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# SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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## DEFINING SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND STRATIFICATION

### DEFINING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of:

- **Resources** such as power, wealth and income
- **Opportunities** (related, for example, to health, education and employment)

Social class, gender, ethnicity and age are all sources of inequality in modern British society.

### DEFINING SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Social stratification refers to the way society is structured into a hierarchy of strata that are unequally ranked. A social hierarchy is shaped like a pyramid with each stratum more powerful than the one below it. The most privileged group forms the top layer and vice versa.

Stratification involves inequalities between groups in the distribution of socioeconomic resources such as wealth, income, status and power. These inequalities persist or continue over time.

In Britain, gender, class, ethnicity and age are the main criteria by which people tend to be stratified.

	<b>Social Class</b>	<b>Slavery</b>
<b>What is stratification based on?</b>	Economic factors such as occupation and income	Some individuals claim that they have the right to own and sell other people, to treat them as property and to deny their human rights
<b>Is status achieved or ascribed?</b>	Achieved	Status was ascribed in the southern states of the US for the people who were born into slavery
<b>Is social mobility possible?</b>	Yes	For many slaves in the southern states of the US, social mobility was unlikely unless, for example, they escaped to safety or until slavery was abolished (emancipation) which was unlikely even then

### DIFFERENT FORMS OF STRATIFICATION

The cast system in traditional India, slavery in the southern states of the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Apartheid in South Africa and the social system in modern Britain are all types of stratification.

Various forms of stratification differ according to whether status is ascribed or achieved. They also differ in terms of how open or closed they are. In an open system of stratification, status is achieved and social mobility is possible (meritocratic). In a closed system, status is ascribed so social mobility is highly unlikely.

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## LIFE CHANCES

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Life chances are a key aspect of studying social inequality and stratification. Life chances refer to people's chances of having positive or negative outcomes over their lifetime in relation to, for example, their education, health, income, employment and housing.

Life chances are distributed unequally between individuals and groups because they are affected by social factors such as class position, gender and ethnicity. People in higher social classes have more chance than those in other classes of accessing good quality healthcare and decent housing. Life chances are shaped by inequalities in wealth, income, power and status.

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## KEYWORDS

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- **Wealth:** money held in savings accounts and shares or ownership of assets such as land
- **Income:** the resources that individuals and households receive over a specific time period. Can be received in cash or in kind
- **Ascribed status:** Social positions that are fixed at birth and unchanging over time e.g. hereditary titles
- **Achieved status:** social positions that are earned on the basis of individuals' talents or abilities
- **Social mobility:** movement up or down between a society's strata
- **Life chances:** an individual's chances of achieving positive or negative outcomes (relating, for example, to health, education, housing) as they progress through life

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## SOCIAL CLASS AS A FORM OF STRATIFICATION

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### APPROACHES TO SOCIAL CLASS

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Marx, Weber and functionalists have all shaped sociological views on social class.

#### MARX

Karl Marx believed that class membership was determined by economic factors (ownership & non-ownership). He identified two main classes in capitalist society:

- Bourgeoisie (capitalist/ruling class)
  - o Wealthy and own property, big businesses, land and factories. Their main interests are higher profits
- Proletariat (working classes)
  - o Own no property and are forced to sell their labour to the bourgeoisie in order to survive. Main interest is higher wages

These two classes have very different interests and this leads to conflict between them (conflict theory).

#### WEBER

Max Weber identified four main classes with different life chances in the labour market:

- Property owners
- Professionals
- Petty bourgeoisie
- Working class

Similarly to Marx, Weber saw class as based on economic factors. He also stressed the importance of status and power in determining life chances.

### FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

According to the functionalist approach, modern society requires a system of unequal rewards. This provides an incentive for the most talented people to train for the key occupations that are essential for society to continue. These top positions must provide scarce rewards such as high pay/status to attract the most able people.

They believe that the stratification system fulfills the function of ensuring that the most important jobs are filled by the most talented and highly qualified people.

They see modern societies such as Britain as meritocratic, to a large extent.

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### MEASURING SOCIAL CLASS

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Occupation is often used to measure social class because it is linked to factors such as levels of pay, working conditions and social status.

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### THE REGISTRAR GENERAL'S SCALE

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Many sociologists have used the Registrar General's scale in the past, in order to measure social class.

This scale allocated people to a class based on their occupation. It distinguished between manual and non-manual occupations. Manual occupations require some physical effort and they may be skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled. These jobs were seen as working class in the Registrar General's scale. In contrast, non-manual, managerial and technical and professional occupations were seen as middle class in this scale.

