



6

Class and Status Inequality

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 6 introduces us to three concepts that we have already covered briefly in earlier chapters: class, status, and social inequality. These issues are central to many conflict theorists for framing how they understand and interpret the structure of our society. Yet, all sociologists appreciate these concepts as key aspects of how our world is structured.

As the authors note, the concept of social stratification is important when discussing and understanding class and status inequalities. For conflict theorists such as Marx, the reason we have these inequalities is because of capitalism and the market under this principle. The bourgeoisie (ruling elites) owns the means of production and therefore can get the proletariat (the majority of people) to work for a fraction of the cost. The bourgeoisie can sell the items/goods made by the proletariat, while the proletariat can only sell his/her own labour power.

Functionalists believe that social stratification is a key element for maintaining a productive and dynamic society that encourages and rewards hard work and effort. Many contemporary theorists have challenged this theory, recognizing that the social inequality between the top and the bottom is extreme and many factors impact how successful people can be within our society. For the symbolic interactionists, a key issue is understanding how people interpret and represent inequality and these inequalities can arise due to differences in productiveness and greed. The businesses try to get consumers to spend their money on items to display wealth. This conspicuous consumption creates a symbol of the “haves” and “have-nots.”

The feminist explanation for social stratification looks at how the male breadwinner ideology has contributed in part to this stratification. Women are also typically paid less for their work than males

(even when doing the same job), and the low pay scale for “pink collar” work is an important factor in the feminization of poverty.

Lastly, the chapter looks at those on the poor/economically marginalized populations: the working poor, women, Aboriginal peoples, seniors, visible minorities, and people with disabilities. All of these groups are affected negatively in some way because of the inequalities present in society. Several different policies were created in Canada to address the issue of poverty, but as the authors note, neo-liberalism and its proponents have essentially seen a scaling back of these policies.

KEY TERMS

Blaming the system	Economic polarization	Neo-liberalism
Blaming the victim	Feminization of poverty	Power
Bourgeoisie	Food insecurity	Proletariat
Class and status	Low Income Cut-off (LICO)	Social stratification
Class consciousness	Low Income Measure (LIM)	Status symbols
Classism	Intersectionalities	Workfare
Conspicuous consumption	Market Basket Measure (MBM)	Working poor
Digital divide	Means of production	
Economic elite	Meritocracy	

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the male breadwinner ideology? (p. 138)
2. What is the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat? (p. 136)
3. What is the “feminization of poverty”? (p. 139)
4. According to William Ryan, what is “blaming the victim”? (p. 147)
5. According to Marx, the capitalist mode of organization has several characteristics that distort the structure and meaning of the economic process. What are four of these characteristics? (p. 136)
6. What is the difference between mechanical and organic solidarity? (p. 137)
7. From 1920 to post-war Canada, several economic policies were enacted. What are four of them? (p. 148)
8. Why is there an overlap between recent immigrant status and visible-minority identity? (p. 145)
9. Why is economic inequality a major risk to human progress? (p. 150)
10. From a sociological perspective, what is the difference between blaming the system and blaming the victim? (p. 147)

READINGS AND WEBSITES

Olsen, Gregg (2011). *Power and Inequality: A Comparative Introduction*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Olsen's book compares three Anglo nations (Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States) with three Nordic nations (Sweden, Norway, and Finland). The purpose of the book is to show that despite the ideology of the West of neo-liberalism and the idea of equality of opportunity, there are many problems with such a notion. Even though everyone has the opportunity to become wealthy, the playing field is not level. Those with power and wealth can maintain the subordination of those below them. What Olsen shows is that in the socialist democratic Scandinavian countries, equality is at a much higher level. His book concludes with what those countries are doing policy-wise to achieve such high levels of equality, and what it means for Canada should we continue to follow the ways of neo-liberalism.

Albanese, Patrizia (2010). *Child Poverty in Canada*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Child poverty is one of those social issues that we as society constantly try to eliminate. No idea is a simple one; no child should ever live in deplorable conditions or starve or be sick from malnutrition. Yet even today there are thousands of children, not only in third world countries, but also in industrialized nations, who live in poverty. Albanese's book provides an excellent look at this issue. She begins by defining what child poverty is. This is followed with a look at the rates and trends of child poverty in Canada. Next, factors such as the family and the neighbourhood are addressed. The author then examines the policies in Canada and makes comparisons to the policies and practices in other countries around the world. In the last section of the book, the author proposes several recommendations and potential solutions through empirical findings as to how we can alleviate this issue.

Wealth Inequality in America. (20 November 2012). [Video]. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM>

This short video highlights the difference between the imagined wealth inequality in the United States and the reality of enormous wealth inequality that exists today.

Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty in Canada. (2017). [Website]. Retrieved from <http://campaign2000.ca/>

Campaign 2000 is a network of organizations committed to ensuring that the Canadian Government makes good on its 1989 promise to end child poverty in Canada. The organization continues to improve public awareness of child/family poverty issues within the country.

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/>

The CCPA is an independent research institute that provides up-to-date information, in multi-media and publications concerned with issues of social, economic, and environmental justice.