

The defining of the social class sociology essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In this essay I shall begin by defining what social class is as illustrated in the collins social work dictionary. I will look at the way class can influence the life chances of a person in Britain today. I will look at how the power and powerlessness of each class can affect the ability of someone to control their lives and access the resources within our society. I will discuss the different ideologies surrounding class and highlight the differences between the life chances enjoyed or not by members of the different social classes. I will argue that class has a significant affect on a persons life chances and try to support that argument with evidence and data.

“ Social class is commonly defined either as a stratum within society based upon a classification of occupations or as a system based upon the distribution and ownership of property in society” (Collins Internet Linked Dictionary of Social Work 2006)

Social class can be defined as a hierarchical order of people (A tiered system with one class above another) within a society, based on their economic, cultural norms or employment status. Social class is often discussed in the terms of social stratification, this refers to the different levels that groups of people consider themselves to be part of or where society in its general term considers the individual to be. Stratification is a term borrowed from geology (the study of rocks) that describes the process where layers of rocks are formed one above the other, these are referred to as strata. In todays society strata are the classes.

In the middle ages there was what was called the estate system (also known as the feudalism) the kings being at the top of the system, then there were

the noble lords and below the lords were the knights. The majority of the population were known as the peasants and the serfs. Each of these were known as a estate.

Estates were different from classes meaning that people were born into an estate that they would remain. There was no social mobility(no way of moving up or down) Their

Position was ascribed (born into) to them following their birth.

In other cultures different social systems developed for example in India a caste system. This is where people believed in reincarnation (born again) the ones at the bottom of the caste system accepted this. Their religion and belief made them think that they deserved to be there and it was ok for others to look them up and down. In hope they would be reborn into a higher caste when they were reincarnated, they would try to lead better lives.

A stronger form of stratification was slavery. Slavery totally subjugated one group to the will and whim of another even to the power of life or death. A slave owner killing a slave would not be thought to have committed murder. This divided the slaves and the slave owners into very different groups in terms of power. The owners of the slaves treated the slaves very badly. Slaves were bought and sold all the time. Sadly slavery still exists in some parts of the world.

All societies have some form of system that describes its social structure. In Britain today this structure is based on class. The way that system is defined has been under discussion for many years. Karl Marx (May 5, 1818 - March

14, 1883) a German philosopher, political economist, historian, political theorist, Sociologist, communist, and revolutionary) described class as being divided into two main groups; The aristocracy or bourgeoisie and the workers or proletariat. The bourgeoisie controlled the means of production, factories natural resources or owned the land. Whilst the workers or proletariat only had their labour which they sold to earn money. Max Weber(1864-1920) A German classical sociologist, described a four tier social class system, though he agreed with Marx that the main division was between the Capitalist class who owned the means of production and the working class who sold their labour to the Capitalist class.

Britain's social structure is most commonly described as a three layer system, which is; the upper, middle and lower class, although many would refine this model further by describing themselves as either upper or lower within each class. The middle class are made up of professionals and educated or highly skilled people, whilst the upper class would be the aristocracy and those with power and influence.

Sociologists also describe an underclass that sits below the working class and is made up of the longterm unemployed or those with little chance of accessing the labour market and who require benefits from the state to survive.

The Office for National Statistics who are a government body responsible for the central collection of all relevant national data use an eight layer system of socioeconomic classification ranging from NS-SEC1(National Statistics Socio Economic Classification) Higher managerial/professional occupations to

NS-SEC8 Never worked/long term unemployed. Effectively NS-SEC8 are the underclass.

All the classes have a wide range of social customs and norms that further identify their members and to which people feel kinship with, such as the types of entertainment they enjoy, their views and beliefs or their mode of speech. Assumptions about a persons class can be made by the way they talk or dress.

“ An Englishman’s way of speaking absolutely classifies him. The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him.” (Cited in Kingdom J Pg 184 2008)

Class background has many affects on almost all areas of peoples lives and influences their life chances. life chances can be described as the benefits available within a society, or the resources that can enhance our experiences, these can be a longer life expectancy, better health, lower child mortality, healthier diet, higher job status, better housing, more frequent and varied holidays, access to private or high quality education and from that a greater likelihood of educational achievement. As well as class, ethnicity and gender affect life chances too.

Sociologists have described a move In recent years from working class into the middle classes this has been due to a rising standard of living and an increase in home ownership.

“ Due to rising living standards among the working class, it was argued, increasing numbers of this group were effectively joining the middle class.”

(Haralambos and Holborn 2004, p. 51).

Power is a feature of the class divisions and as such has influence on the life chances of those within each class. Anthony Giddens (18th Jan 1938) a British sociologist wrote that power is used to oppress and exploit and gives access to scarce resources. This is the view of Marxists who feel that the ruling or upper classes use their power to oppress the working class and exploit their labour.

