

Stratification



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Structures of Inequality

Types of Stratification Structures
Classes—How Many?
Measuring Social Class

Inequality in the United States

Economic Inequality
The Consequences of Social Class

Theoretical Perspectives on Inequality

Structural-Functional Theory
The Conflict Perspective
Symbolic Interaction Theory

The Determinants of Social-Class Position

Microstructure: Individual Opportunities
Macrostructure: The Labor Market
The American Dream: Ideology and Reality
Explaining Upward Mobility

Social Class and Social Life

The Poor
The Near Poor
The Working Class
The Middle Class
The Upper Class

Social Class and Public Policy

Fair Wage Movements
Increasing Educational Opportunities

Inequality Internationally

Three Worlds: Most- to Least-Developed Countries
Structural-Functional Analysis:
Modernization Theory
Conflict Analysis: World-Systems Theory
Global Inequality and Armed Conflict

Where This Leaves Us

Structures of Inequality

Inequality exists all around us. Much of sociological research focuses on one particular kind of inequality called stratification. **Stratification** is an institutionalized pattern of inequality in which those who hold some social statuses get more access to scarce resources than do others. For example, giving a son more financial help than a daughter because the son is nicer is *not* stratification. But if a son receives more help simply because he is male, that *is* an example of stratification.

Inequality becomes stratification when two conditions exist:

- The inequality is *institutionalized*, backed up both by social structures and by long-standing social norms.
- The inequality is based on membership in a group (such as oldest sons or blue-collar workers) rather than on personal attributes.

The scarce resources that we focus on when we talk about inequality are generally of three types: *prestige*, *power*, and *money*. **Prestige**, like status, refers to the amount of social honor or value afforded one individual or group relative to another. **Power** refers to the ability to influence or force others to do what you want them to do, regardless of their own wishes. When inequality in prestige, power, or money is supported by social structures and long-standing social norms, and when it is based on group membership, then we speak of stratification.

sociology and you

Everyone has both ascribed and achieved statuses. You now have the *achieved* statuses of high school graduate and college student, and hope to have the achieved status of college graduate. If your parents graduated from college, you also have the *ascribed* status of coming from an educated family, which you will keep whether or not you graduate from college. How others view you will depend on both your achieved and your ascribed statuses.

Stratification is an institutionalized pattern of inequality in which social statuses are ranked on the basis of their access to scarce resources.

Prestige refers to the amount of social honor or value afforded one individual or group relative to another. Also referred to as status.

Power is the ability to direct others' behavior even against their wishes.

Caste systems rely largely on ascribed statuses as the basis for distributing scarce resources.

Class systems rely largely on achieved statuses as the basis for distributing scarce resources.

Types of Stratification Structures

Stratification exists in every society. All societies have norms specifying that some categories of people ought to receive more money, power, or prestige than others. There is, however, wide variety in how inequality is structured.

A key difference among structures of inequality is whether the categories used to distribute unequal rewards are based on ascribed or achieved statuses. As noted in Chapter 4, *ascribed statuses* are unalterable statuses determined by birth or inheritance. *Achieved statuses* are statuses that a person can obtain in a lifetime. Being African American or male, for example, is an ascribed status; being a convict, an ex-convict, or a physician is an achieved status.

Every society uses some ascribed and some achieved statuses in distributing scarce resources, but the balance between them varies greatly. Stratification structures that rely largely on ascribed statuses as the basis for distributing scarce resources are called **caste systems**; structures that rely largely on achieved statuses are called **class systems**.

Caste Systems

In a caste system, whether you are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, depends almost entirely on who your parents are (Smaje 2000). Whether you are lazy and stupid or hardworking and clever makes little difference. Instead, your parents' position determines your own. If you are male, you are expected to enter your father's occupation or become a beggar if he was one; if you are female, you are expected to follow in your mother's footsteps as a housewife, beggar, or worker. Moreover, in a caste system you can only marry someone whose social position matches yours, and thus your children become locked in to the same status that you and your spouse hold.

