

# Example of research paper on stratification and prejudice: race and poverty

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



Despite what some may believe, social stratification is still a prevalent force in today's society. Current events stories are full of tales of minorities, women, and the poor being discriminated against on a regular basis and in very extreme ways. In order to address these issues and become more fully aware of their consequences, it is important to understand current events in the context of racial, gender, and class discrimination. In this way, we can expand our knowledge of the world and its problems, and educate others who may not have as much information on these issues. In this paper, the scandal regarding Florida's race-based education goals, the sexual harassment of a public official towards female military rape victims and the treatment of permit-less protests in the wake of Occupy Wall Street will be explored, noting the prevalence of gender, racial and class stratification and discrimination in our world today.

## **Racial Stratification – Florida's Race-Based Education Goals**

One aspect of racial stratification that has existed for centuries is the notion that minorities are not as intelligent as whites – it is a tactic that is often used to discredit or minimize the importance or relevance of minority issues, and to further dehumanize them. One way in which this issue has continued to rear its ugly head is in a recent initiative in Florida by the US Department of Education, in which black and Hispanic students are given “severely lower expectations” in their student achievement goals, which are based on race (Reuters, 2013). In essence, the DOE released a series of student achievement goals stratified by race, noting that whites and Asians are expected to perform the best in academic achievement as compared to

blacks and Hispanics. These goals included reading goals for public students where 90% of Asian-Americans would be at grade level reading ability by 2018, while 81% of Hispanics and just 74% of black students would be at the same level (Reuters, 2013).

This kind of expectation is naturally upsetting, as there is no indication that intelligence and education level is dependent on race or genetics - therefore, the assumption that it is can be fairly offensive. The complaint filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center and Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County rests on the idea that these race-based goals are discriminatory; instead of equal achievement being promoted, the goals instead set lower goals for students of certain races (Reuters, 2013). Not only does this create the expectation that blacks and Hispanics are not as intelligent, it can also create fewer incentives for these students to work harder to achieve these grades and better themselves (as it is not expected by society that they be smart). These goals discriminate against minority races by not placing the same incentives on them as they do whites and Asians, therefore actively harming their educational futures.

In order to address these trends, and to apply a solution to this event, the complaint needs to be taken seriously. The race-based education goals should either be adjusted or eliminated altogether, simply focusing on equal expectations for all. By doing so, they would place the expectation on all children to perform equally; while there are mitigating class-related circumstances that can lead to lower education (poor people often having less time and fewer resources to dedicate to quality education), these divisions do not strictly lay along racial lines. If anything, class-based

educational incentives should be provided instead, allowing those who do not have as much to put toward their education to get the resources need to improve themselves. This would allow them the chance to keep up with their peers. Educational performance is not a racial issue; it should not be measured as such.

## **Gender Stratification – Sexism and Rape in the Military**

The issue of women in the military has also been a long-contested one. It is only in recent years that women have been able to take an active role in the military, and the culture of the military is already significantly male-dominated. To that end, rape statistics and instances of sexual harassment of women in the military are significantly high, turning into nearly an epidemic. One of the most recent military-related scandals involving women is the recent allegations toward San Diego Mayor Filner by two women (previously rape victims) who claim Filner sexually harassed them. These women were raped at least once - one was raped three times - in the military, and were subsequently targeted for flirtation, groping, and more by Bob Filner, who was in Congress at the time (Ash, 2013). As a former head of the House Veteran's Affairs Committee, Filner is accused of abusing that power to take advantage of these women, who were mostly survivors of military-based sexual assault. Since there is a huge culture of silence in the military regarding transgressions, these women were conditioned to not speak up, making them prime targets for Filner. At least eight women have spoken up claiming that Filner has had encounters with them where they were inappropriately approached and touched.

