

Lecture 6 Notes: Social Stratification

1 Social Stratification

Social inequality Unequal distribution of resources, rewards, and social positions.

Social differentiation Categories based on class, race, gender, age, education, occupation.

Social stratification Institutionalized system reinforcing inequality via differentiation.

Socio-economic status Position within stratification, operationalized by wealth, income, power, status.

2 Neoliberalism

- **Liberalism:** Laissez-faire capitalism with minimal state.
- **Neo-liberalism:** Market logic preserved; minimal state to protect property, maintain order, provide some welfare.
- Based in the idea that governments cannot create growth, but have some protection for the poor

2.1 Scope of Neoliberalism

- Industry deregulation; foreign trade and capital flow liberalization.
- Austerity cuts to social services, education, welfare.
- Privatization of state enterprises (utilities, prisons, universities).
- Expansion of low-wage service sector.

2.2 Presumptions

- **Entrepreneurial citizenship:** Individuals manage lives with market logic (making choices based on efficiency, competitiveness, and profitability (these are not necessarily financial concepts)).
- Exclusion of those unable to compete (homeless, incarcerated).

- Minimal institutional interference in capitalism.
- Develops everyone as a whole, but contributes to inequality
- Disproportionately benefits people based on class

3 Rethinking Poverty

- **Equality of Opportunity** (chance) vs **Equality of Condition** (level of wealth/status).
- Poverty often framed as individual failure vs structural factors.

Example 1: Higher education

Individuals go to higher education to improve their chances of “success” later in life, but socioeconomic background plays a large role in future income.

4 Meritocracy

Originally developed as satire by Michael Young in 1958, demonstrating the negative effects.

- Based on individual accomplishment/effort
- Circular reasoning: merit defined by social position and vice versa.
- But those in power define success by their own social standing, so they determine success.

5 Common Errors in Thinking

- Selective Observation: Own experiences are not indicative of others experiences (survivorship bias too)
- Fundamental Attribution Error: Attributing characteristics to someone based on position that isn’t what they are (stereotypes)
- Just World Fallacy: outcome is deserving of process

6 Poverty Affects Us All

- High public costs: health, family issues, crime.
- Tax spending on by-products of poverty could exceed cost of root solutions.
- higher chance of people experiencing poverty personally

7 Structural Failings

- Poverty driven by economic and political system failures.
- Life events: job loss, family breakups, health crises.
- Inadequate safety net: childcare, healthcare, affordable housing.

8 Neoliberal Ideals

Efficiency, competitiveness, profitability.

9 Playing the Game

Analogy of musical chairs: rules determine winners; policy focuses on players rather than rules.

10 Canadian Experiences of Poverty

- 53% are \$200 away from insolvency monthly.
- 30% cannot make monthly bills.
- 44% believe they will never escape debt.

Is the top 1% working that much harder than everyone else? No, disparity exacerbated by sociological factors.

11 Social Class & Poverty

- Low-Income Cutoff: $\leq 20\%$ of income on basics.
- Debate: absolute vs relative, income vs consumption measures.

12 Paradigms

12.1 Functionalism

Social inequality as necessary for societal function; compensation based on role importance.

Critical Theory

Inequality maintained by power structures; critiques globalization, neoliberal policy, union decline; intersectionality.

12.2 Symbolic Interactionism

Inequality explained via social interactions: avoidance and presentation rituals.

12.3 Taste and Class

Status symbols; cultural capital; habitus (Bourdieu).