

Introduction

Every society has a system that includes inequality as a key feature of daily life among its citizens. A Functionalist would argue that inequality, since it is a universal condition, is necessary for society to function. A Conflict theorist would argue that inequality is a by-product of an economic system and is the source of social dysfunction. Is it possible that both explanations are correct? Regardless, understanding inequality is essential to understanding society. In order to understand inequality, it is necessary to understand how it is expressed and maintained in society as well as how it affects the individuals within the society.



The Wages of Inequality¹

Systems of Social Stratification

[Social Stratification](#) [Video, 26:40 mins] refers to the way that society is divided into categories of people. It is based on social inequality with the highest strata having the most resources and power and the lowest strata having the least of these. All societies are stratified, yet there are many systems of stratification. Typically, stratification revolves around characteristics other than wealth and power. For example, race, ethnicity and sex and gender often become mechanisms for social stratification. Stratification, at its extreme can result



Separate but Equal²

in slavery or apartheid. Slavery refers to the legal ownership of human beings. While this practice has been outlawed in the U.S., it is still alive and well in many parts of the world. It can also result in [apartheid](#) [Video, 3:35 mins]. Most Americans think of apartheid, the legal separation of racial and ethnic groups as something that happened in South Africa in recent history. They fail to connect the practice with the overt legal segregation that existed in America's south and the covert legal practices in the American north that accomplished the same thing, such as [red-lining](#) [Video, 2:47 mins] and residential segregation. Finally, some societies follow a caste system. This system ascribes social status and class to a family. There is absolutely no social mobility within a caste system and the lowest caste is viewed as "untouchable," as in India.

Socioeconomic Status

Stratification in the United States is primarily based on Socioeconomic Status or SES. SES, a term developed by Max



Climbing the Social Ladder³

Weber, is a factor that is a combination of many social qualities. These include wealth, income, race, sex, religion, education and occupational prestige. This term is often used interchangeably with [social class](#) [Video, 2:06 mins]. Social class, however, is really just a measure of income and occupational prestige. SES is perhaps the best measure for understanding inequality because it factors in the intersectionality of social. People experience social life from a variety of perspectives simultaneously. For example, suppose you interview three of your college professors about their experiences in life. They will share the experience of having a higher education, but they may come from different social class backgrounds. They may be different sexes or genders and they may have different races. These differences will affect the life experiences that each individual has lived through and assimilated into their identity.

Social Class

CLASS	Percentage of Population	Typical Household Incomes	Typical Occupations	Typical Education
UPPER CLASS	1%	\$2 million	Investors, heirs, executives, media/sports personalities	Some prestigious university degrees
UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS	14%	\$150,000	Professionals and managers	College and university degrees, some graduate degrees
MIDDLE CLASS	30%	\$70,000	Semi-professionals, lower-level managers, white collar and highly skilled blue collar jobs	Two- and four-year college degrees
WORKING (LOWER-MIDDLE) CLASS	30%	\$40,000	Semiskilled labor, service, manual, and clerical jobs	High school degrees
WORKING POOR	13%	\$25,000	Low and unskilled workers, lower-paid manual and service jobs, seasonal work	Some high school
UNDERCLASS	12%	\$15,000	Seldom employed or unemployed, part-time labor, many rely on public or private assistance	Some high school

Table Summarizing Social Class Definitions⁴

Societies in the Western world practice a variety of forms of capitalism. This means that they have a social class system. Unlike a caste system, social class can be achieved through social mobility.

You inherit, in some ways, the social class of your parents. It is their social class that will determine the quality of the education that you get as a child, the amenities of the neighborhood you grow up in, and the quality of the shelter, clothing and food that you have access to as a child. The children of poor parents are classified as poor children. However, a social class system allows for [social mobility](#) [Video, 5:04 mins] or opportunities to elevate your social class across your life span. The majority does only slightly better than their parents and there is some speculation that this generation will actually do worse than their parents. While there are many classifications for social class in the United States, ranging from the underclass to the upper class, categorizing individuals by class is problematic. Working class, for example, refers to unskilled laborers and middle class refers to skilled laborers who earn approximately \$70,000 annually. However, some people that work on the production line in the auto industry may earn more than \$70,000, if they have worked there for a long time and put in overtime. How do we classify these unskilled workers who have a middle class income? They experience something known as status inconsistency. This occurs when there are stark inconsistencies between the statuses that an individual holds. Also, social class drives an individual's sense of self identity. For example, a person from the working or poor class may excel in school and become a physician. They move up to the upper levels of SES in terms of income and prestige. However, at heart, they may continue to think of themselves as poor or working class.