India provides the best-known example of a caste system. Under its caste system, all Hindus (the majority religion) are divided into castes, roughly comparable to



Most of India's Dalits ("untouchables") continue to experience poverty and discrimination.

brianindia/Alamy

occupational groups, which differ substantially in prestige, power, and wealth; caste systems also are common in some of India's Muslim and Christian communities. Caste membership is unalterable: It marks one's children and one's children's children.

The caste system was officially outlawed in 1950, when the new nation of India adopted its first Constitution. Since 1990, some of the nation's 200 million Dalits, or "untouchables," have moved out of abject poverty, boosted both by India's improving economy and by government policies designed to benefit them (Sengupta 2008). But most still suffer from discrimination, extreme poverty, and, sometimes, ethnic violence directed against them.

Class Systems

In a class system, achieved statuses are the major basis of unequal resource distribution. Occupation remains the major determinant of rewards, but it is not fixed at birth. Instead, you can achieve an occupation far better or far worse than those of your parents. The rewards you receive depend on your own talent, ambition, and work—or lack thereof.

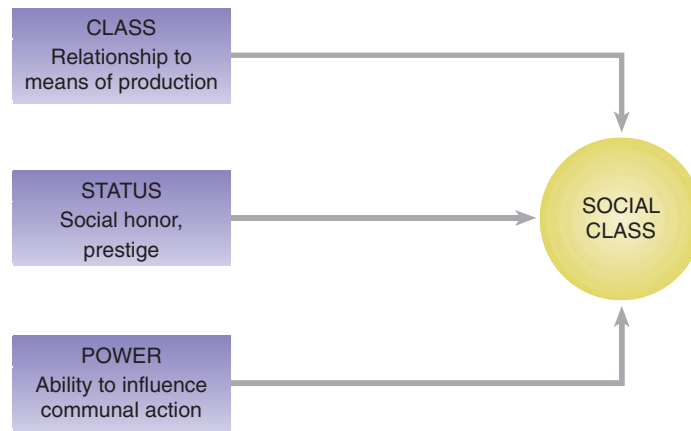
The primary difference between caste and class systems is not the level of inequality but the opportunity for achievement. The distinctive characteristic of a class system is that it permits **social mobility**—a change in social class, either upward or downward. Mobility can occur between one generation and another; if you graduate college, and your parents didn't, you will likely experience upward social mobility. A change in social class can also occur within one's lifetime. For example, a middle-aged engineer whose job is "downsized" and who ends up working as a Wal-Mart greeter has obviously experienced downward social mobility.

Even in a class system, ascribed characteristics matter. Your religion, age, sex, and ethnicity, among other things, will likely influence which doors open for you and which barriers you have to surmount. Nevertheless, these factors have much less impact in a class society than in a caste society. Because class systems predominate in the modern world, the rest of this chapter is devoted to them.

Social mobility is the process of changing one's social class.

FIGURE 7.1 Weber's Model of Social Class

Weber identified three important and independent dimensions that together determine where people rank in a stratification system. The combination of these three measures is sometimes referred to as *social class*.



Classes—How Many?

A class system is an ordered set of statuses. Which statuses are included? And how are they divided? Two theoretical answers and two practical answers to these questions are presented in this section.

Marx: The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat

Karl Marx (1818–1883) believed that there were only two classes. We could call them the haves and the have-nots; Marx called them the *bourgeoisie* (boor-zhwah-zee) and the *proletariat*. The **bourgeoisie** are those who own the tools and materials necessary for their work—the means of production. The **proletariat** are those who do not. The latter must therefore support themselves by selling their labor to the former. In Marx's view, one's **class** depends entirely on one's relationship to the means of production.

Relationship to the means of production obviously has something to do with occupation, but it is not the same thing. According to Marx, your college instructor, the manager of the Sears store, and the janitor are all proletarians because they work for someone else. If your garbage collector works for the city, he is also a proletarian; if he owns his own truck, however, he is a member of the bourgeoisie. The key factor is not how much money a person has or what type of job he does but rather whether he controls his own tools and his own work.

