

owning a home, and getting a good education for their children. To others, it is the promise that anyone may rise from poverty to wealth (from “rags to riches”) if he or she works hard enough. In this chapter, we examine systems of social stratification, partic-

ularly the U.S. class structure, to see how people’s opportunities are affected by their position in that structure. However, before we explore class and stratification, test your knowledge of wealth, poverty, and the American Dream by taking the quiz in Box 8.1.

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

Chapter Focus Question: How is the American Dream influenced by social stratification?

How do prestige, power, and wealth determine social class?

What role does occupational structure play in a functionalist perspective on class structure?

What role does ownership of resources play in a conflict perspective on class structure?

How are social stratification and poverty linked?

WHAT IS SOCIAL STRATIFICATION?

Social stratification is the hierarchical arrangement of large social groups based on their control over basic resources (Feagin and Feagin, 2003). Stratification involves patterns of structural inequality that are associated with membership in each of these groups, as well as the ideologies that support inequality. Sociologists examine the social groups that make up the hierarchy in a society and seek to determine how inequalities are structured and persist over time.

Sociology Now™ Learn more about **social stratification** by going through the Social Stratification in the United States Animation.

Max Weber’s term *life chances* refers to the extent to which individuals have access to important societal resources such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care. According to sociologists, more-affluent people typically have better life chances than the less-affluent because they have greater access to quality education, safe neighborhoods, high-quality nutrition and health care, police and private security protection, and an extensive array of other goods and services. In contrast, persons with low- and poverty-level incomes tend to have limited access to these

resources. *Resources* are anything valued in a society, ranging from money and property to medical care and education; they are considered to be scarce because of their unequal distribution among social categories. If we think about the valued resources available in the United States, for example, the differences in life chances are readily apparent. As one analyst suggested, “Poverty narrows and closes life chances. The victims of poverty experience a kind of arteriosclerosis of opportunity. Being poor not only means economic insecurity, it also wreaks havoc on one’s mental and physical health” (Ropers, 1991: 25). Our life chances are intertwined with our class, race, gender, and age.

All societies distinguish among people by age. Young children typically have less authority and responsibility than older persons. Older persons, especially those without wealth or power, may find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Similarly, all societies differentiate between females and males: Women are often treated as subordinate to men. From society to society, people are treated differently as a result of their religion, race/ethnicity, appearance, physical strength, disabilities, or other distinguishing characteristics. All of these differentiations result in inequality. However, systems of stratification are also linked to the specific economic and social structure of a society and to a nation’s position in the system of global stratification, which is so significant for understanding social inequality that we will devote the next chapter to this topic (Chapter 9).



Box 8.1 SOCIOLOGY AND EVERYDAY LIFE

How Much Do You Know About Wealth, Poverty, and the American Dream?

True	False	
T	F	1. People no longer believe in the American Dream.
T	F	2. Individuals over age 65 have the highest rate of poverty.
T	F	3. Men account for two out of three impoverished adults in the United States.
T	F	4. About 5 percent of U.S. residents live in households whose members sometimes do not get enough to eat.
T	F	5. Income is more unevenly distributed than wealth.
T	F	6. People who are poor usually have personal attributes that contribute to their impoverishment.
T	F	7. A number of people living below the official poverty line have full-time jobs.
T	F	8. One in three U.S. children will be poor at some point of their childhood.

Answers on page 248.

SYSTEMS OF STRATIFICATION

Around the globe, one of the most important characteristics of systems of stratification is their degree of flexibility. Sociologists distinguish among such systems based on the extent to which they are open or closed. In an *open system*, the boundaries between levels in the hierarchies are more flexible and may be influenced (positively or negatively) by people's achieved statuses. Open systems are assumed to have some degree of social mobility. ***Social mobility is the movement of individuals or groups from one level in a stratification system to another*** (Rothman, 2001). This movement can be either upward or downward. ***Intergenerational mobility is the social movement experienced by family members from one generation to the next.*** For example, Sarah's father is a carpenter who makes good wages in good economic times but is often unemployed when the construction industry slows to a standstill. Sarah becomes a neurologist, earning \$350,000 a year, and moves from the working class to the upper-middle

class. Between her father's generation and her own, Sarah has experienced upward social mobility.

By contrast, ***intragenerational mobility is the social movement of individuals within their own lifetime.*** Consider, for example, RaShandra, who began her career as a high-tech factory worker and through increased experience and taking specialized courses in her field became an entrepreneur, starting her own highly successful "dot.com" business. RaShandra's advancement is an example of upward intragenerational social mobility. However, both intragenerational mobility and intergenerational mobility may be downward as well as upward.

In a *closed system*, the boundaries between levels in the hierarchies of social stratification are rigid, and people's positions are set by ascribed status. Open and closed systems are ideal-type constructs; no actual stratification system is completely open or closed. The systems of stratification that we will examine—slavery, caste, and class—are characterized by different hierarchical structures and varying degrees of mobility. Let's examine these three systems of stratification to determine how people acquire their positions in each and what potential for social movement they have.

