

Essay Exam #3

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Introduction to Sociology – SOC 210

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**What is social stratification? What is meant by a caste system vs. a class system, and what are some examples mentioned in the lecture? Describe the American class system and outline the characteristics of the different classes. Finally, discuss the purpose of social stratification -- is it a good or a bad thing according to functionalists and conflict theorists? Why?**

Social stratification is the ranking of people in a hierarchy in society. The term social stratification is derived from geological stratification which refers to the various layers, or strata, of rock and soil. Social stratification involves grouping people based on a number of factors to place them in a class, a caste or some other social layering system. Stratification can be assigned based on race, ethnicity, economic standing, religion or the associations of parents.

Class systems designed around achieved characteristics such as wealth and education, whereas caste systems are designed around ascribed characteristics such as birth religion or gender. The lecture uses the United States class system of economic status and the Indian religious-based caste system as examples. These systems are very similar in that they are fairly reliable during a person's lifetime and that there is a perceived mobility between the classes. The difference between comes with the difficulty for mobility. In the class system, working hard and having some amount of luck can allow for upward movement in the class system, and downward movement can be obtained by simply not making an effort. In the United States it is also possible to move between classes through marriage. In the caste system a movement between castes can only be accomplished through death, and then eventual rebirth in a different caste, determined by how the person lived their life. Marriage between classes is not possible in the caste system of India.

The American class system is primarily divided based on financial factors, the overall wealth of the individual. There is a huge gap between the classes in the American system. The lower class may work and just barely be able to afford the essentials of life, whereas at the peak

of the upper-class an individual may have a stored wealth at or above sixty billion dollars. There are also some other distinctions in the classes, such as the status placed on the occupation, the social standing an individual can achieve by associations and the level of education attained. For the ease of keeping statistics the financial aspect is most often used for giving some sense of a boundary to these classes. The lower-class, also called the working poor, make up about 20% of the population. Most of the individuals in the class live in urban areas and in the south and less than half of them complete high school. The next 33% up the ladder in the working class have a one in three chance of attending college and have very little ability to acquire wealth as they primarily work in jobs such as factory workers, landscapers, mechanics and other somewhat skilled laborers. Usually their skills are very specialized and are unable to expand beyond the job they are trained for. The middle class make up another bracket of the social class system. This class has about a 50% chance of graduating from college and is almost destined for blue collar work. Above the middle class is the classification of people who tend to not have much in the way of concern over money and in general have some type of established society. The upper-middle class is composed of individuals of high-status professional occupations, such as doctors, lawyers and college professors. About two thirds of the offspring of this class graduate from college. The upper 5% of people are in the upper-class. The upper class is usually distinguished not only by their financial holdings (these 5% hold 1/3 of the wealth), but also for their access to Ivy League education and exclusive neighborhoods. Within the upper class there is a division between “new money” and “old money”. Old money is the condition of being financially in the upper-class by way of inheritance and being in a family with an upper-class lineage. New money is the condition that occurs as a result of attaining the upper-class standing by way of

entrepreneurship or other ways through which an individual must earn their wealth themselves. Within the upper-class old money is ranked above new money.

The purpose of social stratification is to differentiate between groups of people. Social stratification also allows for the distribution of power. Functionalists believe that social stratification is a positive thing, as it encourages each member of society to attempt to improve. Social stratification provides a motivation for talented individuals in a society to work hard and to contribute to society with their talents. There is also a push for those talented individuals to work to improve to distinguish themselves from others who are talented in a similar area. Where this is clearly evident in our society is in the arts. In both performing arts and fine arts there are many practicing artists and artisans, but only a certain few become well known. I will pick on my favorite fine art, ceramics, for this. Locally there are many ceramic artists that are very skilled, but only a few are known. In the Dallas, North Carolina there is Barry Lockman, he is a very skilled craftsman, but he is not well known beyond his immediate location. His focus is on his own enjoyment with the clay, and not to the popular trends or to other factors that would make him better known. In essence, he has rejected the motivations provided by social stratification and takes a very humble approach. In Gastonia, North Carolina one of the leading ceramic artists is Vickie Gill. Her work is very much contemporary and she does work to improve herself, or at least make her work stand out more to a general population. Mrs. Gill is likely influenced by social stratification to seek a higher class. Neither Mr. Lockman nor Mrs. Gill descend from a line of distinguished potters. Yet another local artist, Mark Hewitt, in Sea Grove, North Carolina does come from a lineage of distinguished potters and is considered to be of a higher class than his counterparts that do not have the advantage of being from a ceramic family or the benefit of a marketing staff that ensure name recognition. A more dramatic

example is the difference between actors who are struggling compared to the actors who are paid millions of dollars for their performances. There is a difference of talent as well as a difference with the amount of effort the actors put into promoting him/herself. If it were not possible for an unknown actor to become known, there would be a lot less effort put into performances at community theatres and other locations where inexperienced actors perform. It is often the hope or dream of the potential of being discovered that drive those actors to do their best and to improve their performance.