This event is symptomatic of a significant part of gender stratification, which is the expectation of sexual conduct by men toward women. Given the extremely male-dominated world of the military, as well as its isolating and intimidating nature, it can contribute to a culture in which men are able to get away with sexual misconduct toward female soldiers with few recriminations or consequences. The concept of loyalty is so instilled in soldiers that it becomes sacrosanct to point out wrongdoing. In the case of these women suffering from sexual harassment even after the military is done, it is a case of a public official contributing to this misconduct as a result of his close proximity to military-trained women. Rape culture, as a whole, creates the expectation that the men are blameless for their actions – they are either hapless victims of sexualized women who can ‘cry rape’ whenever they think they can get ahead, or they are sexual creatures who ‘simply cannot help themselves.’ These assumptions are extremely wrongheaded, and do nothing but blame the victim and relieve responsibility on the wrongdoer. The reason allegations like these come so late is that, while in the situation itself (especially the military), women feel pressured to keep their mouth shut, because the men have the power over them to ruin their financial careers and reputations in the court of public opinion. These kinds of allegations must be taken seriously if we are to stop the rape and mistreatment of women everywhere, most especially in the military.

One of the most significant and prevalent arguments right now, of all times, is the issue of social stratification. In the wake of a huge recession that saw few consequences for the rich while unemployment rose dramatically, the Occupy Wall Street Movement was a huge grassroots movement in 2011

that saw ordinary citizens of all manner of political groups sitting in Zuccotti Park and other financial districts around the country to protest crony capitalism and the dismantling of the American economy by the 1%. In the wake of that tumultuous time, prospective New York City mayoral candidates are now campaigning on what they would have done, or would do in the future, to handle citizens' concerns and ability to protest. Ideas range from Bill de Blasio's idea to "build spaces" for OWS protesters to meet city officials and discuss the issues with them, to Christine Quinn's idea of making these city official/protestor conversations as non-adversarial as possible (Vilensky, 2013). The issue boils down to the ability for a city to support or allow permitless protests, even when they are economic.

Civil protests are usually class-related, as evidenced by Occupy Wall Street and the goal to make officials aware of the poor's disenfranchisement to the benefit of the rich. This relates to class stratification through the inability for poor people to make their voices heard otherwise; official channels usually dismiss the complaints or make them so small and individual-based that they do not carry sufficient momentum with the public. A sense of apathy creeps in amongst the poor, as they start to feel as though they cannot fight the 1%, who command most of the wealth and power in the country. In order to combat this stratification, protests (just short of actual revolution) must take place, and so this story sees city officials reacting to the way Occupy went and trying to find better ways to reach a compromise. It counts as an admission that the current mayor, Mr. Bloomberg, showed "blatant disregard for community voices" during Occupy, which is further evidence of class stratification; the poor have no other means or agency within society as

compared to the ultra-rich, who can incentivize the maintenance of the status quo and keep themselves rich. In this case, this leaves the poor with few options to actually better themselves, giving them no other choice but to protest.

The Occupy protests caused quite a bit of controversy when they happened. I remember having a significantly heated discussion with my roommate at the time, who vehemently and bitterly disagreed with their perspective and wanted them gone. This led to a huge argument where I did learn quite a bit about him that I hadn't before. In order to discuss with my roommate the issues of Social Stratification and the 99%/1% debate, I needed to know a few things about him first. I asked him several questions: Where did your parents immigrate from? How much money did they have when they got here? What did they do? What scholarship did you get to attend university? How do you plan to become part of the 1%? and so on. Here were his answers: His parents immigrated from India, they currently work as a low-level salesman and a secretary, respectively, and they do not make much money; they also did not have much money when they got here. However, he did get a scholarship that was based on his Indian ethnicity, in addition to his high grades. He plans to get a job out of college at a high-paying engineering firm and make his millions there, becoming part of the 1%. My roommate believes in a 'just world'; that is, if you fail, than you did not deserve to succeed, or did not work hard enough to do so. All of this talk about the 99% and the 1% makes him angry, as he feels as though people are being ungrateful and entitled about what they think they 'deserve.'

People who do not have jobs simply are not working hard enough, or are not

smart enough to make it in American society. To that end, I have to convince him otherwise - that there are many social and economic circumstances that are holding people back, not the least of which are the efforts of the 1% to maintain their wealth at the expense of the rest of the country.

