Lecture Notes

# Chapter 7: Stratification: Rich and Famous—or Rags and Famine?

## Learning Objectives

1. Describe what social stratification means for individuals and groups.
2. Compare key theoretical perspectives on stratification.
3. Explain how achieved and ascribed characteristics impact individuals’ life chances.
4. Explain what affects your chances for social mobility.
5. Compare pluralist and power elite perspectives on stratification.
6. Discuss inequality and poverty from a sociological perspective.
7. Illustrate how the digital divide helps stratify people.

## Chapter Overview

Chapter seven is the first of the three chapters to examine social stratification and how stratification produces social inequality. The chapter begins by emphasizing the many criteria societies use to rank others. Then, the authors detail numerous theoretical arguments on why stratification persists. Specifically, they highlight cultural capital theories at the micro-level. At the meso-level, they examine structural functional and conflict arguments about social stratification, paying special attention to the Davis and Moore thesis to represent functionalists, and Marxism, Weberian theory, and neo-Marxism to detail conflict theory. The authors end the theoretical discussion of stratification by offering Lenski’s evolutionary theory as a macro-level synthesis of both structural functionalism and conflict theory. After introducing possible explanations for the stratification system, the authors focus on social status and how social status affects various aspects of an individual’s life, including their education, health, family life, lifestyle, attitudes toward achievement, religious membership, and political behavior. The authors next discuss social mobility and the micro- and macro-factors that influence mobility in a society. In this discussion, they address different types of stratification systems and how the structure of the stratification system impacts the opportunity for mobility. The authors conclude with a discussion of social class, paying particular attention to poverty and social policies created to eliminate or address poverty in the United States. The chapter ends by discussing the “digital divide” as a unique and modern problem facing social stratification.

## Lecture Outline

I. The Importance of Stratification

A. *Social stratification* refers to how individuals and groups are layered or ranked in society according to how many valued resources they possess

i. Social stratification is an ongoing process of sorting people into different levels of access to resources

ii. The sorting is legitimated by cultural beliefs about why the inequality is justifiable

B. Three main assumptions underlie the concept of stratification

i. People are divided into ranked categories

ii. There is an unequal distribution of desired resources

1. Some members of society possess more of what is valued and others possess less

2. Each society determines what it considers to be valued resources

iii. The criteria societies use to rank others depend on:

1. The society’s history

2. Its geographic location

3. Level of development

4. The society’s political philosophy

5. The decisions of those in power

a. Powerful individuals are more likely to get the best positions, the most desirable mates, and the greatest opportunities

b. Power in society can be assigned by:

1. Birth status
2. Personality characteristics
3. Age
4. Physical attractiveness
5. Education
6. Intelligence
7. Wealth
8. Race
9. Family background
10. Occupation
11. Religion
12. Ethnic group
13. Or any other dimension the society assigns as a basis of power

c. Individuals with power have advantages that perpetuate their power which they try to hold onto through laws, customs, power, and ideology

C. Micro-Level Prestige and Influence

i. Wealth, power, and prestige are awarded according to:

1. *Cultural capital* – knowledge and access to important information in society

2. *Social capital* – networks with others who have influence

ii. Individual qualities also influence cultural and social capital; leadership, personality, sense of humor, self confidence, quick wittedness, physical attractiveness, or ascribed characteristics like gender or ethnicity

D. Meso-Level Access to Resources

i. As individual’s status can be shaped by our access to resources available through organizations and institutions

1. The family reinforces status though the socialization process

2. Educational organizations treat children differently according to their social status

3. Religious affiliation reflects our social status

4. Political systems reinforce the stratification system thought laws, courts, and policing

5. Access to health care depends on one’s position in the stratification system

ii. One’s positions and connections have a profound impact on how they interact with other individuals and groups

