

Sociology 1101 - Exam 2 Notes

Prof. Kristi Williams (T-Th: 11:10-12:30)

What Is Social Stratification?

-**Stratification** is a system by which a society ranks and categorizes people in a hierarchy such that structured inequalities exist between groups in access to material or symbolic rewards results

Four Basic Principles of Social Stratification

- Rankings apply to social categories of people who share a common characteristic (class, status, power, race, gender)
- People's life experiences and opportunities depend heavily on how their social category is ranked
 - Stratification is universal but variable
- a trait of society, not simply a reflection of individual differences; cultural beliefs motivate the rankings
- Ranks of social categories change slowly over time

3 Common Systems

- Caste Systems (see text)—born into it and stay in it for one's whole life
- Meritocracy**—social standing determined by merit & effort
- Class systems**
- Race and Gender**

Class System

- Economically based system of stratification
- Relative categorization and somewhat loose social boundaries (class systems are fluid)
 - Social mobility possible
- Based on both ascribed (birth) and achieved statuses (social mobility common)
- Large scale and impersonal

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

- Basic metric of stratification in modern US
- Income**—earnings from work or investments
 - Wages, salaries and investment money
- Wealth**—total value of money and assets, minus debt
 - Cash, savings, investments, property
- Educational Attainment**—highest level of education
- Occupation**—prestige

U.S. Class Structure

- Upper class**—wealthiest 1% approx 1/3 of nation's wealth
- Middle class**—white collar, non-manual jobs that pay significantly above poverty line;
- working class**—blue collar (manual) labor and pink collar (service) labor that pay above poverty line
- Working Poor**—unskilled low pay jobs usually without benefits; minimum wage jobs leave many in poverty
- Underclass/poor (15%)**—income based; many live in inner cities

Class Stratification and Inequality In the US

- Take a look at the three distributions of wealth

Income Inequality In the US

- in past 45 years, the lowest 20% of households in income never received more than 5.2% of overall US income

Inequality and Social Mobility

- One of the biggest problems with rising levels of inequality is that it inhibits social mobility
- This conflicts with our strong cultural notions of the US as the land of equal opportunity
- Social mobility**—ability to change positions in a social stratification system
 - Intergenerational**—social mobility within the course of one person's life
 - Intergenerational**—social mobility from one generation to another

Theories of Stratification

- Functionalist (Davis-Moore)
- Conflict (Marx)

Functionalist Explanation of Stratification: Davis & Moore Thesis

-**Social stratification has beneficial consequences for the operation of society**

- The greater the functional importance of a position, the more rewards a society attaches to it
- Any society can be egalitarian, but only if people are willing to let anyone perform highly skilled jobs and rewards are not based on quality
- Social position based entirely on innate talent and efforts
- CRITIQUES**
 - Rewards don't always reflect contribution to society
 - Some people have more power to define what is "valuable" and structure rewards accordingly

Marx & Conflict Explanation of Inequality

- People in power (capitalists who own the means of production) are able to define what is “valuable” in society and structure rewards accordingly in ways that protect their interests
 - Laws, policies, and ideologies
- Stratification is not functional but leads to conflict and social tension
- Evidence?

Definitions of Poverty

- Deprivation due to economic circumstances severe enough that one cannot live with dignity
- Absolute poverty**—life threatening lack of resources; can’t meet minimal requirements to purchase food; uncommon in US
- Relative Poverty**—The deprivation of some people in relation to those who have more; Lacks decent standard of housing and healthy living conditions

Measuring Poverty: Official Measure

- Poverty formula developed in the 1960s
 - 3X the cost of a nutritionally adequate diet
 - \$23,850 a year for a family of four
 - 49% are children/young adults (under 25)

Criticisms of Official Poverty Measure

- Overestimates poverty—doesn’t include food stamps, Medicaid, public housing
- Underestimates poverty—because housing is so expensive now, people spend < 30% of income on food (should be based on housing costs or the multiplier should be reduced)

What Causes Poverty?

- Poverty as Cultural—Culture of Poverty
 - Argues that poor people adopt lifestyles and beliefs which differ from those of middle-class, “mainstream” society, in order to adapt and survive in difficult economic circumstances and these help keep them in poverty
 - Dependency culture:** argument that providing welfare erodes people’s desire to work
 - But critics say: Most poverty is situational & most poor have same values as non-poor
- Poverty as Biological/Genetic—Bell Curve
 - Bell Curve Thesis
 - Poverty is caused by low IQ/genetic factors
 - Therefore, efforts to improve opportunities for poor children will be unsuccessful
 - Critic: social experiments show that changes in social environment can improve outcomes for children
 - Critics: even if IQ plays a role, it likely interacts strongly with the environment to influence outcomes
- Poverty as Structural