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Key learning outcomes
By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- understand the way in which social class is defined;
- understand the relationship between social inequality and social class in a range of contexts;
- understand the different ideological positions associated with explaining the existence of social class.

Overview of the chapter
This chapter provides an overview of social class as an enduring contemporary social division, defining social class and exploring its relationship with social inequality. This chapter also explores how social class is related to social status and therefore illustrates how social characteristics relate to experiences of inequality in very different ways. Social class divisions permeate many contemporary societies and are ultimately linked to both social inequality and status in complex ways. The relationship between social class and social inequality is illustrated as complex and this chapter constantly touches on these complexities as well as the importance of status in relation to societal position and inequality. This chapter discusses social class within various contexts and guises to show that inequality associated with class position arises in all places across the globe.
What is social class and why is it important?

As Chapter 1 outlined, social class is an important form of social stratification and division within many contexts in the world. The existence of social stratification means that individuals within many societies experience unequal access to rewards based on their position in the world. At the most basic, rewards are monetary, although, as this chapter illustrates, status is also related to social stratification.

Features of socially stratified societies

- Individuals are ranked based on common characteristics, although this does not mean that they identify with each other. Individuals can change their rank in some societies and move into another category.
- Individuals’ opportunities and life experiences relate clearly to their social position and their ranking. Therefore, differences such as male versus female, black versus white and upper class versus lower class affect life chances significantly.
- Social stratification categories can change over time, although if they do, this is a slow process. For example, many commentators suggest that women are now equal to men in many industrial societies as a result of changing social rankings. However, as Chapter 3 shows, many feminists disagree with this and cite evidence to demonstrate the ways in which women remain unequal in both high- and low-income countries.

Adapted from Giddens (2009)

Social stratification is not a new societal division, as Chapter 1 illustrates. Historically, there have always been such divisions. Table 2.1 summarises these different divisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.1</th>
<th>Historical social divisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of social division</td>
<td>Features of the system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Slavery | - People are owned as property by others and slaves are deprived of many rights  
- Slavery in the USA was seen on Southern plantations, in which being owned meant no legal rights for slaves  
- Slaves were also common in ancient Greece but their roles were less restricted than US slaves  
- Today slavery is illegal in every country of the world, and for many is seen as unethical as well as a violation of human rights |
## Type of social division | Features of the system
--- | ---
Caste | • This is a system in which your social position is ascribed at birth and remains with you for life  
• Social position is based upon different characteristics, such as religion or parental caste position  
• Castes are rigid systems and any contact between different castes is not permissible as castes are seen as needing to remain pure. Thus marriage to someone from a different caste in some places is not allowed in law

Estates | • Estates were found in feudal Europe and contained classes such as aristocracy and gentry as higher classifications and serfs (such as peasants) as the lowest group  
• Mobility and intermarriage was possible so this system was not as rigid as the caste system  
• European estates tended to be locally organised, although Chinese and Japanese estates were organised nationally, and were related to religion

Class | • Classes are large groups of people who share similar economic circumstances and associated lifestyles  
• Class systems can be more fluid and are not based upon religion  
• Class position can be achieved through social mobility; people can move up and down the rankings  
• Class systems are often large and impersonal

Adapted from Giddens (2009)

As Table 2.1 shows, there are many types of social stratification system. However, most traditional systems of stratification, such as the caste and estate systems, have been replaced by class-based systems associated with industrialisation. Given the changes in the world associated with globalisation (see Chapter 7), social class is seen by many as the dominant mode of stratification.

### Defining social class

- ‘We can define a class as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead’ (Giddens 2009: 437).
- Social class is a ranking system based upon access to resources including wealth, education and work-related status (Weber 1978; Lareau and Conley 2008).
within the world today. Given its importance, there are many definitions in the literature about what it is, and how it should be measured.

While societies are constantly changing, there are often elements of traditional class systems that do not keep pace. Therefore, there are still elements of old systems that remain visible, such as South Asians seeking arranged marriages for their children based on caste divisions. This focus on economic and social positions is also somewhat limited as social divisions arise in many forms and are linked into gender, ethnicity, age, global position and social policy approaches. The processes associated with these divisions and within any stratification systems are numerous, and complex. There is also a wealth of evidence illustrating the existence of social class and related inequality over long periods of time. Complete the following learning task to explore your own social class position.

Learning Task 2.1

My own social class position

Have you ever given consideration to your own social class position? Perhaps you have been in situations where you have become aware of your class and status? Take some time to work through the following questions to explore your own class position in more depth, drawing upon your background.

Money and work

- Who earned money in your family?
- What kind of job did the money earners in the family have? How much control did they have at work?
- What were your family's/friends'/society's view of the status of that work?
- What were your family's attitudes about spending? Saving? Borrowing? State welfare?

Home

- What kind of area did you live in?
- Did your parents own your home?
- Who cleaned your home?
SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND INEQUALITY: SOCIAL CLASS

Education

- How much ‘formal’ education did your parents have?
- What were the expectations for your education?
- Are you the first generation in your family to go to university?

Now having thought about the questions above, how would you describe your class background and current class status now? How do you feel about your class background and status? Do you feel that you are part of a specific class, and if so why?