Conflict theorists believe that social stratification hinders society because it allows large gaps between the classes and encourages traits that can inhibit the ability of a person to overcome their life situation. Unfortunately in American society the conflict position can be more easily proven than the functionalist position. Children inherit the social class of their parents. While there is some class mobility it takes a lot of effort to overcome many of the factors that hinder that mobility. Education is often a factor of mobility, but quality education is less accessible to the lower classes than to the upper class. The lack of quality education makes it difficult to excel and to move upward in the classes. As a result, there is not quality education available for the offspring of the lower classes, leading to an endless cycle. Upper classes have the benefit of having money that can be invested and eventually passed on to a younger generation, ensuring the class of their offspring. According to conflict theory the social stratification locks individuals into a cycle that few rarely escape.

**What is the difference between sex and gender? Are the differences between men and women biological or learned? Based on the lecture, discuss these issues as well as the gender inequalities that still exist today.**

Sex is a biological trait and gender is a social role. In a majority of individuals the gender traits will resemble what is expected of that physical sex. Sex is ascribed at birth, and gender is learned, at least in part, through socialization. Sex is the largest division between people and is also the oldest. It is possible for a person's physical sex and their gender to not match. In most societies those individuals are considered to be deviants. In some cultures, such as Polynesian culture, transgendered individuals are recognized separately from males or females. In those cultures the third gender is referred to as Māhū. Sex-linked differences between men and women are biological. These traits include the ability of a woman's brain to create new pathways when there is brain damage, or the iron deposits at the top of the nasal cavity which can lead men to have a somewhat better sense of direction than women. The traits that determine gender are a little more complex and just as with other areas of behavior there is a nature vs. nurture situation where it is very difficult to discern what aspects of "maleness" or "femaleness" comes from biological factors and what is determined by learning from society. As an example, it is difficult to establish proof of the source of the maternal instinct in females. There are certain biological traits which must occur for the behavior to be evident, but also, it is nearly impossible to find an example subject that has not been exposed to a social situation where those traits have been exhibited. Men are thought to have biologically determined better spatial and mathematical abilities, which would seem to pre-determine their ability to excel in certain fields. In a similar way, women are thought to have biologically determined abilities in verbal skills. While these differences would seem to dictate that men would be better with things such as accounting and women better with management roles, women almost never find themselves in positions of power.

Gender inequality is still quite prevalent in American society. For several decades the level of pay for females has been about 77 cents for every dollar that a male makes. There is also a gap between the number of men and women that pursue degrees in math and science fields. While women are just as likely to complete a bachelor's degree as men, they are not in the same fields and women are less likely to continue on to graduate level study. There is also a great deal of sex typing in work. Women are still more likely to be secretaries than men and men are more likely to be construction workers than women. This may have some to do with physical abilities for the work, but is likely based on stereotypes that have existed for several centuries. In the family structure men are given preference as they are seen as leaders of households. In almost all situations a woman will take her husband's name at marriage, and the children will also acquire the father's name. In the past, and in some modern wedding ceremonies, it is traditional for the bride to take an oath to "love, honor and obey" her husband. With heightened abilities of oration that females have, one might think that they were likely to have a large amount of political presence. This is not the case. There has not yet been a female president and while more than half of the population is women, there are very few women in congress. Out of 100 senators, 17 are women, and of 435 members of the House of Representatives only 76 are women. These numbers are presently the highest they have ever been. There is a trend towards a balance in government, but it is very slow process to overcome the male-lead traditions of government. It is possible that with the relative historical recency of female suffrage that women do not yet feel adequately empowered to vote, or are still holding on to a culturally programmed position that women do not make good leaders. In addition to family, education and government inequalities of sex, there are also some other limitations. An area where American women have also been discriminated against is in popular culture acceptance. As recently as the 1980's women have

had difficulty being published. Michelle Teiman, an economist, could not get her 1985 theoretical paper published in a peer-reviewed journal until submitting it with a more masculine pen-name. Similar occurrences have been reported in the more open-minded field of science fiction. In the 1960s, Dorothy Fontana had to take the name D.C. Fontana on scripts for Star Trek that she wrote because it was believed that both the networks and the fans would reject a script written by a woman. Inequality for women continues as they are passed over for promotions and excluded from the top management of large corporations.