E. Macro-Level Factors Influencing Stratification

i. The economic system is often the basis for stratification

1. The economic system included the occupational structure, level of technology, and distribution of wealth in a society

2. Robust and diverse economies provide more opportunity for people to raise their status than in poor or stagnant economies

ii. The geographic location of nations also affects opportunities available to individuals in these societies

iii. Resources like a strong educational system, well-paying jobs, a vibrant economy, productive land, an ample supply of water, money to pay workers, and access to the most efficient and powerful technology all influence stratification

II. Theoretical Explanations of Stratification

A. Micro-Level Theories

i. Rational Choice Theory

1. Focus on individuals and the way they make decisions regarding their own self-interest

a. *Delayed gratification –* delaying rewards or benefits

i. People willing to do this expect to experience prosperity later

ii. Symbolic Interaction

1. Individuals learn their social position through learning what is expected, appropriate, and inappropriate behaviors for their group through the socialization process

2. One learns values, speech patterns, consumption habits, appropriate groups memberships, and self-concepts through socialization

3. Cultural capital influences children’s school and home environments

4. Social class also affects socialization and values

a. High-class families tend to stress thinking skills as opposed to simply learning to obey authority figures

i. This results in members of the middle or upper classes to get the best education, setting them up to be future leaders with better life chances

5. Symbols also often represent social positions

a. *Conspicuous consumption* is displaying goods in a way that others will notice and that will presumably earn the owner respect

b. The culture defines which projects will be viewed as status symbols

i. Purchased products becomes symbols that are intended to define the person of high status

B. Meso- and Macro-Level Theories

i. Structural-Functional Theory

1. Stratification within societies is an inevitable—and probably necessary—part of the social world

2. The stratification system provides each individual a place or position in the social world and motivates individuals to carry out their roles

3. The Davis-and-Moore thesis

a. *Value of positions:* Positions in society are neither equally valued nor equally pleasant to perform; some positions are more highly valued because people feel they are very important to society

i. Societies must motivate talented individuals to prepare and occupy the most important and difficult positions

b. *Preparation requires talent, time, and money*: o motivate talented individuals to make the sacrifices necessary to prepare for and assume difficult positions, differential rewards must be offered

c. *Unequal distribution of rewards*: The difference in rewards leads to unequal distribution of resources for occupations in society

d. As a result, stratification is inevitable

ii. Conflict Theory

1. Stratification is the outcome of struggles for dominance in scarce resources, with some individuals in society taking advantage in others

2. Individuals and groups act in their own self-interest by trying to exploit others, leading inevitably to a struggle between those who have advantages and want to keep them, and those who want them

3. Conflict theory is a product of its historical context

a. Shift from the feudal system to the rise of urban factories, which resulted in widespread social inequalities

b. Context shaped the questions conflict theorists were interested in:

i. How do societies produce necessities?

ii. How are relationships between rich and poor people shaped by this process?

iii. How do many people become alienated in their routine, dull jobs in which they have little involvement and no investment in the end product?

4. Karl Marx is considered the father of conflict theory. He described four possible ways to distribute wealth:

a. According to each person’s needs

b. According to what each person wants

c. According to what each person earns

d. According to what each person can take

i. Competitive capitalist societies organize themselves around the final way

5. Marx thought there were two economically based social classes

a. Individuals in the same social class have similar lifestyles, shared ideologies, and hold common outlooks on social life

b. The struggle over resources between the haves and the have-nots is the cause of conflict

c. The *bourgeoisie* are the capitalist class; the *haves*

i. The *bourgeoisie* control the *means of production,* or the necessary resources to create capital

ii. The *bourgeoisie* also control the norms and values of society

iii. The *bourgeoisie* use their power to make the distribution of resources seem “fair” and justified

iv. The *bourgeoisie* use social control to maintain their control in society

d. The *proletariats* are the working class; the *have-nots*

i. The *proletariats* will remain exploited as long as they do not develop a *class consciousness*, or a shared awareness of their poor status in relation to the means of production

ii. Intellectuals in society could help the *proletariat* develop a class consciousness and to mobilize to overthrow the *bourgeoisie* to create a *classless society* where all wealth is shared

e. Conflict theorists do not believe that money and other rewards are given to the most important positions in society

