Social Stratification: Crash Course Sociology #21

Crash Course: Sociology
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Imagine two people, two extremely wealthy people. One of them inherited their money, acquiring it through the luck that comes with being born to owners of immense amounts of property and wealth. And the other person worked for what they have. They started at the bottom, and through years of hard work and clever dealing, they built a business empire. Now, which one would you say deserves their wealth?

Sociologically, the interesting thing here isn't your answer, not really. It's the fact that different societies in different times and places have different answers to this question. Because the question of what it means to deserve wealth, or success, or power is a matter of social stratification.

[Theme Music]

Social stratification is what we're talking about when we talk about inequality. It's a system by which society categorizes people and ranks them in a hierarchy. Everything from social status and prestige, to the kind of job you can hold, to your chances of living in poverty, are affected by social stratification. That's because, one of the first principles of social stratification is that it's universal but variable. It shows up in every society on the planet but what exactly it looks like, how it divides and categorizes people, and the advantages or disadvantages that come with that division, vary from society to society.

Realizing that social stratification exists in every society brings us to another principle: that stratification is a characteristic of society and not a matter of individual differences. People are obviously all different from each other so we might assume that stratification is just a kind of a natural outcome of those differences, but it's not. We know this because we can see the effects of social stratification on people independent of their personal choices or traits.

For example, children of wealthy families are more likely to live longer and be healthier, to attend college, and to excel in school than children born into poverty. And they're also more likely to be wealthy themselves when they grow up. And this highlights another key principle of social stratification: it persists across generations. So stratification serves to categorize and rank members of society, resulting in different life chances.

But generally society allows some degree of social mobility or changes in position within the social hierarchy. People sometimes move upward or downward in social class, and this is what we usually think of when we talk about social mobility. But more common in the United States is horizontal mobility-changing positions without changing your standing in the social hierarchy. This generally happens when a person moves between jobs that pay about the same and have about the same occupational prestige.

Like stratification itself, social mobility isn't just a matter of individual achievement; there are structural factors at play too. In fact, we can talk specifically about structural social mobility: when a large number of people move around the hierarchy because of large societal changes. When a recession hits and thousands of people lose their jobs and are suddenly downwardly mobile, that's structural mobility.

But stratification isn't just a matter of economic forces and job changes. Which brings us to another aspect of social stratification: it isn't just about economic and social inequalities; it's also about beliefs. A society's cultural beliefs tell us how to categorize people and they also define the inequalities of a stratification system as being normal, even fair. Put simply: if people didn't believe that the system was right, it wouldn't last. Beliefs are what make systems of social stratification work. And it's these beliefs about social stratification that inform what it means to deserve wealth or success or power.

These four principles give us a better understanding of what social stratification is, but they still haven't told us much about what it looks like in the real world. So, sociologists classify stratification systems as being either closed or open.

Closed systems tend to be extremely rigid and allow for little social mobility. In these systems, social position is based on ascribed status, or the social position you inherit at birth. On the other hand, open systems of stratification allow for much more social mobility, both upward and downward. Social positions tend to be achieved, not ascribed.

Now, these terms are pretty theoretical, so let's look at some examples of more closed or open systems as well as societies that fall in the middle. The archetypal closed system is a caste system. Of these, India's class system is probably one of the best known. And while it's a social system of decreasing importance, it still holds sway in parts of rural India and it has a strong legacy across the country. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The traditional caste system contains four main large divisions called Varna: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. Together these Varnas encompass hundreds of smaller groups called Jatis at the local level. The caste system in its traditional form is a clear example of an extremely rigid, closed, and unequal system. Caste position not only determined what jobs were acceptable, but it also strongly controlled its members' everyday lives and life outcomes.

The system required endogamy, or marriage within your own caste category. And in everyday life, the caste system determined who you could interact with and how, with systems of social control restricting contact between lower and higher castes. And this whole system was based on a set of strong cultural and religious beliefs, establishing caste as a right of birth and living within the strictures of your caste as a moral and spiritual duty. Thanks Thought Bubble.

