

Chapter 10: Social Class in the United States

CHAPTER SUMMARY

“There are the poor and the rich, and then there are you and I, neither poor nor rich.” This summarizes the level of consciousness most Americans have regarding social class. The fact is that sociologists have no clear-cut, agreed-upon definition of social class. However, most sociologists adopt Max Weber’s components of social class, defining it as a large group of people who rank close to one another in terms of wealth, power, and prestige.

Wealth and income are not synonymous. It is possible to have great wealth and little income or little wealth but a high income. Wealth and income are unevenly distributed in the United States with a large and growing gap separating the richest Americans from the poorest. The top 20 percent of the population receives almost half of all the income in the United States while the bottom 20 percent receives only slightly more than 4 percent of the nation’s income. An elite group of Americans, made up of the nation’s wealthiest people, wield extraordinary economic, social, and political power in the United States. Conversely, the poorest Americans face tremendous hardships because they lack the means to afford even the most basic necessities of life.

Jobs that pay more, require more education, entail more abstract thought, and offer greater autonomy are ranked higher than jobs that require less education, are lower paying, involve more physical labor, and are closely supervised. A chart of occupational prestige shows that physicians, college professors, and lawyers hold the most prestigious positions and bill collectors, factory workers, and gas station attendants are among the least prestigious positions.

Sociologists use the term, “status inconsistency,” to refer to people who rank higher on some dimensions of social class and lower on others. A study by Ray Gold showed that unionized apartment house janitors made more money than many of the tenants for whom they cleaned and carried out their garbage.

Although both Karl Marx and Max Weber proposed models of social class, both of these models have been modified to be more representative of the class structure as it now exists. Modifying Karl Marx’s model of social class, sociologist Erik Wright identified four classes: capitalists, petty bourgeoisie, managers, and workers. Sociologists Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl developed a social class model, which consists of six classes: the capitalist class, the upper middle class, the lower middle class, the working class, the working poor, and the underclass.

Among other things, social class affects and/or influences people’s health, family life, education, religion, and politics. The lower one’s social class, the more likely that individual will die before the expected age. People from the lower classes are also more likely to smoke, eat more fat, use drugs and alcohol excessively, become involved with violent crime, exercise less, and practice unsafe sexual behavior leading to higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases, higher rates of out-of-wedlock child births, higher infidelity rates, and higher divorce rates. Mental illness is also more closely associated with the lower class population.

Unlike other systems of stratification, class is the most fluid, offering opportunities and providing social mobility—both vertically and horizontally along the social class ladder. Sociologists have identified three basic types of social mobility: intergenerational mobility, structural mobility, and exchange mobility. The degree of mobility is significantly affected by many things including: access to technology, culture, race–ethnicity, gender, age, and, especially, by marital status and where people live.

To measure the degree of poverty a family faces, the government established a standard based on family size and income. The model is based on the factor of three times what the average family of a specific size would spend on food. Families making less than the calculated amount are considered to be below the poverty line and entitled to benefits specifically available to the poor.

The poor are not evenly distributed throughout the United States. There is a clustering of poverty in the South, among African Americans and Latinos, among individuals with less education, and among women. Children are the most adversely affected by poverty and are more likely than adults to live in poverty. The number of children living in poverty is disproportionately high among single-parent families.

The reason people are poor falls between two competing explanations: one stresses features of society that limit some people's access to opportunities, the other focuses on people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. In an effort to encourage people in poverty to be more self-sufficient, the welfare system was restructured in 1996, requiring states to place a lifetime cap on welfare assistance and requiring welfare recipients to look for and take available jobs.

Portraying America as a land of limitless economic possibilities, the Horatio Alger myth equates hard work with upward social mobility. It suggests that all people who fail to achieve success in America fail because of their own shortcomings.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. What Is Social Class?