Having completed the first learning task you should now have an insight into your own class position, as well as the myriad of areas which relate to social class. Social class and inequality are also interlinked in a variety of ways. For example, people within lower social classes can be excluded from participating in society, and are thus marginalised. Furthermore, those in higher class positions often benefit from the labour of others which can be argued to be exploitative. Finally, power is also evident within class dynamics and class positions, with those in lower social positions often lacking both power and authority (Young 1990). Social class therefore remains important, with many debates about how to measure it still ongoing.

Measuring social class

The measurement of social class has caused much debate within the literature because it is complex. Large-scale patterns of similar employment within industries such as mining, mills and factories no longer exist today. Therefore, analyses of class have had to develop to accommodate such changes because divisions cannot simply be described as vertical. Some measures of class are also problematised because they are based on the male head of household’s occupation and so have received criticism from feminists. There is validity in this criticism as work patterns have changed: more women now participate in the labour market and some may have higher class positions than their husbands.

Crompton’s work (Crompton and Jones 1984; Crompton and Sanderson 1990) is important in demonstrating the complexity of class and other social divisions. She argues that in order to understand class inequalities, gender inequalities also have to be explored. Other debates about the measurement of social class have centred on whether to make theoretical approaches (such
as Marxism and Weberianism) implicit or explicit, how to assign occupations to groups or classifications, and the importance of the father’s and mother’s occupation in constructing socio-economic measures (Marks 1999). The UK measurement system that is currently used is outlined in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2  The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social class ranking</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Higher managerial and professional occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Employers and managers in larger organisations (e.g. company directors,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>senior company managers, senior civil servants, senior officers in police)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Higher professionals (e.g. doctors, lawyers, clergy, teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lower managerial and professional occupations (e.g. nurses and midwives,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>journalists, actors, musicians, prison officers, lower ranks of police)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Intermediate occupations (e.g. clerks, secretaries, driving instructors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Small employers and own account workers (e.g. publicans, farmers, taxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drivers, window cleaners, painters and decorators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lower supervisory, craft and related occupations (e.g. printers, plumbers,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>television engineers, train drivers, butchers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Semi-routine occupations (e.g. shop assistants, hairdressers, bus drivers,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cooks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Routine occupations (e.g. couriers, labourers, waiters and refuse collectors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Those who have never had paid work and the long-term unemployed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Office for National Statistics (2011)

Table 2.2 shows class positions based on occupation and demonstrates the importance of occupation as a tool for determining social class position. Occupations are related to economic earnings, with the highest-earning individuals being further up the ladder. Attitudes to occupations are often reflective of such class divisions, with status being related to occupation in many societies. This class scale is based on the work of a sociologist called John Goldthorpe (see Marshall 1998), who devised a scheme based on relative labour market position and work, which has now evolved into the scheme above. The scale in Table 2.2 has been criticised in the literature because the
scheme does not cover everyone; if you are reading this as a student, then you might realise that the category you fall into is not listed. The scale also does not demonstrate the large-scale differences in wealth that are evident within contemporary society (Giddens 2009). However, despite these criticisms, Goldthorpe’s class scale has been extended into a European classification scheme, listed in Table 2.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESeC class</th>
<th>Common term</th>
<th>Employment regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large employers, higher-grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations</td>
<td>Higher salariat</td>
<td>Service relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations and higher-grade technician and supervisory occupations</td>
<td>Lower salariat</td>
<td>Service relationship (modified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate occupations</td>
<td>Higher-grade white-collar workers</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small employer and self-employed occupations (excluding agriculture)</td>
<td>Petit bourgeoisie or independents</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed occupations (agriculture etc.)</td>
<td>Petit bourgeoisie or independents</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower supervisory and lower technician occupations</td>
<td>Higher-grade blue-collar workers</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower services, sales and clerical occupations</td>
<td>Lower-grade white-collar workers</td>
<td>Labour contract (modified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower technical occupations</td>
<td>Skilled workers</td>
<td>Labour contract (modified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine occupations</td>
<td>Semi- and non-skilled workers</td>
<td>Labour contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never worked and long-term unemployed</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from University of Essex (2012)

More recently, Dorling (2016a) has argued that class categorisations based upon occupations has to change, because it is possible to hold multiple class identities. He asks about how to categorise the class position of a university graduate who works in a call centre, rents a house with friends and has financial support from parents. The areas in which people live and wealth are now important in countries such as the UK. Furthermore, the class position of
women has changed markedly with involvement in the labour market, and women now have a longer life expectancy than men. A large scale survey in 2013, involving 161,000 people in the UK, found that class based upon occupation is outdated, and suggests that it has three dimensions – economic, social and cultural. Seven new classes were noted as a result of this study.

Contemporary social classes in the UK

- *Elite* - the most privileged group in the UK, based upon wealth. This group has the highest levels of economic, social and cultural capital.
- *Established middle class* - the second-wealthiest, scoring highly across economic, social and cultural capital.
- *Technical middle class* - a small, distinctive new class group which is prosperous but has low levels of both social and cultural capital. Distinguished by its social isolation and cultural apathy.
- *New affluent workers* - a young class group which is socially and culturally active, but has mid-range levels of economic capital.
- *Traditional working class* - scores low on all forms of capital, but is not deprived. Its members can have reasonably high house values (age-related – oldest average age is 66).
- *Emergent service workers* - a new, young, urban group which is relatively poor but has high social and cultural capital.
- *Precariat, or precarious proletariat* - the poorest, most deprived class, scoring low for both social and cultural capital.