Theories of Social Inequality

Perspective	Approach to Social Inequality	Case Study: Poverty
Structural Functionalism	Social inequality is a necessary part of society. Different reward structures are necessary as an incentive for the best qualified people to occupy the most important positions. Even poverty has functions that help maintain social order.	The functions of poverty for society include the facts that the poor take otherwise undesirable jobs and housing, purchase discount and secondhand goods, and provide work for thousands, including social service caseworkers and others who work with the poor.
Conflict Theory	Social inequality creates intergroup conflict—poor and rich groups have different interests and may find themselves at odds as they attempt to secure and protect these interests.	Social welfare programs that assist the poor are funded by tax dollars, which some wealthy citizens may be reluctant to provide because taxes reduce their net income. This can create conflict between rich and poor groups in society.
Symbolic Interactionism	Social inequality is part of our presentation of self. We develop everyday class consciousness as a way to distinguish the status of others.	Poor and wealthy persons have differential access to the “props” used to project particular versions of self. In particular, professional clothing such as business suits can be too expensive for poor individuals to purchase, which can put them at a disadvantage in job interviews, where a professional image is necessary. Organizations like Dress for Success provide professional clothing for those who can't afford it, leveling the playing field a bit in terms of impression management.

Theories on Social Inequality⁵

Conflict theory was developed by Karl Marx as a means of describing the changes from a feudal system to a social class system. He argued that a capitalistic society divides people into two categories: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production and the proletariat are the workers who earn merely “subsistence wages.” He argued that these social classes increase and perpetuate inequality and oppression because one’s relationship to the means of production becomes the defining point in one’s self-identity. In fact, capitalism depends on inequality because it needs a source of cheap labor to survive, and to increase the returns to capital, or profits, the bourgeoisie must drive the working proletariat into wage slavery, reducing their pay to the lowest level possible. Per Marx, the only way to end inequality would be to end capitalism. Structural Functionalists focus on social stability. Davis and Moore argued that inequality exists because not all jobs are created equal. They argued that society sets a higher value on jobs that are essential to the survival of the society. Davis and Moore argued that the more important the job is to society, the higher the wages associated with that job will become. Symbolic Interactionists explore how we learn values within a social class and how this leads to a class identity. Bourdieu argued that we reproduce social life. Social reproduction means that wealth and status are inherited as cultural capital. If your mother is a physician, she may raise you with the expectation that you will be a physician. This childhood expectation will increase the likelihood that you will go to medical school. Symbolic Interactionists build on this idea with Goffman’s notion of everyday class consciousness. He argued that we learn the social cues for our class behaviors. We become aware of these behaviors and look for them in the behaviors of others.

Consequences of Social Class

It is clear that different opportunities are available for people with more resources. Those with more resources are more likely to have access to better education as children and affordable access to higher education. Higher levels of education provide opportunities for occupations that have higher salaries. Higher income provides greater opportunity for home ownership, leisure time and the accumulation of wealth, which can then be passed on to future generations. There are



Food Line at Homeless Shelter⁶

less obvious consequences of social class, however. [Recent studies show troubling reductions in upward economic mobility among Americans, and even more retained stratification among classes](#) [PDF, File Size 630 KB]. For example, people tend to marry within their culture and social class. An upper class woman is more likely to marry an upper class man and vice versa. There are cultural rules that dictate who you are allowed to marry that include “marrying well,” or within or above your social class. Marrying within one’s social class assures that wealth and poverty, for the most part, stay within the structure of the family across generations. Also, [women and minorities](#) [Video, 6:34 mins] are more likely to be or to become impoverished. People in the lower classes have worse health outcomes and lower life expectancies than those in

the upper classes. Historically, this has been linked to access to health care. Finally, the poor are more likely to be arrested and convicted for crimes and are more likely to be the victims of crime than those with more resources.