- A. Sociologists do not have a clear-cut definition of social class.
- B. Most agree with Weber that social class can be defined as a large group of people who rank close to each other in wealth, power, and prestige.
- C. Wealth consists of property (what we own) and income (money we receive). Wealth and income are not always the same; a person may own much property yet have little income, or vice versa. Usually, however, wealth and income go together.
 1. Ownership of property (real estate, stocks and bonds, and so on) is not distributed evenly: 10 percent of the U.S. population owns 70 percent of the wealth, and the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans own one third of all of the U.S. assets.
 2. Income is also distributed disproportionately: the top 20 percent of U.S. residents acquire 47 percent of the income; the bottom 20 percent receives 4.2 percent. Each one-fifth of the U.S. population receives approximately the same proportion of national income today as it did in 1935; those changes that have occurred reflect growing inequality.
 3. Apart from the very rich, the most affluent group in U.S. society is the executive officers of the largest corporations. Their median income (including salaries, bonuses, and stock options) is \$3 million a year.
- D. Power is the ability to carry out your will despite resistance.
- E. Mills coined the term the "power elite," to refer to those who are the big decision makers in U.S. society. This group shares the same ideologies and values, belong to the same clubs, and reinforce each other's world view.
- F. Domhoff believes that no major decision in the U.S. government is made without their approval.
- G. Prestige is the respect or regard people give to various occupations and accomplishments.
 1. Occupations are the primary source of prestige, although some people gain prestige through inventions, feats, or doing good to others. Occupations with the highest prestige pay more, require more education, entail more abstract thought, and offer greater autonomy.
 2. For prestige to be valuable, people must acknowledge it. The elite traditionally have made rules to emphasize their higher status.
 3. Status symbols, which vary according to social class, are ways of displaying prestige. In the United States, they include designer label clothing, expensive cars, prestigious addresses, and attending particular schools.
- H. Status inconsistency is the term used to describe the situation of people who have a mixture of high and low rankings in the three components of social class (wealth, power, and prestige).
 1. Most people are status consistent; they rank at the same level in all three components. People who are status inconsistent want others to act toward them on the basis of their highest status, but others tend to judge them on the basis of their lowest status.
 2. Sociologist Gerhard Lenski determined that people suffering the frustrations of status inconsistency are more likely to be radical and approve political action aimed against higher status groups.
 3. Status inconsistency is common for lottery winners whose wealth is vastly greater than either their education or occupational status.-

II. Sociological Models of Social Class

- A. How many classes exist in industrial society is a matter of debate, but there are two main models, one that builds on Marx and the other on Weber.
- B. Sociologist Erik Wright realized that not everyone falls into Marx's two broad classes (capitalists and workers, which were based on a person's relationship to the means of production). For instance, although executives, managers, and supervisors would fall into Marx's category of workers, they act more like capitalists.

1. Wright resolved this problem by regarding some people as simultaneously members of more than one class, which he called contradictory class locations.
 2. Wright identified four classes: capitalists (owners of large enterprises); petty bourgeoisie (owners of small businesses); managers (employees who have authority over others); and workers.
- C. Using the model originally developed by Weber, sociologists Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl created a model to describe class structure in the United States and other capitalist countries.
1. The capitalist class (1 percent of the population) is composed of investors, heirs, and a few executives; it is divided into “old” money and “new” money. The children of “new” money move into the old money class by attending the right schools and marrying “old” money.
 2. The upper-middle class (15 percent of the population) is composed of professionals and upper managers, almost all of whom have attended college or university and frequently have postgraduate degrees. This class is the one most shaped by education.
 3. The lower-middle class (34 percent of the population) is composed of lower managers, craftspeople and foremen. They have at least a high-school education.
 4. The working class (30 percent of the population) is composed of factory workers and low-paid white collar workers. Most have high-school educations.
 5. The working poor (16 percent of the population) is composed of relatively unskilled blue-collar and white-collar workers, and those with temporary and seasonal jobs. If they graduated from high school, they probably did not do well in school.
 6. The underclass (4 percent of the population) is concentrated in the inner cities and has little connection with the job market. Welfare is their main support.
 7. The homeless are so far down the class structure that their position must be considered even lower than the underclass. They are the “fallout” of industrialization, especially the postindustrial developments that have led to a decline in the demand for unskilled labor.
- D. The automobile industry illustrates the social class ladder as described by Gilbert and Kahl.
1. The Ford family and Ford executives represent both the upper and lower levels of the capitalist class.
 2. Owners of Ford dealerships are members of the upper middle class, while a salesperson employed there is drawn from the lower middle class.
 3. Mechanics who repair Ford automobiles are members of the working class. The working poor are presented by the “detail” workers.
 4. If the agency employs day laborers to mow the lawn or clean the lot, they would come from the underclass.