Adapted from BBC News (2013)

However, despite these arguments, class divisions remain based upon occupation in many other societies. For example, social stratification in Japan is based on a mixture of old divisions, such as nobility and feudal classifications, combined with more occupation-based categorisations that include social graduations such as upper, upper-middle, lower-middle and middle class. Japanese class divisions have less firm boundaries than UK classifications and family standing remains an important tool for assessing social status within Japan (Macionis and Plummer 2008), hence class divisions are slightly different but occupation is still part of the way in which class positions are determined. The Indian caste system, in which people are divided into specific
social categories that form a rigid hierarchy, is again based upon occupation and is a stark example of class inequality. The lowest classification of individuals is called ‘the untouchables’. Within the UK and USA, the term underclass has also been used, and more recently within the UK the word chav has been a popular but negative label. These are both negative labels for individuals in the lowest social groups.

Chavs: the new underclass?

- Murray (1984) wrote about the underclass within the USA, referring to African Americans, who were at the bottom of society. He drew upon the idea of the culture of poverty, where groups develop a dependency, have little incentive to work, or find stable relationships, or live within ‘solid’ communities. Ultimately, this leads to social disintegration. This idea then transported to the UK in the 1990s (Murray 1990).

- Members of the underclass have no employment, may be homeless, and dependent upon welfare. The term has also been used to refer to inner city communities of non-white ethnicity, so there have been discussions of a ‘black underclass’. The term is negatively loaded, and has been debated within the literature so some scholars prefer to discuss social exclusion which tends to emphasise processes beyond individuals (Giddens and Sutton 2017).

- The term underclass is still used within contemporary debates, and has a strong association with immigration, thus has an ethnic component.

The term chav has received media attention within the UK and refers to specific cultural representations of the white working class, so again has ethnic connotations. Chavs are seen as having out-of-control bodies, wearing the ‘wrong’ kinds of clothing, using drugs excessively, having a poor diet, and being obese. Chavs are constructed as abject individuals, with poor lives, that they are incapable of improving. The media demonstrates that they are unintelligent, lazy and lacking motivation – they display a lack of control in all areas. They are seen as potentially ‘contaminating’, vulgar, and as having inappropriate consumption practices associated with a lack of taste (Adams and Raisborough 2011).

Labels such as underclass and chavs tell us about social class divisions in relation to cultural differences between societal groups, which are linked to status and consumption patterns – consumption is an important societal reference, and is related to how social classes are represented (Adams and Raisborough 2011).
They also show that class as a social division remains important. Claims have been made both politically and within the broader literature that class divisions are dying and are no longer important. Class divisions are arguably changing because of societal changes. Paluski and Waters (1996) and Dorling (2016a) argue that the political, economic and social importance of class is changing because societies are organised around status rather than occupation. These claims and some counter criticisms are presented in Table 2.4.

**Table 2.4 The death of class debated**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence for the death of class</th>
<th>Some considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The huge shift in property ownership with many more people owning property has restricted the privileges passed on to future generations by capitalists.</td>
<td>Some individuals remain excluded from the property market entirely based upon their economic status and position within society. Those in higher social positions can still pass on more privilege as property ownership is often in the form of portfolios rather than a single residential dwelling. Property ownership may be achieved by some in lower social classes at considerable economic cost, such as debt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumers have more power within contemporary society; thus, class is marked by the ability to purchase consumer goods, rather than by social class.</td>
<td>Consumption patterns are based upon economic position and resources; thus, those in lower social positions are likely to have less consumption power due to their occupation. The achievement of status via consumption is evident across social rankings but the recent financial crisis outlined the amount of debt held by individuals in high-income countries. Those in poorer paid occupations are more likely to accrue debt to achieve consumer status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalisation has changed the occupational structure in higher-income countries with fewer traditional manual jobs existing. Stratification therefore exists on a more global than national scale.</td>
<td>Chapter 1 presents evidence to suggest the importance of national social stratification with the UK being a notable example of a largely unequal society based upon occupation and economic position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structures are also changing, with greater geographical mobility, therefore the importance of the family in the reproduction of class is changing.</td>
<td>Research shows that social factors, including family, affect our life chances and social mobility (see below). For many, social class position still brings disadvantage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Abbott (2001)

As Table 2.4 demonstrates, class is not necessarily dead but changing societal trends are adding to the complexities associated with the concept. Class still remains important and is linked to inequality in a number of ways.
although contemporary class divisions are often depicted as being based on a fairer system than previous historical divisions, such as slavery or feudal systems, because they arguably relate to individual achievement. Thus, if you work hard and achieve, then you can move up the social class scale and gain a better job than your parents. This fits with the concept of meritocracy, a term that has been used politically to describe how individual merit results in rewards, because everyone in society is presented with equal opportunities. However, some argue strongly that this is not the case. Complete the following learning task to explore the measurement of inequality, and what this tells us about social class.

Learning Task 2.2
A lesson in measuring inequality

Use the internet to find the website for Danny Dorling (a professor at Oxford University) who has written about inequality and class for many years. His latest book (2017, Polity Press) is *Do we Need Economic Inequality?* Click on the book’s image (top right of the screen), then access the free sample chapter, called ‘Bell Curves’.

1. Read the chapter, making notes. What is the key argument?
2. What do the bell curves tell you about social inequality in the world today especially in the UK and the USA? Are they a useful measure?
3. What do you think that this means in relation to social class position?

