

Social class is form of social stratification sociology essay



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\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

\n \t

1. [Introduction:](#) \n \t

2. [Body:](#) \n \t

3. [Conclusion:](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Introduction:

Social class is a form of social stratification which impacts on peoples' lives either negatively or positively. It refers to wealth, education level, occupation and prestige of a particular group of people. Factors which are inter-connected include the gender, sexuality, race and abilities (McDowell et al., 2013). It is important that social class be understood in the context from which it originates, primarily due to factors which occur inter-connectedly as mentioned above. There are many concepts relating to social stratification, but for the purpose of this essay I will focus mainly on Karl Marx's conflict theory, supplemented by Max Webber's functionalist ideology. Similarly factors such as education and employment will be central in this essay. I believe that the acquisition of knowledge and prestige via employment plays an important role in defining an individual's lifestyle and subsequently their life chances.

Body:

It must be noted that most of the research done by Karl Marx was based on westernized capitalist societies and it is primarily due to this fact that his concept of conflict theory exists in an economic realm or context (Lenski,

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2008). Marx demarcated class of people in terms of either lower, middle or upper class. In 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' Marx refers to lower-class societies as the proletariat and the upper-class as the bourgeoisie. The proletariat are a class of people who do manual labour which requires no specific skill, or simply put, they are the working (blue-collar) section of society. The bourgeoisie employ the working class society in order to increase their capital (Mohandesi, 2013). It is interesting to note that the position an individual finds himself or herself relative to the above category, impacts on their life chances and thus their social class. According to Max Weber (Davidson, 2009) social class and a person's life chances are interdependent. In this sense, the higher an individual is positioned in the social hierarchy (class) the better his or her life will be; the opposite occurs for those who are in a poorer position. Factors include becoming wealthier, increasing one's prestige, the acquisition of knowledge and the improvement of an individual's living conditions. These are known as social advancements or improvements.

According to a research study by Jean Anyon (1980) educational opportunities vastly improved as the socio-economic conditions of a particular social group increased. Anyon (1980) in 'Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work' found that schools were organised in a manner which reflects the social class of the families. Her results were derived from five schools which were broken down into working-class, middle-class, affluent professional and executive elite schools. Furthermore Anyon (1980) concludes that skills and knowledge which moves toward social power or prestige are obtainable to children from higher social groups but are

inaccessible to the working class which are offered a practical curriculum. This study shows that the curriculum grooms children to fill an employment role suited to their social class or better put, so that the more challenging professions are occupied by the most skilled and talented individuals. In this sense, lower class schools educated individuals in a manner which requires them to follow orders rather than use their own initiative and understanding of the work. The emphasis on individualism increases as the social class of the school increases. In my experience I concur with what Anyon has found because there exists numerous types of schools or institutions ranging from technical to managerial and professional. Examples are the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town College and The University of the Western Cape. Marx also suggests that institutions are used to oppress the subordinates of a society, this statement coupled with Anyon's research, displays a rather frightful image. Institutionally people are being transformed and socialized, from a young age, to follow the layers of strata found in society.

Education ultimately leads to employment which in turn culminates in the acquisition of wealth or material property. According to Max Weber, the ownership of physical assets, which is obtained by means of production, creates unique characteristics in terms of the individual's life chances (Shortell, 2012). Furthermore, Weber believes that the ownership of property is central to class differences and in this case there will always be a relationship between employee and employer or property renter and property owner. In our modernized capitalist society empowered by neoliberalism, emphasis is placed on the acquisition of wealth thereby

stratifying society into upper-class rich and the lower-class poor inhabitants. In this sense one can improve one's social class by increasing wealth and also the ownership of property-making this an open societal system (opposed to the system of slavery). Employment is therefore an opportunity to achieve wealth and increase status, however, inequalities occur whereby a bread baker (regardless of his skill) has less chances to improve his conditions than the owner of the bakery. Functionalists (Marxism) would argue that economic disparity benefits the majority of society and is also an essential element for the operation of society as a whole (Lenski, 2008).

Conclusion:

In my opinion, I see employment as the second phase in a three phase process in light of an individual's life chances. The first phase being education and the last being a successful business owner or CEO. As mentioned above, the level of education provided to individuals varies according to their socio-economic standing. This is the crux of my argument mainly due to the manner in which institutions shape society in preparation for their pre-planned future i. e. external forces of which they have no control over. A false consciousness thus exists in the open capitalist society whereby the proletariat is made to believe that they have equal opportunities to improve their life chances, when in actual fact their original social class serves as a key which only opens a limited number of doorways to success. Those who are endowed with a higher social class are granted unlimited opportunities to all elements of success, prestige, wealth, knowledge and ultimately advantages to better their life's chances.