III. Consequences of Social Class

- A. The lower a person’s social class, the more likely that person is to die at an earlier age than people in higher classes; this is true at all ages. Social class shapes our lifestyles, which affects our health. Also, since medical care is expensive, the higher classes receive better medical care, despite government aid to the poor; the result is a two-tiered system of medical care. Additionally, life is better for those in higher social classes. They have fewer problems and more resources to deal with the ones that they have.
- B. Mental health is worse for the lower classes because of stresses associated with their class position. Those higher in the class system are better able to afford vacations, psychiatrists, and counselors; their class position gives them greater control over their lives which is a key to good mental health.
- C. Social class also plays a role in family life.
 1. Children of the capitalist class are under great pressure to select the right mate in order to assure the continuity of the family line. Parents in this social class play a large role in mate selection.
 2. Marriages are more likely to fail in the lower social classes given the challenges of inadequate income; the children of the poor are therefore more likely to live in single-parent households.
 3. Child rearing varies by class, with each class raising its children with attitudes and behaviors suited to the kinds of occupations they will eventually hold. Lower class families teach children to defer to authority, as is required in their jobs. Higher class families encourage freedom, creativity, and self-expression, as is found in their jobs.
- D. Education levels increase as one moves up the social class ladder. The change occurs not only in terms of the amount of education obtained, but also in terms of the type of education, with the capitalist class bypassing public schools in favor of exclusive private schools, where its children are trained to take a commanding role in society.
- E. All aspects of religious orientation follow class lines. Social classes tend to cluster around different denominations. Lower classes are attracted to spontaneous worship services and louder music such as that

found with Baptists, while higher classes prefer more restrained worship services such as those found in the Methodist religion.

- F. Political views and involvement are influenced by social class.
 - 1. The rich and the poor take divergent political paths, with people in lower social classes more likely to vote Democrat, while those in higher classes vote Republican; the parties are seen as promoting different class interests.
 - 2. People in the working class are more likely to be liberal on economic issues (more government spending) and more conservative on social issues (opposition to abortion).
 - 3. Political participation is not equal: the higher classes are more likely to vote and get involved in politics than those in lower social classes.
- G. The criminal justice system is not blind to class either.
 - 1. The white-collar crimes of the more privileged classes are more likely to be dealt with outside of the criminal justice system, while the street crimes of the lower classes are dealt with by the police and courts.
 - 2. Members of lower classes are more likely to be arrested, are more likely to be on probation, parole, or in jail, and more crimes occur in lower class neighborhoods.
- H. The new technology does not affect social classes in the same way.
 - 1. The higher one is on the social class ladder, the more likely they are to benefit from technology. For the capitalist class, the new technology is a means to extensive, worldwide profits.
 - 2. The upper-middle class also benefits because the new technology enables them to achieve in their chosen professions, and their education prepares them to take a leading role in managing in the new global system.
 - 3. Below these top two classes, technology creates much more uncertainty, which increases as you move down the ladder. Those at the bottom have few technological skills and face the real possibility of losing their jobs because of technological change.

IV. Social Mobility

- A. There are three basic types of social mobility: intergenerational, structural, and exchange.
 - 1. Intergenerational mobility is the change that family members make in their social class from one generation to the next. As a result of individual effort, a person can rise from one level to another; in the event of individual failure, the reverse can be true.
 - 2. Structural mobility involves social changes that affect large numbers of people. By way of example, when computers were invented, many opportunities opened up for people to switch from blue-collar to white-collar work. While individual effort played a role, the major reason for the change in position was structural.
 - 3. Exchange mobility is movement of people up and down the social class system, where, on balance, the system remains the same. The term refers to general, overall movement of large numbers of people that leaves the class system basically untouched.
- B. Women have been largely ignored in studies of occupational mobility. Studies of social mobility among men indicate that about one half of sons have moved beyond their fathers; about one third have stayed at the same level; and about one sixth have fallen down the ladder.
 - 1. As structural changes in the U.S. economy have created opportunities for women to move up the social class ladder, studies of their mobility patterns have appeared.
 - 2. One study indicated that women who did move up were encouraged by their parents to postpone marriage and get an education.
- C. Statistics can be used either positively or negatively to explain social mobility depending on the purpose.
 - 1. It appears that about one-third of the poorest 10 percent and one-third of the richest 10 percent of children end up in the same social class as their parents.
- D. The costs of social mobility include risking the loss of one's roots.
 - 1. A study of British women who had achieved middle class status through education or marriage found that these women were caught between two worlds—the one they were brought up in and their current one.
 - 2. An American study found that among working class families in which the adult children had achieved upward social mobility because of parental sacrifices that enabled them to get an education, the parent-adult child relationship was marked by estrangement, lack of communication, and bitterness.

