

human excrement and carrying it away in baskets for disposal. Women from this caste typically clean dry toilets in homes, while men do the more physically demanding cleaning of sewers and septic tanks. They face barriers when trying to leave, such as threats of violence and eviction from local residents as well as harassment and unlawful withholding of wages by local officials (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Even Indians living in the United States find that caste sometimes colors their experiences with friends and business associates (J. Berger, 2004).

Estate Systems

A third form of stratification is the *estate system*, or *feudal system*, which develops when high-status groups own land and have power based on their noble birth (Kerbo, 1991). Estate systems were most commonly found in preindustrial societies. In medieval Europe, the highest “estate” in society was occupied by the aristocracy, who derived their wealth and power from extensive landholdings. The clergy formed the next estate. Although they had lower status than the aristocracy, they still claimed considerable status because the Catholic Church itself owned a great deal of land and exerted influence over people’s lives. The last, or “third,” estate was reserved for commoners: serfs, peasants, artisans, and merchants. Movement between estates was possible, though infrequent. Occasionally, a commoner might be knighted, or a wealthy merchant might become an aristocrat.

Some reminders of the estate system can still be seen today. In Great Britain, for instance, Parliament’s House of Lords is still occupied primarily by people of “noble birth,” and a small group of aristocratic families still sit at the top of the social ladder, where they enjoy tremendous inherited wealth and exercise significant political power. For a moment, this system seemed to be changing. In 2007, the British House of Commons (the so-called lower house) voted overwhelmingly to introduce elections to the House of Lords. It also voted to remove the last remaining “hereditary peers,” whose presence in the House of Lords is based solely on their noble lineage (Cowell, 2007). A week later, the House of Lords soundly rejected the measure.

Social Class Systems

Stratification systems in contemporary industrialized societies are most likely to be based on social class. A *social class* is a group of people who share a similar economic position in society based on their wealth and income. Class is essentially, therefore, an economic stratification system. It is a means of ranking people or groups that determines access to important resources and life chances. Less obviously, perhaps, social class provides people with a particular understanding of the world and where they fit into it compared with others.

Class systems differ from other systems of stratification in that they raise no legal barriers to *social mobility*—the movement of people or groups from one level to another. Theoretically, all members of a class system, no matter how destitute they are, can rise to the top. In practice, however, mobility between classes may be difficult for some people. For instance, where you live can influence your chances of upward mobility. Climbing the income ladder is less common in the Southeast and industrial Midwest and more likely in the Northeast and West where poor people have a greater chance of living in mixed-income neighborhoods with better elementary schools and high schools and more civic engagement (Leonhardt, 2013).

In addition, some economists say that it often takes five or six generations to erase the advantages or disadvantages of a person’s economic origins (Krueger, 2002). Within the span of a single generation, there isn’t much social mobility—wealthy parents tend to have wealthy children; poor

parents tend to have poor children. In fact, the United States has significantly less social mobility than comparable nations. For instance, 42% of Americans who grew up in the bottom fifth of incomes stay there as adults. In Denmark, the figure is 25% and in Britain it's 30% (Jäntti, 2006). Likewise, race and gender have historically determined a person's access to educational, social, and employment opportunities. Women of color are especially likely to face barriers to upward mobility, in terms of both economic disadvantage and lack of emotional support from their families (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992).

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON STRATIFICATION

Sociologists have long been interested in explaining why societies are stratified. Two theoretical perspectives—the structural-functionalist perspective and the conflict perspective—offer insights into the sources and purposes of social inequality. They are often presumed to be competing views, but we can actually use them together to deepen our understanding of why social inequality exists, how it develops, and why it is so persistent.

The Structural-Functionalist View of Stratification

From a structural-functionalist perspective, the cause of stratification lies in a society's inevitable need for order. Because social inequality is found in some form in all societies and thus is apparently unavoidable, inequality must somehow be necessary for societies to run smoothly.

As with bureaucracies, the efficient functioning of society requires that various tasks be allocated through a strictly defined division of labor. If the tasks associated with all social positions in a society were equally pleasant and equally important and required the same talents, it wouldn't make a difference who occupied which position. But structural functionalists argue that it does make a difference. Some occupations, such as teaching and medicine, are more important for the well-being of society than others and require greater talent and training. Society's dilemma is to make sure that the most talented people perform the most important tasks. One way to ensure this distribution of tasks is to assign higher rewards—better pay, greater prestige, more social privileges—to some positions in society so that they will be attractive to people with the necessary talents and abilities (K. Davis & Moore, 1945). Presumably, if these talented people were not offered sufficiently high rewards, they would have no reason to take on the difficult and demanding tasks associated with important positions. Why would someone go through the agony and costs of many years of medical school, for instance, without some promise of compensation and high prestige?

Just because a position is important, however, does not mean it is generously rewarded (K. Davis & Moore, 1945). Imagine what our society would be like without people who remove our trash. Not only would our streets be unsightly, but our collective health would suffer. Therefore, garbage collectors serve a vital social function. But they don't get paid very much—on average, about \$550 a week, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015c)—and trash removal is definitely not a highly respected occupation.

Why aren't garbage collectors higher up in the hierarchy of occupations? According to the structural-functionalist perspective, it is because we have no shortage of people with the skills needed to collect garbage. Physicians also serve the collective health needs of a society. But because of the skills and training needed to be a doctor, society must offer rewards high enough to ensure that qualified people will want to enter the medical profession. Doctors—even those just starting out—can expect to make, on average, four times more than garbage collectors (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015c).