Marx, of course, was not blind to the fact that in the eyes of the world, store managers are regarded as more successful than truck-owning garbage collectors. Probably managers think of themselves as being superior to garbage collectors. In Marx's eyes, this is **false consciousness**—a lack of awareness of one's real position in the class structure. Marx, a social activist as well as a social theorist, hoped that managers and janitors would develop **class consciousness**—an awareness of their true class identity. If they did, he believed, a revolutionary movement to eliminate class differences would be likely to occur.

Weber: Class, Status, and Power

Several decades after Marx wrote, Max Weber developed a more complex system for analyzing classes. Instead of Marx's ranking system, which identified only two classes, Weber proposed three independent dimensions that determine where people rank in a stratification system (Figure 7.1). One of them, as Marx suggested, is class. The second is power, and the third is status, which, like prestige, means social honor or social value. Individuals who share a similar status typically form a community

The **bourgeoisie** is the class that owns the tools and materials for their work—the means of production.

The **proletariat** is the class that does not own the means of production. They must support themselves by selling their labor to those who own the means of production.

Class, in Marxist theory, refers to a person's relationship to the means of production.

False consciousness is a lack of awareness of one's real position in the class structure.

Class consciousness occurs when people understand their relationship to the means of production and recognize their true class identity.

of sorts. They invite one another to dinner, marry one another, engage in the same kinds of recreation, and generally do the same things in the same places.

Weber argued that although status and power often follow economic position, they may also stand on their own and have an independent effect on social inequality. In particular, Weber noted that status often stands in opposition to economic power, depressing the pretensions of those who “just” have money. Thus, for example, a member of the Mafia may have a lot of money and may own the means of production (a brothel, a heroin manufacturing plant, or a casino), but he will not have honor in the broader community.

Measuring Social Class

Marx and Weber provide us with theoretical concepts we can use in understanding class systems. Modern researchers, however, need practical ways of measuring class, not just theoretical definitions. These days, most researchers focus not on class (as Marx defined it) but on *social* class. A **social class** is a category of people who (as Weber suggested) share roughly the same class, status, and power and who have a sense of identification with one another. When we speak of the upper class or of the working class, we are speaking of social class in this sense.

The most direct way of measuring social class is simply to ask people what social class they belong to. The results of the 2008 General Social Survey are presented in Figure 7.2. As you can see, only tiny minorities see themselves as belonging to the upper and lower classes. The rest are split nearly evenly between those who identify as working- or middle-class. Studies show that the difference between working- and middle-class identification has important consequences, affecting what church you go to, how you vote, and how you raise your children.

Another common way to measure social class is by **socioeconomic status**. Socioeconomic status refers to education, occupation, income, or some combination of these. Socioeconomic status does *not* measure how people identify their own class position. Instead, these measures rank the population from high to low on criteria such as years of school completed, family income, or the prestige of one’s occupation (as ranked by surveys of the population).

Inequality in the United States

Stratification exists in all societies. In Britain, India, and China, social structures ensure that some social classes routinely receive more rewards than do others. This section considers how stratification works in the United States.

Economic Inequality

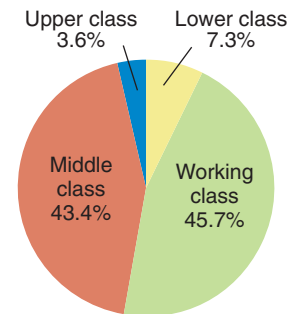
One very important type of inequality is income inequality. **Income** refers to all money received in a given time period by a person or family. Income can include salaries, wages, pensions, dividends and interest, as well as money received from the government (through Social Security, for example). **Income inequality** refers to the extent to which incomes vary within a given population.

Income inequality is very high in all class systems but is especially high in the United States. Of the 29 industrialized nations that participate in the long-term Luxembourg Income Study (2000), only two, Mexico and Russia, have more income inequality than the United States.

FIGURE 7.2 Social Class Identification in the United States

Social class is a very real concept to most Americans. They are aware of their own social-class membership. They feel that, in a variety of important respects, they are similar to others in their own social class and different from those in other social classes.

SOURCE: General Social Survey. <http://sda.berkeley.edu>. Accessed May 2009.