Having completed the second learning task, you will have gained more understanding about the many factors that influence class position and inequality, and you can be more critical about concepts such as social mobility. Class divisions, however measured and labelled, are an ever-present feature of contemporary societies.

Social mobility

The term social mobility is often used within UK political discussions, and refers to the opportunity for people to move up the class scale. Thus, if you achieve educationally, you move up the class scale. If you work hard and achieve via employment, then you will also be able to move up the class scale.
While contemporary class societies do exhibit greater fluidity (mobility) than historical feudal or caste societies, social mobility is not as easy to accomplish as those in power and politics suggest. Indeed, reading Chapter 1 should have helped you to understand that equal opportunity is a problematic concept given the range of inequalities both within and between societies across the world. Research shows that the UK, as an example, is a country that exhibits low social mobility (Blanden 2009). Analyses of social mobility often focus on education as the route to class movement without an examination of the cultural factors that can play a part.

**Why social mobility is hard to achieve in the UK**

- Research has shown that there are strong links between scoring well in intelligence tests and in coming from more advantaged backgrounds (Breen and Goldthorpe 1999).
- Calder (2017) suggests that background matters as much as ever. For example, 71% of senior judges are privately educated. Family differences would be less significant if Britain was a more equal place, thus a society with less of a gap between the rich and the poor would have higher social mobility.
- Socialisation in early childhood also plays a role in shaping class differences in ability (Scherger and Savage 2009), showing that notions of equal opportunity for all are misguided because social factors remain linked to the prospects of different groups (Jackson et al. 2005).
- Pickett and Wilkinson (2017) note that Britain has a poor record on social mobility, but despite this the government offer relatively few solutions to this issue. They argue that the lack of social mobility within Britain is the result of high income inequality. They note that while many young people have aspirations, they are less likely to be successful because of structural barriers, and high levels of inequality.
- In Britain today, there is a post-code lottery in relation to opportunities for social mobility. Disadvantaged individuals’ chances of becoming successful relate to the areas in which they live. London accounts for almost two-thirds of social mobility ‘hotspots’. Coastal and older industrial towns are social mobility ‘cold-spots’ (Social Mobility Commission 2017).

Furthermore, class effects work in a variety of ways in relation to upward mobility because the transmission of cultural capital in relation to encouraging and supporting children contributes to the reproduction of class (Scherger and...
Savage 2009). Analyses of social mobility also tend to focus on upward mobility, assuming that individuals always wish to improve themselves and achieve self-betterment. Those who do not ascribe to such beliefs are negatively labelled in many social contexts because dominant political arguments focus on equality of opportunity, responsibility and the need for us all to achieve our potential without focusing on barriers and structural impediments for many, as well as the multiplicity of advantages that come with higher social positions. Payne (2017) notes that given the changes to occupations in recent years, unless professional destinations continue to increase, there will be no more room at the top. D’Arcy and Finch (2017) note the importance of employment for social mobility, following research with those who find themselves in low-paid positions.

Social mobility: the British great escape?

For those in low-paid positions, social mobility is not available. Research notes four types of cohorts of ‘progression’:

1. **Stuck** - some people remained in low-paid positions annually over a ten-year period.
2. **Escapers** - some earn more than the low-pay threshold for three years of the ten-year period, so have moved to sustained higher pay.
3. **Cyclers** - some people move up and down the scales of pay.
4. **Exiters** - some people retire, move into self-employment, leave the country or die.

In summary, for some people low pay is the only rung on the ladder (not the first until they are able to climb higher) which limits social mobility.

(Adapted from D’Arcy and Finch 2017)

Clearly, social mobility is not one-directional: some people may become downwardly mobile, an aspect of social mobility widely overlooked within political discussions. Social mobility remains hard to achieve, despite the idea that education is the ‘fix-all’ to this problem. In the UK context the increasing privatisation of higher education means that achieving social mobility is likely to be more difficult for those from the poorest social categories. From 2012 UK universities raised tuition fees to a maximum of £9,000 per year for each student completing an undergraduate degree, with this figure subsequently
rising. Despite policies being put into place to assist those from the poorest backgrounds, many suggest that gaining an undergraduate degree will become about who can afford the fees, rather than individual ability. Media debates have discussed how young people will have to turn to ‘the bank of Mum and Dad’ (Hardy 2011), but this is assuming that mum and dad have money to give. Brown (2015) analyses the changing higher education landscape with the UK since the 1980s, when the process of marketisation began. He notes that this includes the introduction of student fees, and subsequent price rises, changes in research funding and reduction in subsidies in several areas. The Coalition Government (2010–2015) advanced the speed of this process through increasing fees, deregulating student number places (this involves number caps for students with lower grades which is likely to limit widening participation) and relaxing market entry rules. Ultimately the cost of education is now predominantly borne privately, which for many is detrimental to widening participation (i.e. enabling those who are less advantaged to have access to higher education).

These debates about social mobility have long been in existence and are not specific to the UK, nor are they class divisions. Sociology as a discipline has explored global class divisions since industrialisation and now writers focus on the complexity of contemporary divisions, illustrating how they inter-relate as well as their relationship to both power and lifestyle (Macionis and Plummer 2008). Understandings of social class positions have also been expanded in that they represent more than accent or modes of dress. The term ‘class’ refers to dynamic power relationships between people and control over various resources as well as occupational position. Thus, social class remains important despite the debate discussed earlier in Table 2.4.

