

UNIT 6

Social Stratification (What it is and its Systems)

Overview

Having understood what theories of social, and to some extent, economic change, have been put forward to explain Caribbean society, we will now discuss Social Stratification. When we speak of social stratification, we are speaking about a concept that as a society we have constructed through our social and cultural practice. This is what is described as a social construct. Social stratification is a social construct that hierarchically ranks people according to criteria such as race, ethnicity and occupation, to name a few. It is a construction that embodies the inequalities between groups and it exists in every society, even in those that claim to be egalitarian. In this unit we will define social stratification, examine theories of social stratification and probe the explanations of social stratification put forward by authors in the Caribbean.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Discuss, using sociological perspectives, the role of social stratification.
2. Apply sociological perspectives to a critical review of examples of social stratification in the Caribbean.
3. Analyse the impact of social stratification systems on Caribbean societies.
4. Critically review, using observations and scholarly references, the ways in which social stratification is perpetuated in Caribbean society.

This Unit is divided into two Sessions as follows:

Session 6.1: What is Social Stratification (and its systems)

Session 6.2: Social Stratification and in the Caribbean



Readings & Resources

Required Readings

Barrow, C., & Reddock, R. (2001). *Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings*. Section 2, Chapter 12-17 Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Available via UWilinC.

Mustapha, N. (2013). *Sociology for Caribbean Students* (2nd edition). Module 3, pp. 211-241. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Available via UWilinC.

OpenStax. (2016). *Introduction to Sociology 2e*. OpenStax CNX. May 18, 2016.

Sections 9.1-9. Available at

http://cnx.org/contents/AgQDEnLI@6.20:bi_khgk9@4/Introduction-to-Social-Stratif

You are also advised to locate and read: Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

Session 6.1

Defining Social Stratification

Introduction

Social stratification is an institutionalized social construction which ranks individuals in society according to some level of importance. This level of importance is based on a value system of the society and, in some instances for example, where race and ethnicity are concerned, carries with it valued and perceived attitudes. Institutions such as religion and education contribute to entrenchment of social stratification. As you will read later when you probe theories of social stratification, these social institutions support stratification as critical to the functioning of society.

Origins of Social Stratification

Social stratification is not new. It is a form of social inequality that has been around from the earliest of societies. For example, the view has been presented that, in what we describe as hunter gatherer society, status and prestige was conferred through persons achieving expectations. Men for example, were understood as being superior hunters. The achievement of such an expectation established the hunter as having high rank amongst other males. That ranking also attracted authority, power and influence. Women were not hunters in that society and their value was seen to come from their gathering and reproductive duties.

The hunter gatherer society is a simple discussion of social stratification. As societies became more complex based on presence of different groups and value systems, the identification of clear-cut ranking of members of society became more difficult. For example, in modern western society, one may regard the occupational status of a teacher as being low, relative to that of doctor, based on the importance and value the society places on that role in society and the level of remuneration. Let us complicate things a bit and add some layers to the same teacher, same doctor scenario. If higher earnings are what is valued more heavily for class determination, a teacher who earns from multiple jobs within this role may consider him/herself as of a higher class than the accepted working class ascribed to their occupational status. The teacher's level of earnings, equivalent to that of a doctor allows him/her to participate in the acquisition of upper class status symbols such as residence, vehicle type to name a few. This is particularistic and there has been work that suggests income may not enough to make people distinct from each other. Markers such as values, specifically distinctions such as working class values compared to values of the upper echelons of society, make it difficult for groups of persons who through education move up to higher classes of society gain acceptance by the original members of that class. Having mentioned the concept of class, presents the opportunity for you to now

move into the first learning activity.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 6.1

Checking and Applying Basic Concepts

As in the previous unit there are basic concepts you will have to provide short notes for. Read [Mustapha \(2013\) Chapter 8, pp. 213-225](#) ending with the section on Class System. Now read [Openstax'Introduction to Sociology, Sections 9.1 and 9.2](#). Together they provide useful perspectives on these groupings in society with examples and discussion including the Caribbean, Europe, the USA, India etc.

Using the information provided in the reading resources and sociological definitions from scholarly references you have researched and cited appropriately, do the following:

Provide examples from your own society of the terms listed below and post them in the designated forum. You must respond to the posts of at least two of your peers.

- | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|
| 1. Class | 5. Closed Social Mobility |
| 2. Caste | 6. Open Social Mobility |
| 3. Estate | 7. Meritocracy |
| 4. Status | |

Were there any on the list for which you could find no example in your society? Can you offer an explanation for the absence?

Now that you have explored these basic concepts and found examples of these in your own societies let us now turn our attention to the explanations provided for social stratification.

Theories of Social Stratification

There are three views of social stratification that we should discuss in this session. These include the functionalist view, the Weberian perspective and the Marxian perspectives.