This explanation makes some sense. But when we examine the pay scales of actual occupations more closely, it comes up short. For instance, despite the fact that they're in the same profession and have gone through similar training, a registered nurse in a doctor's office can make close to four times as much as a registered nurse working in a high school or junior college. A plumber at a city hospital makes more than twice what a plumber at a decent-sized hotel makes (Davidson, 2011).

But let's not stop there. One look at the salary structure in today's society reveals obvious instances of highly paid positions that don't seem as functionally important as positions that receive lower wages. For instance, as a couple, Beyoncé and Jay-Z earn about \$180 million a year (\$115 and \$65 million respectively). The boxer, Floyd Mayweather makes \$105 million. Filmmaker Steven Spielberg pulls in \$100 million. Oprah Winfrey and Justin Bieber each earn over \$80 million a year (*Forbes Magazine*, 2015b). You might say that TV personalities, filmmakers, boxers, and singers serve vital social functions by providing the rest of us with a recreational release from the demands of ordinary life; and the best entertainers and athletes do have rare skills, indeed. However, society probably can do without another megahit movie, concert, or welterweight title fight more easily than it can do without competent physicians, scientists, computer programmers, teachers, or even trash collectors, who earn substantially less in a year than what many celebrities earn in a day.

Furthermore, the structural-functionalist argument that only a limited number of talented people are around to occupy important social positions is probably overstated. Many people have the talent to become doctors. What they lack is access to training. And why are some people—women and members of racial and ethnic minorities—paid less for or excluded entirely from certain jobs? The debates over equal employment opportunity and equal pay for equal work are essentially debates over how the functional importance of certain positions is determined.

Finally, when functionalists claim that stratification serves the needs of society, we must ask, whose needs? A system of slavery obviously meets the economic needs of one group at the expense of another, but that doesn't make it acceptable. In a class-stratified society, individuals who receive the greatest rewards have the resources to make sure they continue receiving such rewards. Over time, the competition for the most desirable positions will become less open and less competitive. The offspring of "talented"—that is, high-status—parents will inevitably have an advantage over equally talented people who are born into less successful families. Hence, social background and not personal aptitude may become the primary criterion for filling important social positions (Tumin, 1953).

The structural-functionalist perspective gives us important insight into how societies ensure that all positions in the division of labor are filled. Every society, no matter how simple or complex, differentiates people in terms of prestige and esteem and possesses a certain amount of institutional inequality. But this perspective doesn't address the fact that stratification can be unjust and divisive, a source of social *disorder* (Tumin, 1953).

The Conflict View of Stratification

Conflict theorists are among those who argue that social inequality is neither a societal necessity nor a source of social order. They see it as a primary source of conflict, coercion, and unhappiness. Stratification ultimately rests on the unequal distribution of resources—some people have them, others don't. Important resources include money, land, information, education, health care, safety, and adequate housing. Those high in the stratification system can control these resources because they are the ones who set the rules. The conflict perspective takes it as a fundamental truth that stratification systems serve the interests of those at the top and not the survival needs of the entire society.

Resources are an especially important source of inequality when they are scarce. Sometimes, their scarcity is natural. For instance, there's only a finite amount of land on earth that can be used, inhabited, and owned. At other times, however, the scarcity of a resource is artificially created. For instance, in 1890, the founder of De Beers, the South African company that currently controls two thirds of the international diamond market, realized that the sheer abundance of diamonds in southern Africa would make them virtually worthless on the international market. So he decided to carefully limit the number of diamonds released for sale each year. This artificially created rarity, coupled with a carefully cultivated image of romance, is what made diamonds so expensive and what continues to make companies such as De Beers so powerful today (Harden, 2000).

Rich and politically powerful individuals frequently work together to create or maintain privilege, often at the expense of the middle and lower classes (Phillips, 2002). The U.S. Congress is dominated by members—both Republicans and Democrats—who are far richer than the citizens they represent. The median net worth of a member of Congress is about \$1.03 million, 18 times more than that of a typical American household (Choma, 2015). Over half of Congress members are millionaires. Thus, from the conflict perspective, it's not at all surprising that politicians would make decisions that benefit the wealthy over others. For instance, in 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that placing limits on the amount of money individuals could contribute to national candidates for office was unconstitutional. That year, only about 32,000 wealthy people—roughly one one hundredth of 1% of the population—provided \$1.2 billion in federal campaign contributions (Olsen-Phillips, Choma, Bryner, & Weber, 2015).

Furthermore, while Congress continues to search for ways to cut spending on programs designed to help low-income Americans, such as Medicaid (the health insurance system that covers poor adults and their dependents), low-income housing programs, legal services for the poor, and supplemental nutrition for poor families (Greywolfe359, 2011), the wealthiest 20% of the population gets over half of the overall savings from breaks in the U.S. tax code (for things like mortgage interest and rental expenses; Congressional Budget Office, 2013). In fact, Americans earning over \$1 million a year receive about \$30 billion a year in federal grants and subsidies (D. Stone & Colarusso, 2011). In addition, although the federal tax rate on corporate profits is 35%, wealthy corporations actually enjoy a tax rate of only around 12.6% due to an array of legal deductions and favorable loopholes (N.D. Schwartz, 2013). Indeed, when called upon to provide financial relief to the victims of natural disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes, many members of Congress favor paying for the aid only by cutting the budgets of existing social programs that help other needy citizens rather than by repealing tax cuts for upper-class Americans (Pappas, 2013).