Social class is a category of people who share roughly the same class, status, and power and who have a sense of identification with each other.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a measure of social class that ranks individuals on income, education, occupation, or some combination of these.

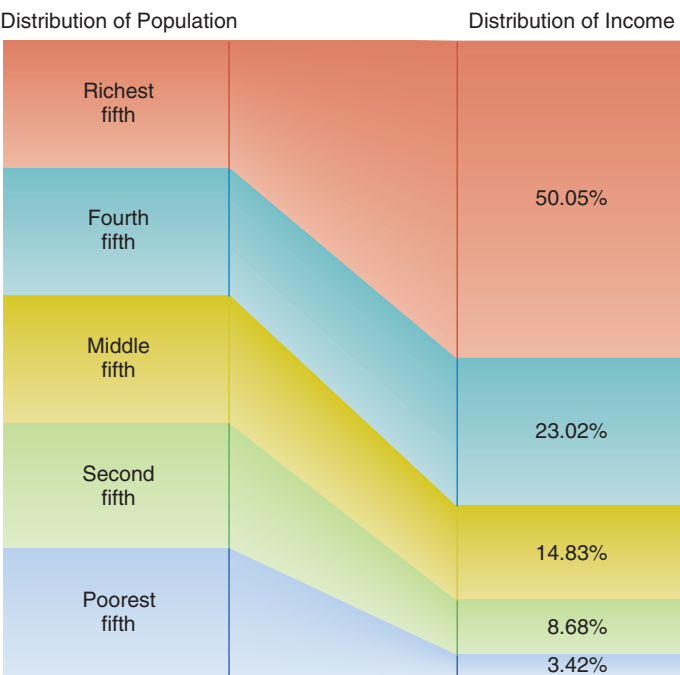
Income refers to money received in a given time period.

Income inequality refers to the extent to which incomes vary within a given population.

FIGURE 7.3 Income Inequality in the United States

Imagine dividing all U.S. citizens into five equal-size groups (quintiles). If all income in the country was also divided equally, each quintile (20 percent) of Americans would receive 20 percent of all income. In reality, the richest 20 percent (quintile) of Americans receives half of all the income, and the poorest 20 percent of the population receives less than 4 percent.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (2006).



Income inequality in the United States has increased steadily since 1970 (DeNavas-Walt & Cleveland 2002; Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). It has increased most, however, at the two ends of the income spectrum: The poorest 10 percent of the population has become significantly poorer, while the richest 10 percent has become significantly richer. When we divide the U.S. population into five equal-sized groups (quintiles), we find that the poorest 20 percent of American households now receive only 3.4 percent of all personal income, whereas the richest 20 percent receive 50 percent of income—more than 14 times as much (Figure 7.3). In contrast, in Sweden, for example, doctors and lawyers earn on average only about twice what waitresses and gas station mechanics earn.

The rise in income inequality stems from changes in the U.S. economic structure coupled with changes in government policy (Massey 2007; Morris & Western 1999). As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 13, 80 percent of all Americans now work in service or retail jobs. These jobs typically pay far less than the manufacturing jobs that once dominated the U.S. economy. Meanwhile, across all economic sectors, employers are laying off permanent employees and replacing them with lower-paid temporary or part-time workers. Other employers are replacing well-paid American workers with cheaper workers either in Southern states or, increasingly, in foreign countries. At the same time, government policies have 1) made it more difficult for unions to gain members and influence, 2) cut taxes for the wealthy, decreased benefits for the poor, and 3) allowed the value of the minimum wage to decline, thus keeping down the incomes of poor and working-class Americans (Massey 2007).

As bad as income inequality is, looking only at that measure actually understates the levels of economic inequality in the United States. For a more accurate measure of inequality, we need instead to look at wealth. **Wealth** refers to the sum value of money and goods owned by an individual or household at a given point in time (including savings, investments, homes, land, cars, and other possessions). The richest

Wealth refers to the sum value of money and goods owned by an individual or household.



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When children grow up in very unequal backgrounds, they are likely to end up leading very different and unequal lives.