### PROBLEMS WITH THE REGISTRAR GENERAL'S SCALE

- The scale is based on occupation and so it is difficult to place people without jobs (such as students, retired and unemployed) into a social class.
- The class position of a jobless married woman was assessed on the basis of her husband's occupation, which might be misleading
- Wealthy upper-class people and property owners were difficult to place on a scale based on occupation
- Two people may have the same occupation or job title yet there may be huge differences in their wealth, income, status and qualifications

### THE NATIONAL STATISTICS SOCIOECONOMIC CLASSIFICATION

The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) addresses some of the problems associated with the General Registrar's scale. It uses occupation but covers the whole population including students and long term unemployed people.

The NS-SEC groups together the occupations that are similar in

- The **rewards** they provide – such as pay, career prospects and job security
- **Employment status** – takes into account whether someone is employer/employee
- Levels of **authority and control** – takes into account whether someone is responsible for other workers/are supervised by others

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## GENDER, ETHNICITY & AGE

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These sources of inequality are significant in class-based societies.

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### INEQUALITY BASED ON GENDER

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Feminist approaches explore gender inequalities in society.

Over the last 40 years, reforms in areas such as education and employment have addressed aspects of gender inequality. For example, governments have introduced anti-discrimination laws such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) to reduce gender inequalities.

Today, women are increasingly likely to achieve high level education qualifications, high status jobs and good salaries.

Feminists would still argue that gender remains the most significant social division in contemporary society. They see society as patriarchal.

They see society as a patriarchal one in which men:

- Have **a lot of power** within families, politics and the workplace
- Generally receive a **bigger share of rewards** such as wealth and status

Often, men and women do not work in the same occupations. For instance, fire fighting is male dominated and nursery nursing is female dominated. When men and women do work in the same occupations, women are more likely to be in lower-level or middle-level jobs while men tend to hold the higher grade and senior management posts. For example, in 2007, 19% of men and 11% of women worked as managers or senior officials. Women on average still earn less than men. One reason for this is that women are more likely than men to work in low-paid jobs. Women are also more likely than men to be employed part-time rather than full time. One explanation for the persistence of gender inequality at work focuses on discrimination in the workplace. Another explanation suggests that women are held back when applying for promotions or developing their career because they have the main responsibility for housework and childcare. A third explanation argues that inadequate or expensive childcare provision presents some women from participating in full-time paid work or staying in employment long enough to progress in their career.

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### INEQUALITY BASED ON ETHNICITY

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Over the last 40 years, reforms and policies have addressed inequality based on ethnicity in areas such as education, employment and criminal justice. For example:

- Many employers have equal opportunities policies to support equality and diversity
- The 1976 Race Relations Act outlawed discrimination based on ethnicity
- The Equality and Human Rights Commission has powers to enforce the equality laws and to shape public policy on equality issues
- Within organizations, awareness of institutional racism has been raised

As a result of such changes, many commentators will argue that inequalities based on ethnicity are much less significant than they were 40 years ago. However, others will argue that there has been little real change in the fields of employment, education and criminal justice. For example, unemployment rates in England & Wales are higher among ethnic minorities such as Pakistani

and Bangladeshi in comparison to White British or White Irish people. Research has also found that men and women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage have much worse chances of getting professional and managerial jobs than their white peers of the same age and educational level.

Governments have tried to reduce inequalities between different ethnic groups by funding bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission which enforces equality laws, as well as through legislature such as the Race Relations Act in the 1970s.

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## INEQUALITY BASED ON AGE

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Sociologists argue that age is socially constructed. This can be seen in the historical and cross-cultural differences in expectations surrounding age. For example, although child labour is now illegal in Britain, it was the norm among working-class families in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and exists in some parts of the world today.

The status of older people can vary between cultures. In some cultures, ageing is seen as something to be avoided. In others, however, age is seen as something to look forward to and older people have a high status in society.

The term ageism describes a situation in which someone is treated differently and less favourably based on their age. In Britain, there are now regulations against age discrimination in employment and training.

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## KEYWORDS

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- **Ageism:** prejudice/discrimination upon the basis of age
- **Ethnicity:** cultural norms and values that distinguish one ethnic group from another

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## WEALTH, INCOME & POVERTY

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### WEALTH & INCOME

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- **Wealth** refers to the ownership of assets that are valued at a particular point in time. Marketable assets include houses and land that can be sold in order to make money. Wealth also includes shares and savings.
- **Income** refers to the flow of resources which individuals households receive over a specific period of time. People may receive income in cash (e.g. wages, welfare benefits and pensions) or in kind (e.g. company car and petrol allowances)

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### THE DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH & INCOME

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Wealth is distributed unequally in the UK. For example, in 2001, the wealthiest 1% owned 33% of marketable wealth whilst the least wealthy 50% owned just 3% of this wealth.

Income is also distributed unequally in the UK. For example, in 2007, the poorest 10% of people received 3% of total income while the top 10% received 40% of total income.