There's some evidence that a growing number of Americans perceive tensions between those at the top and the rest of the population, as the conflict perspective would predict. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center (2014a) found that 62% of Americans believe that the economic system unfairly favors the powerful and 78% believe that too much influence is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies. In addition, nearly 6 in 10 people believe that the rich pay too little in taxes and 55% believe that rich people are more likely than the average person to be greedy (cited in Kohut, 2012).

What the conflict perspective gives us that the structural-functionalist perspective doesn't is an acknowledgment of the interconnected roles that economic and political institutions play in creating and maintaining a stratified society.

The Marxian Class Model Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848/1982) were the original proponents of the view that societies are divided into conflicting classes. They felt that in modern societies,

two major classes emerge: *capitalists* (or the bourgeoisie), who own the *means of production*—land, commercial enterprises, factories, and wealth—and are able to purchase the labor of others, and *workers* (or the proletariat), who neither own the means of production nor have the ability to purchase the labor of others. Workers, instead, must sell their own labor to others in order to survive. Some workers, including store managers and factory supervisors, may control other workers, but their power is minimal compared with the power exerted over them by those in the capitalist class. Marx and Engels supplemented this two-tiered conception of class by adding a third tier, the *petite bourgeoisie*, which is a transitional class of people who own the means of production but don't purchase the labor power of others. This class consists of self-employed skilled laborers and businesspeople who are economically self-sufficient but don't have a staff of subordinate workers (R. V. Robinson & Kelley, 1979). Exhibit 10.1 diagrams the positions of the three classes.

Capitalists have considerable sway over what and how much will be produced, who will get it, how much money people will be paid to produce it, and so forth. Such influence allows them to control other people's livelihoods, the communities in which people live, and the economic decisions that affect the entire society. In such a structure, the rich inevitably tend to get richer, to use their wealth to create more wealth for themselves, and to act in ways that will protect their interests and positions in society.

Ultimately, the wealthy segments of society gain the ability to influence important social institutions such as the government, the media, the schools, and the courts. They have access to the means necessary to create and promote a reality that justifies their exploitative actions. Their version of reality is so influential that even those who are harmed by it come to accept it. Marx and Engels called this phenomenon *false consciousness*. False consciousness is crucial because it is the primary means by which the powerful classes in society prevent protest and revolution. As long as large numbers of poor people continue to believe that wealth and success are solely the products of individual hard work and effort rather than structured inequalities in society—that is, they believe what in the United States has been called the American Dream—resentment and animosity toward the rich will be minimized and people will perceive the inequalities as fair and deserved (R. V. Robinson & Bell, 1978).

Neo-Marxist Models of Stratification In Marx's time—the heyday of industrial development in the mid 19th century—ownership of property and control of labor were synonymous. Most jobs were either on farms or in factories. Lumping all those who owned productive resources into one class and all those who didn't into another made sense. However, the nature of capitalism has changed a lot since

EXHIBIT 10.1 Marx's Model of Class

| | Control labor of others | Do not control labor of others |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Own means of production (land, factories, etc.) | <i>Capitalists</i> | <i>Petite bourgeoisie</i> |
| Do not own means of production | <i>Workers</i> | <i>Workers</i> |

then. Today, a person with a novel idea for a product or service, high-speed Internet access, and a smartphone can go into business and make a lot of money. Corporations have become much larger and more bureaucratic, with a long, multilevel chain of command. Ownership of corporations lies in the hands of stockholders (foreign as well as domestic), who often have no connection at all to the everyday workings of the business. Thus, ownership and management are separated. The powerful people who run large businesses and control workers on a day-to-day basis are frequently not the same people who own the businesses.

In light of changing realities, more contemporary conflict sociologists, such as Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), have offered models that focus primarily on differing levels of authority among the members of society. What's important is not just who owns the means of production but who can exercise influence over others. **Authority** is the possession of some status or quality that compels others to obey (Starr, 1982). A person with authority has the power to order or forbid behavior in others (Wrong, 1988). Such commands don't require the use of force or persuasion, nor do they need to be explained or justified. Rulers simply have authority over the ruled, as do teachers over students, employers over employees, and parents over children. These authority relationships are not fixed, of course: Children fight with their parents, students challenge their teachers, and workers protest against their bosses. But although the legitimacy of the authority may sometimes be called into question, the ongoing dependence of the subordinates maintains it. The worker may disagree with the boss, and the student may disagree with the teacher; but the boss still signs the paycheck, and the teacher still assigns final grades.

Like Marx and Engels, Dahrendorf believed that relations between classes inherently involve conflicts of interest. Rulers often maintain their position in society by ordering or forcing people with less authority to do things that benefit the rulers. But by emphasizing authority, Dahrendorf argued that stratification is not exclusively an economic phenomenon. Instead, it comes from the social relations between people who possess different degrees of power.

Dahrendorf's ideas about the motivating force behind social stratification have since been expanded. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright and his colleagues (Wright, 1976; Wright, Costello, Hachen, & Sprague, 1982; Wright & Perrone, 1977) have developed a model that incorporates both the ownership of means of production and the exercise of authority over others. The capitalist and petite bourgeoisie classes in this scheme are identical to those of Marx and Engels. What is different is that the classes of people who do not own society's productive resources (Marx and Engels's worker class) are divided into two classes: managers and workers (see Exhibit 10.2).

