

Social stratification and inequality sociology essay



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Social stratification is a sociological phenomenon in which people in the society are placed in different ranks with reference to same economic conditions. Normally, there are those of a high standard and others of a low standard. Social stratification borrows classification from earth sciences and thus it refers to its classes as strata. The difference in economic characteristics of persons leads to domination of power by one group to another. Social Stratification is characterized by four core principles namely; Social stratification has been said to be transferable from generation to another. Every generation adopts the classifications that had been set by a generation that proceeded.

Social stratification is a societal characteristic and not an individual view. The society forms a uniform way of grading persons ' which is not a sole person's objective'.

Social stratification is said to be universal and also variable. Though this statement seems contradictory, it means that classification is uniform in a certain society but will vary when compared with other societies.

Lastly, social stratification is not all about equality of persons, but also the beliefs that they hold. This means that social classes in the society are also based on common beliefs.

The classification of the society into various ranks brings about inequality. In the western communities, social stratification adopts three key; the upper, middle and lower class. It is due to these classes that inequality is developed. Those of upper class view themselves as superior and having

more prestige compared to their counterparts in lower ranks. Therefore, sharing of common resources in the society is based on the stratification ranks. Inequality is a social evil that emanates from social stratification (Bottero 3-8).

Origins of the Social Stratification Theory

The above theory is said to have emanated from the Judaeo-Christian Bible ' which presents' the social idea of the Greeks. Though the idea was not extremely straightforward at the beginning, it has gone through various transformations to the present day where it presents itself clearly.

The Sociological View of Social Stratification and Inequality

Various sociologists have had different views and interpretations on social stratification. For instance, Talcott Parsons who was an American sociologist emphasized that stability of social stratus is partly influenced by universal values. On a different note, Marxism identifies unequal distribution of resources and limited mobility to be factors of stratified societies.

However, numerous sociologists have had a uniform view with reference to the fact that the wealthy ' in the society' control the political power. In such a case, the poor ought to submit to orders from the rich. Several sociologists had diverse views on the origin and form of the social stratification theory. Below are some of these sociologists and various discussions regarding each one of them.

Karl Marx

In his theory of Marxism, Karl asserted that social stratification in the society is based on the way people are related to the factors of production. In such, there exist two different categories of persons; those that own the factors of production and those who labor for the owner of the factors of production. The classification by Karl Marx seems to be inadequate especially in the current view of economics. This is because there exist various aspects of the present economy that have been left unsolved by the Marxism theory. For instance; it does not provide accurate categorization as to productive, occupational and economic aspects of society.

Modern scholars of economics have said that the issue of social stratifications requires in depth classifications other than the generalized one provided for by the Marxism theory. In fact, theories behind social stratification need to draw a clear cut between the economic aspects of skilled and unskilled labor, owning and managing a business and also between business and professional occupational roles.

Secondly, the Marxism theory appears to be so generalized to the extent that it overlooks various vital social-structural phenomena that are of a great influence in the society. These include ethnic affiliations, kinship and lineage affiliations. Modern sociologists have ‘however’ not ignored these crucial aspects the way Marx did. Thirdly, the theory of Marx on social stratification seems to be so limited in defining the role of cultural factors in social classification. Cultural factors include legal practices, religious norms and scientific ideas among others. It is crucial to note that science has played a key role in maintaining social classes. In summary, Marx defined the

relationship between people and property as the key aspect behind social stratification (Jackson chapter 2).

Max Weber

Weber was thrilled by the propositions of his predecessor, Marx, and hence he thought of making corrections to Marx's theory. Weber designed a model based on status, class and a more explicit and systematic differentiation with reference to social stratification. Unlike Marx who identified property to be the sole determining factor in social stratification, Weber identified status and class as additional factors. Weber built an interconnected model that would define the relationship between these three factors. Any one of factors can affect the other two, and in any case any of these factors can be replaced with another. In his model, Weber also did not cover several key influencing factors like education, ethnic and kinship factors.

Below are the definitions that Weber gave to his three factors of influence;

He defined class as an individual's economic position in the society with reference to birth and their personal achievement. Secondly, he defined status as the position occupied by an individual in the society as a result of their social honor, popularity and prestige. Weber also defined power as the ability of an individual to progress despite various factors offering resistance in the society (Rossides, 186).

Wright Mills

Wright sought to advance Weber's thoughts on social stratification with no discrimination whatsoever. Similar to Weber, he identified power to be

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economic oriented but 'in addition to be influenced by' political and military domains. Through his famous book titled 'The Power Elite', Mills brings out a clear connection between political power and social status in the society. He asserted that the very power embodied persons occupy a certain class in the society. In order to keep themselves relevant in the society, the power elite tend to develop close ties in ideas, work and marital issues. To him, the power elite are clearly defined in education institutions whereby the persons of the high status group attend prominent schools thus preparing them for high class tertiary schools.