V. Poverty

- A. The U.S. government classifies the poverty line as being families whose incomes are less than three times a low-cost food budget.
1. This official measure is grossly inadequate since it inflates the amount of money that is spent on food. It is also the same across the country, even though the cost of living is higher in some states than others.
 2. Any modification of this measure instantly adds or subtracts millions of people, and thus has significant consequences.
- B. Certain social groups are disproportionately represented among the poor population.
1. The poor tend to be clustered in the south, a pattern that has existed for about 100 years. The poverty rate for the rural poor is higher than the national average. While they show the same racial and ethnic characteristics as the nation as a whole, they are less likely to be on welfare or to be single parents, are less skilled and educated, and find that only lower-paying jobs are available to them.
 2. Race is a major factor. Racial minorities are much more likely to be poor: 10 percent of whites and 26.2 percent of Latinos and 24 percent of African Americans live in poverty.
 3. The chances of being poor decrease as the amount of education increases.
 4. The gender of the person who heads a family is another major predictor of whether or not a family is poor. Most poor families are headed by women. The major causes of this phenomenon, called the feminization of poverty, are divorce, births to unwed mothers, and the lower wages paid to women.
 5. Although the percentage of poor people over age 65 is practically the same as their overall percentage, elderly Hispanic Americans and African Americans are almost three times more likely to be poor than elderly white Americans.
 6. The elderly are less likely than the general population to be poor.
- C. Children are more likely to live in poverty than are adults or the elderly. This holds true regardless of race, but poverty is much greater among minority children.
- D. In the 1960s, it was suggested that the poor get trapped in a “culture of poverty” as a result of having values and behaviors that make them “fundamentally different” from other U.S. residents.
1. National statistics indicate that most poverty is short, lasting one or less years. Only 12 percent of the poor live in poverty for five or more years.
 2. Since the number of people who live in poverty remains fairly constant, this means that as many people move into poverty as move out of it.
- E. In trying to explain poverty, the choice is between focusing on individual explanations or on social structural explanations.
1. Sociologists look to such factors as inequalities in education; access to learning job skills; racial, ethnic, age, and gender discrimination; and large-scale economic change to explain the patterns of poverty in society.
 2. The other explanation is individualistic, focusing on the characteristics of individuals that are assumed to contribute to their poverty.
- F. In 1996, federal welfare reform was enacted. There are caps on welfare assistance and recipients are required to look for work.
1. In the aftermath of this, welfare rolls dropped. However, this does not mean that people are working; they may not be on welfare because they have reached their limit.
 2. Conflict theorists argue that the purpose of the welfare system is to maintain an army of reserve workers. In times of economic expansion, welfare requirements are tightened, forcing workers into the job market. When recession hits, welfare rules are relaxed.
 3. Two out of five who left welfare also moved out of poverty. Three out of five are still in poverty or back on welfare. A third who were forced off welfare have no jobs.
- G. Because the poor don’t see the future as different from the past, they find it difficult to defer gratification—that is, give up things now for the sake of greater gains in the future. Sociologists argue that the behaviors of the poor are not the cause of their poverty but rather a result of their poverty.
- H. Because of real-life examples of people from humble origins who climbed far up the social ladder, most U.S. residents (including minorities and the working poor) believe that they have a chance of getting ahead.
1. The Horatio Alger myth obviously is a statistical impossibility. Despite this, functionalists would stress that this belief is functional for society because it encourages people to compete for higher positions, while placing the blame for failure squarely on the individual.
 2. As Marx and Weber both noted, social class affects our ideas of life and our proper place in society. At the same time, the dominant ideology often blinds us to these effects in our own lives.