Wright's approach gives us a sense that social class is not simply a reflection of income or the extent to which one group exercises authority over another. Lawyers, plumbers, and cooks, for instance, could each conceivably fall into any of the four class categories. They may own their own businesses and hire assistants (placing them in the capitalist class), work for a large company and have subordinates (placing them in the manager class), work for a large company without any subordinates (placing them in the worker class), or be self-employed (placing them in the petite bourgeoisie; R. V. Robinson & Kelley, 1979).

Wright's approach also emphasizes that class conflict is more than just a clash between the rich and the poor. Societies have, in fact, multiple lines of conflict— economic, political, administrative, and social. Some positions, or what Wright calls **contradictory class locations**, fall between two major classes. Individuals in these positions have trouble identifying with one side or the other. Middle managers and supervisors, for instance, can align with workers because both are subordinates of capitalist owners. Yet because middle managers and supervisors can exercise authority over some people, they may also share the interests and concerns of owners.

EXHIBIT 10.2 Wright's Model of Class

| | Exercise authority | Do not exercise authority |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Own means of production | <i>Capitalists</i> | <i>Petite bourgeoisie</i> |
| Do not own means of production | <i>Managers</i> | <i>Workers</i> |

Weber's Model of Stratification Other conflict sociologists have likewise questioned Marx's heavy emphasis on wealth and income as the sole factors that stratify society. Max Weber (1921/1978) agreed with Marx that social class is an important determinant of stratification. However, he observed that the way people are ranked is not just a matter of economic inequality. Weber added two other dimensions—status (or what he called prestige) and power—to his model of stratification, preferring the term **socioeconomic status**—the prestige, honor, respect, and power associated with different class positions in society—rather than class to describe social inequality (Weber, 1970).

The existence of these other dimensions makes the conflict model of class stratification more complex than simply a battle between the rich and the poor. **Prestige** is the reverence and admiration given to some people in society. It is obviously influenced by wealth and income, but it can also be derived from *achieved* characteristics, such as educational attainment and occupational status, and from *ascribed* characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and family pedigree. While wealth and prestige often go hand in hand, they don't necessarily have to. Drug dealers, for example, may be multimillionaires, but they aren't well respected and therefore aren't ranked high in the stratification system. On the flip side, professors may earn a modest salary, but they can command a fair amount of respect. **Power**, for Weber, is a person's ability to affect decisions in ways that benefit him or her. Again, power is usually related to wealth and prestige, but it need not be. Sometimes low-income individuals can band together and influence decisions at the societal level, as happened in 2012 when several thousand janitors effectively shut down the city of San Francisco by going on strike and marching through the streets to demand higher wages and better working conditions.

CLASS INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

One of the ideological cornerstones of U.S. society is the belief that all people are created equal and that only individual shortcomings can impede a person's progress up the social ladder. After all, the United States is billed as the "land of opportunity." Our folklore is filled with stories of disadvantaged individuals who use their courage and resolve to overcome all adversity. We don't like to acknowledge that class inequality exists or that some people face immovable obstacles on the path to success that others will never have to face. But sociologists tell us that our place in the stratification system determines the course of our lives, in obvious and subtle ways.

Class and Everyday Life

Class standing in the United States has always determined a whole host of life chances, including access to higher education; better-paying jobs; and healthier, safer, and more comfortable lives:

- In fire-prone regions of the country, insurance companies offer “premium” protection plans to wealthy policyholders. At the first sign of a wildfire in the vicinity, someone will come and spray special fire retardant on the policy owner’s house to prevent it from burning (W. Yardley, 2007).
- A study of street repair work in Indianapolis found that the average time it took between the filing of a complaint and the fixing of a pothole was 11 days in neighborhoods with an average annual income of more than \$55,000; in neighborhoods with an average income of less than \$25,000, it took an average of nearly 25 days (T. Evans & Nichols, 2009).
- For an annual fee, ranging from a few thousand to as much as 30 thousand dollars, wealthy individuals can buy “boutique” or “concierge” medical care, which includes special access to their physician via 24/7 cell phone and text; same-day appointments with a guaranteed waiting time of no more than 15 minutes; nutrition and exercise physiology exams at the patients’ homes; nurses to accompany them when they go to see specialists; and routine physicals that are so thorough they can last up to 3 days (Belluck, 2002; Garfinkel, 2003; Ody, 2012; Zuger, 2005). For those wealthy individuals who end up in the hospital, the pampering continues. New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Hospital offers a luxury penthouse wing whose deluxe accommodations rival the world’s best hotels: chef-prepared gourmet menus, the finest Italian bed linens, a marble bathroom, and a butler (N. Bernstein, 2012).
- On airplanes, class distinctions are painfully obvious. While airlines have reduced the space between coach section seats by about 10% since the 1990s (Mouawad & White, 2013), more affluent passengers can luxuriate in the spacious first-class section that often includes flatbed seats. First-class cabins usually contain more flight attendants per person than coach, and first-class attendants respond more quickly to call buttons. In addition, most airlines now have special express security lines for first-class passengers so as to avoid inconvenient delays. And it’s not just about shorter waits, better service, and roomier seats. Virgin Atlantic Airlines offers its first-class passengers leather armchairs with matching ottomans that turn into double beds. Emirates Airlines offers first-class passengers their own enclosed suites—complete with mini-bar, 19-inch television, bed, and “dine on demand” room service—as well as access to one of two shower spas on board (Rosato, 2004). In Paris’s Charles De Gaulle Airport, Air France offers its high-end customers a dedicated first-class lounge with a spa and a restaurant catered by one of the city’s finest chefs. In addition, immigration officers come directly into the lounge to check passports and passengers are driven from the lounge to the airplane in a limousine (Mouawad, 2011).

