

## 8. Stratification, social inequalities and social mobility

### Social Stratification

Sociologists use the term social stratification to describe the system of social standing. Social stratification refers to a society's categorization of its people into rankings of socioeconomic tiers based on factors **like** wealth, income, race, education, and power.

You may remember the word “**stratification**” from geology class. The distinct vertical layers found in rock, called stratification, are a good way to visualize social structure. Society's layers are made of people, and society's resources are distributed unevenly throughout the layers. The people who have more resources represent the top layer of the social structure of stratification. Other groups of people, with progressively fewer and fewer resources, represent the lower layers of our society.

In the United States, people like to believe everyone has an equal chance at success. To a certain extent, Aaron illustrates the belief that hard work and talent—not prejudicial (harmful) treatment or societal values—determine social rank. This emphasis on self-effort perpetuates the belief that people control their own social standing.

However, sociologists recognize that **social stratification** is a society-wide system that makes inequalities apparent. While there are always inequalities between individuals, sociologists are interested in larger social patterns. Stratification is not about individual inequalities, but about **systematic inequalities** based on group membership, classes, and the like. No individual, rich or poor, can be blamed for social inequalities. The structure of society affects a person's social standing. Although individuals may support or fight inequalities, social stratification is created and supported by society as a whole.

Factors that define stratification vary in different societies. In **most societies, stratification is an economic system**, based on wealth, the net value of money and assets a person has, and income, a person's wages or investment dividends. While people are regularly categorized based on how rich or poor they are, other important factors influence social standing. **For example**, in some cultures, wisdom and charisma are valued, and people who have them are revered more than those who don't. In some cultures, the elderly are esteemed; in others, the elderly are disparaged or overlooked. Societies' cultural beliefs often reinforce the inequalities of stratification.

### Characteristics of Social Stratification:

On the basis of the analysis of the different definitions given by eminent scholars, social stratification may have the following characteristics.

**(a) Social stratification is universal:**

There is no society on this world which is free from stratification. Modern stratification differs from stratification of primitive societies. It is a worldwide phenomenon. According to Sorokin “all permanently organized groups are stratified.”

**(b) Stratification is social:**

It is true that biological qualities do not determine one's superiority and inferiority. Factors like age, sex, intelligence as well as strength often contribute as the basis on which statues are distinguished. But one's education, property, power, experience, character, personality etc. are found to be more important than biological qualities. Hence, stratification is social by nature.

**(c) It is ancient:**

Stratification system is very old. It was present even in the small wondering bonds. In almost all the ancient civilizations, the differences between the rich and poor, humble and powerful existed. During the period of Plato and Kautilya even emphasis was given to political, social and economic inequalities.

**(d) It is in diverse forms:**

The forms of stratification are not uniform in all the societies. In the modern world class, caste and estate are the general forms of stratification. In India a special type of stratification in the form of caste is found. The ancient **Aryas** were divided into **four varnas** (tribes): **the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas** and **Sudras**. The ancient **Greeks** were divided into **freemen** and **slaves** and the **ancient Romans** were divided into the **particians** and the **plebians**. So every society, past or present, big or small is characterized by diversified forms of social stratification.

**(e) Social stratification is Consequential:**

Social stratification has two important consequences one is “**life chances**” and the other one is “**life style**”. A class system not only affects the “life- chances” of the individuals but also their “life style”.

The members of a class have similar social chances but the social chances vary in every society. It includes chances of survival and of good physical and mental health, opportunities for education, chances of obtaining justice, marital conflict, separation and divorce etc.

**Life style** denotes a style of life which is distinctive of a particular social status. Life-styles include such matters like the residential areas in every community which have gradations of prestige-ranking, mode of housing, means of recreation, the kinds of dress, the kinds of books, TV shows to which one is exposed and so on. Life-style may be viewed as a sub-culture in which one stratum differs from another within the frame work of a commonly shared over-all culture.

### **Systems of stratification/Types of Stratification:**

Social stratification is based upon a variety of principles. So we find different type of stratification.

**The major types of stratification are**

- (i) Caste
- (ii) Class
- (iii) Estate
- (iv) Slavery

**Caste** is a hereditary endogamous social group in which a person's rank and its accompanying rights and obligations are ascribed on the basis of his birth into a particular group. **For example-** Brahmins, Kshyatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudra Caste.

**Class-Stratification** on the basis of class is dominant in modern society. In this, a person's position depends to a very great extent upon achievement and his ability to use to advantage the inborn characteristics and wealth that he may possess.

**Estate system** of medieval Europe provides another system of stratification which gave much emphasis to birth as well as to wealth and possessions. Each estate had a state.