The Stigma of Poverty

To be [poor](#) [Video, 3:54 mins] is to be stigmatized. The United States is built on the culture of the American dream. This argues that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough. The flip side to this is the belief that lack of success comes from lack of working hard. This leads to the belief that the poor deserve to be poor because they aren't willing to work hard. This notion of the "undeserving poor" leads to individual explanations for poverty rather than structural explanations.

One explanation is the Culture of Poverty theory. This theory suggests that poor communities are separated from the dominant culture. This separation leads to the development of an independent culture. This culture is fatalistic and poverty is accepted as a way of life that cannot change. This means that the motivation to change is diminished. This theory is controversial because it puts the responsibility of poverty on the impoverished. It ignores the role that lack of access to opportunity plays in perpetuating poverty. In reality, poverty cannot be fully explained without incorporating structural and individual explanations. Structural theories explain the social institutions that encourage and maintain poverty while individual theories can explain the experiences of individuals within that structural landscape.



Welfare Center⁷

The Social Construction of Race

Inequality must also be understood from the perspective of [race and ethnicity](#) [Video, 26:41 mins]. If you ask the average person to explain why race exists, you are likely to get a biological explanation. This explanation would be true, to a point. The color of your skin and eyes is determined by genetics. If your modern ancestors migrated to a cold northern region of the globe, they evolved to have light skin and eye color as well as high nasal passages. This was necessary to survive in colder climates and higher altitudes. If your ancestors remained in or migrated to warmer climates, their genes did not mutate to acclimate. This biological explanation explains why we look different. It doesn't explain why this matters. Sociology is the discipline that examines race and ethnicity as a social construction. This means that race has no true biological meaning, beyond minor differences in skin tone. Rather, race is significant only because society decides it is significant.



What is Race?⁸

How is race defined? Consider the image above. The couple in this photo has a mixed race heritage. When you look at the picture of their twins, do you see one twin as white and the other as non-white? Does knowing that these girls are biologically twin sisters change your understanding of how race is defined? Does it challenge preconceived notions of the importance of race?

Ethnicity and Identity

Ethnicity is often used interchangeably with race but it is not the same thing. Ethnicity refers to a cultural background while race refers to biological characteristics that are used to categorize individuals. Ethnicity is important to self-identity. Beginning with the Nativist movement and anti-immigration campaign during the Great Immigration, the discussion of ethnicity and hyphenated Americans remains controversial in the United States. One side of the controversy argues that if you are born in the U.S., you are an American and should only claim that nationality. This tends to confuse nationality and ethnicity. Nationality refers to the country in which you hold citizenship. Hyphenated Americans are those that embrace symbolic and situational ethnicity. They retain elements of the culture that their ancestors brought with them during immigration and that have passed down through the generations of their family. Do you celebrate St. Patrick's Day because your last name is O'Malley? Do you celebrate Cinco de Mayo because your last name is Gomez? If so, you are participating in symbolic ethnicity. These are public behaviors that are driven by your family's ethnic identity. Ethnicity can also be situational. You might celebrate your Mexican heritage on Cinco de Mayo, but not mention it at work if you are the only Latino employee. You might be inclined to downplay your ethnic identity to fit in better with the work place culture. That doesn't change the importance of ethnicity to self-identity. It just illustrates that ethnic identity can be socially manipulated when necessary.



St Patrick's Day Parade⁹

The Definition of a Minority

Theoretically, differences in race and ethnicity should be interesting. They bring diversity in life experiences that can make personal interactions more fulfilling. However, the opposite is true. Race and ethnicity have historically been used to divide groups within society. They have been used to create an "Us versus Them" mentality that has led to discrimination and racism. They have been used to create [minority](#) [Video, 5:35 mins] status for groups within society. The social meaning of minority is not associated with the



Multiculturalism¹⁰

numerical size of a group. It is a distinction of social power. Minority groups are denied equal access to social power and opportunity. The group that holds minority status has poorer social outcomes because they hold less wealth and power within the social structure. Minorities are categorized by some characteristic that they share which sets them apart from the dominant culture. This might include race, religion, culture, or nationality.