This sort of exclusive personal attention reinforces feelings of power and privilege. On the other side of the coin, people who are less well off routinely face frustrating barriers in their daily lives. They must often make use of public facilities (health clinics, Laundromats, public transportation, etc.) to carry out the day-to-day tasks that wealthier people can carry out conveniently and privately.

Social class also determines access to everyday resources that can contribute to long-term advantages. Poor families spend, on average, 60% of their income on food, clothing, and housing, leaving less money available for leisure activities as well as things geared toward the future, like insurance and savings. As one author put it, “thinking about the future is a form of luxury” (D. Thompson, 2013, p. 1). Consider also something we all now take for granted: Internet access. It would seem as if the Internet has become a truly universal resource. Over the last decade, inexpensive access over wireless phone lines has brought the Internet to millions of working-class people who may not have been able to afford it in the past. However, the emergence of services like video on demand, videoconferencing, online medicine, and web classrooms has restratified digital access. These functions require the kind of high-speed connections that tend to be available only through expensive contracts. Eighty-one percent of people earning between \$60,000 and \$100,000 a year own smartphones compared to 47% of those who earn less than \$29,000 (Barone, 2014). Half of middle and high school students from higher-income families have high-speed Internet access at home, compared to 20% of middle-income children and only 3% of poor children (cited in C. Kang, 2013). High-speed access can provide many educational, technological, occupational, and quality-of-life opportunities that lower-speed connections can’t. As a result, those with slower connection speeds may experience lower-quality health services, entertainment outlets, career opportunities, and education options (Crawford, 2011). In addition, lower-income middle school students lag behind more affluent students in their ability to find, evaluate, and discuss information they find online (Leu, Forzani, Rhoads, Maykel, Kennedy, & Timbrell, 2015).

We can see similar imbalances when it comes to college admissions. We would like to think that admissions decisions are based solely on a student’s merit: high academic achievement (reflected in high school grades) and strong intellectual potential (reflected in scores on standardized aptitude tests like the SAT). What could be fairer than the use of these sorts of objective measures as the primary criteria for determining who gets an elite education that will open doors for a lifetime?

Would it disturb you to know that your SAT score may depend as much on your parents’ financial status as on your own intellect? Obviously, simply coming from a well-to-do family doesn’t guarantee a high score on the SAT, but it can help. If you were fortunate enough to attend high school in an affluent, upper-class neighborhood, chances are your school offered SAT preparation courses. In some of these schools, students take practice SAT exams every year until they take the real one in their senior year. Even if a school doesn’t provide such opportunities, private lessons from test preparation coaches are available to those who can afford them. Access to these opportunities pays off (see Exhibit 10.3).

But social class is not just about differences in access to technological, educational, or economic opportunities. People create and maintain class boundaries through their perceptions of moral, cultural, and lifestyle distinctions (Lamont, 1992). For example, some communities forbid residents to dry their clothes outdoors on clotheslines because it gives the neighborhood a shabby appearance. A few years ago, the town of Wilson, North Carolina, voted to prohibit people from keeping old sofas on their front porches (Bragg, 1998). For generations, poor people in the area—unable to purchase expensive outdoor furniture—had kept their worn-out sofas and chairs on the porch, where they could still be used. But more affluent residents saw the practice as “low class” and approved the ban to make neighborhoods more presentable.

In the end, class is a statement about self-worth and the quality of one’s life:

It’s composed of ideas, behavior, attitudes, values, and language; class is how you think, feel, act, look, dress, talk, move, walk; class is what stores you shop at, restaurants you eat in; class is the schools you attend, the education you attain; class is the very jobs you will work at

throughout your adult life. Class even determines when we marry and become mothers. . . . We experience class at every level of our lives; class is who our friends are, where we live . . . even what kind of car we drive, if we own one. . . . In other words, class is socially constructed and all-encompassing. (Langston, 1992, p. 112)