6. No truly classless societies have ever developed

7. Marx is heavily criticized by some Conflict theorists for his almost exclusive focus on the economic system

8. Max Weber believed that we should also consider power and prestige (in addition to wealth) when determining someone’s position in the stratification system

9. Recent stratification theorists argue that there are five social classes:

a. *Capitalists* who own the means of production and purchase and control the labor of others

b. *Managers* who sell their labor to capitalists and manage the labor of others for capitalists

c. *Petty bourgeoisie*, or small shop or business owners, who own some of the means of production but control little labor of others

d. *Workers* who sell their labor to capitalist

e. *Underclass* who are excluded largely from the system and have virtually no property, power, or prestige

10. Conflict theorists argue that the modern worker is still exploited

a. Owners get more income than is warranted by their responsibilities

b. Better educated and skilled people get more income than is warranted by the differential in education

c. Labor that produces many of our goods is provided by impoverished people around the world working for low wages in multinational corporations

iii. The Evolutionary Theory of Stratification: A Synthesis

1. *Evolutionary theory* is a theory that combines structural-functionalist and conflict theory to determine how scarce resources are distributed and how that distribution of stratification; the primary assumption of evolutionary theory is that inequality differs in society because of different levels of technological development

2. The basic assumptions of evolutionary theory are:

a. To survive people must cooperate

b. Despite the need to cooperate, conflicts of interest occur over important decisions that benefit one individual or group over another

c. Valued items such as money and status are always in demand and in short supply

d. There is likely to be a struggle over these scarce goods

e. Customs and traditions in a society often prevail over rational criteria in determining the distribution of scarce resources

3. After the minimum survival needs of both individuals and the society are met, power determines who gets the surplus

a. Privileges flow from having power

b. Prestige usually results from having access to both power and prestige

4. When testing evolutionary theory, Lenski found that the degree of inequality increases with technology until it reaches the advanced industrial stage

5. As surplus acquires in agrarian societies, those who acquire power also control surpluses, and they use this to benefit their friends and relations

6. When societies finally reach the advanced industrial stage, inequality is moderated because there is greater political participation from people in various social cases and because there are more resources available to be shared in society

a. Industrialism brings a surplus of wealth, a division of labor, advanced technology, and interdependence among members of a society

i. As a result of more important resources, no one individual can control all the important knowledge, skills, or capital resources

1. This eliminates the two extremes of haves and have-nots

7. Evolutionary theory draws from structural functionalism the idea that talented individuals need to be motivated to make sacrifices by allowing private ownership to motivate them

8. It also draws from conflict theory the idea that individuals will attempt to control as much wealth, power, and prestige as possible, resulting in potential conflict as some accumulate more wealth than others

9. Evolutionary theory also recognizes the importance of exploitation in creating inequality

10. It also suggests that while some amount of inequality may be useful in highly complex societies, there is far more stratification in the United States than seems necessary

a. Extreme amounts of inequality can undermine productivity, in that it may make upward mobility so impossible that the most talented people are not always those in the most demanding and responsible jobs

III. Individuals’ Social Status: The Micro-Level

A. Individual Life Chances and Lifestyles

i. Achieved and ascribed characteristics both affect one’s chances for success in life

ii. *Life chances* refer to one’s opportunities, depending n their achieved and ascribed status in society

iii. Life chances influence placement in organizations which impacts educational experiences. Important institutions that impact life chances are:

1. Education

a. The cost of education creates an insurmountable barrier for some

b. Education also affects political, religious, and marital attitudes and behavior