“ Power is the ability to achieve your aims against opposition”

(Harris S, Study Guide Sociology Pg120)

Power is a necessary component in any society, otherwise pandemonium would break lose: leaders must be established.

Max Weber (1864-1920) A German classical sociologist distinguished three types of legitimate power that exist in society these are;

Rational-legal authority, this is based on rules and procedures which are usually written down. Obedience is therefore not to an individual but to the rules. The government holds this type of power and uses a bureaucracy to control the application of those rules for example, through taxation via the Inland Revenue.

Charismatic authority is derived from the personal qualities a person possesses that give them the ability to charm, lead, persuade, inspire and

<https://assignbuster.com/the-defining-of-the-social-class-sociology-essay/>

influence others. Adolf Hitler used his charisma and oratorical skills to influence others into following and believing in his ideology of National Socialism.

The third type described by Weber is Traditional authority; this is based on historical precedent. Monarchies are examples of the people that have traditional authority.

“ Power” needs to be seen as the property of various forms of social organization and relationships, rather than as a “ thing” in its own right.

(Cited in Power and Politics Unit P2: Theories of The State [www. sociology. org. uk](http://www.sociology.org.uk))

The influences of class on the life chances of a person are dependent upon the power that person or class has, to access the limited resources available. The working class with their limited financial power and dependance on the labour market are restricted in the power they can muster to assist them in acquiring the resources of the society. Whilst the upper class have influence and wealth that they can use to gain themselves all that they might need.

In our society social workers have power that Webber would describe as rational legal authority granted to them by the rules of our society. Following government legislation they use their power to assist and protect the more vulnerable members of society. In their work they should always apply AOP/ADP Anti discrimination Practice and Anti Oppressive Practice both of which aim to improve the quality of life or well being of individual groups and communities. These practices have been developed to fight the inequalities inherent in a hierarchical society and ensure a more inclusive approach is

<https://assignbuster.com/the-defining-of-the-social-class-sociology-essay/>

used. When working with parents of looked after children (LAC) the social worker must always ensure they have given the parents all information and guidance they need to access their rights.

Ideology

Depending on your political viewpoint class differences are something that is a natural result of any human society falling into a hierarchical order or a system of oppression maintained to exploit the working class.

It has been suggested that social inequality is a feature of all human societies.

(Haralambos and Holborn 2004, p. 1; Bilton et al 1994, p. 34)

The right wing political viewpoint would agree with the quote seeing in it a vindication of the natural order of things. Whereas a Marxist would argue that such inequality should be seen as unacceptable and the product of exploitation by the ruling class.

Capitalism and right wing politics believe in a free market where those who can, succeed and have the opportunity for self improvement. They believe that if some one has the “right stuff” then they will be able to rise to the top regardless of the position from which they start.

“The particular features British conservatives see as their tradition tend to include social hierarchy, the monarchy, the House of Lords, the patriarchal family, property and a natural ruling class. Inequality is natural and socially

necessary: it cannot be eradicated. Consequently poverty is nothing to be ashamed of.”

(Kingdom J Pg 39. 2008)

Marxists or Socialists would argue that the gulf between the ruling class and the oppressed working classes was so great that it was impossible for them to compete on an equal footing. Socialists view society as a whole and feel a moral responsibility to one another. This collectivism fosters values of fraternity and altruism towards all members of society and consequently they see inequality and something to overcome.

The political ideology around class is focussed around whether a hierarchical system with a social elite controlling the majority of power and resources and with an underprivileged working class providing a source of cheap labour is acceptable as a natural consequence of human societies or whether a more equal system which shares the resources of the society based on need is something which a developed society should strive for. Debate on this will continue.

Life Chances the differences

‘ Based on Weber’s tradition, social groups are stratified according to their lifestyles, in the sense of consumption patterns, understanding that the lifestyle is as much a choice as a result of people’s chances. According to Cockerham and colleges, Weber’s overall thesis states that ‘ chance is socially determined, and social structure is an arrangement of chances. Hence, lifestyles are not random behaviours unrelated to structure but are

typically deliberate choices influenced by life chances' (Cockerham et al., 1997: 32

A serious affect of social class on life chances is the rate of deaths in children. Mortality rates for death from injury in children have been dropping over the last century and though they have more than halved in the last twenty years it has been identified that there are wide variations in the mortality rate by socioeconomic class. The table below taken from the British Medical Journal is part of a study into death from injury in children under 15 by socio economic group.