**Slavery** had economic basis. In slavery, every slave had his master to whom he was subjected. The master's power over the slave was unlimited.

### **Dimensions of Social Stratification:**

Social stratification is multi-dimensional. It is the case not only in present-day complex societies but it is so in other types of societies and in other historical periods as well. We have seen that in a stratified society, social positions are evaluated according to a scale of values. Among the various criteria of evaluation that appear to be related to class status in our complex society, we may briefly discuss the following.

Only the most important of these criteria or dimensions have been included. The order in which the list has been drawn up does not mean any order of relative importance. In theory, each is as important as every other. In any concrete social situation, however, one may be more important in the determination of behaviour than another.

**(a) Wealth, Property or Income:**

**Wealth** is important not only in itself but for what it enables its owners to do. Wealth multiplies his living choices, his life chances, and his opportunities. In addition, wealth, property or high income serve as symbols of success in a society in which material success is upheld as a worthwhile achievement.

An additional observation needs to be made here. Wealth itself may in some case be less important than the manner in which it was acquired. Is the money 'old' and 'dignified' or 'new' and 'ostentatious'? Sometimes inherited wealth confers a higher prestige than earned wealth.

Further, different ways of earning it are subject to varying evaluations. Honest enterprises are obviously rated high in comparison with criminal enterprises. Sometimes manufacturers have an edge over traders in terms of enjoyment of social esteem. This brings us close to the occupational criterion.

It is obvious; therefore, that wealth or income is not a simple criterion, but rather a relatively complicated one. If we use it as a single criterion of class, ignoring all these considerations, the chances are that we shall arrive at erroneous inferences.

**(b) Family or Kinship:**

Class status, in general, is a family rather than an individual phenomenon. It also comes to be a hereditary one. That is, class status, once attained, tends to endure through several generations. When class endogamy (i.e. marriage within the class) is encouraged and customarily practiced, class status can be perpetuated over relatively long periods.

**(c) Location of Residence:**

There is always an ecological correlate of class status. In the U.S.A., **for example**, areas of residence are demarcated, more or less, on class lines. Consequently, as a person moves up the social ladder, he changes his residence and chooses the area which is appropriate for people of his class. So when one knows the address of a person, one knows at once the status of the person concerned.

The fact that a person lives in a locality, considered respectable in public estimation, adds to his standing in society. In the absence of other criteria, sheer location of residence can sometimes serve as an index of class position.

**(d) Duration of Residence:**

No one can expect to achieve the highest class status automatically by acquiring substantial 'property' and establishing residence in the 'best' locality unless he is also a member of an 'old' family.

**(e) Occupation:**

Evaluations of occupational statuses vary widely from society to society and from time to time in the same society. In India, for instance, white collar occupations usually obtain a higher evaluation in comparison with blue-collar occupations. In different societies and in different historical periods, the relative amount of prestige which attaches to a particular productive role or occupation may vary.

"This variability is a result of the fact that the same necessary function in a social system — for example, the military function and roles — may be somewhat differently valued according to the different sets of values that prevail in different social systems and at different times". The differential evaluation of occupational statuses offers a number of clues to the ideologies that prevail in different cultures.

**(f) Education and Knowledge:**

In all societies learning, whether sacred or secular, distinguishes those who have it from those who do not.

This is true for **three** reasons:

- (i) Its acquisition requires effort,
- (ii) Its possession permits the performance of tasks that would otherwise be impossible,
- (iii) The amount of knowledge that individuals acquire, either formally through education, or informally, affects the way they behave.

It may be noted that this dimension of stratification produces effects independently of the other dimensions, and that possession of education and knowledge may help one to acquire control over other dimensions of stratification.

### **Social Stratification and Social Mobility:**

Social mobility refers to the movement within the social structure, from one social position to another. It means a change in social status. All societies provide some opportunity for social mobility. But the societies differ from each other to extent in which individuals can move from one class or status level to another.

It is said that the greater the amount of social mobility, the more open the class structure. The concept of social mobility has fundamental importance in ascertaining the relative “openness” of a social structure. The **nature, forms, direction** and **magnitude** of social mobility depends on the nature and types of social stratification. Sociologists study social mobility in order to find out the relative ‘openness’ of a social structure.

Any group that improves its standard will also improve its social status. But the rate of social mobility is not uniform in all the countries. It differs from society to society from time to time. In India the rate of mobility is naturally low because of agriculture being the predominant occupation and the continuity of caste system as compared to the other countries of the world.

### **Types of Social Mobility:**

In social stratification the movement occurs in **three** directions.