Wealth and income influence life chances. For example, people on high incomes have the choice between NHS and private healthcare, state and private education or between renting and buying a property. Most people on low incomes do not have these choices.

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## POVERTY

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Poverty can be defined as:

- **Absolute poverty** when people's income is so low that they cannot obtain the minimum needed to survive
- **Relative poverty** which is when people's income is well below average so they are poor compared with others in their society. They cannot afford to have the general standard of living that most other people in their society enjoy

Poverty can also be defined in terms of exclusion from everyday activities and customs. This is about people who experience poverty from the activities and living patterns that most people take for granted.

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## MEASURING POVERTY

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There are different ways of measuring poverty:

- **Low incomes** – this is the main official UK government way of measuring poverty
- **Lack of** items that the majority of the population see as **necessities**
- **Subjective measures** – in which people judge themselves to be living in poverty

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## GROUPS AT RISK OF POVERTY

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Research suggests that the proportion of people in poverty is higher among:

- Single parent households
- Single pensioners
- Families with a child under 11
- Households without paid workers
- People who left school aged 16 or under
- Children and young people

Poverty is linked to ethnicity, gender and age.

People living in households headed by someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage are at risk of living in low-income households. Possible reasons for this could include racism and discrimination in the labour market. Members of some minority ethnic groups are less likely to take up the welfare state assistance to which they are entitled. Members of some minority ethnic groups are also more likely to experience unemployment and are more likely to live in low income households.

Women face a greater risk of poverty than men. Possible reasons could include the fact that women earn less than men, on average, because they are more likely to work in low paid jobs and to work part-time. In general, women live longer than men so there are a larger number of older female pensioners living alone. Women are less likely than men to have an income from an occupational pension. Women are also more likely than men to head single-parent families which often have to live on low incomes.

Children and pensioners are more at risk of poverty than other age groups. Possible reasons for this include living on a low income such as state retirement pension and not claiming the benefits to which they are entitled to.

This is all captured in the idea of the life cycle of poverty. The life cycle of poverty shows that people may move in and out of poverty at different points during their lives. For example, an individual may live below the poverty line during childhood. As a young adult, they can earn money and move out of poverty. If they have children, the added expense may mean they move back into poverty. When their children leave home, they may escape poverty. During old age, they no longer get a wage so they may move back into poverty. So, children and pensioners are more at risk of poverty.

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### KEYWORDS

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- **Absolute poverty:** people experience absolute poverty when their income is insufficient to obtain the minimum needed to survive
- **Life cycle of poverty:** movement into and out of poverty at different stages during the course of a person's life
- **Poverty line:** a government-approved line that divides people who are living below a set income level (living below the poverty line) from those who are living above it. In Britain, there is no official poverty line
- **Relative poverty:** people experience relative poverty when they cannot afford to meet the general standard of living of most other people in their society

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## DIFFERENT SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF POVERTY

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Some approaches focus on individuals and groups while others focus on structural factors.

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### INDIVIDUAL EXPLANATIONS OF POVERTY

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Individual explanations highlight the behavior/lifestyles of individuals and groups who experience poverty. They suggest that the poor are responsible in some way for their own situation:

- **Culture of poverty**
  - In this account, people from the poorest sections of society are socialized within a subculture of poverty. They develop a way of life and a set of values to cope with their position. For example, they live for the moment and see no point in planning ahead. However, these values prevent them from taking up educational opportunities or saving for the future, and in this way, escaping poverty
- **Cycle of deprivation**
  - In this view, poverty involves both material and cultural deprivation. It persists from generation to generation, locking families into a cycle of deprivation
- **Welfare dependency and the underclass**
  - In the 1980s and '90s, New Right approaches identified the emergence in Britain of an underclass - a group of undeserving poor whose attitudes and values are different from those of mainstream society. This group remains in poverty because they are encouraged by welfare

The idea of social exclusion can be used to criticize individual explanations of poverty. Socially excluded people are shut out from participating in society's socioeconomic, political and cultural

life by factors beyond their control. The idea of social exclusion stresses society's role in excluding some people from full participation.

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## STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF POVERTY

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Structural approaches look at the way society is structured economically, socially and politically to create poverty and perpetuate it over time:

### MARXIST APPROACH

This view states that poverty is the inevitable result of the class-based inequalities that are built into capitalist society. Capitalism is an economic system that generates extreme wealth for the bourgeoisie/ruling class while producing poverty among sections of the proletariat

### UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE INADEQUACIES OF THE WELFARE STATE

Unemployment is seen as a key issue in understanding the causes of poverty. During economic recessions, unemployment levels rise and, as a result, the number of people experiencing poverty also increases. Another view is that welfare state benefits are too low. In this view, the solution to the problem of poverty is to give more money to the people in poverty by increasing the value of pensions and welfare benefits.

To summarize...