Key Terms

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

anomie: Durkheim's term for a condition of society in which people become detached from the norms that usually guide their behavior (275)

contradictory class location: Erik Wright's term for a position in the class structure that generates contradictory interests (276)

culture of poverty: the assumption that the values and behaviors of the poor make them fundamentally different from other people, that these factors are largely responsible for their poverty, and that parents perpetuate poverty across generations by passing these characteristics on to their children (292)

deferred gratification: forgoing something in the present in the hope of achieving greater gains in the future (294)

downward social mobility: movement down the social class ladder (284)

exchange mobility: about the same numbers of people moving up and down the social class ladder such that, on balance, the social class system shows little change (285)

feminization of poverty: a trend in U.S. poverty whereby most poor families are headed by women (290)

Horatio Alger myth: the belief that due to limitless possibilities anyone can get ahead if he or she tries hard enough (295)

income: money received, usually from a job, business, or assets (268)

intergenerational mobility: the change that family members make in social class from one generation to the next (284)

poverty line: the official measure of poverty; calculated to include those whose incomes are less than three times a low-cost food budget (286)

power: the ability to carry out your will, even over the resistance of others (271)

power elite: C. Wright Mills' term for the top people in U.S. corporations, military, and politics who make the nation's major decisions (271)

prestige: respect or regard (272)

property: material possessions (268)

social class: according to Weber, a large group of people who rank close to one another in wealth, power, and prestige; according to Marx, one of two groups: capitalists who own the means of production and workers who sell their labor (268)

status: the position that someone occupies in society or a social group (274)

status consistency: ranking high or low on all three dimensions of social class (274)

status inconsistency: ranking high on some dimensions of social class and low on others; also known as *status discrepancy* (274)

structural mobility: movement up or down the social class ladder that is due to changes in the structure of society, not to individual efforts (285)

underclass: a small group of people for whom poverty persists year after year and across generations (279)

upward social mobility: movement up the social class ladder (284)

wealth: the total value of everything someone owns, minus the debts (268)

Key People

Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

William Domhoff: Drawing upon the work of C. Wright Mills, Domhoff states that the power elite is so powerful that no major decisions in the U.S. government is made without its approval. (271)

Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl: These sociologists developed a more contemporary stratification model based on Max Weber's work. (278)

Ray Gold: In research on status inconsistency, Gold studied tenant reactions to janitors who earned more than they did. He found that the tenants acted "snooty" to the janitors, and the janitors took pleasure in knowing the intimate details of the tenants' lives. (274)

Daniel Hellinger and Dennis Judd: These sociologists identified the average citizen's belief that he/she exercises political power through the voting process as the "democratic façade" that conceals the real source of power in the United States. (271)

Elizabeth Higgenbotham and Lynn Weber: These sociologists studied the mobility patterns for women. They found that those women who experienced upward mobility were most likely to have strong parental support to defer marriage and get an education. (285)

Melvin Kohn: Kohn studied social class differences in child-rearing patterns. (282)

Steph Lawler: This sociologist interviewed British women who had achieved upward mobility through education or marriage. (286)

Elliot Liebow: Back in 1967, this sociologist studied black street-corner men. He noted that their circumstances made it difficult for them to save for the future, since whatever funds they had were needed to survive in the present. (294)

Gerhard Lenski: Lenski noted that everyone wants to maximize their status, but that others often judge an individual on the basis of his lowest status despite the individual's efforts to be judged on the basis of his highest status. (274)

Karl Marx: Marx believed that there were only two social classes- the capitalists and the workers. Membership is based on a person's relationship to the means of production. (274)

C. Wright Mills: Mills used the term "power elite" to describe the top decision-makers in the nation. (271)

Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb: Sennett and Cobb studied the impact that a child's upward mobility had on his relationship with his parents. They found that the parents' sacrifices in order to afford the educational costs for their children were rarely appreciated; with increased education the child grew distant from the parents' world. (268)

Max Weber: Weber developed the definition of social class that is used by most sociologists. He noted that social class is made up of a large group of people who rank close to one another in terms of wealth, power, and prestige. (268,276)

Erik Wright: Wright proposed an updated version of Marx's theory of stratification. (276)