The study found that whilst the overall mortality rate for children under 15 for death from injury fell from 11. 1 deaths per 100, 000 in 1981 to 4. 0 deaths per 100, 000, In 2001. There was a distinct difference between the socioeconomic class groups. The chances of death from injury for children from NS-SEC8 who's parents had either never worked or were longterm unemployed was over 13 times higher than for children from the highest social group NS-SEC8

It can also been seen clearly from the table that the mortality rate per 100. 000 rises steadily as the social class moves downward with the exception of the top two classes which are reversed, though the difference between then is only 0. 3 per 100, 000. It is clear from this that a child's life chances in terms of survival are directly linked to the social class they are born into. The inequality between the social groupings is stark, especially when you look at undetermined deaths: those deaths were 32. 6 times higher for children from

the lowest social class. This study only looked at death from injury and does not include those deaths due to poor health or hygiene.

Table 1

Deaths from injury and poisoning and rates per year per 100 000 children aged 0-15 years by eight class NS-SEC, 2001-3

NS-SEC

Deaths 2001-3

Rate (95% CI) per year per 100 000 children

1: Higher managerial/professional occupations

85

1. 9 (1. 6 to 2. 4)

2: Lower managerial/professional occupations

111

1. 6 (1. 3 to 1. 9)

3: Intermediate occupations

59

2. 9 (2. 2 to 3. 7)

4: Small employers/own account workers

105

2. 9 (2. 4 to 3. 5)

5: Lower supervisory/technical occupations

91

2. 7 (2. 2 to 3. 3)

6: Semi-routine occupations

148

4. 0 (3. 4 to 4. 7)

7: Routine occupations

180

5. 0 (4. 3 to 5. 8)

8: Never worked/long term unemployed

383

25. 4 (22. 9 to 28. 1)

Total

1162

4. 0 (3. 8 to 4. 2)

NS-SEC= National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification.

â€ Excludes one child for whom NS-SEC was missing

BMJ. 2006 July 15; 333(7559): 119.

doi: 10. 1136/bmj. 38875. 757488. 4F.

Copyright © 2006, BMJ Publishing Group Ltd.

One of the greatest factors still causing a difference between the classes with regards to life chances is education, despite the best attempts of the state system and years of work to close the gap between the educational experience of the upper and lower classes, there is a gulf that is almost insurmountable. Children from working class families do less well against all educational benchmarks, from GCSE results to university entrance. One group that suffer more than most are children in the care system. LAC (looked after children) are affected by: Poverty, housing, unhealthy diets and poor education success. Considering these effects on LAC they can play an enormous part of their individual, social and functioning throughout their life. It is understood and evidenced that children who are brought up in the care system previously had a lack of opportunity, therefore making these individuals less likely to be motivated to achieve any academic qualifications and lead to a large number of young people leaving the care system without any opportunities available to them to reach their full potential. This reinforced the class system, creating a group of individuals who would be more likely to remain dependent on the state system, therefore creating a cycle of individuals within their own class system. " The cycle of deprivation

is bad for everyone. But is particular unfair for children who miss out on opportunities because they inherit the disadvantage faced by their parents, so their life chances are determined by where they come from rather than who they are" (cited in Cunningham. J and cunningham. S 2008 page 45)

Looked after children are more likely to be excluded from school, leave with less than five GCSE passes and tend not to go onto further education. Before even starting school they will often have suffered from attachment disorders making it difficult for them to connect with or trust others, they may have suffered from poor nutrition, they will possibly have missed medical appointments for health problems and immunisations, or suffer from low self esteem which will seriously affect their ability to learn and develop the confidence to believe they can succeed. They move school more frequently than average and have more time off school. In some cases they are the main carer for younger siblings due to the lack of care given by parents. " Every Child Matters" is an initiative brought in following the Laming inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbe that aimed to address these issues by making all agencies involved with children work more effectively together to eliminate the inequalities that children from poor or underprivileged backgrounds face.

Conclusion

Concluding this essay I believe that there is clear evidence that class has an influence on life chances. We have seen how children's mortality rate are vastly higher in the lowest class compared with all other classes and in particular those in the highest two classes. Access to private education gives

the upper classes a route into the most powerful positions in society and financial rewards which allows them to perpetuate the system. Children from the working class and underclass or those in care are at greater risk of harm and social isolation, where they enter a vicious circle locking them into a cycle of depravation. It is my belief that Victoria Climbe was an example of class distinction. Her Aunt and Uncle were able to use their power in relation to their knowledge of the bureaucracy of the care system within different countries to hide the abuse and harm they were causing the child prior to her death. The Laming enquiry found that Victoria had suffered deprivation, lack of nourishment, physical abuse and poverty. The Laming inquiry found it intolerable that so many agencies could be involved with a child and yet she was still able to be killed by her carers. The recommendations of the inquiry aimed to ensure that the services provided to children were seamless and ensured that “ every child matters”. That they should be encouraged, supported and have the opportunity to reach their individual potential, thus giving them the best life chances possible.

This legislation was aimed to ensure that children from deprived backgrounds or looked after children had a chance to attain the goals children from others classes considered normal and that failings in bureaucracy and the integration of services were no longer a loophole that abusers could use to evade detection.