20 percent of households by income now own *69 percent* of all wealth (McClain 2005). Historical research suggests that this unequal distribution of wealth is a long-standing pattern in the United States, dating back to at least 1810. However, wealth inequality has increased over the last two decades and is now higher in the United States than in any other industrialized nation (Mahler & Jesuit 2006).

The Consequences of Social Class

Almost every behavior and attitude we have reflects our social class at least somewhat. Do you prefer bowling or tennis? foreign films or American? beer or sherry? These choices and nearly all the others you make are influenced by your social class. Knowing a person's social class will often tell us more about an individual than any other single piece of information. This is why "Glad to meet you" is often followed by "What do you do for a living?"

But social-class differences go beyond mere preferences to real consequences. Consider the following examples:

- People with incomes of less than \$7,500 a year are *four* times as likely to have been the victim of a violent crime as those with incomes over \$75,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a).
- Infants whose mothers fail to graduate from high school are 50 percent more likely to die before their first birthday than infants whose mothers attend college (National Center for Health Statistics 2009).
- Compared to those from more affluent homes, students from poor and working-class homes are much more likely to attend community colleges rather than four-year colleges and to drop out regardless of which type of college they attend (Correspondents of the New York Times 2005).

As these examples suggest, individuals who have more money enjoy a higher quality of life overall.

Theoretical Perspectives on Inequality

According to *Forbes* (2008), Steven Spielberg is now worth \$3.0 *billion* and earns many millions each year. Meanwhile, the average police officer earns about \$47,000, and 20 percent of American families have annual incomes below \$20,291 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009a; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2008a). How can we account for such vast differences in income? Why isn't anybody doing anything about it? We begin our answers to these questions by examining the social structure of stratification—that is, instead of asking about Steven Spielberg or Officer Malloy, we ask why some *groups* routinely get more scarce resources than others. After we review these general theories of stratification, we will turn to explanations about how individuals are sorted into these various groups.

Structural-Functional Theory

The structural-functional theory of stratification begins (as do all structural-functional theories) with the question, Does this social structure contribute to the maintenance of society? The classic statement of this position was given by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945), who argued that stratification is necessary and justifiable because it contributes to the maintenance of society. Their argument begins with the premise that each society has essential tasks (functional prerequisites) that must be performed if it is to survive. The tasks associated with shelter, food, and reproduction are some of the most obvious examples. Davis and Moore argue that we need to offer high rewards as an incentive to make sure that people are willing to perform these tasks. The size of the rewards must be proportional to three factors:

- *The importance of the task.* When a task is very important, very high rewards are justified to ensure that the task is completed.
- *The pleasantness of the task.* When the task is relatively enjoyable, there will be no shortage of volunteers, and high rewards need not be offered.
- *The scarcity of the talent and ability necessary to perform the task.* When relatively few have the ability to perform an important task, high rewards are necessary to motivate this small minority to perform the necessary task.

From this perspective, it makes sense to pay doctors more than childcare workers: Although both fields are necessary, far fewer people have the intelligence, skills, and talent needed to enter medicine, especially since it requires long years of training and long hours of work in sometimes unpleasant and stressful circumstances. To motivate people who have this relatively scarce talent to undertake such a demanding and important task, Davis and Moore would argue that we must hold out the incentive of very high rewards in prestige and income. Society is likely to decide, however, that there will always be plenty of people willing and able to take care of children, even if the wages are low. To structural functionalists, then, the fact that doctors are paid more than childcare workers is a rational response to a social need.

The Concept Summary on Two Models of Stratification compares the structural-functional model of social stratification with the competing conflict model of stratification, which we discuss below.

