

# Social Stratification: Identities and Inequalities

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper explored through the dimensions of what social stratification is, dimensions of social inequalities as a basis of social stratification, the conceptual foundations of social inequalities and identities and the formation of identities as a basis of inequality.

**Design/methodology:** The present study employed descriptive research to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends and categories related to social stratification. In order to understand inequality in the context of increasing social inequalities, we need to use an intersectional lens that helps to explain how people experience inequality according to different and intersecting aspects of their identity.

**Findings:** The main findings highlight the dimensions of social stratification, the social inequality caused by it and how the various social identities are shaped on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender. Social identities are a way for people to conceptualize the different ways in which society has classified people based on their characteristics. Each of these characteristics, groups people into either in-groups or out-groups based on their race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation.

**Keywords:** Social stratification, social inequality, identity, race, social class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion.

## 1. Introduction

Social stratification is a basic element of social organization in human societies. Whenever people live together, the interpersonal relations and the relations among groups of dominance and submission, rank or hierarchy appear. Social stratification is concerned with the patterning of inequality and its enduring consequences on the lives of those who experience it. As said by Otis Duncan, the difference between inequality and stratification is that “social stratification refers to the persistence of positions in a hierarchy of inequality, either over the life time of a birth cohort of individuals or, more particularly, between generations” (1968).

Sociologists are of the view that there are a variety of factors, including social class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality and religion that influence stratification in society. According to Anthony Giddens (2000), stratification can be defined as structured inequalities between different groupings of people. Social stratification when used in the general or broad sense includes all forms of social inequality from caste and rigid occupation classes to stratification based on age and sex. In order to understand inequality in the context of increasing social inequalities, we use an intersectional lens that helps to explain how people experience inequality according to different and intersecting aspects of their identity. For example, no one is just poor, or just working class, or just a woman or just a disabled person, but each person experiences a combination of inequalities differently which in turn shapes how they respond in different situations.

In the present paper, we shall be discussing the conceptual foundations of identities and inequalities as the bases of social stratification. We shall go through the dimensions of social stratification, the social inequality caused by it and how the various social identities are shaped on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender.

## 2. SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Stratification is the ranking of groups/strata where each strata shares a particular lifestyle which makes it possible to distinguish it from other strata. Inequality on the other hand refers to the ranking of individuals in advanced industrial societies where stratification by classes is replaced by a continuous ranking of individuals based on their occupations. The individuals may or may not support inequalities, but social stratification is created and supported by society as a whole through values and norms and consistently durable systems of stratification. We normally, mistake stratification for economic inequality, for example, we can compare wages in the United States to wages in India and term it as social inequality. But, prejudice and discrimination, whether against a certain race, ethnicity or religion, equally account for inequalities, both within and between nations. Thus, social inequality is conceptualized as a relatively durable pattern of institutions and social relationships in which valued resources are distributed unevenly across social groups and social categories.

## 3. IDENTITY

We often experience inequality in and through categories, labels and classifications that define individuals, groups and collectives. Social identity refers to a person's membership in a social group. The groups that comprise a person's social identity include age, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and religion. The categories related to identity such as gender, race, class, etc are essential to study because they are profoundly and unmistakably linked to social structures where the ownership and control of material and symbolic resources are systematically stratified.

In order to understand, how one's identity expresses the inequalities present in our society, we shall take into consideration the social categories. The categories can be broadly divided into four parts, it includes:

1. Traditional sociological categories associated with structural locations, group affiliations and types of social relationships, for example, class position, occupation, nationality, geography, religion, marital status, sexuality, etc.
2. Categories linked to physical attributes which include age, race, disability, sex, size, etc.
3. Category labels that are more localized and defined by a person's biography, skill, ability or individual characteristics which include test scores, athletic prowess, criminal history, etc. and
4. Dispositional categories referencing personality, stereotypes or slang classifications which tells if a person is introvert, extrovert or ambivert.

Thus, we can say that, a category label can not only be used to identify, classify, or indicate a person as a certain type, but it also has the potential to be used in the production and reproduction of inequality.

## 4. IDENTITIES AND INEQUALITIES

Social stratification involves the division of population into unequal layers or strata based on income, wealth, race, gender, ethnicity, power, status, age, or some other characteristic. Sociologists study these strata across groups defined by social identities. Social identity refers to a person's membership in a social group. They are a way for people to conceptualize the different ways in which society has classified people

based on their characteristics. Each of these characteristics, groups people into either in-groups or out-groups. Historically it is evident that social identities have been used to unfairly privilege some people and discriminate against others.