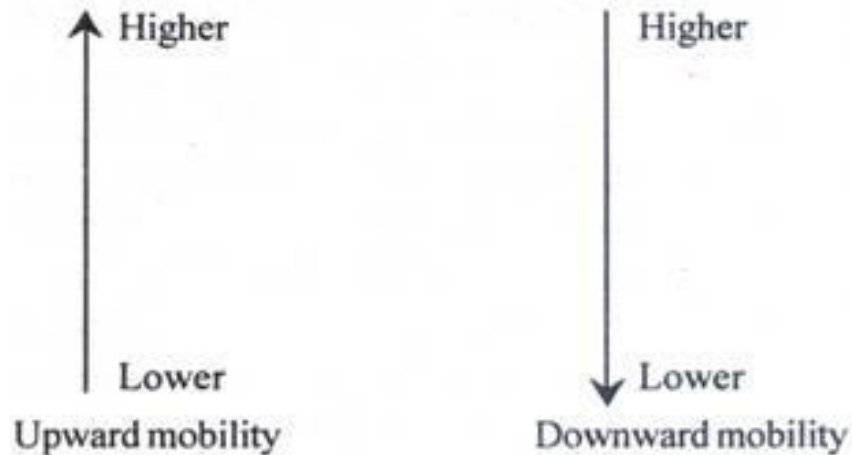
- (a) From lower to higher
- (b) From higher to lower
- (c) Between two positions at the same level.

**Social mobility** is of **two types**:

- (i) Vertical mobility
- (ii) Horizontal mobility

#### **(i) Vertical mobility:**

It refers to the movement of people from one stratum to another or from one status to another. It brings changes in class, occupation and power. It involves movement from lower to higher or higher to lower. There are **two types of vertical mobility**. One is **upward** and other is **downward** mobility.

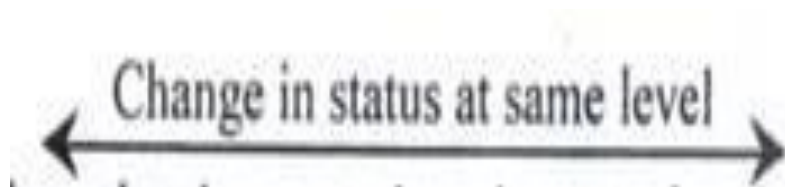


When an individual moves from lower status to higher status, it is called upward mobility. **For example**, if the son of a peon joins a bank as an officer, it is said to be upward social mobility but if he loses the job due to any other reason or inefficiency, he is downwardly mobile from his previous job. So downward mobility takes place when a person moves down from one position to another and change his status.

#### **(ii) Horizontal Mobility:**

It refers to the movement of people from one social group to another situated on the same level. It means that the ranks of these two groups are not different. It indicates change in position without the change in status. **For example**, if a teacher leaves one school and joins another school or a bank officer leaves one branch to work in another or change of residence is the horizontal mobility.

#### **Horizontal mobility**



Apart from the above two broad types of social stratification, there are **two other types of social stratification** in terms of dimension of time. They are:

#### **(i) Inter-generational mobility:**



When changes in status occur from one generation to another, it is called intergenerational mobility. **For example**, if the son changes his status either by taking upon occupation of higher or lower rank with that of his father, there inter-generational mobility takes place.

**(ii) Intra-generational mobility:**

When changes in status occur within one generation, it is called intra-generational mobility. **For example**, the rise and fall in the occupational structure of a family which leads to change in its social status within one generation is called intra-generational mobility.

**The Criminal Justice System and Social Stratification**

Because certain populations are forced into positions of social inequality, crime becomes more common within those populations. “Most inmates are minority men under age 40 ‘whose economic opportunities have suffered the most over the last 30 or 40 years. Incarceration in the United States is socially concentrated among very disadvantaged people,’” says U.S. News & World Report.

In the United States, the people most likely to commit crimes are “people without education, jobs, housing, or hope,” U.S. News explains. This is proved by the fact that people from disadvantaged populations are frequently given harsher sentences than those from dominant populations for the same crimes.

**Reinforcing social stratification further** is the fact that inmates and ex-convicts are, themselves, a disadvantaged population. Once a person has a criminal record, it’s easy for potential employers to access that information on the internet and deny jobs because of it, says U.S. News. This makes it difficult for those who have criminal records to find jobs that pay enough.

Correcting this social stratification effect in the criminal justice system is no easy task. Those without enough money to meet their basic needs are often likely to have inadequate healthcare, little access to quality education and limited access to jobs that pay well. Simply put, disadvantaged populations frequently don’t have access to the tools necessary to reduce or eliminate that disadvantage, and many of them become involved in the criminal justice system as a result.