### The importance of class

Social class divisions remain important in many locations across the world, reflected in everyday experiences and widely held views.

- **Within Britain social class position is related to consumption and status.** Turner (2017) notes that margarine (a butter substitute) is a contemporary weapon of class war, and vehicle of class racism. Those in higher social classes only use butter.

- **Fox notes that ‘class pervades all aspects of English life and culture’ (2005: 15), with the pronunciation of specific words being clearly linked to social class position.** For example, a lower-middle or middle-middle-class English person will say ‘pardon’, and upper-middle-class person is likely to say ‘sorry’, but an upper-class or working-class person will say ‘what?’ Another example that she notes relates to the word ‘toilet.’ The correct upper-class term is ‘loo’ or ‘lavatory’, whereas the working classes and middle classes tend to say ‘toilet.’
• Social class stereotypes maintain inequality, and show that social class matters. In the US, rich people are stereotyped as more competent although colder (i.e. less friendly) than poorer people. In comparison, poorer people are viewed as both lazy and incompetent. These perceptions also interact with racial and gender stereotypes (Durante and Fiske 2017).

• There is a large bank of research evidence across western countries and cultures which shows that those with higher social class standing have better physical and mental health. Social class matters for health, with cultural context shaping the mechanisms and extent of health-related impacts (Miyamoto 2017).

Explaining social class divisions

Sociologists have also spent much time discussing and explaining social divisions through different theoretical lenses, demonstrating a variety of competing interpretations and explanations. These explanations are now outlined in relation to social stratification and the existence of social class. The consensus perspective, also known as the functionalist perspective, argues that social divisions are necessary within society because such stratification results in benefits in relation to how society operates. Societies have complex occupational systems in which jobs vary in terms of importance. Therefore, those in the more skilled positions are more talented and require higher rewards. Such positions are also the most functionally significant and therefore come with higher rewards attached to them, both economically in terms of higher wages and with associated prestige (Davis and Moore 1945). For Davis and Moore social stratification is simply about unequal rewards. Having a system that provides unequal rewards is about motivating people to achieve more and therefore gain higher rewards. This explanation fits with the notion of a meritocracy, already discussed. Both meritocracy and the notion of social stratification as a functional necessity have been widely criticised. Davis and Moore (1945) fail to explain the existence of very different systems of stratification within societies across the world and do not detail how functional importance can be measured. Furthermore, social stratification does not necessarily reward individual talent either, as is claimed here (Macionis and Plummer 2008). This theory fails to explain the culture of celebrity in the Global North, which results in people who are not necessarily educated or, indeed, talented earning significant amounts of money.

Other theoretical perspectives are less positive in how they analyse social stratification, adopting conflict perspectives to explain the existence of class inequality. Marxism was introduced in Chapter 1 as a perspective that developed after the industrial revolution and depicted those in power owning the
means of production (bourgeoisie), with the less powerful working for them (proletariat). This analysis may no longer be applicable to today’s class systems because of the changing dynamics of work, as already discussed earlier in the chapter. Changes include the expansion of classes, the fragmentation of the labour market and the development of weightless economies owing to technological advancement. In addition, more women now engage with the labour market, some individuals spend less time in the labour market due to prolonged education and earlier retirement, and there has been a debated decline in class politics.

Despite these changes, Marxist theory still has some contributions to make in highlighting some still-relevant points for consideration in relation to the existence of social stratification. For example, the key argument that differences in social and economic resources serve the interests of certain groups remains an important feature of contemporary debates about capitalism and inequality. Indeed, given the level of inequalities that exist within the world today, it is impossible to dispute the suggestion that capitalism perpetuates poverty and advantage. Many sociologists (Giddens 1982; Boswell and Dixon 1993) argue that despite the problem with Marx’s revolutionary ideas, his theory is valuable for the following reasons:

- Wealth remains concentrated in the hands of the minority.
- The global system is capitalist.
- Work is degrading for many.
- The law favours the rich.

Weber is another theorist who spent time analysing social stratification, providing a more nuanced analysis by examining status. Ultimately, Weber identified stratification as a multidimensional process (Macionis and Plummer 2008). Weber agreed that class was based on economics, but he also saw skills as being important because these affect the types of work that people can participate in and be rewarded for. Thus, the more skilled are able to gain employment with good conditions, including economic reward and better life chances, resulting in different lifestyles and perceptions of status. Clearly, this analysis is valuable because status remains important within contemporary society.

An American sociologist called Wright (1997) combined aspects of the work of both Marx and Weber to illustrate that there are different types of control over economic resources, such as:

1. control over economic capital and money;
2. control over the physical production of labour (such as factories, companies and land);
3. control over labour power.
Those individuals who are located in the lowest social classes have no control over any of these areas. Other individuals occupy more complex positions; for example white-collar workers still sell their labour like manual workers but they retain a higher degree of control over their work setting. For Wright (1997), these workers are contradictory, with his analysis focusing on such workers’ relationship to authority and their possession of skills. These workers are both the exploiters and the exploited, as they assist capitalists and are rewarded with higher wages and promotions. Therefore, they experience less inequality than others. Wright’s (1997) focus on skills and expertise is useful in exploring how some individuals receive greater economic rewards than others within the labour market. He depicts those who have skills that are in short supply as being able to receive higher rewards for their work. These different job positions are also related to perceptions of social status; thus different occupations are related to economic rewards as well as perceptions of higher levels of status. Social class and social status remain invariably tied to economic inequality.