The Functionalist Perspective

This perspective explains social stratification as emanating from the subscription by members of society to a value consensus, simply described here as common expectations and values. Members of society who closely reflect these shared expectations and values are held in high esteem, an esteem which produces prestige. Different societies have different value systems but increasingly in this globalized environment and its association with democratic ideals, the convergence across value systems is observable. Have you ever thought about these different levels and values attributed to groups in this way? Do you agree? One of the contributors to the understanding of social stratification in the Functional school of thought is Talcott Parsons. Parsons' views on this form of social inequality is based on the notion that all societies have value systems and ranking of persons is also justifiable because it is a representation of achievement of shared values.

The matter of cultural pluralism is key to M.G. Smith's thesis. Bolland (1998) makes the important point that the cultural emphasis that Smith used as a lens to explain Caribbean societies was justified by the absence of a consensus of cultural values between the Africans and Europeans. Caribbean societies, then, and now, are defined by the diversity of the cultures which seem to mix but not combine.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 6.2

Critiquing the Functionalist Perspective and its Application to the Caribbean

Read [Mustapha \(2013\) Chapter 8 pp 225-228](#) on the Functionalist Perspective.

In a paragraph of no more than 170 words evaluate the usefulness of the functionalist perspective on social stratification as an explanation of your own society's social stratification arrangements.

Share your post in the designated forum. Comment on the findings of at least two of your colleagues.

Having considered the Functionalist perspective and the ways in which it applies to your society we will now consider the Conflict perspective offered by Karl Marx and Max Weber on social stratification.

Please complete the learning activity below.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 6.3

Read and Discuss the Conflict Perspective on Social Stratification

It is very easy for us to understand what maybe the perspective of Marx on stratification. He would have examined stratification within the context of industrial society and pre-occupied his perspective with a concentration on two groups in society and their relation to the means of production.

The haves and have-nots or the bourgeoisie and the working class.

After reading [Mustapha \(2013\)](#) pp. 228-231 explain in your own words

1. The relationship between hierarchy and conflict as Marx explains this.
2. The extent to which Marx's proposed solution for easing the plight of the working class does not account for the other contributors to ranking of persons in society.

Share your thoughts in the designated forum and comment on the posts of two of your peers.

The Weberian Perspective

Weber believed that social stratification resulted mainly from struggles of over scarce resources and also power and prestige in society. People's belonging to a class was a reflection of their market situation. People who share similar class situation experienced the same amount of economic reward and life chances. Their market situation directly affected the chances of acquiring good housing and other valued desirables of society. Weber postulated that the major division in society was between those who owned the forces of production and those who did not. That does not mean, however, that he only saw two classes in society. Weber had a more complex view of the class breakdown in society. He identified four class groupings: the propertied upper class, the property-less white collar workers, the petty bourgeoisie, the manual working class.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 6.4

Read and Compare Explanations from Weber and Marx

Referring to what you have read in [Mustapha \(2013\)](#) on pp. 230-231 about Weber offer a comparison of the usefulness of Weber's view on stratification with that of Karl Marx.

Share your notes in the designated forum.

Comment on the notes provided by at least one other colleague.

You should pay careful attention to these explanations in respect of the ways in which they explain social stratification that you experience both in your personal life, as well as, what you read about in other places in the world and what you see in entertainment products like those offered on television.

Session 6.1 Summary

In this session we have looked at three theories of social stratification. While they are very classical in their approach, they have influenced modern perspectives on social stratification. Two of the theorists, Weber and Marx, debate the origin of social stratification in economic terms while the functionalist view argues the assumption that people have shared values and the achievement of these automatically assists with the ranking of individuals. So, we have two structural theories and a theory based on action and agency. What else can we highlight from the session? Let us look at some points that we need to revisit:

1. Social Stratification and social inequality are not the same thing. But social stratification is a form of social inequality. Social inequality just refers to socially created inequalities (Haralambos and Holborn 2013).
2. While there may be attempts to create an egalitarian society, such has become an ideal. Even in societies where income may not be a determinant of status and ranking, other factors such as the importance of someone's job can bring perceived prestige and power.
3. Social mobility is an important concept to social stratification. It is really the ability of persons to move upward or downward in a society, for example, from working class to middle class. In a competitive capitalist society, people can move downward based on occupational status because the value of their jobs may change based. Before the turn of the 21st century, computer programmers were prized positions but sixteen years later the importance of this role

compared to software and application developers is diminished.

4. Examples of closed systems of social mobility can be found with caste systems. In such social systems, people have an ascribed status from birth. The position people are ascribed to when they are born can have serious implications for their life chances. While it may be said that people are given equal starts due to the presence of equal opportunities to education, people come to these opportunities with different advantages. Meritocracy then is a questionable, debatable issue.

Session 6.2

Social Stratification in the Caribbean

Introduction

The previous session has exposed us to a definition of stratification, as well as, theories about this form of social inequality. In keeping with the general thought that most societies, especially western have characteristics of social inequality, we will now probe the reality of social stratification in the Caribbean. In this session we will learn about the peculiarities of stratification as evidenced by the shared past of Caribbean people and the region's pluralistic form. There are two learning activities in this session.