Conceptual Model to Social Stratification

A conceptual model for the current nature of social stratification ought to be multidimensional. It should have considerable measurement techniques and be flexible to accommodate various ideological biases. There appears to be two factors that have led to the resistance of such a conceptual model. These are ideological and methodological oriented. Looking at ideological issues, we find sociologists who still hold on to the traditional ways of classifying people. They want to maintain definitions that are straightforward, clear and self explanatory. However, straightforward definitions have proved to be incompetent in the current nature of society that presents changing and complex situations.

With reference to methodology aspects, scientists have had fear of exploring a multidimensional concept because they fear the complex resources and methods that could be involved. The more differentiated a model is the more involving it will be in terms of equipments needed to analyze and the

processes that will be involved. Researchers have committed themselves in exploring models that are multidimensional ' however' significant success has not been realized. Studies by the Hindu caste society show that a multidimensional model is necessary.

Various dimensions of stratification are closely related to one another, but this does not mean that they are not exclusively autonomous. For instance, such dimensions as power, prestige, income and education are in a way related to one another. However, in some cases, it can be noted that power is independent of the other factors. In fact, in certain circumstances, power may be attained irrespective of occupational prestige. Again, a certain level of education grounds may not be strong enough if not accompanied by money. The key role of a multidimensional model is to address issues of interdependence and independence of social stratification factors.

Key Dimensions of Social Stratification

Power

As defined earlier in this paper and with reference to Karl Marx, power refers to the ability to pursue goals despite resisting factors. Power will be addressed with reference to size and various natures of societies. The degree of division of labor in the society is related to the way typical social classes will be formed. Power exists in two diverse forms; legitimate and illegitimate and hence there cannot be established a direct relation between power and social stratification.

Occupational Prestige

The various productive roles in the society are accorded different level of prestige. It has been evident that though societies may be different, there will always exist a similarity in the way they accord prestige to various occupations. For instance; some professions like law, medicine and pilot, are given a high level of prestige because they are associated with good amounts of money. The variability of the way occupations are valued is dependent on the way the society values those occupations. Therefore, it is vital to note that prestige accorded to various occupations will differ with reference to the values of the societal setting.

Income/Wealth

Wealth plays an extremely significant role in social stratification. Whether earned or inherited, wealth will impact the class that a person will occupy in the society. Various profession and business roles in the society offer diverse opportunities in accumulating wealth. Sometimes, the so high ranked roles have proven to accumulate low wealth when compared to low prestige roles. Looking at the example of a professional doctor who uses intellect and professionalism to accumulate his wealth yet he may not gather a lot like a bandit. The latter can accumulate in one night, money equal to that a professional doctor earns in an entire month. ' When money is used as the determining factor in social stratification,' business and professional roles lack relevance.

Social stratification on the basis of income influences to a significant extent other dimensions of societal classification. For instance; the level of education gained by a person may be determined by the relative amount of

income they have. Disposable income has also not been left out in studying how it influences social stratification.

Family and Ethnicity

The status of kinship groups and family lineage plays a vital role in determining the social classes in the society. Not once and not twice have persons being seen as wealthy and hence prestigious because their fore fathers were wealthy. The role played by a family in the society in terms of monetary contribution and influence holds a significant support as to why it holds a certain class in the society. The class occupied by a certain family in the society determines the social class it occupies and hence the treatment they will be accorded by the entire society. Family and ethnic position do not 'however' hold a one to one relationship in far as social stratification is concerned.

Local Community Status

Individuals and families do not live in isolations or islands 'in the society'. Their day to day activities are influenced by norms set by the nature of the community. Families and individuals by extension are given placed under certain social classes due to the way the society operates. The position of the local community in the society is determined by the nature of influence it has on the entire community (Andersen 216-220).

Modern Stratification Systems

In the contemporary world, there exists three key systems of stratification which are; slavery, the caste system and the class system. Despite various

laws disregarding slavery, many people in the world today live in conditions that can be classified as slavery.

Slavery

Slavery is still eminent in nations such as Ghana, Benin and Mauritania among others. Also, Asia has been mentioned numerously for prevalent cases in sex slavery.

Caste System

The above is a social system that is based on characteristics and traits those persons possess by virtue of their birth. These traits include body type, race, gender and age among others. The caste system is said to be a rigid one. This means that it assigns various unchangeable castes to persons which cannot be varied. However, persons have in various situations tried to change their ascribed statuses by lying about their age, changing nationality or performing plastic surgery, but not at all times do these attempts yield positive results.

Class System

Class system classifies individuals in reference to statuses earned and not those individuals were born with. Persons born in a certain social class can choose their careers, education level and spouses. The class system is characterized by social mobility nature. Social mobility refers to the act of moving either up or down the various social strata (Levine)

Conclusion

Every society has various classes that are assumed by members of the society based on various factors. Common held belief in the society model the way a society sets up these classes. Most common factors that determine classification are education and knowledge, power, prestige, and religion among other factors. Sociologists have formed various theories to address the determining factors of social stratification though no one theory seems to have provided comprehensive coverage. Every society exhibits unique factors and believes, but there exists a close relationship between the way these diverse factors influence social stratification.