Class Distinctions

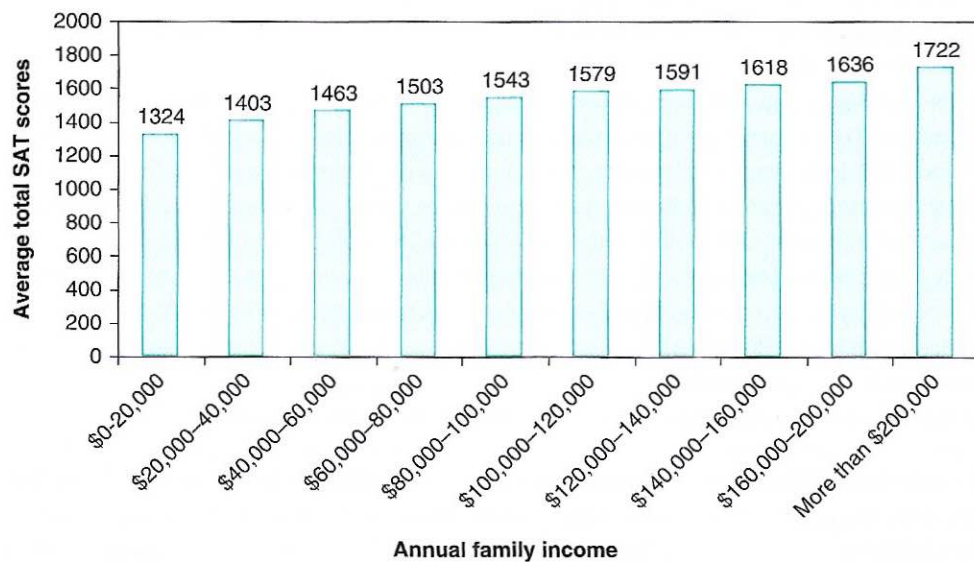
Although the boundaries between classes tend to be fuzzy and subjective, distinct class designations based on typical occupational patterns and incomes remain a part of everyday thinking, political initiatives, and social research. When we think of social classes, we usually talk about the upper class, the middle class, the working class, the near-poor, and the poor (see Exhibit 10.4)

The Upper Class The **upper class** in the United States is a small, exclusive group that occupies the highest levels of status and prestige. For some, membership in the upper class is relatively recent, acquired through personal financial achievement. These families are usually headed by high-level executives in large corporations and highly compensated lawyers, doctors, scientists, entertainers, and professional athletes. Such individuals may have been born into poor, working-class, or middle-class families, but they have been able to climb the social ladder and create a comfortable life. They are sometimes called “the new rich.”

Others, however, are born into wealth gained by earlier generations in their families (Langman, 1988). The formidable pedigree of “old wealth,” not to mention the wealth itself, provides them with insulation from the rest of society. Their position in society is perpetuated through a set of exclusive clubs, resorts, charitable and cultural organizations, and social activities that provides members with a distinctive lifestyle and a perspective on the world that distinguishes them from the rest of society.

Although “old wealth” families enjoy upper-class status across generations, most American families go through a wide range of economic experiences that can move them from one class level to another.

EXHIBIT 10.3 The Effect of Family Income on SAT Scores



SOURCE: National Center for Fair and Open Testing, (2014).

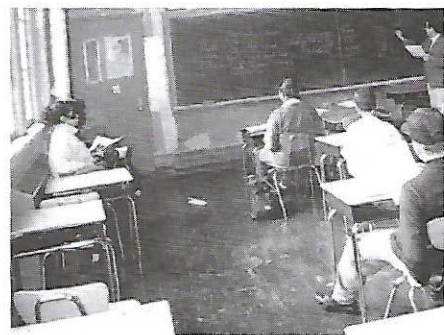
VISUAL ESSAY—THE PERKS OF CLASS

In a chapter about stratification and inequality, it's very easy to get bogged down (even overwhelmed) by statistics. We can talk about unemployment figures, median household incomes, net worth, wage disparities, and rates of health care coverage all we want. But in the end, inequality plays itself out in people's lives, particularly in how they go about meeting their day-to-day needs. Here we see images of a few common aspects of everyday life (traveling by air, traveling by land, going to school) from the perspective of those at "the top" and those who are not as fortunate.

As you look at these photos I want you to think about the larger implications of these different experiences. For instance, aside from comfort, what difference does it make whether you take an intercontinental flight in a private three-room suite or elbow-to-elbow with the stranger next to you in the cramped coach section? Similarly, what other feelings of advantage (or disadvantage) get reinforced when traveling in a chauffeur-driven limousine versus taking a crowded public bus like this one in San Francisco? Finally, how would your learning experience change if you attended a public high school in the South Bronx where textbooks are out-of-date and the ceilings are caving in versus a private high school in Austin, Texas, where the facilities are state-of-the-art and every student is given an iPad? As you ponder these questions, think of a bigger question: is it true—as our folklore would have us believe—that everyone in this society has the same opportunities to live a good life?



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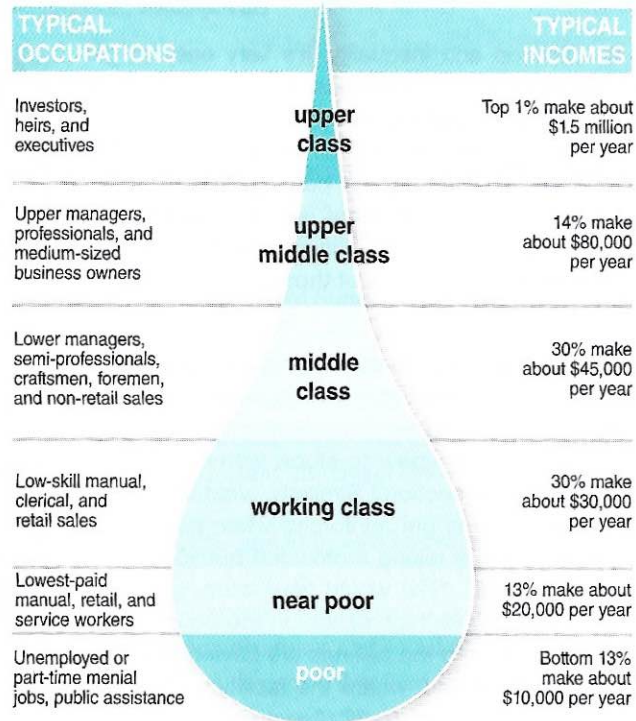
Jose Girbas/Bloomberg via Getty Images



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EXHIBIT 10.4 Social Classes in the United States

SOURCE: Adapted from Gilbert, 2015.