First of all, one cannot assume that people who do not have jobs, or have not "made it", are unwilling to work. There are a variety of reasons why people are not working - the 2008 economic crisis left millions of Americans out of work, with one in seven people below the poverty line (Rogers, 2001). This does not mean people are "lazy," or "entitled" - this simply means that people are not giving them jobs, or they are losing their jobs. Many people went into economic destitution due to the housing crisis, where the American Dream was sold to them in home ownership, and the people in charge of the banks made very poor investment decisions by offering subprime loans to those who could not afford them. This had the effect of crashing the housing market, and left these unsuspecting people without homes or jobs.

There is absolutely no correlation between lack of intelligence or laziness and income or wealth. Many intelligent people work hard every day to no avail; many 'unskilled' jobs actually take a great deal of physical and mental acuity, one large reason being that they are so uncelebrated that no support system exists for them (Ehrenreich, 2001). While you say that these people simply "don't work hard enough" and "aren't smart enough," they are not afforded nearly the opportunities that others have. The fact that you came from poverty and are doing so well is fantastic, but that is also due to a bit of luck as well; very few people get the opportunities you have, and not everyone gets these lucky breaks. There are those with poor home lives



whose schools were lackluster, and did not give them the quality education they would need to go out and succeed in the real world. It is extremely difficult for those of us in the bottom 20% to improve their lot in life due to the institutionalized racism, sexism, and lack of resources provided to them (Ehrenreich, 2001). The reason they do not succeed is, first and foremost, they are not given the chance to.

In the meantime, median pay for executives has quadrupled, while ordinary jobs have dropped below 90% of what they were in the 1970s (Rogers, 2001). Low-pay workers are getting paid even less, to the point where they simply cannot sustain even a basic lifestyle without working another job. This is due to the increasing efforts by executives to increase their pay while taking it away from their workers, who desperately need it. Instead of being 'job creators,' as the 1% call themselves, they take away jobs to increase their bottom line. They have the means to create jobs, but are not creating them - they are not giving enough back to the workers and the public who help keep their businesses afloat. On a long enough timeline, this means that no one will be left who can afford to do business with them, and their own businesses will fail. The executives need their lower-level workers and their customers in order to succeed; if their consumers have no money to buy their products with, they will fail as well. This is the reason why social stratification needs to change; its current direction is leading toward an insular course of action that would lead to no one being able to do anything for anyone, and so the two groups must work together to create a more equitable distribution of wealth.

In essence, the income inequalities that are present in the United States are

not due to laziness or failure. You are a rare case in that you did come from poverty and immigrated to this country, and you worked hard to get good grades. However, there is a system in this country that is designed to keep the disenfranchised from actually escaping their circumstances, while many people are born into money or are given privileges that others cannot benefit from. One cannot assume that, just because I could do it, everyone else can. If everyone who was intelligent and worked hard succeeded, there wouldn't be enough money in the country to go around. Instead, social stratification exists to create divisions and arbitrary distinctions by which people can be denied that success (Massey, 2007).

Using labels like 'lazy' and 'dumb' because they are poor only serves to vilify them and rob them of any encouragement to succeed, while making those in power feel better for not contributing to society as a whole. You are using anecdotal evidence to apply your own specific circumstances for everyone, when not everyone gets the chances you do. It is not a matter of laziness or entitlement; they are only asking for the chance to make their own way, when social stratification and other factors are preventing them from even doing that. It was in this respect that I was able to actually convince my roommate that being poor did not mean you were undeserving of wealth, but that societal and class forces (including race and gender) contributed to social stratification and discrimination.

In conclusion, social stratification is still a prevalent force in current events. Racial discrimination happens even in the creation of our education system, and the expectations of students to succeed. Gender discrimination happens in male-dominated areas like the military, where women are not given the

benefit of the doubt and are discouraged from standing up for themselves. Class discrimination happens when people who are poor are unable to be given a voice in their society except for ostensibly unlawful, permitless protests. In order to address these issues, we must be able to talk to each other about them and fully understand the conditions that lead to this stratification.

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