

Social Stratification

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of social stratification, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Social Stratification
 - a. Caste Systems
 - b. Class Systems

1. SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Social stratification is the structured ranking of groups in society in a hierarchical fashion. You can think of stratification like strata, or layers of soil that are deposited. There is a layer of topsoil, then another layer of soil, and clay at the bottom. Society is the same way, with groups of people stratified in layers.

These groups of people are unequal, therefore stratification is a system for structuring inequality in society. **Social inequality** describes a condition in which everyone has varying amounts of wealth, power, and prestige. All societies have inequality in some fashion, and all societies exhibit some form of stratification. It is important to know that social stratification is built into the structure of society--it's a structural issue, not an individual quality.

IN CONTEXT

Where you are in the structure of society is not your fault, per se. Society exhibits a structure, and your parents pass on positions in structure to you, their children. Sociologists have built careers studying wealth transfer, status transfer, and class transfer from parents to children.

Societies, given that they have inequality, don't simply fall apart. People have to be at least somewhat complicit and reconciled with the different levels of wealth, power and prestige in society. Every society has beliefs about why stratification exists, which helps facilitate in society's complacency. These beliefs are an example of an ideology--explanations for why there is stratification in society.

There are two forms of social stratification:

- Caste system

- Class system



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Stratification

Like layers of soil, or "strata," social stratification is the hierarchical layering of groups of people in society from high to low.

Social Inequality

A condition in which members of a society have different amounts of wealth, power, and prestige.

1a. Caste Systems

The **caste system** is a rigid system of stratification that is virtually closed and in which the boundaries between classes are firmly observed.

There is no **social mobility** in caste systems, referring to the movement either up or down in the social strata, or hierarchy. Caste systems don't allow for social mobility because you are born into the caste that you are going to achieve in life. You can't leverage your own talent and hard work to move up in the social hierarchy--it doesn't work that way in caste systems. You're born into the caste that you will remain in your entire life. Castes are bound up with certain occupational categories.



EXAMPLE If you're born into an occupational category of carpenter, for instance, you will be a carpenter. It won't even occur to you, and you won't give it much thought, because caste societies are controlled. They even determine who you can marry--you cannot marry somebody from a different caste.

Today, caste societies are largely a thing of the past. You can still see some historical vestiges of the caste system in parts of rural India, for example. But even in the cities in India, the caste system is giving way with the onset of economic industrialization. It should be noted, though, that the caste system was a large part of human society up until the Industrial Revolution.

Because caste systems limited opportunities for advancement and limited the freedom for people to chart their own way of life, they didn't change. If you know at birth what you're going to be, who you can marry, etc., then society isn't going to change too much. Caste societies were fairly stable and traditional through time.



TERMS TO KNOW

Caste System

A rigid system of social stratification that does not allow for social mobility.

Social Mobility

The degree to which one can move upwards or downwards in society.

1b. Class Systems

The stability of caste systems changed, however, with the **Industrial Revolution**. You start to see the caste system giving away with the transition to an industrial society and industrial capitalism. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, there was little chance for upward social mobility.

The Industrial Revolution demolished feudal societies and traditional forms of social stratification, giving way to class systems and class societies.

The **class system** is a system of social ranking based on the economic position achieved. The notion of achievement is the key to the stratification in the class system--you can venture out and achieve your class by virtue of your hard work, talents, accomplishments, life circumstances, etc.

In a caste system, you couldn't do this, because everything was rigid and ascribed to you at birth. In a class system, however, there's ideally more freedom and more social mobility, and you can achieve your status rather than have it given to you.

IN CONTEXT

In the transition from a feudal society to industrial capitalism, the feudal lords realized that they could utilize their land to make money in markets that didn't previously exist, so they closed off all the common area and the peasants were cast off.

What are these peasants going to do? They migrated to the city and find that they have to start selling themselves and competing with each other for work in a factory. They start to work for a wage, which was something they had never done before--hence, the idea of the wage comes into being, an idea that is so common to you now.

Even though it was an uncomfortable transition for these people to learn to compete and work for wages, it also gave them more opportunities and more freedom. In industrial capitalism, there are many different jobs and many different functions that people can choose from, so these options allow the sorting of society based upon economic position achieved. You begin to see a more fluid social system--it's less rigid, with more social mobility, ideally.

In retrospect, current opinion finds caste systems and the preindustrial ordering of people in groups to be abhorrent to modern industrial sensibilities. Why did people live like that? A hallmark of American society--one of our founding values--is equality of opportunity, and this is because Americans highly value the freedom to go out and achieve their economic position and class in life. Ideally, you may think that everyone has equal opportunities, but sociology is adept at showing that this isn't the case.

Even though you are ostensibly living in a class society in which anyone can go out and achieve their economic position from the same starting point, sociology demonstrates that this is a myth. In this country, people's life chances are affected by their birth, by the culture and the cultural environment they grow up in, and by categories such as race and gender. Therefore, not everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps with the same equality of opportunity. Nonetheless, it is characterized as a class society, with a class system of social stratification.



TERMS TO KNOW

Industrial Revolution and Societies

The industrial revolution and the transition to industrial capitalism largely got rid of caste systems of social stratification and replaced them with less rigid and more flexible class systems of stratification.

Class System

A system of social stratification based on economic achievements in the lifecourse.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **social stratification** by exploring two of its forms, **caste systems** and **class systems**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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