Slavery

Slavery is an extreme form of stratification in which some people are owned by others. It is a closed system in which people designated as "slaves"

Sociology Now™ Learn more about **social mobility** by going through the Effects of Social Mobility: A Personal Journey Video Exercise.



Box 8.1 SOCIOLOGY AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Answers to the Sociology Quiz on Wealth, Poverty, and the American Dream

1. **False.** The American Dream appears to be alive and well. U.S. culture places a strong emphasis on the goal of monetary success, and many people use legal or illegal means to attempt to achieve that goal.
2. **False.** As a group, children have a higher rate of poverty than the elderly. Government programs such as Social Security have been indexed for inflation, whereas many of the programs for the young have been scaled back or eliminated. However, many elderly individuals still live in poverty.
3. **False.** Women, not men, account for two out of three impoverished adults in the United States. Reasons include the lack of job opportunities for women, lower pay than men for comparable jobs, lack of affordable day care for children, sexism in the workplace, and a number of other factors.
4. **True.** It is estimated that about 5 percent of the U.S. population (1 in 20 people) resides in household units where members do not get enough to eat.
5. **False.** Wealth is more unevenly distributed among the U.S. population than is income. However, both wealth and income are concentrated in very few hands compared with the size of the overall population.
6. **False.** According to one widely held stereotype, the poor are lazy and do not want to work. Rather than looking at the structural characteristics of society, people cite the alleged personal attributes of the poor as the reason for their plight.
7. **True.** Many of those who fall below the official poverty line are referred to as the “working poor” because they work full time but earn such low wages that they are still considered to be impoverished.
8. **True.** According to recent data from the Children’s Defense Fund, one in three U.S. children will live in a family that is below the official poverty line at some point in their childhood. For some of these children, poverty will be a persistent problem throughout their childhood and youth.

Sources: Based on Children’s Defense Fund, 2001; Gilbert, 2003; and U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b.

are treated as property and have little or no control over their lives. According to some social analysts, throughout recorded history only five societies have been slave societies—those in which the social and economic impact of slavery was extensive: ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, the United States, the Caribbean, and Brazil (Finley, 1980). Others suggest that slavery also existed in the Americas prior to European settlement, and throughout Africa and Asia (Engerman, 1995).

Those of us living in the United States are most aware of the legacy of slavery in our own country. Beginning in the 1600s, slaves were forcibly imported to the United States as a source of cheap labor. Slavery was defined in law and custom by the 1750s, making it possible for one person to own another person

(Healey, 2002). In fact, early U.S. presidents including George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. As practiced in the United States, slavery had four primary characteristics: (1) it was for life and was inherited (children of slaves were considered to be slaves); (2) slaves were considered property, not human beings; (3) slaves were denied rights; and (4) coercion was used to keep slaves “in their place” (Noel, 1972). Although most slaves were powerless to bring about change, some were able to challenge slavery—or at least their position in the system—by engaging in activities such as sabotage, intentional carelessness, work slowdowns, or running away from owners and working for the abolition of slavery (Healey, 2002). Despite the fact that slavery in this country officially ended many years ago, sociologists



© Bojan Brezaj/Corbis

Systems of stratification include slavery, caste, and class. As shown in these photos, the life chances of people living in each of these systems differ widely.



© Alan Sussman/The Image Works



© SuperStock

such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) believe that its legacy is deeply embedded in current patterns of prejudice and discrimination against African Americans.

Slavery is not simply an unfortunate historical legacy. Although legal slavery and serfdom, involving private ownership of people, no longer exist at the beginning of the twenty-first century, economist Stanley L. Engerman (1995: 175) believes that the world will not be completely free of slavery as long as there are “debt bondage, child labor, contract labor,

and other varieties of coerced work for limited periods of time, with limited opportunities for mobility, and with limited political and economic power.”

The Caste System

Like slavery, caste is a closed system of social stratification. A **caste system** is a **system of social inequality in which people’s status is permanently determined at birth based on their parents’**

ascribed characteristics. Vestiges of caste systems exist in contemporary India and South Africa.

In India, caste is based in part on occupation; thus, families typically perform the same type of work from generation to generation. By contrast, the caste system of South Africa was based on racial classifications and the belief of white South Africans (Afrikaners) that they were morally superior to the black majority. Until the 1990s, the Afrikaners controlled the government, the police, and the military by enforcing *apartheid*—the separation of the races. Blacks were denied full citizenship and restricted to segregated hospitals, schools, residential neighborhoods, and other facilities. Whites held almost all of the desirable jobs; blacks worked as manual laborers and servants.

In a caste system, marriage is endogamous, meaning that people are allowed to marry only within their own group. In India, parents traditionally have selected marriage partners for their children. In South Africa, interracial marriage was illegal until 1985.

Cultural beliefs and values sustain caste systems. Hinduism, the primary religion of India, reinforced the caste system by teaching that people should accept their fate in life and work hard as a moral duty. Caste systems grow weaker as societies industrialize; the values reinforcing the system break down, and people start to focus on the types of skills needed for industrialization.

