Chapter Activities

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

## Living on a Budget

**Objective:** This activity should get your students to realize the lifestyle differences between upper-middle-class and poor families in the United States.

**Directions:** Prior to coming to class, the instructor should print out online ads for job openings, available housing, and transportation for sale. Place your students in small groups and give them a collection of newspapers. Assign them the task of finding job(s) for two partners in a family, housing, child care, and transportation. Once they find a job, assign the group a realistic monthly salary for the career they select and have them budget the salary for all the financial responsibilities or wants the family may have during a particular month. It is important that the instructor does not limit the career path the students select. (It is actually better if they select upper-middle-class occupations). Once they have finished their budgets (25–30 minutes), give them a similar amount of time to budget the same responsibilities or wants on the monthly minimum wage in your state. After the students are finished with the second budget, the instructor should lead a discussion about the differences in the two lifestyles. The students should consider what items that were previously considered necessities became luxuries. Ask the students to project the relative happiness of the families. Students should also discuss if the division between the two family’s lifestyles were greater, less, or about what they expected. The instructor can also tie the activity into a discussion of the “living wage” or a discussion of the working poor in the text.

## How Much Do You Need to Earn to Survive in Your City?

**Objective:** To understand the complexities of poverty and how much someone needs to earn to meet financial responsibilities.

**Directions:** Present this family to your class. A married husband and wife with two children. One child is 7 years old and attends public school, the other is 3 years old. Break the class up into groups. Have each group write out a monthly budget for what they consider necessities for this family. Have each group share their budget and compile the results. Have actual costs for your city available. Average costs for food for a family of four, fulltime daycare for a 3-year-old, transportation costs, and most importantly rent for a 2- or 3-bedroom apartment.

Offer ideas of budget items students may have overlooked (health insurance and taxes). Present the fair market rent for 2- and 3-bedroom apartments in your city.

Have students calculate that hourly wage needed for the family to afford their budget. Where does this wage land the family in terms of the median income for your city?

**Note**: In the author’s experience, this activity leads to excellent discussions on what is considered a “need” versus a “want.” Debated needs include cell phone, internet access, and a personal car. Students typically underestimate the costs for nearly all budget items.

**Variation:** Once students have calculated their budget and needed hourly wages, have them calculate what this translates to in annual income. Compare these figures with the poverty line. Discuss how the poverty line came to be and have students discuss the differences in their annual incomes needs and the poverty line.

## Child Sex Trafficking

**Objective**: Students will understand why child sex trafficking occurs in the United States.

**Directions:** Break the students into small groups and assign each group one item from the list found here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/15/human-trafficking-month\_n\_4590587.html. Have the students, as a group, analyze the item that they were given and have them come up with potential solutions to the item they were assigned and then have them share with the rest of the class.

## That’s Not Fair

**Objective:** The activity will get students to realize the impact desired resources have on social stratification.

**Directions:** Instructors should come to class with a limited number of an item that the class would determine a “desired resource.” The resource could be extra-credit points, exam questions, an extension on a deadline, an excused absence from class, a snack, office supplies—anything that your students might find desirable will work, but the more desirable the item, the more successful the activity will be. Tell the students about the resource and give them the task of determining how the resource will be distributed. Give them 15 minutes to discuss the matter and require them to come to a democratic consensus at the end of that time. Tell them that if they do not reach a consensus at the end of the allowed time, the resource will not be offered to anyone. The instructor should keep track of various solutions that are posed and what type of student proposes the solution (i.e., do the “A” students suggest the reward go to students with the highest grades? and do females suggest the reward goes to females?). At the end of the activity, lead a discussion on the suggested distribution methods and how they match Marx’s four models to distribute wealth. Have your students discuss whether their methods more closely resembled structural functional theorists’ or conflict theorists’ explanation for stratification in society. Also, have them discuss if other socially desirable resources are distributed in similar different ways and how their distribution affects inequality.

## Ranking Members of Society

**Objective:** This activity will get your students to consider whether power, privilege, or prestige is the most socially important resource. It will require students to assess the assumptions of the structural functional theory of stratification.

**Directions:** In small groups have your students come up with an occupation or social role for each of these descriptions:

* High wealth
* Low wealth
* High prestige
* Low prestige
* High power
* Low power
* Low power; high wealth
* High power; low wealth
* High prestige; low wealth
* Low prestige; high wealth
* High power; low prestige
* Low power; high prestige

Instructors should make copies of a sheet listing these descriptions to pass out to student groups with the lists in different, random order. The groups should create a separate sheet of paper on which they only write the list of occupations or social roles and not the descriptions. The instructor should then collect these lists and distribute the lists to different groups (no group should get its own list back). Give the new groups 5 minutes to distribute $2 million in salary as annual income to the 12 occupations or roles on the list. After this task is complete, tell the groups they have 2 minutes to select the three occupations or roles from the list they would take to a tropical island with them to start a new society. Then have a representative from the group that created the list share with the new group what categories the occupations or roles were in. Give the groups some time to reflect on how they determined social importance and the distribution of social rewards. Then the instructor should lead a discussion on the structural functionalist perspective of stratification, getting students to comment on the thesis drawing from their experience with the activity. The discussion should center on the relative importance of social roles and the unequal distribution of rewards.

## The Digital Divide and Occupational Segregation

**Objective:** This activity should have students see the reality of the digital divide and how it may shape educational opportunities.