- Critics argue that the culture of poverty and cycle of deprivation explanations ignore structural factors and fail to explain why people are poor in the first place
- New Right approaches focus on the underclass whose members are seen as dependent on welfare provision. Critics argue that the term underclass is used to label and blame the victims of poverty

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## MAJOR DEBATES ABOUT SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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One debate focuses on how much social mobility there is in modern Britain and whether society is becoming more meritocratic. Other debates look at whether social class is still a useful concept in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and whether Britain is now a classless society.

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## MERITOCRACY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

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Some sociologists argue that Britain is a meritocracy, to a large extent. This means that status is achieved and occupational positions are allocated on the basis of individual ability. So, social class origins, gender or ethnicity are seen as less significant than talent and motivation in determining an individual's occupation and class position.

High rates of social mobility suggest that:

- Society is meritocratic
- Opportunities are available to everyone, regardless of their social class origins

Routes to mobility include educational qualifications, financial windfalls and changes in the occupational structure such as a growth in white collar occupations. Barriers include gender discrimination, lack of skills and qualifications.

Goldthorpe's (1972-1974) mobility study suggested that some long-rang mobility had occurred. Working class children did, in fact, end up in middle-class occupations. However, they were much less likely than middle-class children to do so.

More recently, Crompton has noted that social mobility in Britain is in decline. This is linked partly to changes in the occupational structure. For example, the growth in professional and managerial jobs has slowed down so there is now less room at the top.

People of African Caribbean heritage are more likely to be in occupations that are classified as working class. This can have consequences for their chances of upward social mobility. This can also have consequences for their children's life chances including their educational opportunities.

Sociologists working within the Feminist approach argue that gender inequality is the most important cause of social division in modern Britain. Gender inequality can be found in the workplace today despite equality laws such as the Sex Discrimination Act. On the other hand, many girls are now achieving better examination results ant GCSE and A-level than boys. Also, increasing numbers of females are going into higher education and entering professional careers such as medicine.

Other sociologists see inequality based on ethnicity as the most important cause of social division in contemporary Britain. For instance, members of some minority ethnic groups underachieve at school and experience higher levels of unemployment compared with other groups.

Sociologists from the Marxist approach see social class divisions as key to understanding capitalist society. Some sociologists, however, argue that inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, class and age are interlinked rather than separate categories. Such sociologists explore the way these inequalities are linked together.

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL CLASS

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One view is that social class divisions are less clear-cut in Britain today compared with the 1950s.

For example, it is argued that:

- **Traditional working-class communities have declined**
  - E.g. communities centered on heavy industry, coal-mining and shipbuilding have declined
- **Class identities have weakened** and people no longer strongly identify themselves as working or middle class

Another version of the decline of class view suggests that class divisions have become less significant than those based on gender, ethnicity and age:

- **Women, some minority ethnic groups, children and older people are more risk of poverty than other groups**
- Divisions based on gender can be seen in the **gender inequalities in the workplace**, the **gender pay gap** and the **under-representation of women in political life**
- **Ethnic inequalities.** Divisions based on ethnicity can be seen in the over-representation of some minority ethnic groups among low income households, and the under-representation of some minority ethnic groups among MPs and in the professions

Other sociologists will argue that inequalities based on class, gender, ethnicity and age are all significant in modern Britain. **In this view, class, gender, ethnicity and age are seen as interlinked aspects of inequality rather than as completely separate aspects.**

Many sociologists argue that social class remains a central concept in sociology because social class still impacts on people's daily lives. Class-based inequalities in life chances persist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, while class may have changed, it has not declined.

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#### INTER-GENERATIONAL SOCIAL MOBILITY & INTRA-GENERATIONAL SOCIAL MOBILITY

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Inter-generational mobility occurs when an individual enters a different stratum from his or her parents. It refers to movement between the generations of a family rather than over the course of an individual's life.

Intra-generational mobility occurs when an individual moves up or down between the strata of a stratification system over the course of their life.

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#### KEYWORDS

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- **Classless society:** a society that does not have different social classes
- **Inter-generational social mobility:** movement up or down between the strata of a stratification system as measured between the generations of a family
- **Intra-generational social mobility:** movement of an individual over the course of their life up or down between the strata of a stratification system
- **Long-range mobility:** social mobility that involves significant movement
- **Short-range mobility:** social mobility that involves limited movement

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#### EXAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS

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1. Identify **two** ways in which British governments have tried to reduce inequalities between different ethnic groups over the last 50 years. (2 marks)
2. Explain what sociologists mean by social inequality. (4 marks)
3. Describe **one** way in which ethnicity and social class may be linked **and** explain the possible consequences of this link. (5 marks)
4. Describe **one** way in which sociologists measure social class **and** explain why this way of measuring class could be criticized. (5 marks)