Stratification in the Caribbean

All of the themes identified in the historical European analysis are important to the Caribbean's own questioning of how social stratification contributes to the inequality that our ancestors faced and that people in contemporary society continue to face. Race hierarchies, for example, and the hegemonic ideals associated with being white and being able to buy into colonial influence, have affected social relations and chances of Caribbean people. Jamaica's experience with Rastafari and the repression of the movement could be cited as an example of this hegemonic ideal spilling over into pre and post independent periods of a Caribbean society. Let us be clear about something: social stratification is a form of social inequality and, like any form of inequality, operates a system of inclusion and exclusion which rewards those who are included and penalizes those who are excluded from dominant social groupings and the entitlements and benefits that accrue to these. There have been Caribbean writers probing social stratification in the Caribbean, some of whom you will be reading when you read Barrow & Reddock (2001). Let us now move to the first Learning Activity for this session.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 6.5

Read and Contemplate

Read [Mustapha \(2013\)](#) Chapter 9, pp 237-241 to learn about M.G Smith's view on Race Stratification and Lloyd Brathwaite's views on Social Stratification.

Pay special attention to the different points of entry into the issue that Smith and Brathwaite use.

1. Is there any greater usefulness in a view that focuses on cultural diversity and racial antagonism as opposed to one which focuses on ethnic identification and ethnic purity as the basis on which the social structure is established?
2. Does the fact that social stratification operates differently in other societies tell you anything about social stratification?
3. Have you noted that race, class and colour do not have universal meaning and application?
4. If race, class and colour mean different things to different people, does that knowledge in any way help us to disrupt some of the conflict caused by racism, classism etc.?



LEARNING ACTIVITY 6.6

Role Play

Part of your role as a Social Affairs Officer in the Division of Political and Social Affairs in the Caribbean Regional Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is monitoring the contestation between rights and experiences of Caribbean people. UNDP Caribbean has become aware of a possible grant opportunity that can help fund the capacity building of local community-based organizations to address human rights and its disconnect with experiences. Your supervising officer has appointed you the lead on the development of notes on historical social inequality experiences.

Utilizing one of the chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 or 17 in [Barrow & Reddock \(2001\)](#) do a draft submission of no more than **350 words** illustrating how the historical ranking of people in one Caribbean society and the reflexivity involved has affected their human development (literacy, income-earning and life expectancy for example) experiences. You will need to cite your authors appropriately in-text and in a bibliography.

This task is geared at making you think analytically about what you are reading. You must identify the chapter which you are using for the development of the notes. When you are done, submit in the designated forum.

Session 6.2 Summary

The session we just completed highlighted the following issues in respect Caribbean Social Stratification:

1. Perspectives on stratification in the Caribbean, as illustrated with the works of M.G. Smith and Brathwaite.
2. Despite Caribbean societies becoming more open and the ability of persons to move up or down the social mobility ladder, increasing barriers such as colour of skin have deprived groups of people from realizing economic gains and rewards.
3. The social construction of gender has also made the chances of overcoming social inequalities much more difficult for females. This perception has affected wages/salaries, occupational elevation/status for example. In the early Caribbean while race marginalized the freed blacks from accessing services and educational disciplines that would push up their social status women not only had to struggle with racial stratification but also ranking in society based on patriarchal system. Gender stereotyping based on the value of masculinity has continued in modern Caribbean society.

UNIT SUMMARY

We have learnt several facts on social stratification and also had the opportunity to probe the reliability of the Eurocentric views of this form social inequality in the Caribbean's own discourse on social inequalities. We have learnt:

1. Social stratification is a form of social inequality.
2. The functionalist school sees stratification resulting from shared values and people's ability to achieve these shared values in relation to others in society. Marx and Weber recognize forces of production as a determinant of social stratification but Weber also recognized prestige and power.
3. The determinants of social stratification are varied based on what people value in a society. Matters of race, ethnicity, gender, property ownership have featured prominently in the stratification discourse.
4. The aforementioned determinants have significantly impacted on people's life chances, with different groups experiencing the different levels of severity. These experiences have occurred despite pronouncements and infrastructure symbolical representing equality for all. There has been a great amount of change however, something we see with women and their climb up the social mobility ladder.
5. Value such as skin colour and status in general and occupational status, specifically, was brought out in the works of Carl Stone and the browning phenomenon in Jamaica as well as Brathwaite's note on the professional black man in Trinidad who would achieve status if he married someone of a lighter colour. His professional achievement was of little significance.
6. Stratification should not be viewed in polarized lens, black versus white, man versus women because whereas these are important to the conversation on status and mobility other identity determinants can play a huge part in perceived social status. For example, a Chinese doctor in Barataria, Trinidad may be held in esteemed status but would not experience this in Port of Spain because of his ethnicity.
7. In modern and contemporary society, social stratification based on race and ethnicity can present challenges for inclusion of minority groups and pose problems for their access to housing, job acquisition and wider assimilation in host societies.

In the next unit we will examine stratification and see how as socially constructed concept, there is a big problem with its perpetuation of inequality.

References

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