Class position and inequality

- Occupational social class is an important factor in shaping inequalities because what people earn is an important factor in shaping their experiences of class.
- Class position affects educational attainment so those from lower social-economic groups are less likely to access higher education, which in turn affects their employment opportunities, again shaping their experience of class.
- Risks of adverse events are higher for those in lower social classes. For example, fire has always affected poorer communities more. There is a strong correlation between inequalities and the way in which fires are distributed. Children whose parents were unemployed were more likely to die of fire-related injuries compared to those with parents in higher social classes (Hastie 2017).
- Some researchers argue that inequality in access to resources leads to further stratification based upon economic status and social class position (Markus and Stephens 2017).

Social status

Increasingly, social status is important within contemporary society. Social stratification includes a subjective element based on how individuals judge themselves and others. Sernau (2011) describes the many different ways in
Social status and inequality

- Social status related to social class, income or lifestyle is all fundamentally linked to social inequality. If some individuals and groups have higher social status within society, then others will be considered to have lower status.

- Social power and social class are both related to control over resources, and therefore inequality (Rucker and Galinsky 2017).

- Higher social status (and usually class position) is related to power and control. For example, in India justice for the poor and therefore powerless is rare, with Dalits (those with the lowest social status) experiencing crimes usually without recourse to justice (Thekaekara 2016).
- The social status of migrants entering the UK (and indeed other European countries) is often illustrated as the migration of the less well off because migrants take low-paid jobs. In this instance social class is reduced to being about money, ignoring the complexity and richness of migrants’ experience (Vico 2017).

- Class stereotypes as well as class position are central to attitudes towards redistribution, with the poor often blamed and stigmatised for their position by those in better positions. Class polarisation may be linked to heightened economic polarisation (Bullock 2017).

- Cultural tastes and practices which form part of our daily life are shaped by social class position and serve to distance some groups from others. Those who have more material resources and prestige (social status) belong in a different societal space (Veenstra 2007).

Prestige can also be earned in other ways from those associated with income. Charitable giving, philanthropic endeavours and the presentation of gifts can earn prestige. Sernau (2011: 165) argues that ‘those who have gained great wealth and now want prestige as well must return some of their wealth to the community to get it.’ This is not just the case in high-income countries, but has also been associated with tribal communities, as demonstrated through anthropological analyses (see Mauss 1967).

Giving is not just about money and gifts; it can also involve donating time or expertise, for example, volunteering in community enterprises. In Britain this has become increasingly important in policy circles in recent years. Within their social policy discourse, the UK New Labour government (1997–2010) stressed the importance of volunteering in society, and this was developed further by the Coalition government’s emphasis on ‘the Big Society’, in which volunteering was seen as being the central lynchpin in achieving social benefit and citizenship. While volunteering as a form of giving has received criticism in some quarters, in others it can be important in accruing prestige. UK media coverage of the 2012 Olympic Games, for instance, often praised the volunteers who supported the Games, crediting them with making the Games a great success, so that the title ‘Games-makers’ itself became an indication of the status given to volunteering in this context.

Prestige can also be gained by individual members of society achieving respectability within their social contexts. Prestige in the form of respectability is arguably more important for those in lower-income groups. As Sernau (2011: 165) states: ‘Within their small communities of neighbours and co-workers, they (individuals within low-income groups) held some measure of social honour for their moral standards, their hard work, their experience, and their practical wisdom. They were also interested in distancing themselves from those they viewed as having none of these.’ The final sentence of this quote is interesting and demonstrates that prestige is associated with social positioning.
Marmot’s book *The Status Syndrome* (2004) explores the relationships between health outcomes and status. Those with lower status, even within the same organisation, have worse health outcomes. Similarly, James’s *Affluenza* (2007) depicts the constant push for the accumulation of possessions within contemporary western society to demonstrate both prestige and status. He describes this as an illness called ‘Affluenza’ in a clear critique of capitalism. Furthermore, in the wake of riots in the UK in 2011, Bauman (2011), when commenting on causation, suggested that the riots were ultimately linked to status and were participated in by those who lacked social prestige. In terms of your own lifestyle and how you view status, complete the following learning task to help you reflect on your own values.

**Learning Task 2.3**

**How is status constructed in contemporary society?**

Dorling (2015) notes that within the UK we have schools for our social class, universities for classes, housing estates, types of hobbies and even specific jokes for one class rather than another. Bearing this in mind, think about the following questions:

1. What is important for status in your own social circles? Is it about having possessions? If so, which ones? Is it about behaving in a specific way? Is it about how you present yourself and dress? Is it about holding a certain set of values? List all of the ways in which you achieve status.

2. Now think about how you define social status. Think about the judgements that you make about others. List the ways in which you make judgements. For example, do you judge people’s occupation? Which jobs hold more status for you? Is it about the area in which people live? Is it about the size of an individual’s home, or perhaps the type of car that they drive?

3. Celebrity and fame are associated with status in many locations around the world; take time to think about what it is that provides celebrities with status—e.g. the money that they earn, or their lifestyle?

4. Finally, take some time to think about how status may be conceptualised differently across the world. How might status be achieved in China, for example?
The above learning task will have helped you to explore your ideas and attitudes about status. The mechanisms which position people into classes are limited by being based on just the occupations we undertake, but class is determined by so much more than the jobs we do. Values, status and judgements from peers are also important in constructing stratifications within contemporary society.