As we have seen, in closed systems of stratification, group membership is hereditary, and it is almost impossible to move up within the structure. Custom and law frequently perpetuate privilege and ensure that higher-level positions are reserved for the children of the advantaged (Rothman, 2001).

The Class System

The *class system* is a type of stratification based on the ownership and control of resources and on the type of work people do (Rothman, 2001). At least theoretically, a class system is more open than a caste system because the boundaries between classes are less distinct than the boundaries between castes. In a class system, status comes at least partly through achievement rather than entirely by ascription.

In class systems, people may become members of a class other than that of their parents through both intergenerational and intragenerational mobility, either upward or downward. Horizontal mobility occurs when people experience a gain or loss in position and/or income that does not produce a change in their place in the class structure. For example, a person may get a pay increase and a more prestigious title

but still not move from one class to another. By contrast, movement up or down the class structure is *vertical mobility*. Martin, a commercial artist who owns his own firm, is an example of vertical, intergenerational mobility:

My family came out of a lot of poverty and were eager to escape it. . . . My [mother's parents] worked in a sweatshop. My grandfather to the day he died never earned more than \$14 a week. My grandmother worked in knitting mills while she had five children. . . . My father quit school when he was in eighth grade and supported his mother and his two sisters when he was twelve years old. My grandfather died when my father was four and he basically raised his sisters. He got a man's job when he was twelve and took care of the three of them. (qtd. in Newman, 1993: 65)

Martin's situation reflects upward mobility; however, people may also experience downward mobility, caused by any number of reasons, including a lack of jobs, low wages and employment instability, marriage to someone with fewer resources and less power than oneself, and changing social conditions (Ehrenreich, 1989; Newman, 1988, 1993). Laura, who was born in the 1950s and who grew up believing in the American Dream, finds instead that she has experienced downward mobility:

I'll never have what my parents had. I can't even dream of that. I'm living a lifestyle that's way lower than it was when I was growing up and it's depressing. You know it's a rude awakening when you're out in the world on your own. . . . Even if you are a hard worker and you never skipped a beat, you followed all the rules, did everything they told you were supposed to do, it's still horrendous. . . . You don't get where you were supposed to wind up. At the end of the road it isn't there. I worked all these years and then I didn't get to candy land. . . . (qtd. in Newman, 1993: 3)

Is the American Dream eroding? Some analysts believe that the American Dream is getting a makeover among young adults, particularly those with a college education, who are optimistic about their future. For example, Emily Eaves, a recent college graduate, does not believe the gloomy projections that suggest that her generation will be the first to achieve less than their parents: "I'm not saying it's easy to achieve. But I think we have as good a chance or better than the generations before us. I think there are a lot of opportunities out there" (qtd. in Tanamachi, 1997: A1). In contrast, anthropologist Katherine Newman (1993: 11) believes the American

Dream is withering because many young people face a future of “escalating housing prices, occupational insecurity, blocked mobility on the job, and the cost-of-living squeeze that has penalized the boomer generation, even when they have more education and better jobs than their parents.” Ascribed statuses such as race/ethnicity, gender, and religion also affect people’s social mobility. We will return to the ideals versus the realities of social mobility and the American Dream when we examine the U.S. class structure later in the chapter.

CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CLASS

Early sociologists grappled with the definition of class and the criteria for determining people’s location in the class structure. Both Karl Marx and Max Weber viewed class as an important determinant of social inequality and social change, and their works have had a profound influence on how we view the U.S. class system today.

Karl Marx: Relationship to the Means of Production

According to Karl Marx, class position and the extent of our income and wealth are determined by our work situation, or our relationship to the means of

Sociology Now™ Learn more about **social class** by going through the Layers of Social Class Animation.

production. As we have previously seen, Marx stated that capitalistic societies consist of two classes—the capitalists and the workers. The **capitalist class** (*bourgeoisie*) consists of those who own the means of production—the land and capital necessary for factories and mines, for example. The **working class** (*proletariat*) consists of those who must sell their labor to the owners in order to earn enough money to survive (see Figure 8.1).

According to Marx, class relationships involve inequality and exploitation. The workers are exploited as capitalists maximize their profits by paying workers less than the resale value of what they produce but do not own. Marx believed that a deep level of antagonism exists between capitalists and workers because of extreme differences in the *material interests* of the people in these two classes. According to the sociologist Erik O. Wright (1997: 5), material interests are “the interests people have in their material standard of living, understood as the package of toil, consumption and leisure. Material interests are thus not interests of maximizing consumption *per se*, but rather interests in the trade-off between toil, leisure and consumption.” Wright suggests that *exploitation* is the key concept for understanding Marx’s assertion that *interests* are generated by class relations: “In an exploitative relation, the exploiter *needs* the exploited since the exploiter



This recent strike by service employees reflects the activism of workers throughout the years as they have sought to gain better wages and working conditions. How would Karl Marx explain the problems experienced by employees such as these?