#### 4.1 IDENTITIES AS BASIS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

On the basis of one's social identity, people are grouped in to an in-group or out-group. For example, if we consider a person born from 1981 to 1996, he automatically becomes a member of the Millennials in-group and if he is born after 90s, he is an out-group as he belongs to the generations Gen Z and Gen X. The groups that comprise a person's social identity include age, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and religion.

##### 4.1.1 RACE

Race as a biological concept refer to a large category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics like skin color, type of hair, facial features and size of head. Thus, in simple words we can say that race refers to the distinct genetic features of a person, most commonly identifiable by skin color. Sociologists defines race as a group of people who are perceived by a given society as biologically or culturally different from the others.

Race plays an important role in shaping our identity and in turn can shape the way we think or see the world around us. Race has been one of the primary social identity characterizations throughout history and has led to serious discrimination and even genocide based on racial prejudice also known as racism.

There are four main types of discrimination based on race, they are:

- **Direct discrimination:** This happens when someone treats a person worse than another person in a similar situation because of their race. For example, when a person would not rent a flat to a person of different race.
- **Indirect discrimination:** This happens when an organisation has a particular policy or way of working that puts people of a racial group at a disadvantage. For example, when a hairdresser refuses to employ stylists that cover their own hair, this would put any Muslim women or Sikh men who cover their hair at a disadvantage when applying for a position as a stylist.
- **Harassment:** Harassment occurs when someone makes you feel humiliated, offended or degraded. For example, a young British Asian man at work keeps being called a racist name by colleagues.
- **Victimisation:** It is the state or process of being victimised or becoming a victim. For example, if a young British Asian wants to make a formal complaint about his discrimination, his manager threatens to sack him unless he drops the complaint.

Racial discrimination in India have also increased during COVID-19 pandemic, as racial crimes against the Tibet-Mongoloid origin people, especially from the North East have intensified. The National Campaign Against Torture (NCAT) provided 30 incidents of racial attacks on the Tibetan-Mongolic looking persons, especially from the North East related to COVID-19 pandemic from across the country.

##### 4.1.2 CLASS

A social class consists of a set of people who share similar status with regard to factors like wealth, income, education and occupation. Class stratification system or ranking creates inequality in society and determines one's social position in terms of these factors. The class model depicts the distribution of property, prestige and power among society based on income, education and occupation. The socioeconomic status primarily refers to people's wealth but also points to a range of other social and

cultural markers associated with people of different social classes such as job type, food preferences and values.

In a social class, a person or group of persons identifies themselves in relation to others in society based on their economic and social position. According to Goldthorpe, factors like attitudes, values and behaviours create a class identity. Thus, class identity can impact our happiness, our sense of security, our daily interactions and even our experience with the justice system. For example, there is evidence that people from lower economic classes are arrested, charged and imprisoned at higher rates. (O’Neil Hayes, 2020). Traditionally, people are separated into three socioeconomic groups: working-class, middle-class and upper-class. Working class people would work in low-paid blue-collar jobs whereas the middle-class people work in salaried white-collar jobs and enjoy the benefits of home ownership. Lastly, the upper-class people are business owners or people from old money who would rely on their ownership of capital to generate wealth. These separations of socioeconomic status are increasingly fluid, where working-class people may become wealthy or enjoy homeownership but they might continue to identify with working-class culture, food, music, and work ethic.

#### **4.1.3 ETHNICITY**

While race is a biological trait based on physical traits that are inherited, ethnicity is cultural or social in its meaning. An ethnic group is a subgroup of population with a set of shared social, cultural and historical experiences with relatively distinctive beliefs, values and behaviours. In this context, we can say ethnicity refers to the shared social, cultural and historical experiences stemming from common national or regional backgrounds that make subgroups of a population different from one another. Ethnicity is a social phenomenon in which people learn their ethnic differences since childhood as a process of socialization. Ethnic identity refers to a person’s social identity within a larger context based on membership in a cultural or social group. According to Max Weber, “ethnic groups are those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists” (quoted in Hutchinson & Smith 1996, p. 35). Historically ethnic differences between people have led to situations of conflicts. For example, Balkanization of Europe is largely attributed to the ethnic problems and the contemporary conflicts in Africa are largely due to ethnic differences.

