KEY TERMS

Absolute poverty  A minimum level of subsistence that no family should be expected to live below.
Achieved status  A social position that a person attains largely through his or her own efforts.
Ascribed status  A social position assigned to a person by society without regard for the person’s unique talents or characteristics.
Bourgeoisie  Karl Marx’s term for the capitalist class, comprising the owners of the means of production.
Capitalism  An economic system in which the means of production are held largely in private hands and the main incentive for economic activity is the accumulation of profits.
Caste  A hereditary rank, usually religiously dictated, that tends to be fixed and immobile.
Class  A group of people who have a similar level of economic resources.
Class consciousness  In Karl Marx’s view, a subjective awareness held by members of a class regarding their common vested interests and need for collective political action to bring about social change.
Class system  A social ranking based primarily on economic position in which achieved characteristics can influence social mobility.
Closed system  A social system in which there is little or no possibility of individual social mobility.
Cultural capital  Our tastes, knowledge, attitudes, language, and ways of thinking that we exchange in interaction with others.
Digital divide  The relative lack of access to the latest technologies among low-income groups, racial and ethnic minorities, rural residents, and the citizens of developing countries.
Dominant ideology  A set of cultural beliefs and practices that helps to maintain powerful social, economic, and political interests.
Estate system  A system of stratification under which peasants were required to work land leased to them by nobles in exchange for military protection and other services. Also known as feudalism.
Esteem  The reputation that a particular individual has earned within an occupation.
False consciousness  A term used by Karl Marx to describe an attitude held by members of a class that does not accurately reflect their objective position.
Horizontal mobility  The movement of an individual from one social position to another of the same rank.
Income  Wages and salaries measured over some period of time, such as per hour or year.
Intergenerational mobility  Changes in the social position of children relative to their parents.
Intragenerational mobility  Changes in social position within a person’s adult life.
Life chances  The opportunities people have to provide themselves with material goods, positive living conditions, and favorable life experiences.
Open system  A social system in which the position of each individual is influenced by his or her achieved status.
Party  The capacity to organize to accomplish some particular goal.
Prestige  The respect and admiration that an occupation holds in a society.
Proletariat  Karl Marx’s term for the working class in a capitalist society.
Relative poverty  A floating standard of deprivation by which people at the bottom of a society, whatever their lifestyles, are judged to be disadvantaged in comparison with the nation as a whole.
Slavery  A system of enforced servitude in which some people are owned by others as property.
Social inequality  A condition in which members of a society have different amounts of wealth, prestige, or power.
Social mobility  Movement of individuals or groups from one position in a society’s stratification system to another.
Socioeconomic status (SES) A measure of class that is based on income, education, occupation, and related variables.

Status group People who have the same prestige or lifestyle, independent of their class positions.

Stratification A structured ranking of entire groups of people that perpetuates unequal economic rewards and power in a society.

Underclass The long-term poor who lack training and skills.

Vertical mobility The movement of an individual from one social position to another of a different rank.

Wealth The total of all a person’s material assets, including savings, land, stocks, and other types of property, minus his or her debt at a single point in time.

ADDITIONAL LECTURE IDEAS

10-1: Status Inconsistency—Janitors and Tenants

Sociologist Ray Gold interviewed apartment building janitors in Chicago. Since these janitors are unionized, they have relatively good wages and are eligible for rent-free apartments. But like people in most occupations, janitors have an image, in this case, unfavorable. They are viewed by tenants and the public as ignorant, lazy, and dirty. In addition, it is assumed that anyone, even if he or she has failed at everything else, can be a janitor. These stereotypes are reinforced by the menial tasks performed by janitors (such as emptying the garbage), the dirty clothes they wear, and the fact that many of them are foreign-born.

These stereotypes make the janitor’s job difficult, since social relationships with the tenants are important. While making efforts to establish good relations with the tenants, janitors are well aware that their jobs are held in low esteem. Even people who are viewed as “good tenants” maintain a social distance from janitors. The janitors in Gold’s study commented on the jealousy expressed by tenants whenever janitors tried to better themselves. A raise in pay, a new automobile, or new furnishings in the janitor’s apartment lead to unkind remarks and sarcasm. And live-in janitors are never able to get away from these attitudes, since the building is their home.

Professional ethics are something we associate with lawyers and psychiatrists, but Gold found that janitors have them as well. They frequently know a tenant’s personal secrets, and they must learn proper procedures for easing gracefully out of delicate situations.

Both the professional behavior and the substantial income of janitors contradict tenants’ views of them as servants. But this conceptual conflict remains unresolved: middle-class tenants depend on janitors but do not regard the job as a middle-class occupation. Workshops for janitors and custodians, often held on college campuses, are furthering the janitors’ image of themselves as professionals. Yet there is little indication that tenants’ image of janitors is also improving.


10-2: Measuring Social Class: Subjective and Reputational Methods

In addition to the objective method of measuring social class, sociologists use two other techniques: the subjective method and the reputational method.
The subjective method of measuring social class permits individuals to locate themselves within a system of social ranking. Class is viewed as a social rather than a statistical category. The subjective method assumes that people can identify their membership in a social class just as they would their race, gender or age; other types of social differentiation. In a sense, this method measures the class consciousness discussed by Karl Marx.