For instance, it's estimated that 73% of American families will spend at least one year in the top fifth of income earners (Rank, 2014).

Sociologists G. William Domhoff (1983, 1998) and C. Wright Mills (1956) have made the case that members of the upper class can structure other social institutions to ensure that their personal interests are met and that the class itself endures. They control the government, large corporations, the majority of privately held corporate stock, the media outlets, universities, councils for national and international affairs, and so on (Domhoff, 1998). Hence, members of this class enjoy political and economic power to a degree not available to members of other classes.

For example, the educational system plays not only a key socializing role (see Chapter 5) but also an important role in perpetuating or reproducing the U.S. class structure. Children of the upper class often attend private schools, boarding schools, and well-endowed private universities (Domhoff, 1998). In addition to the standard curriculum, these schools teach vocabulary, inflection, styles of dress, aesthetic tastes, values, and manners (R. Collins, 1971). These schools tend to emphasize “essay-text literacy”—the ability to read, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize written texts—in their curricula. Such a skill enables students to communicate in precise language and to formulate, examine, and defend arguments. Important social institutions such as governments, corporations, and professions are built upon essay-text literacy (Finn, 2012).

Required attendance at school functions; participation in esoteric sports such as lacrosse, squash, and crew; the wearing of school blazers or ties; and other “character-building” activities are designed to teach young people the unique lifestyle of the ruling class. In many ways, boarding schools function like “total institutions” such as prisons and convents (E. Goffman, 1961), isolating members from the outside world and providing them with routines and traditions that are highly effective agents of socialization.

In a study of more than 60 elite boarding schools in the United States and Great Britain, Peter Cookson and Caroline Persell (1985) showed how the philosophies and programs of boarding schools help transmit power and privilege. This school experience forms an everlasting social, political, and economic bond among all graduates, and the schools act as gatekeepers into prestigious universities. After graduates leave these universities, they connect with one another at the highest levels in the world of business, finance, and government. The director of development at Choate, an elite prep school in Connecticut, said this:

There is no door in this entire country that cannot be opened by a Choate graduate. I can go anywhere in this country and anywhere there’s a man I want to see . . . I can find a Choate man to open that door for me. (quoted in Cookson & Persell, 1985, p. 200)

The privileged social status that is produced and maintained through the elite educational system practically guarantees that the people who occupy key political and economic positions will form a like-minded, cohesive group with little resemblance to the majority whose lives depend on their decisions. As one columnist put it:

There is an archipelago of affluent enclaves clustered around the coastal cities, Chicago, Dallas, and so on. If you’re born into one of them, you will probably go to college with people from one of the enclaves; you’ll marry someone from one of the enclaves; you’ll go off and live in one of the enclaves. (D. Brooks, 2012, p. A23)

The Middle Class In discussing the U.S. class system, it is tempting to focus on the very top or the very bottom, overlooking the chunk of the population that falls somewhere in the ill-defined center: **the middle class**. Ironically, the middle class has always been important in defining U.S. culture. Every other class is measured and judged against the values and norms of the middle class. It is a universal class, a class that supposedly represents everyone. According to one recent survey, 9 out of 10 Americans consider themselves middle class regardless of the size of their income (cited in P. Cohen, 2015). Not surprisingly, the middle class is a coveted political constituency. Liberal and conservative politicians alike court it. Policies are proclaimed on its behalf.

But the lofty cultural status of the middle class in U.S. society belies the difficulties it experiences. Economists, pundits, and sociologists have long been fond of talking about the middle class being “under assault,” “endangered,” or “fragile” (T. A. Sullivan, Warren, & Westbrook, 2000). Median household incomes rose steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s but have leveled off and even fallen a bit ever since. In 1980, the median household income (in current dollars) across all ethnoracial groups in the United States was \$44,059. By 2013, it had only increased to \$51,939 (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014).

In addition to lower incomes, many middle income workers across the country are seeing their hours cut—for instance, by being moved from full time to part time or by losing opportunities for overtime. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013a), in 2013, about 8 million workers had to cut their hours to fewer than 35 a week due to slack work conditions or the inability

to find full-time work. Employer-provided benefits like pensions and retirement accounts have also fallen since 2007 (Mishel, Bivens, Gould, & Shierholz, 2013).

Moreover, between 2007 and 2010, the average value of a middle-class household's assets (or net worth) fell 40%, from \$126,400 to \$77,300 (Bricker, Kennickell, Moore, & Sabelhaus, 2012). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in 1967, 53% of households were defined as "middle income" (that is, they earned between \$35,000 and \$100,000 a year); in 2013, that figure dropped to 43% (cited in Searcey & Gebeloff, 2015). And in 2014, for the first time in history, the American middle class was no longer the wealthiest middle class in the world—Canada's median income is now higher than that in the U.S. (Leonhardt & Quealy, 2014).