2. Health, Social Conditions, and Life Expectancy

a. Access to health care is determined by availability of doctors and medical facilities, money for transportation and treatment, access to child care, release-time from other tasks in order to get to a medical facility

b. The affluent also have access to better food, are less exposed to polluted water and unhygienic conditions, and are able to pay for medical care and drugs when they have ailing health

c. In developing countries, shorter life expectancies and deaths are due to controllable infectious diseases

d. In affluent countries, heart disease and cancer are the most common cases of death

e. The United States has much larger gaps between the rich and poor people than most other wealthy countries

i. The United States trails 40 other developed nations in infant mortality rates

ii. The life expectancy of men living in Harlem is shorter than the life expectancy of men living in Bangladesh

3. Lifestyles

a. *Lifestyles* are attitudes, values, beliefs, behavior patterns, and other aspects of someone’s place in the social world shaped through the socialization process

b. Lifestyles are not a function of how much money you have

i. Values and behaviors are learned during childhood may not change as access to material possessions changes

4. Attitudes toward Achievement

a. Differ by social status and are generally closely correlated with life chances

b. Motivation to get ahead and beliefs about what an individual can achieve are products of upbringing

c. Upbringing produces opportunities one thinks are available

d. Tolerance for “different” individuals is influenced by social status

5. Family Life and Child-Rearing Patterns

a. a. Different parenting styles transmit differential privilege to their children

b. b. Upper-class children participate in more organized activities

6. Religious Membership

a. In the United States, upper-class individuals are disproportionately Episcopalian, Unitarian, and Jewish

b. In the United States, lower class individuals are disproportionately Nazarene, Southern Baptist, Jehovah’s Witness, and holiness and fundamentalist sects

7. Political Involvement

a. Upper-middle classes are most supportive of elite or pro-capitalist agendas, while lower working-class members are least supportive

b. The lower the social class, the more likely people are to vote for liberal parties, and the higher one’s social status the more likely one is to vote conservative on economic issues consistent with protecting wealth

c. In 2012, increases in the Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters

d. Political behavior is also associated with *status inconsistency*,or an unevenness in social status when individuals have high status on one trait and low status on another trait

i. Individuals who experience status inconsistency are likely to be very liberal and experience discontent with the current political system

IV. Social Mobility: The Micro-Meso Connection

A. *Social mobility* refers to the extent and direction of individual movement in the social stratification system

B. Four issues dominate the ability of mobility:

i. Types of social mobility

ii. Methods of measuring social mobility

iii. Factors that affect social mobility

iv. Whether there is a “land of opportunity”

C. Types of Social Mobility

i. *Intergenerational mobility* refers to change in status compared to your parents’ status, usually resulting from education and occupational attainment

ii. The amount of intergenerational mobility in a society measures the degree to which the society has an *open class system,* or one that allows movement between classes

1. There is a severe lack of mobility among the upper-upper and lower-lower classes in technologically developed countries, which perpetuates the belief that mobility is possible and the system is fair

iii. *Intragenerational mobility* refers to the change in position in a single individual’s life

iv. *Vertical mobility* refers to movement up or down in the hierarchy, which sometimes involves changing social classes

D. How Much Mobility is There? Measures of Social Mobility

i. One traditional method of measuring mobility is to compare fathers and sons

ii. Several conclusions can be derived

1. There is a high level of occupational inheritance

2. There is also considerable movement up and down the occupational ladder from one generation to the next

3. By a considerable margin, sons are more likely to move up than down

iii. Determining the mobility of women is more difficult because they often have lower level positions and their mothers may not have worked full-time

iv. One conclusion that can be drawn is that both women’s and men’s occupational attainment is powerfully influenced by class origins

E. Factors Affecting an Individual’s Mobility

i. Mobility depends on micro-level factors such as socialization and education

1. Family background. Parents in professional families use three times as many different words at home

2. Socialization leads to job change of similar status because an individual’s socialization and training are most applicable to similar jobs

3. Education gives people skills to access jobs, social networks, and determines their access through curricula through “streaming” and tracking

a. College degrees disproportionately go to students in the top status groups (50%), with only 10% from the bottom half of income levels

b. *Meritocracy* positions would be allocated in a social group or organization according to their abilities and credentials, as in level of education attained

ii. Mobility also depends on macro-level factors like the occupational structure and economic status of countries, population changes and the number of people vying for similar positions, discrimination based on gender or ethnicity, and the global economic situation

