rank.
- *Vertical mobility* is the movement from one social position to another of different rank. This may be upward or downward.
- *Intergenerational mobility* involves changes in social position relative to one's parents. **Example:** a college professor whose parents were farmers
- *Intragenerational mobility* involves social changes within one's adult life. **Example:** a teacher's aide becoming a superintendent

#### 3. Social Mobility in the United States

##### a. Occupational Mobility

- Occupational mobility is more common among males than females. About 60 to 70 percent of sons are employed in higher-ranked occupations than their fathers.

##### b. The Impact of Education

- Education has a greater impact than family background—although family background influences the likelihood that one will receive a higher education.
- Education is a very important means of intergenerational mobility.
- The impact of education has diminished in the past decade. B.A./B.S. degrees serve less as a guarantee of upward mobility, because more people have them.

##### c. The Impact of Race and Ethnicity

- African American men with good jobs are less likely than White men to see their children attain the same status; African American children are less likely to receive financial support from their parents.

##### d. The Impact of Gender

- Women are more likely to withdraw from the labor force if their job skills exceed the jobs offered them.
- The large range of clerical occupations open to women offer modest salaries and little chance to advance.
- Women find it harder to secure financing to start self-employment ventures than men do.
- Women are unlikely to move into their fathers' positions.
- Women's earnings have increased faster than their mothers' did at a comparable age, so their incomes are substantially higher.

## KEY TERMS

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- Absolute poverty** A minimum level of subsistence that no family should be expected to live below.
- Achieved status** A social position that a person attains largely through his or her own efforts.
- Ascribed status** A social position assigned to a person by society without regard for the person's unique talents or characteristics.
- Bourgeoisie** Karl Marx's term for the capitalist class, comprising the owners of the means of production.
- Capitalism** An economic system in which the means of production are held largely in private hands and the main incentive for economic activity is the accumulation of profits.
- Caste** A hereditary rank, usually religiously dictated, that tends to be fixed and immobile.
- Class** A group of people who have a similar level of wealth and income.
- Class consciousness** In Karl Marx's view, a subjective awareness held by members of a class regarding their common vested interests and the need for collective political action to bring about social change.
- Class system** A social ranking based primarily on economic position in which achieved characteristics can influence social mobility.
- Closed system** A social system in which there is little or no possibility of individual social mobility.
- Conspicuous consumption** Purchasing goods not to survive but to flaunt one's superior wealth and social standing.
- Dominant ideology** A set of cultural beliefs and practices that helps to maintain powerful social, economic, and political interests.
- Estate system** A system of stratification under which peasants were required to work land leased to them by nobles in exchange for military protection and other services. Also known as *feudalism*.
- Esteem** The reputation that a specific person has earned within an occupation.
- False consciousness** A term used by Karl Marx to describe an attitude held by members of a class that does not accurately reflect their objective position.
- Feminization of poverty** A trend in which women constitute an increasing proportion of the poor people of both the United States and the world.
- Horizontal mobility** The movement of an individual from one social position to another of the same rank.
- Income** Salaries and wages, interest on savings, stock dividends, and rental income.
- Intergenerational mobility** Changes in the social position of children relative to their parents.
- Intragenerational mobility** Changes in social position within a person's adult life.
- Life chances** The opportunities people have to provide themselves with material goods, positive living conditions, and favorable life experiences.
- Objective method** A technique for measuring social class that assigns individuals to classes on the basis of criteria such as occupation, education, income, and place of residence.
- Open system** A social system in which the position of each individual is influenced by his or her achieved status.
- Power** The ability to exercise one's will over others.
- Prestige** The respect and admiration that an occupation holds in a society.
- Proletariat** Karl Marx's term for the working class in a capitalist society.
- Relative poverty** A floating standard of deprivation by which people at the bottom of a society, whatever their lifestyles, are judged to be disadvantaged *in comparison with the nation as a whole*.
- Slavery** A system of enforced servitude in which some people are owned by other people.
- Social inequality** A condition in which members of society have differing amounts of wealth, prestige, or power.
- Social mobility** Movement of individuals or groups from one position in a society's stratification system to another.

**Socioeconomic status (SES)** A measure of social class that is based on income, education, and occupation.

**Status group** People who have the same prestige or lifestyle, independent of their class positions.

**Stratification** A structured ranking of entire groups of people that perpetuates unequal economic rewards and power in a society.

**Underclass** The long-term poor who lack training and skills.

**Vertical mobility** The movement of an individual from one social position to another of a different rank.

**Wealth** An inclusive term encompassing all a person's material assets, including land, stocks, and other types of property.