**Note to Instructors:** This activity will require computers and the Internet. However, without Internet access, this activity could be adapted with the students conducting the research at home and bring evidence of their findings to class to discuss.

**Directions:** Take a traditional method of job recruitment (such as job classified ads in community newspapers or by collecting flyers and advertisements for job openings in the campus area). Have your students evaluate the types of jobs listed in this medium. Then have your students conduct an online job search. (Instructors may want to compile a list of websites students can use for the mock job search. Suggested sites are monster.com, careerbuilder.com, your college or university’s employment postings, your state’s employment postings, websites for local or corporate stores in the area, etc.). After you have given students 30–45 minutes to search for jobs, instructors should lead a discussion on how the digital divide might contribute to social inequality. For instance, were your students able to find “better” jobs online or in the paper? What jobs would be available to job seekers using the traditional method to find employment? What jobs would be available to job seekers using the Internet to find employment? Instructors can also ask students to discuss why employers might choose to advertise their opening in a particular medium and if that serves as a gate-keeping mechanism.

## Wealth and Income Inequality

**Objective**: This activity will help students understand the wealth and income inequality in the United States.

**Directions:** Before showing the clip titled, “Wealth Inequality in America,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM, have the students write down, on piece of paper, what they believe the wealth and income gap is between the wealthiest and poorest people in the United States. Then show them the clip referenced above. Ask them to compare what they have written down with the information presented in the clip and have them share their results with the class.

## Status Symbols

**Objective:** This activity requires your students to consider the role of symbols in maintaining and reproducing social inequality.

**Directions:** Read your students the following brief descriptions of individuals and have your students, either in small groups or individually, create a list of material possessions they might expect the individual to own. Here are some sample descriptions:

* Jess is a college sophomore majoring in fashion merchandising. Although she grew up with relatively affluent parents, she is paying for college on her own with the help of student loans. She works part time in the local mall.
* Keith holds an executive position in a Fortune 500 company. He lives with his spouse and their two teenage sons.
* Becky is a single mother of three young children and is the assistant manager of a local restaurant. She holds a degree in hospitality management.
* Ivan is an elderly man who is retired from an auto manufacturing plant. He lives with his wife, Laura Marie. They are often visited by their grandchildren.
* Kacie is a 30-year-old metropolitan art director. She has no children and no partner.

After giving the students a few minutes to create a list of items the fictitious individuals may possess, have them share the lists with one another through discussion. Instructors should address the differences and similarities in the lists the students created, paying particular attention to how students’ interpretation of the individual’s social status contributed to the material possessions they expected them to have. Instructors should integrate symbolic interaction theorists’ perspectives of social stratification into the discussion and use the activity to have students assess the merit of the theory and the importance of symbols in maintaining and creating social divisions.

## How We Help

**Objective:** This activity should require students to evaluate social welfare programs in their society. It should also make students see the stigma society places on certain social welfare programs.

**Directions**: Either in groups or individually, instructors should ask students to think of five ways the state or federal government helps or provides aid to (1) upper-class individuals or families, (2) middle-class individuals or families, (3) working-class individuals or families, and (4) poor individuals or families. Instructors should make a list as well, to ensure that programs are highlighted that students might not recognize as support. Through having students share their lists with the class or in a small group, lead a discussion on various policies created to help different social groups. Instructors should focus the class discussion on the public perception of the various policies and how that public perception is shaped by (or influences) social inequality. Instructors should also lead the class in a discussion of which group the government “helps” the most. They can also focus on how the different policies affect the recipients’ chances for social mobility.

## Just How Many Social Classes Are There?

**Objective:** This activity will show students how complex social classes are and get them critically thinking about the concept and its definition.

**Directions:** Either individually or in small groups, ask your students to come up with a list of the social classes that they believe exist in the United States. As a precursor to this exercise, it is best if you have already lectured on education, occupation, income, and wealth disparities. Once they have created their list, have them categorize who belongs to each class based on the following questions:

1. How much education do people in this social class have? Where did they go to school? What kinds of training do they have?
2. Where do people in this social class live? What do their homes look like? Do they rent or own?
3. What kinds of jobs do people in this social class hold? What qualifications did they need to have for these positions?
4. How much money do these people have in savings and investments? How much do these people owe on mortgages, car loans, student loans, and credit card debts?
5. How much income do people in this social class earn? Who contributes financially to the household?
6. What do the people in this social class do for fun? Where do they go, if anywhere, on vacation?
7. What kinds of lives do the children of this social class have? What do they do for fun?

Based on how your students answer these questions, ask them to revisit their social classes. Do they feel that their list is exhaustive? Do they feel like their classes are classified enough to be useful, or are the classes too big to be meaningful? Given that we typically acknowledge three social classes in our society, lead your students in a debate on whether that is enough or if it is meaningful.

## Who Deserves Welfare?

**Objective:** This activity will show students who really need welfare and how their opinions of welfare recipients have been influenced.

**Directions:** Have students prepare a list of characteristics of welfare recipients without putting their names on the paper and turn them in to you so you can compile a list of the characteristics and how many students have each of them listed. Most often, students will hold unrealistic, media-influenced opinions about the poor. After compiling the list, present students with the real statistics regarding welfare and hold a discussion about who deserves welfare and how it should be controlled.

## Cultural and Social Capital

**Objective:** This activity will help students assess their own levels of social and cultural capital.

**Directions:** Review with students the definitions of cultural and social capital. Have students list examples of social capital and cultural capital they possess in their lives. Have the students discuss their results. How do they think their results will impact their social mobility?