Today, even families with good incomes live close to the financial edge, one layoff or medical emergency away from financial crisis. Consequently, Americans now see a middle class with fewer opportunities to get ahead, less disposable income, and lower job security than the middle class of previous generations. According to one recent poll, 85% said it was more difficult now than a decade ago to maintain their standard of living (cited in Blow, 2013).

Not only do middle-class jobs pay less than they used to, but there are fewer of them to go around. Many people who have followed the institutionalized path to success—getting a college degree, developing marketable skills, building an impressive résumé—are finding themselves out of work as companies cut costs to stay afloat. Hundreds of thousands of once-solid jobs in high tech, communication, and finance have disappeared. Many people who were once middle class are either marginally attached to the labor force or completely discouraged over their job prospects. By most accounts, middle-class jobs will continue to be in short supply, meaning that many college-educated people will be thwarted in their attempts to earn a comfortable living. Economists project that incomes for middle-class households won't reach their 2000 levels again until 2018 (Mishel, Bivens, Gould, & Shierholz, 2013).

To add insult to injury, economists predict that even as the economy improves, the job market will continue to be weak in part because companies have learned to produce more cost efficiently with a smaller workforce. Since 2010, equipment and software prices have dropped 2.4% while labor costs have risen 6.7%. So when companies grow, they quickly realize that it's much cheaper to buy new machines than to hire more people (Clifford, 2013). In 1999, the typical new business started with 7.7 employees; today that figure is 4.7 (cited in Rampell, 2012). Said one executive, "I want to have as few people touching our products as possible. Everything should be as automated as it can be" (quoted in Rampell, 2011, p. A1). Consequently, the number of middle-income jobs has dropped. There were 74% fewer word processor/typist jobs, 70% fewer computer operators, 46% fewer travel agents, and 29% fewer accountants and bookkeepers in 2013 compared to 2000 (Rattner, 2014). Moreover, employers are increasingly turning to temporary and part-time workers rather than full-time, permanent workers (who would be eligible for benefits). In 2010, one quarter of the 1.17 million private-sector jobs that were added were temporary jobs (cited in Rich, 2010).

It's no wonder that many middle-class adults feel like they're on a treadmill that constantly threatens to throw them into a less desirable social class (Blow, 2013). Compared to two decades ago, a smaller percentage of Americans believe it is possible to start out poor, work hard, and get rich (Sorkin & Thee-Brenan, 2014).

The Working Class Members of the **working class**—people who work in factory, clerical, or low-paying sales jobs—are even more susceptible to economic fluctuations than those in the middle class. Most working-class people have only a high school education and earn an hourly wage rather than a weekly or monthly salary. Although they may earn enough money to survive, they typically don't earn

enough to accumulate significant savings or other assets. Under the best circumstances, they usually have difficulty buying a home or paying for a child's education. When times are bad, they live their lives under the constant threat of layoffs, factory closings, and unemployment.

The middle class may be under siege, but the working class always suffers disproportionately from downturns in the U.S. economy. Consequently, they are far more pessimistic about their futures than wealthier Americans. For instance, one survey found that people who make less than \$30,000 a year are more likely to expect to be laid off or take a pay cut and to say they have had trouble paying for medical care or paying the rent (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Their fears are real. To save money, many large companies first reduce their low-wage workforce. In 2012, American employers initiated 6,500 "extended mass layoff events" (where at least 50 employees from a single employer file for unemployment insurance benefits and are out of work for 30 days or more), resulting in the loss of more than 1.25 million jobs, mostly in manufacturing and retail (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013c).

To survive psychologically in an economically unstable world, many working-class people resort to defining their jobs as irrelevant to their core identity. Instead of focusing on the dreariness or the insignificance of their work, they may come to view it as a noble act of sacrifice. A bricklayer put it simply: "My job is to work for my family" (Sennett & Cobb, 1972, p. 135). Framing their work as sacrifice allows them to escape the disappointment of an unfulfilling job and orient their lives toward their children's and grandchildren's futures, something that gives them a sense of control they can't get through their jobs.

But it is especially difficult for working-class parents to sacrifice "successfully." Upper-class and middle-class parents make sacrifices so their children will have a life *like* theirs. Working-class parents sacrifice so their children will *not* have a life like theirs. Their lives are not a "model" but a "warning." The danger of this type of sacrifice is that if the children do fulfill the parents' wishes and rise above their quality of life, the parents may eventually become a burden or an embarrassment to them. Thus, people who struggle to make ends meet are sometimes caught in a vicious trap. In addition, they must deal with public perceptions of them and their work that are decidedly negative.

MIKE ROSE

The Mind at Work

Author Mike Rose (2004) grew up in a modest home, the son of working-class immigrants. Most of the adults in his family and in his neighborhood never graduated from high school, and all of them worked in blue-collar or service jobs their whole lives. He was fully aware, early on, that these manual laborers did not occupy a particularly valued place in American society. Low-paying jobs are often labeled "unskilled." Such workers are consistently marginalized, either by more affluent people who treat them as if they are invisible or by widely held cultural stereotypes that they are unintelligent and unrefined. Because their work doesn't usually require advanced educational credentials, there's a belief that those who do it aren't that bright.

Rose set out to examine these stereotypes. He observed working-class people on the job—waitresses, hair stylists, plumbers, welders, and so on—and took detailed notes of their activities. Once he became aware of the rhythms of their work, he began asking them questions, casual ones to start with and more specific ones as he got to know them better.

(Continued)