Explaining differences in social status

Negative labelling, as described in Chapter 1, is also important in constructing understandings of status associated with both class position and occupation. This type of labelling is not new, as this chapter has already outlined its discussion of chavs and the idea of an underclass. The work of Charles Murray, who wrote about the idea of an underclass, was strongly influenced by his right-wing ideology. Murray’s later work (1990) said that he investigated whether this ‘disease’ of the underclass was spreading. The term ‘underclass’ has been used ever since by a variety of politicians, for example within the UK context following widespread riots in 2011. The term ‘feral underclass’ was used in the media at that time (Lewis et al. 2011). This term is not unique to the UK; in the USA it has also been used, as has the label ‘ghetto poor’ (Wilson 1996). Interestingly, research findings from Morris (1993) suggest that there is no direct evidence of a distinctive culture of the underclass, as has often been described. Indeed, in Victorian England the poor were labelled as ‘the great unwashed’ and treated with disdain. Thus, negative attitudes to the lower social classes have existed for many years, albeit represented in different guises. Social stratification is therefore tied to attitudes about class position and status. These attitudes have long served a purpose and, for Dorling (2009), are a clear reason as to why inequality persists.

Status is embedded in many societal contexts and is reproduced via the socialisation process in which parents teach children work habits, expectations and consumption patterns. One theoretical interpretation of this is Bourdieu’s (1984) ‘habitus’. Habitus is a complex concept, but is one which describes how individuals acquire a set of socially learned dispositions. This includes skills, ways of acting and habits. These are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life and are taken for granted. They relate to social status and position because taste and habits are conditioned by social class position and societal stratification systems. Largely generalising, Bourdieu (1984) argues that upper-class habitus is marked by an aesthetic disposition in which art and music are appreciated as part of the cultural capital possessed by such groups. Comparatively, working-class habitus is influenced by economics and conformity. Habitus operates to reinforce class inequality because individuals feel comfortable in their own habitus and perceive a higher-class habitus as being at odds with their own experiences and viewpoints. Therefore, taste simultaneously ‘unites and separates’ (Bourdieu 1984: 56).
Social status, class and inequality

- Status remains linked to social class position within the UK, with specific behaviours being seen as indicative of class position. Markers of both status and social class include educational attainment, job title, area of residence and consumption patterns (think about comparing going to the opera or to the cinema).

- Status motivates people’s behaviour, and becomes more important in areas where higher levels of inequality exist. Social status permeates popular culture in commonly used phrases such as ‘know your place’.

- Some studies suggest that there is a link between social status and economic inequality, and the level of support that people articulate in relation to the existence of inequality within society. For example, those of higher social class and status, such as politicians, are more likely to support the existence of inequality (Kraus and Callaghan 2014).

Turner (1988) also theoretically explores the different types of status that exist within contemporary society, and argues that social stratification has three major components:

1. politico-legal rights (status as entitlement);
2. cultural distinction (status as lifestyle, similar to habitus);
3. economic class.

Status is important too in understanding other social divisions as well as class. For example, the status of women in many places in the world is lower than that of men, which results in gender being a significant social division (see Chapter 3). Social status and social class are also strongly related to social exclusion. Social exclusion is associated with stratification and class position. It is a concept that gathered popularity within the political arena in the UK, with the New Labour government establishing a Social Exclusion Unit in 1997, the year in which they came to power. Social exclusion is a label for the ways in which people become cut off from wider societal processes and are denied opportunities to self-improvement as a result of the stratification of society. Chapter 1 explores the concept in depth. It is useful here to consider how stratification can lead to social exclusion for some groups, and the relationship between social stratification and exclusion. While some individuals in higher classes may seek to exclude themselves, for example, by living in gated
communities, others may be excluded through their lack of power and low social position. Thus, stratification and social class position are inherently linked to inequality.

Inequalities and stratification in contemporary society
Throughout history, many societies have demonstrated inequalities and different forms of social stratification, as indeed is also seen in contemporary times. Certainly, as Chapter 1 outlines, some commentators argue that social inequality and stratification is actually greater today than it has ever been. Given the issues that exist in measuring social inequality and stratification, this is a hard claim to prove, although now routine data collection across the world makes it easier to chart more recent trends. For many, social inequality is increasing (see Chapter 1), and some explanations of these increases relate to globalisation (see Chapter 7) and the deregulation of financial markets (see Chapter 9). Measures of social inequality are improving and now encompass broader conceptualisations and the impact that stratification and inequalities are having on us all. Now complete the learning task below to explore this further.

While social stratification still exists, and inequalities remain tied to it, there are people who experience social mobility and are thus able to move up

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**Learning Task 2.4**

**Exploring how inequality is bad for us all**

1. Use the internet to access the following websites and listen to the following talks:


   ‘A TED Talk on Income Inequality’ by Nick Hanauer, www.ted.com/talks/nick_hanauer_beware_fellow_plutocrats_the_pitchforks_are_coming

2. What are your own views about social stratification and inequality? Are these necessary aspects of society, as some theorists and politicians suggest?