1. The occupational structure and economic vitality of a nation affects the chances for individual mobility

2. Population trends, like fertility rates, influence the number of people looking for jobs

3. Divisions based on gender and ethnicity cause some people to experience privilege; some experience disprivilege due to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, or a combination of these

4. Many women and ethnic minority groups, locked in a cycle of poverty, dependence, and debt, have little chance of changing their status

5. Mobility at the micro-level is also dependent on macro-level occurrences in the interdependent global market and international events

F. Is There a “Land of Opportunity”? Cross-Cultural Mobility

i. Opportunities for upward mobility have changed significantly with globalization

1. Manufacturing jobs in the global economy have moved from developed to developing countries

2. Globally, much of the upward mobility in the world is taking place among those who come from small, highly educated families with “get-ahead” values, and who see education as a route to upward mobility

ii. What Are Your Chances for Mobility?

1. College education is the most important factor in moving to high-income status in global north countries

2. The value of education increases because of changes in the occupational structures, creating new types of jobs and a “new social class” with skills for the computer and information age

V. Major Stratification Systems: Macro-Level Analysis

A. In *ascribed stratification systems*, characteristics individuals are born with determines ones position in society

B. In *achieved stratification systems*, individuals are allowed to earn positions through their ability and effort

C. Ascribed Status: Caste and Estate Systems

i. *Caste systems* are the most rigid ascribed systems and are maintained by cultural norms and social control mechanisms that are deeply imbedded in religious, political, and economic institutions

1. Caste predetermine:

a. Occupational positions, marriage partners, residences, social associations, and prestige levels

2. Castes are recognized though:

a. Clothing, speech patterns, family name and identity, skin color, and other distinguishing characteristics

3. Socialization is important in caste systems because it teaches individuals their place in society

4. Stability in caste systems is maintained by ideology

ii. *Estate systems* are ascribed systems characterized by the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a small minority of political-military elite, with the peasantry tied to the land

1. Peasants received protection against invading armies and enough of the food they produced to survive from the nobility

2. Estate systems are based on the ownership of land, the position one is born into, or military strength

3. An individual’s rank and legal rights are clearly spelled out, and arranged marriages and religion bolster the system

D. Achieved Status: Social Class Systems

i. *Social class systems* of stratification are based on achieved status

1. Members of the same social class have similar income, wealth, and economic position

2. They share comparable styles of living, levels of education, cultural similarities, and patterns of social interaction

ii. Social class position is based on three main factors determining positions in the stratification system: property, power, and prestige

iii. Achieved status systems maintain that everyone is born with common legal status

iv. Weber suggested that positions in the social stratification system, according to Weber, are determined by these three elements:

1. The Property Factor. Property, or wealth, refers to owning or controlling the means of production

2. The Power Factor. Power is the ability to control or influence others

a. Two theories dominate the explanations of power. The *power elite* model suggests that individuals with powerful positions in political, business, and military arenas who interact with each other and ensure that their power is not threatened

b. The *power pluralist theorists* argue that power is not held exclusively by an elite group, but is shared among many power centers, each of which has its own self-interests to protect

3. The Prestige Factor. Prestige involves the esteem and recognition one receives, based on wealth, position, or accomplishment

E. Social Classes in the United States

i. Characteristics of the Middle Class

1. Makes up about 45% of the population (self-reported majority claim to be middle class)

2. Wages and salaries in the middle class have declined since the 1980s

a. Macro-level trends influencing this are downsizing and layoffs, technological shifts, competition, free trade and trade deficits between countries, immigration, and deregulation

3. Upper-middle-class families have high income, high education, high occupational level, and high participation in political life and voluntary associations

a. Families enjoy a stable life, stressing companionship, privacy, pleasant surroundings in safe neighborhoods, property ownership, and stimulating associations