#### **4.1.4 GENDER**

The concept of gender goes beyond the biological differences between men and women and refers to socially constructed differences between them in terms of attributes, roles and relationships. The definition of gender is given by Canadian Institute of Health Research and it goes as “Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men and gender diverse people and it influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact and the distribution of power and resources in society. Gender identity is not confined to a binary i.e. girl/woman and boy/man and nor is it static rather it exists along a continuum and can change over time. There is considerable diversity in how individuals and groups understand, experience and express gender through the roles they take on, the expectations placed on them, relations with others and the complex ways that gender is institutionalized in society.”

The term gender identity refers to the personal sense of an individual’s own gender. Gender identity is one’s own internal sense of self and their gender, whether that is man, woman, neither or both. It is related with our gender expression i.e. the way we present our gender to the world through clothing, dress,

physical attributes, mannerisms, behavior, etc. but at the same time it does not have to be correlated. When a person is assigned a sex at birth and they are comfortable and continue to identify that way, they are someone who identifies as cisgender. When a person is assigned a sex at birth and they are not comfortable with it and no longer socially or physically identify themselves that way, they may be someone who identifies within the transgender community.

#### **4.1.5 SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

Sexual orientation refers to one's physical and romantic attraction towards people of certain sex. Sex is a label that a person is given at birth based on medical factors, including their hormones, chromosomes and genitals. Sexuality, whereas, refers to a person's sexual feelings, thoughts, desires and attractions. It is a personal identifier that best describes whom a person may be attracted to sexually, emotionally, intellectually or romantically. It includes sexual orientation, which is a person's romantic or sexual attraction toward another person that includes both sexual behaviours and personal identity. Sexual orientation encompasses both heterosexuality i.e. attraction to someone of the opposite sex and homosexuality i.e. attraction to someone of the same sex. These categories are not always clear-cut as people often fall on a continuum between heterosexuality and homosexuality and many people have attractions to both or multiple sexes. Some common terms that are associated with sexuality are lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer and many different identities as well. These distinct terms are crucial for a deeper acknowledgement of LGBTQ and sexual identities. LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. The plus is used to signify all of the gender identities and sexual orientations that letters and words cannot yet fully describe.

There are many other problems faced by the LGBTQ community such as rejection by loved ones or social groups, bullying at school, harassment by neighbours, danger of violence in public places, casual homophobic comments, prejudice from professionals, no protection against discrimination at work and verbal harassment.

#### **4.1.6 RELIGION**

There is a strong correlation between inequality and religion, as societies marked by high inequality are more religious than those with more egalitarian income distributions. The reason behind this is that high inequality generates intense insecurities, leading the poor to seek shelter in religion for both psychological and materialistic comfort. We can define religion through two approaches; functional which tend to have broad, more inclusive definitions of religion and through substantive approaches which tend to have narrower and more exclusive definitions of religion. The functionalists define religion in terms of the functions it performs for individuals and society. The substantive definitions of religion define religion in terms of its content rather than its function. For example, a common approach to defining religion substantively is to define religion in terms of a belief in a higher power such as a god or other supernatural forces. As defined by Robertson (1970), "Religion refers to the existence of supernatural beings that have a governing effect on life".

Religious identity is defined as how a person or group of persons think of themselves as belonging to and representing the values of a particular religion and/or religious sect. Due to inequalities based on religion, individuals and groups suffer from systemic marginalization, exclusion and in extreme cases, genocide on account of their religious beliefs and affiliation. The 21st century has already witnessed two instances of violent and systematic communal targeting, one in Iraq and another in Myanmar. These were linked to religious inequalities for systematic elimination on the basis of their religious affiliation.



## 5. CONCLUSION

We can conclude by saying that the term social stratification is applied to the phenomena of structured social inequality which arise as unintended consequences of social processes and relationships. It is a hierarchical ordering of people in a society differentiated according to power, privileges and status. Sociologists are of the view that there are a variety of factors, including social class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality and religion that influence inequality in society.

My concluding thoughts on the current topic rest on the premise that in order to understand inequality in the context of increasing social inequalities, we need to use an intersectional lens that helps to explain how people experience inequality according to different and intersecting aspects of their identity. Social identities are a way for people to conceptualize the different ways in which society has classified people based on their characteristics. Each of these characteristics, groups people into either in-groups or out-groups based on their race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation. Thus, we can say that, not only a category label can be used to identify, classify, or indicate a person as a certain type, but also it has the potential to be used in the production and reproduction of inequality.

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