We see a variation of the caste system in feudal Europe with the division of society into three orders or estates: the nobility, the clergy, and the commoners. Again, a person's birth determined his social standing. Commoners, for instance, paid the most taxes and owed labor to their local lord. So they had little expectation that they'd rise above their station. The whole social order was justified on the belief that it was ordained by god, with the nobility ruling by so-called divine right.

Both caste systems use ancestry and lineage as a main principle of social stratification but race has also been used as the main distinction in closed social systems. The South African system of apartheid, for instance, maintained a legally enforced separation between black people and white people for decades. Apartheid denied black people citizenship, the ability to own land, and any say whatsoever in the national government. The Jim Crow laws of the American South were another example, as was slavery before that.

In contrast with caste systems, class systems are the archetypal open systems. They aren't based solely on ascribed status at birth. Instead they combine ascribed status and personal achievement in a way that allows for some social mobility. Class is the system of stratification that we have in American society. The main difference between caste and class systems is that class systems are open, and social mobility is not legally restricted to certain people. There aren't formally defined categories in the same way there are in the traditional Indian Caste system. Being in the "under-class" in the U.S. is not equivalent to being an "untouchable" from India.

In class systems, the boundaries between class categories are often blurred, and there's greater opportunity for social mobility into and out of class positions. The American system of stratification is founded on this very idea, in fact: that it's possible, through hard work and perseverance to move up the social hierarchy, to achieve a higher class standing. And this points to another difference in systems of stratification: instead of ancestry, lineage, or race being the key to social division, the American system has elements of a meritocracy which is a system in which social mobility is based on personal merit and individual talents. The American dream is that anyone, no matter how poor, can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" and become upwardly class mobile through nothing but hard work and gumption.

The American system is certainly more meritocratic than feudal Europe or traditional India, but the idea of meritocracy is as much a justification for inequality as it is an actual principle of stratification. In an open, class-based system of stratification, it's easy to believe that anyone who's not upwardly mobile deserves their poverty. Because a meritocratic class system is supposed to be open, it's easy to ignore the structural factors that influence class standing. But just as the Indian caste system and feudal estate system placed their limits on certain groups, the American class system limits just how far hard work can take some people.

The US class system tends to reproduce existing class inequalities, because the advantages that you start with have an incredibly powerful impact on where you can end up. This is part of the reason that the US is still stratified along race and gender lines. That said, these inequalities are no longer explicitly enshrined in the law, which is an example of the greater openness of class systems. Because of this openness, class systems also have a greater likelihood of opportunity for individuals to experience status inconsistency: a situation where a person's social position has both positive and negative influences on their social status.

Stratification isn't just a matter of one thing after all. When we talk about socioeconomic status, for instance, we're including three things: income, education, and occupational prestige. An example of status inconsistency is an adjunct professor who's very well educated but earns a low income. There's an inconsistency among these difficult aspects of their social status. Low income tends to decrease social status while at the same time, a high level of education and the societal respect for the occupation of college professor improves social status.

All these comparisons between closed and open systems might make it sound like they're totally different; a system is either one or the other. But really they're two poles on a spectrum. Not every society is strictly a caste system or a class system. Modern Britain, for instance, is a good illustration of a mixed system of stratification. It still maintains a limited caste system of nobility as a legacy of the feudal system or estates, which survive alongside and helps reinforce a class system similar to what we have in the US.

And some systems of social stratification even claim that its citizens are entirely equal, as the Soviet Union did. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the USSR was established as a theoretically classless society. But inequality is more than just economic. And Soviet society was stratified into four groups, each of which held various amounts of political power and prestige: Apparatchiks or government officials, Intelligentsia, industrial workers, and the rural peasantry.

So, like I mentioned before, stratification is universal, but variable. If you want to study a society, one of the things that you need to look at is the way that it's stratified and whether, and how, social mobility occurs.

Today we learned about social stratification. We talked about four basic principles of a sociological understanding of stratification. We discussed open and closed systems of stratification, and finally we talked about examples of different kinds of stratification systems, including caste systems and class systems.

Next time, we'll talk more about the why and how of stratification by looking at different sociological theories of stratification.

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