4. Middle- to lower-class families include small businesspeople and farmers; semi-professionals; middle management personnel; and sales in clerical workers who work in office settings

a. Families are relatively stable, they participate in community life, and they have more political power than the classes below them

VI. Poverty: Determinants and Social Policy

A. Around the world-nearly 870 million people, or roughly 1 in every 8 people on Earth, go to bed hungry every night

B. The poor—the underclass—have no permanent or stable work or property-based income, only casual or intermittent earnings in the labor market

i. They are dependent on help from government agencies or private organizations to survive

ii. They have no collective power and little representation of their interests and needs in the political system

C. *Absolute poverty*, or not having resources to meet basic needs, means no prestige, no access to power, no accumulated wealth, and insufficient means to survive

D. *Relative poverty* refers to those whose income falls below the poverty line, resulting in an inadequate standard of living relative to others in a given country

i. Relative poverty leads to shortened life expectancy, higher infant mortality, and poorer health

E. The *feminization of poverty* refers to the trend in which single females, increasingly younger and with children, make up a growing proportion of those in poverty

i. Often heightened by divorce, unequal earning power, and inability to collect child support

F. There are multiple costs a society pays for poverty

i. It loses the talent and abilities that these people could contribute

ii. It must expend tax dollars to address their needs or to regulate them with social workers and police

iii. People live with a contradiction of cultural values which claim that all citizens are “created equal” and are worthy of respect, yet not all can “make it” in society

G. Eliminating Poverty: Some Policy Considerations

i. The number of people on welfare has dropped 57 % in the United States since 1996

ii. The goal of most welfare programs is to eliminate poverty by changing the factors that perpetuate poverty, but without money or jobs, this is impossible?

iii. Workfare and other Aid Programs

1. These programs mainly attribute poverty to the lack of labor

iv. “Women, Infants, and Children Program” or WIC provides nutritional help to poor families

v. Head Start provides early childhood education

vi. Workfare is a work incentive program that offers job training and food stamps.

1. It requires able-bodied unemployed and underemployed adults to work, be receiving on-the-job training, or be getting education skills to qualify

a. However, other macro-level conditions contribute to poverty aside from lack of work

i. Are there jobs available at living wages?

ii. When the public is attracted to politicians who cut taxes, there is no money for social programs and little hope for helping the “invisible” poor out of poverty

iii. Also, prisons absorb public funds that could go to poverty reduction, yet crime is often a result of people feeling that they have no other options for survival

VII. National and Global Digital Divide: Macro-Level Stratification

A. The global social world is increasingly based on producing and transmitting information through digital technology

B. Individuals with insufficient access to computers and lack of technical skills face barriers to many professions and opportunities

C. Computer and Internet use is largely stratified in the world

D. Researchers have identified 3 tiers in the digital divide based on

i. 1) Personal computers per 100 population

ii. 2) Internet users per 100 in population

iii. 3) Internet bandwidth per person

E. Tier 1; all developed countries plus some in the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East; Tier 2-Brazil, Russia, China, and some small countries in South America; Tier 3-African nations

F. Cell phone users around the world rose from 500 million in 2000 to nearly 6 billion in 2011.

i. South Korea is the most wired country in the world

G. Additionally, most websites and e-mail services use English, computers are designed with a Western alphabet, and some digital systems in computers are established on the basis of English symbols and logic

VIII. The Global “Digital Divide” and Social Policy

A. Change is really slow in traditional rural agricultural area

B. New opportunities are changing the traditional caste structures in urban industrial areas

C. Some countries are skipping stages when improving technology, i.e. not getting wired for land lines and skipping to cell phones

IX. What Have We Learned?

A. The issue of social stratification calls into question the widely held belief in the fairness of our economic system

B. By studying this issue, we better understand why some individuals are able to experience prestige and to control power and wealth at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, while others have little access to those resources