Although it is easy to use, the subjective method has several shortcomings. In defining their own social class, people may reveal their aspirations rather than their actual positions; that is, they may respond with a type of false consciousness. For example, many people say they are “middle-class” when in fact their earnings and savings are too low for this classification. In addition, there is a general tendency for Americans to call themselves “middle-class” or “working class,” perhaps reflecting the importance of equality as a value in our society, and to avoid identifying with the elitist upper class or the disadvantaged lower class. National surveys show that an overwhelming majority of Americans define themselves as middle or working class. Thus, the subjective method may convey a false impression that there is little class differentiation in the United States.

With the reputational method of measuring social class, class membership depends on the evaluation of selected observers. That is, you will be considered a member of a given social class if others see you that way. Like the subjective method, the reputational method views class as a social category.

Sociologists using the reputational method call on a group of “judges,” who are familiar with a community and all its members, to rate the positions of various individuals within the stratification system. W. Lloyd Warner employed this technique in his detailed study of a community he called “Yankee City”; he determined a person’s social class by asking others how the person ranked within the community. (See Warner and Paul S. Lunt. The Status System of a Modern Community. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942.) Of course, the reputational method is limited to studies of small communities or small groups.

10-5: Is There a “Culture of Poverty”?

Anthropologist Oscar Lewis, in several publications based on research conducted among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, identified what he called the “culture of poverty.” Lewis believed that poverty has a strong effect on family life and leaves a negative mark that upward mobility may not erase. In other words, the implication of Lewis’s “culture of poverty” is that the poor will continue to exhibit their deviant lifestyle—“living for today,” not planning for the future, having no enduring commitment to marriage, lacking a work ethic, and so forth—even when they move out of the slums. Lewis stressed the inevitability of living out the culture of poverty regardless of later events. See Oscar Lewis. Five Families. New York: Basic Books, 1959; Oscar Lewis. La Vida. New York: Random House, 1965. This argument has been widely employed to justify antipoverty programs designed to bring “middle-class virtues” to the children of the poor. It is also used to discourage giving poor people control over programs aimed at assisting them.

To say that Lewis and similar thinkers have touched off a controversy is an understatement. Critics argue that Lewis sought out exotic, pathological behavior. He ignored behavior indicating that even among the poor, most people live conventionally and strive to achieve goals similar to those of the middle class. For example, archeologists at the University of Arizona have monitored trends in food utilization by examining household refuse—an example of unobtrusive measures—and found that low-income households went further than middle class households in choosing less expensive items, and that they wasted even less. William Ryan contends that lack of money is the cause of poor people’s problems and of any discrepancies in behavior, not inherent disabilities or aftereffects of child rearing practices. It is unfair, according to Ryan, to blame the poor for their lack of money, low educational levels, poor health, and low-paying jobs. See Ryan. Blaming the Victim, rev. ed. New York: Random House, 1976.

In the debate over a culture of poverty, policy makers neglect to make a distinction between culture and subculture. The poor in the United States do not make up a culture unto themselves: they are one segment of the larger American culture. The behavioral patterns of the poor that arise out of their low-income status may constitute a subculture, but poor people still share most of the larger society’s norms and values. Social planners must develop fresh initiatives that recognize this.
1. Briefly summarize the four systems of stratification presented in the text.
2. To what degree is slavery present in the world in the new century?
3. Slavery was not limited to plantation life in the United States, because it still exists in the world today. Explain.
4. Distinguish between an open system and a closed system.
5. Distinguish between horizontal mobility and vertical mobility.
6. How does the impact of intergenerational mobility on an individual differ from that of intragenerational mobility?
7. Summarize Daniel Rossides’s description of the class system in the United States.
8. Discuss capitalism from a Marxist perspective.
9. Distinguish between class consciousness and false consciousness and give examples of both.
10. To what extent have Karl Marx’s theories been useful in understanding contemporary industrial societies? To what extent have they been misleading?
11. Distinguish among Weber’s use of the terms class, status group, and power.
12. Contrast Max Weber’s and Karl Marx’s views of social class.
13. What efforts are being made to measure the contribution that women are making to the economy?
14. Distinguish between wealth and income.
15. How are wealth and income distributed in the United States?
16. Explain the utility of the terms absolute poverty and relative poverty.
17. Who are the poor in the United States today and what is meant by the feminization of poverty?
18. Discuss the feminization of poverty and explain its growing significance.
19. How is the underclass different from the poor?
20. Describe the ways in which stratification influences a person’s life chances.
21. Discuss the motion picture Titanic and how it illustrates the concept of life chances?
22. How does the Internet revolution exacerbate the difference in life chances between rich and poor in the United States?
23. Compare the commitment to social service programs in other countries with the commitment in the United States.

**CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss why patriotism could be considered a form of false consciousness. Give some examples to support your answer.
2. Explain why the upper classes may allow persons in the lower classes to attain prestige without granting them power or wealth. Give examples to support your answer.