Racism and Discrimination

[Racism](#) [Video, 4:17 mins] is the values and beliefs that one race is superior to another. These values and beliefs are used to justify inequality. They are based in the belief that there are genetic differences among the groups that make one inferior to another. Prejudice is the practice of prejudging an individual based on an underlying stereotype about the group and discrimination is when racist or prejudiced ideas cause unequal and unfair treatment against an individual or group. It is possible to discriminate even if you do not hold racist or prejudiced thoughts. This is problematic for individual interactions, but it can be avoided personally by avoiding these individuals. Institutional discrimination is more problematic. [Institutionalized discrimination](#) [Video, 2:41 mins] occurs when the values and policies that govern social structures are discriminatory. In Chapter 7, you were introduced to the concept of apartheid and segregation. These are examples of institutional discrimination. Laws in the American south and South Africa made racism and discrimination legally supported.



Civil Rights March on Washington D.C.¹¹

Color Blind Racism and White Privilege

There is a growing movement and discussion to become a color blind society. On the surface, this sounds appealing. At the root of the argument is that we should not use race to judge another person. Rather our perceptions should be rooted in the merits of the individual's actions and not their group memberships. In an equal society this would be true. Color blind racism exists because society is not equal. Color blind racism removes race as an explanation for existing inequality. This results in the belief that society does not have [white privilege](#) [Video, 6:37 mins]. It is important to understand that white privilege does not mean that every white person is privileged. Poor whites struggle to make ends meet just like poor non-whites. The concept of white privilege means that while the poor of all races struggle, poor whites do not also struggle against racism. White privilege simply



Rachel Dolezal¹²

means that whites are not judged by the color of their skin regardless of their social status. Privilege refers to a social advantage that is not earned. Another aspect of color blind racism is [cultural appropriation](#) [Video, 3:03 mins]. This is when the member of a dominant group assumes the identity of a minority group member, often for their own benefit. Rachel Dolezal, for example, claimed that she was African American. To make the deception more believable she passed off an African American friend as her father, changed her hair color and style and darkened her skin. As she did this, she climbed the administrative ranks at the NAACP. Rachel Dolezal is white, but has many adopted siblings that are African American. Her case is controversial because she is committed to the advancement of equality and is strongly bonded to her non-white siblings while being estranged from her white parents. She argues that her self-identity is “non-white”. Despite this, she deliberately lied to everyone about her race and her ethnicity. This leaves her motivation and the response to her actions difficult to explain.

The Consequences of Racism

Many of the consequences of poverty are amplified by racism and discrimination. Non-whites are more likely to live in poverty. African Americans are less likely to marry because there may be little benefit to marriage for impoverished women. Non-whites are less likely to be insured and more likely to suffer from chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes. While the Affordable Health Care Act may reduce the inequality in insurance coverage, non-whites are more likely to live in communities without access to a primary care physician. Non-whites are less likely to have access to the same quality of elementary education and are less likely to attend college. They are also less likely to graduate from college. Non-whites are underrepresented in professional occupations that pay well and overrepresented in jobs with lower wages and less prestige. Finally, non-whites are more likely to be arrested for a crime than whites. When they get arrested they are more likely to be convicted and to get the maximum sentence than their white counterparts. They are also more likely to be targeted for surveillance (such as DWB or Driving while Black) because non-whites suffer from stereotypes. In short, non-white citizens are over policed and under protected. They are more likely to be the victim of crime, especially murder. The most extreme consequence of racism is the practice of genocide, the murder of a social identity group in an attempt to eradicate them, whether due to ethnicity, gender, religious identity, or sexual preference.



The Ku Klux Klan¹³

The readings and the videos in this module have introduced you to theoretical frameworks for understanding inequality. You have learned how all of your social experiences intersect to create your individual social experiences and how these experiences can create or deny social opportunities. You have learned how race and ethnicity can be used to perpetuate inequality. The

following activities will give you the opportunity to apply the theories from this module and to test your knowledge of the basic concepts of inequality, racism and discrimination.

Image Citation:

¹ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

² http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/140_1645116

³ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

⁴ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

⁵ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

⁶ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/139_197116

⁷ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/139_1971606

⁸ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

⁹ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/115_3937612

¹⁰ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/154_2896170

¹¹ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/300_2292120

¹² Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

¹³ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/139_1918197