3. Does current policy support inequality and capitalism?

4. Do you agree with the perspectives presented in the talks? Are inequalities bad for us all?
the social class scale, myself included, as a child of working-class parents who is now an academic. New societal developments are also slowly changing patterns of inequalities. For example, technological advancements can lead to social mobility for some and of course social exclusion for others. Have you ever considered notions of technological classes? Some classes are excluded from technological development, while other class differences can be seen in the use of certain websites and online social networking. BBC News (2007) reported on research which showed how technological divisions mirror stratification within the United States. White children of educated parents are more likely to use Facebook, whereas users of MySpace were more likely to be from lower-class groups and have less educated parents. More recent research similarly illustrates that there are class differences in the ways in which technology is used, and that it is not always a mechanism for social inclusion (Clayton and Macdonald 2013). Research in this area illustrates that technological differences within stratified societies work to perpetuate any inequalities rather than addressing them. These patterns are indicative of varying social experiences related to the stratified nature of contemporary society.

The stratification of life experience

Life experiences are influenced by social class position, status and inequality. The world can be divided into three types of experience:

1. The very rich and high-status groups whose lifestyles are completely different from most people and who have traditionally remained away from the gaze of researchers, although this is now changing.

2. At the opposite end of the social scale are those who have incomes of less than $1 per day. Collier (2008) labels them as the ‘bottom billion’. They have poor life experiences, poor health outcomes and are socially excluded in multiple ways. Their lives are brutal and often ‘wasted’ (Bauman 2004).

3. And the majority, such as you and I. We still experience social divisions, such as those related to gender, ethnicity, economic position and access to resources, and we are still subject to social stratification, holding social class rankings.

(Adapted from Macionis and Plummer 2008)

Given the evidence presented within this chapter, it is clear that social class, status and stratification remain within the UK, US and a range of other wider contexts. While patterns of stratification have changed, given the
context of the economy and work, inequalities in social position remain a feature of contemporary life for all.

**Case Study: The establishment**

The term ‘establishment’ has existed within the UK since the 1950s, and refers to the elite social classes and networks at the top of the social hierarchy, which remain tight knit in order to maintain positions of status and economic power. Terms such as ‘the old boys’ network’ are also used to depict the same processes.

Jones (2014) argues that behind democracy within the UK, the powerful rich hold massive power and reap huge profits as a result. His books details several ways in which the complex system of the powerful elite dominates our lives, for example, through the lobbying processes taking place in Westminster, through the media, and through powerful business boardrooms and trading rooms in London. He writes about the vested interests of the powerful, uniting them against those who are less well off. He also criticises the taxation system, and the continued abuse of it by those with wealth and status, working to keeping the status quo. He therefore argues that the establishment is the biggest threat to our democracy today and consequently must be challenged.

While the book received varying reviews, and some criticism by more right-wing media outlets, it did direct attention and critical scrutiny towards those at the very top of society, which has not always been the case. Historically, there has been a tendency to focus upon the problems caused by those with lower social status and class position. Jones (2014) argues that this has always been deliberate, and works as a mechanism to deflect attention away from the rich and powerful, as part of the ‘guarding’ of the establishment order.

**Summary of key points**

- Social stratification systems are those which organise people into hierarchies based on differential characteristics. The dominant contemporary form of stratification is based on economic differences, with people being categorised into social classes according to their occupation. Status is also
related to social class position. Lifestyle and cultural factors are analysed too within the contemporary literature.

- Despite debates about the death of social class and some changes in the way in which society is organised, social class remains a considerable influence on our lives, particularly in contexts such as the UK. Social class position is clearly correlated with a variety of inequalities, such as economic resources, educational attainment and health outcomes.

- A range of theories exist which can be used to explain social class. This chapter has summarised analyses from Marx and Weber. Some focus on economic divisions, while others place more emphasis on status, but all see class as having a significant relationship with social inequality.

List of questions to stimulate debate and reflection

1. Which social class do you feel that you belong to and how are you making the decision? For example, is it about your parental occupations, lifestyle and status? If you are unsure, then you can take a test – see The Great British class calculator: What class are you? Available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22000973

2. What kind of power do you feel that you have in your life, and how does social stratification experienced by you limit your power, or indeed increase it? To what extent are you able to be autonomous in your everyday life? Politicians and the media suggest that we all have control over our life and social class position; do you agree now that you have read the evidence presented within this chapter?

3. What are your thoughts on social stratification? Do you think that it is inevitable? Is inequality linked to the forms of stratification discussed in this chapter inevitable too? Whose interests does inequality ultimately serve?

Further reading


The author writes about herself, and her own class position and status within this book. She links social mobility to education and explores what is lost when
moving from one class to another. Hanley’s own experience is interesting, and a useful lens through which to explore the existence of class divides, snobbery and the impacts of social policy. Hanley’s accessible style enables the reader to see that there are many barriers to social mobility, and while people try to overcome them, not all manage.


This book is a useful introduction as it aims to open readers’ eyes to the ways that social statuses shape our experiences and impact our life chances. The anthology draws upon leading experts, who explore broad topics such as identity, power and privilege, to underscore the central argument that divisions such as class, race and gender do not exist in isolation; they are often interrelated in determining inequalities.

Savage, Mike (2015) Social Class in the 21st Century. London: Pelican. This is an introductory-level text about social class in the UK, with the author arguing that class distinctions remain as important as ever today. The author draws upon data from the Great British Class Survey conducted in 2013, showing that wealth equals advantage and that inequalities are growing. The author discusses the ‘transmission of advantage’, a concept used to describe how prosperity is handed on to future generations. Interesting, and evidence-based.