Criticisms

This theory has generated a great deal of controversy. Among the major criticisms are these:

concept summary

Two Models of Stratification

Basis of Comparison	Structural-Functional Theory	Conflict Theory
1. Society can best be understood as:	Groups cooperating to meet common needs	Groups competing for scarce resources
2. Social structures:	Solve problems and help society adapt	Maintain current patterns of inequality
3. Causes of stratification are:	Importance of vital tasks, unequal ability, pleasantness of tasks	Unequal control of means of production maintained by force, fraud, and trickery
4. Conclusion about stratification:	Necessary and desirable	Unnecessary and undesirable, but difficult to eliminate
5. Strengths:	Consideration of unequal skills and talents and necessity of motivating people to work	Consideration of conflict of interests and how those with control use the system to their advantage
6. Weaknesses:	Ignores importance of power and inheritance in allocated rewards; functional importance overstated	Ignores the functions of inequality and importance of individual differences

1. High demand (scarcity) can be artificially created by limiting access to good jobs. For example, keeping medical schools small and making admissions criteria unnecessarily stiff reduce supply and increase demand for physicians.
2. Social-class background, sex, and race or ethnicity probably have more to do with who gets highly rewarded statuses than do scarce talents and ability.
3. Many highly rewarded statuses (rock stars and professional athletes, but also plastic surgeons and speechwriters) are hardly necessary to the maintenance of society.

Sociologists continue to research these issues and to debate the usefulness of structural-functional theory for understanding inequality.

The Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists take a very different approach to inequality. They argue that inequality results not from consensus over how to meet social needs but from class conflict.

Karl Marx provided the classic conflict theory of inequality. He argued that inequality grew naturally from the private ownership of the means of production. Those who own the means of production seek to maximize their own profit by minimizing the amount of return they must give to the proletarians, who have no choice but to sell their labor to the highest bidder. In this view, stratification is neither necessary nor justifiable. Inequality does not benefit society; it benefits only the rich.

Like classic Marxist theory, modern conflict theory recognizes that the powerful can oppress those who work for them by claiming the profits from their labor (Wright 1985). It goes beyond Marx's focus on ownership, however, by considering how control also may affect the struggle over scarce resources and how class battles

Removing garbage is both unpleasant and absolutely essential to modern life, yet most garbage collectors are paid low wages. Structural-functional theory attributes their low wages to their lack of skill, whereas conflict theory attributes it to their lack of power.



©Michael Dwyer/Stock Boston Inc.

play out in governmental politics (Grimes 1989; Massey 2007). In addition, modern conflict theory looks at noneconomic sources of power, especially gender and race. These theorists argue, for example, that in the same way that capitalists benefit from the productive labor of workers, men gain benefit from the “reproductive” labor of women. The term **reproductive labor** describes traditionally female tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and nurturing—those tasks that often make it possible for others to work and play. Modern conflict theorists point out that in most families, those with the least power do the most reproductive labor; as a result, these individuals end up having fewer opportunities to earn the good incomes that might otherwise increase their power within the family (Cancian & Oliner 2000).

Criticisms

There is little doubt that people who have control (through ownership or management) systematically use their power to extend and enhance their own advantage. Critics, however, question the conclusion that this means that inequality is necessarily undesirable and unfair. First, people *are* unequal. Some people are harder working, smarter, and more talented than others. Unless forcibly held back, these people will pull ahead of the others—even without force, fraud, and trickery. Second, coordination and authority *are* functional. Organizations work better when those trying to do the coordinating have the power or authority to do so.

Reproductive labor refers to traditionally female tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and nurturing that make it possible for a society to continue and for others to work and play.

Self-fulfilling prophecies occur when something is *defined* as real and therefore *becomes* real in its consequences.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Unlike structural-functional theory and conflict theory, symbolic interaction theory does not attempt to explain why some social groups are so much better rewarded than others. Instead, it asks *how* these inequalities are perpetuated in everyday life.

One of the major contributions of symbolic interaction theory is its identification of the importance of **self-fulfilling prophecies**. Self-fulfilling prophecies occur when something is *defined* as real and therefore *becomes* real in its consequences. This social dynamic is one of the ways that social-class statuses are reinforced.

For example, when teachers assume that lower-class students are less intelligent and less able to do intellectual work, the teachers are less likely to spend time helping them learn. Instead, teachers may shuffle lower-class students off to vocational classes that emphasize discipline and mechanical skills rather than intellectual skills. After several years of such “schooling,” lower-class students may, in fact, have fewer intellectual skills than do others.

