



SYM 101
SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Unit : 05

Topic : Social Stratification Part II

Content

**Theories of
Social
Stratification**

**Functions of
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Stratification**

Theories of Social Stratification

- **Plato and Aristotle:** Social inequalities exist in every society in terms of natural differences. That is, naturally people are born unequal. Theory given by them considered pattern of inequalities as natural, permanent and inevitable.
- Plato envisioned 3 classes: **Guardians, Auxillaries and Workers**
- During Renaissance period, an alternative approach developed towards understanding the pattern of inequality started.
- **St. Thomas and St. Augustine** first attempted to understand hierarchical order in society in terms of power, property and prestige.
- With this, intellectual tradition favouring understanding of inequalities in social term started.

Theories of Social Stratification

- Later philosophers like **Locke, Bentham, Rousseau, Hegel** argued that emergence of social classes is based on either inherent difference, acquired difference or combination of both.
- **Rousseau talked about social inequalities as created system of private property.**
- After middle of the 19th century, sociological understanding of inequalities started.
- Marx added dimension of division of labour in understanding social inequality.
- Weber gave trinitarian model of stratification in terms of class, status and power.

Theories of Social Stratification

- In the first half of the 20th century, a new set of theories in form of **structural-functional approach** emerged towards understanding pattern of inequalities, in the writings of **Talcott Parsons, Davis and Moore, W.L.Warner.**
- **Talcott Parsons understanding of social stratification is from functionalist perspective.**
- For him, every society is based on consensus, which is seen in terms of norms and values. Conformity to norms and values is considered desirable.
- Evaluation is done on these norms and values.

Theories of Social Stratification

- **Davis and Moore gave 3 propositions.** Melvin Tumin raised objection against these propositions, which were later justified by Davis and Moore.
- Society is made of certain positions. Some positions are functionally more important than others.
- Most important positions require most talented people, therefore more rewards are attached to these positions to attract talented people.
- To attain talent, one has to undergo training and sacrifices.

Theories of Social Stratification

- **W.L.Warner** developed a different justification for existence of social stratification.
- According to him, social strata are generally separated into relatively distinct segments that have more or less balanced and integrated culture. Thus, these strata ensure cultural stability in society by compartmentalising people on the basis of different culture. This reduces chance of inter-group conflict.
- **Six distinct classes were identified by him:** Upper, Upper-Middle, Lower, Lower-Middle, Upper-Lower, Lower-Lower

Functions of Social Stratification

- The glimpse of the cultures of the world reveals that no society is 'classless', that is, unstratified. All the known established societies of the world are stratified in one way or the other. According to Moore and Kingsley Davis, stratification system came to be evolved in all the societies due to the functional necessity. As they have pointed out the main functional necessity of the system is the requirement faced by any society of placing and motivating individuals in the social structure. Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons".



Encourages hard work: A key function of class stratification is to motivate individuals to strive toward societal values by working hard. Those who best embody and fulfill these values are typically rewarded with greater prestige and social recognition. Occupations tend to be ranked higher when they involve critically important functions and require rare or specialized skills. These roles often demand hard work, extensive training, and significant responsibility, and are therefore compensated with monetary rewards, social status, and other privileges. However, not all roles deemed important receive adequate compensation, indicating an imbalance in how society values and rewards certain occupations.

Ensures competition: Class stratification, to some extent, facilitates what is known as the “circulation of elites.” When high levels of prestige, comfort, and rewards are attached to certain positions, competition naturally arises. This competitive process helps ensure that individuals with greater efficiency and capabilities rise to the top, where their talents can be most effectively utilized.

Serves an Economic Function: This competitive dynamic also plays an important economic role by promoting the efficient use of available talent. In systems where top positions are ascribed, such as the caste system, it becomes essential to provide differential rewards. These rewards act as incentives for the upper classes to maintain their status by continuing to meet certain performance or behavioral standards. Even within the caste system, individuals at the top may lose their prestige if they fail to uphold these expectations.

Prevents waste of resources: The system of social stratification helps prevent the misuse of limited resources by ensuring that individuals with rare and socially valuable talents—whether inherited or acquired—are placed in positions where their abilities are most effectively utilized. Members of the elite class often possess such qualities, which justifies the privileges they enjoy, such as comfort and exemption from menial labor. From a functional perspective, it benefits society to fully employ these individuals' skills. For example, it would be inefficient and wasteful to invest significant resources in training someone as a doctor or engineer only to assign them tasks that require minimal skill and for which there is already an abundant workforce. Assigning people to roles suited to their capabilities ensures that talent and resources are not squandered.

Stabilises and reinforces the attitudes and skills: Individuals typically prefer to maintain relationships within their own social class, with close and intimate connections more often occurring among fellow class members. This tendency serves a specific social function—it helps stabilize and reinforce the attitudes, values, and skills that support one's class position, especially within the upper class. People with shared values and interests tend to interact more comfortably with one another, and their repeated interactions further affirm and strengthen these common traits.

Facilitates Pursuit of Different Professions: The values, attitudes, and traits of various social classes often differ, and this variation serves a functional purpose in society. Since both manual and non-manual jobs are necessary for the functioning of society, not all roles appeal equally to everyone. Highly educated or "refined" individuals may find certain types of work unattractive because they have been socialized, from an early age, to aspire to different kinds of professions. Through early family influence and socialization, individuals internalize values, attitudes, and expectations aligned with their social class. These internalized characteristics significantly shape their career preferences and job choices.

Social Control: Social classes contribute to maintaining order when the cultural patterns of the lower classes are embedded within the broader societal framework. Interestingly, a degree of tension or antagonism between different classes can also serve a purpose. Upper and lower classes often act as contrasting benchmarks for one another, helping to reinforce acceptable norms and behaviors and thus functioning as tools of social regulation.

Regulating the 'Shady' Sectors: Class stratification also helps manage and influence individuals involved in illicit activities—such as gamblers, black marketeers, small-time criminals, and smugglers. While these groups operate outside legal boundaries, they frequently acknowledge and respect the established class hierarchy. Although wealth may temporarily substitute for prestige, it is not a true replacement. Many such individuals aspire to gain social legitimacy, often by transitioning into respectable professions or engaging in charitable and cultural pursuits. This reflects how the class system subtly guides even those on the fringes of society toward conformity and social respectability.



THANKYOU