**What is meant by Race and Ethnicity? What are the problems with defining an individual's race or ethnic group? What is a minority group, according to the lecture? Outline the four ways majority groups can "deal" with minority groups in society (genocide, etc.) and what they mean. Finally, discuss the differences between prejudice and discrimination.**

The difference between race and ethnicity is whether or not its traits are physical. Race is primarily a physical classification. Race is determined by skin color, hair texture, eye spacing, eye shape, nose shape and any number of other factors that are not particularly distinguishing. Ethnicity refers to a person's cultural background, primarily the culture in which the person has grown up. There may be some physical indications of a person's ethnicity, but those traits are outward things such as clothing. Outward traits of ethnicity can be deceiving.

The problem with defining an individual's race is that is not particularly specific. People from different parts of the world will sometimes have similar physical traits. One situation where it could be particularly difficult to discern meaningful information by observing a person's race is when interacting with a member of one of many Asian nations. Misidentifying a person of Japanese origin as Chinese may be found to be insulting. There are also situations in which a multi-racial person may be encountered. A multi-racial person may take on more attributes of one parent over the other and their appearance may be deceptive. The problem with defining a person's ethnicity is that is also may be deceptive. By identifying certain traits about a person's clothing, jewelry or other possessions it is possibly to misinterpret the ethnic origin. An example used in the lecture is individuals who are participating in some type of cultural celebration, such as St. Patrick's Day. While individuals engaging in these types of cultural celebrations may appear to have the traits of those cultures (in this case, Irish), it is very possible that they are not. The best way to determine a person's ethnicity or cultural heritage is to ask them, while making no assumptions as to their heritage.

Minority groups are groups of people that are set apart from the majority by unequal treatment. There is no requirement for there to be a mathematical minority for the group to be a social minority. The lecture identifies women as a minority group. Minority groups tend to lack power and are set apart by

sexist or racist attitudes. The creation of minority groups comes from the identification with certain in groups or out groups. The in group with which a person identifies with is usually thought to be superior to all other groups by that individual.

Majority groups can deal with minorities by genocide, segregation, assimilation or pluralism. Genocide is the complete eradication of a minority group by killing its members. In this situation the minority group is decided to be inferior and in most cases they are in some way identified as being unclean. Segregation is less severe than genocide, but still represents a great intolerance of the minority. Segregation involves physically separating the minority group from the majority. Some majorities will attempt to create the image of a “separate but equal” situation, but when the majority is the group controlling the resources, there is almost never equality in segregation. Segregation is a form of institutional discrimination, usually in which the institution is an entire government. Assimilation involves essentially converting the minority to the majority. The minority is accepted, but under the conditions that they take on the values of the majority. Assimilation is the form of minority integration that is expressed through the phrase “melting pot” when used to refer to a cultural merging. Through assimilation the minority is very likely to lose their cultural identity. Pluralism is perhaps the most non-damaging way to integrate individuals into a society. Instead of being killed, separated or reprogrammed the individuals are allowed to retain their original culture, but also will take on attributes of the majority. Pluralism allows multiple cultures to live together peacefully and encourages respect of the uniqueness of each component culture. The cultural trend in America is toward a pluralistic society, which would be moving from a culture of a “melting pot” to more of a “tossed salad”.

The essential difference between prejudice and discrimination is that prejudice is completely internalized. Discrimination is an action that is taken in treating different groups differently. Prejudice is an attitude towards a group, usually without knowing anything about the group. Prejudice is similar to stereotyping in that they are both attitudes and ideas formed with a limited knowledge of a people. Stereotyping is based on limited experience with a group and then applying it to the entire group.

Discrimination is prejudice and stereotyping put into action. Discrimination happens in daily society through simple choices that people make, such as deciding who a person will or will not interact with. These decisions may occur from an irrational fear of a people based on some stereotype. Institutional discrimination is a more damaging form of discrimination as it affects a larger number of people and is usually a very noticeable form of discrimination. A historically common form of institutional discrimination in the United States was educational segregation. Different races were required to attend different schools, usually with the African American schools receiving less funding and having much worse conditions than their white counterparts. While legally this form of discrimination is no longer allowed, there are still lasting effects of when it was actively practiced. Neighborhoods formed around schools and a lot of those neighborhoods have maintained their ethnic backgrounds.