

Is modern Britain an
unequal society?



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Britain is often described as an unequal society however the accuracy of this statement is regularly debated because; the term inequality is very vague as individuals often have opposing views when searching for the meaning. Due to the ambiguity of the word 'unequal' I am going to be approaching the question 'is contemporary Britain an unequal society' from a sociological perspective in order to best describe and explain social inequalities in Britain. The term social inequality from a sociological point of view means a lack of fairness between different groups of people living in society. Through this definition we are able to identify three main categories, in which social inequalities are divided, this occurs through gender, class and race which will be highlighted throughout my essay. The main focus of my essay would be based on the Marxist and Feminist views as they set the foundations to best describe and explain social inequalities. However, there are other sociologists whom also study this topic; therefore I will be examining their views very briefly.

Another form of social inequality that occurs in Britain is class inequalities; it is difficult to define this because in contemporary society class is fragmented. However, in order to fully understand class inequalities the concept must be operationalised. There are various sociologists such as Carl Marx who define class inequalities as 'a group of people who stand in a common relationship to the means of production'. Although class is often perceived as a 'dynamic, fluid, always changing', in Britain there is still a clear class structure in which class is divided. This class structure is often compared to a pyramid which consists of three levels; these are the upper class, middle class and working class, this arrangement is known as social

stratification, whereby each level of the formation has distinguishing features in terms of skills, status and income. The upper class consist of a small proportion of members of Britain's population; these groups of people tend to have ascribed status such as the royal family. However members of the upper class with achieved social status are professionals with high status jobs such as property owners and employers. The middle class are employed in profession, managerial and administrative jobs for example lawyers, these groups of people are often described to have an intermediate class situation. The working class consists of the highest proportions of people in Britain's population, the working class members are found at the bottom of the hierarchy, they have the low status jobs which include a complex division of labour. People from the working class groups tend to consist of unskilled workers who participate in manual labour. Although there are the three main layers in Britain's class structure is divided the idea of the underclass also needed to be highlighted. This concept is developed by Charles Murray and is often used to describe a segment of the population located at the very bottom of the class structure in which they are marginalised from the rest society. Members of the underclass have very low living standard, they are thought to be relatively deprived therefore explaining why they have the highest rates of infant mortality. The majority of members in the underclass are unemployed and relay on the welfare state, as a result of this dependency the idea of the 'nanny state' was developed. In correspondence to the idea of the nanny state these recent trends show that the top 10% earners get 27.3% of all earning whilst bottom 10% get 2.6%. This trend highlights that there is an unequal distribution of wealth as income is an important mechanism which measures a person's wealth, this therefore

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shows that social inequalities take place in contemporary Britain. Marxist sociologists use these figures to then develop their idea further. They argue that Britain is a capitalist society, whereby the bourgeoisie exploit the working class in order to benefit themselves. The process of industrialisation caused capitalism to develop further because Britain has moved from a manual intensive form of labour to a more capital intensive labour as a result of this development. British is often referred to this as industrial capitalism. There is also a clear relationship between class inequalities and education. For example, the educational system in Britain has been changed on several occasions in order to prevent inequalities between different social groups. i.e. the increase in government expenditure in education allows people from deprived backgrounds to complete higher education for free, therefore creating more employment opportunities for them. However, despite these changes, class inequalities still exist in the educational system, for example, the curriculum is said to have hidden agendas in which favour the ruling class. The reason for this is because the curriculum is made by the upper class, therefore favouring upper class pupils. For example, English exams require pupils to use the elaborated code, which is a form of speech which the upper class use, therefore giving them a competitive advantage as the working class use the restricted code. This view is also reinforced by sociologist Bernstein. Another common feature of the working class background is material deprivation; as a result of this, they are at a drawback in comparison to upper class pupils as they are unable to purchase resources such as extra textbooks to further increase their knowledge. There are also other areas such as housing and health that put the ruling class at an academic advantage.

Another area in which social inequalities arise is through racial segregation. Race was traditionally referred to as fixed biological differences; however over the years this definition has been criticised. As a result of this contemporary sociologists defined race as a social construct based on the observed physical and cultural characteristics of an individual. Race is a term closely linked to ethnicity as ethnic groups are defined by their sense of sharing distinct culture. Ethnic minorities are also said to experience inequalities, however due to the difficulty in separating the two terms I will explain how racial and ethnic inequalities should be best described and see if it still exists in contemporary Britain. There is a general idea that there is a racial division between black and white in Britain, it is argued that ethnic minorities have a minority status in society and are often perceived as second class citizens. However, in certain areas of Britain this type of social inequality has been prevented because of legislations such as equal opportunities acts which protect ethnic minorities from being discriminated against giving them the same opportunities as the dominating groups. Despite the implementation of this legislation, covert racism still takes place. The concept that corresponds with this is institutional racism, where racialised ethnic groups are systematically disadvantaged, it was recently highlighted in the media (BBC news) that institutional racism still occurs in contemporary Britain within the police workforce, the Macpherson report on the Stephen Lawrence case also shows institutional racism taking place. The amount of ethnic minorities that have an established status in the political party is disproportionately imbalanced in comparison to the majority therefore suggesting that overt race/ethnic inequalities occur in British society. Although social inequalities still exist in contemporary Britain other

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parts of the world such as America are slowly developing, this was shown when the current president Barack Obama was elected. In Britain there is a negative racial stigma attached to African Caribbean families, one of the main reasons is because they have the highest proportion of single parent families. New right sociologist Charles Murray holds a strong view which states that single parent families are the main causes of deviant behaviour and the breakdown of society. On the other hand some sociologists argue due to the rapid technological growth in Britain the media has exagerrated crimes that take place within the African- Caribbean community therefore leading to deviancy amplification as a result of this therefore policing within those areas have been on the increase meaning they are more prone to getting caught for their crimes in comparison other ethnic groups.

It is evidently clear that social inequality still exists in contemporary Britain; however different sociological perspectives explain social inequalities many ways and opposing views on its impact on society. For example functionalists have a positive view on social inequalities, they see it as an enviable part of society, this is because there are different social positions in society which require particular skills therefore, through these inequalities the correct role allocation are set therefore benefiting society in the long run. Whereas, both Marxist and feminist theories have a more negative approach on social inequities and the effect it has on society. They believe that it has led to an increase in exploitation of members in society therefore leading to social breakdowns. On the other hand post- modernists take a very different approach as they have a more contemporary view as they believe that the British society is changing as a result of this it is incorrect to say that social

inequalities means one thing or social inequalities still exists because it is a complex phenomenon. Therefore in order to fully understand social inequalities we must take the three categories in which social inequalities has been divided into and identify the correlations which they have with one another because social inequalities means different to different people.