Symbolic interaction theory also helps us understand how everyday interactions reinforce inequality by constantly reminding us of our place in the social order. For example, in most restaurants, waiters and waitresses must enter through the back door. They often must use separate bathrooms that are far less pleasant than those used by customers, take their breaks in windowless rooms that lack air conditioning, and wear clothes that make them look like maids and butlers. Customers often speak rudely (or crudely) to serving staff, who are expected to smile in response. And, at the end of the evening, the customer decides whether the waiter or waitress deserves a tip. In all these ways, normal restaurant interactions reinforce customers’ sense of social superiority and servers’ sense of social inferiority.

The Determinants of Social-Class Position

With each generation, the social positions in a given society must be allocated anew. Some people will get the good positions and some will get the bad ones; some will receive many scarce resources and some will not. In a class system, this allocation process depends on two things: the opportunities available to specific individuals and the overall opportunities available in a society’s labor market. We refer to these, respectively, as micro- and macro-level factors that affect achievement.

Microstructure: Individual Opportunities

Unlike in a caste system, in the United States social position is not directly or completely inherited. Yet people tend to belong to a social class the same as or similar to that of their parents. How does this come about? The best way to describe the system is as an **indirect inheritance model**. Parents cannot fully determine their children’s social status, but they strongly affect whether their children will have the opportunities needed to obtain or maintain a higher social status.

The best single predictor of your eventual social class is your parents’ income (Corcoran 1995; Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). Your parents’ income affects your life chances in many ways (Corcoran 1995; Harris 1996; Bettie 2003). If your parents are middle or upper class, you are more likely to be born healthy and more likely to get good nutrition and health care during childhood. As a result, you are less likely to have mental or physical disabilities that might reduce your potential income (Weitz 2010). Your parents will have the time and money to give you a stimulating environment in which your intellectual capacities can thrive and you will most likely attend good schools in which teachers assume their students are “college material.” Similarly, as we discussed in Chapter 2, your parents will have endowed you with cultural capital: values, interests, knowledge, and social behavior patterns that mark you as middle or upper class.

Class differences in home environment and in parents’ support for school also have important effects on children’s success. Bright and ambitious lower-class children

The **indirect inheritance model** argues that children have occupations of a status similar to that of their parents because the family’s status and income determine children’s aspirations and opportunities.

Wealthier children who can study on their laptops in quiet, private bedrooms find it far easier to succeed academically than do poorer children who have no computers of any sort and who must study in busy, noisy rooms surrounded by younger brothers and sisters.



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often find it hard to do well in school when they have to study at a noisy kitchen table, have no funds for SAT tutoring or extracurricular activities, have to work part-time jobs to help support their family, and know their parents need them to get full-time employment as soon as possible (Newman & Chen 2008). In contrast, middle-class children who grow up in supportive environments often find it hard to fail even if their ambitions and talents are modest.

In addition, if your parents went to college or have middle-class jobs, you probably always assumed that you would go to college and automatically signed up for algebra and chemistry in high school. Your parents may have given you money to take an SAT prep course, to visit colleges around the country, and to pay for as many applications as you chose to submit. If your parents didn't attend college, they may have encouraged you to start earning an income right away rather than seeking further education. Your high school advisor, too, is more likely to have encouraged you to register for shop or sewing rather than algebra or other courses needed for college entrance (Bettie 2003). If you later decided you wanted to go to college, you first had to overcome all these barriers.

If your parents graduated college, the benefits to you will continue even after you graduate college yourself. Your parents are likely to have both the income and the contacts that will help you get into a good school. After you graduate, they are likely to know people who can help you get good jobs. They may also help you buy clothes for your job interviews, purchase your first home, or pay for family vacations, allowing you to invest your earnings in a new business. They might even invest in the business themselves. All these factors make parents' income a powerful predictor of their children's eventual income (Corcoran 1995; Newman & Chen 2008).

Macrostructure: The Labor Market

The indirect inheritance model explains how some people come to be well prepared to step into good jobs, whereas others lack the necessary skills or credentials. By themselves, however, skills and credentials do not necessarily lead to class, status,

or power. The other variable in the equation is the labor market: If there is a major economic depression, you will not be able to get a good job no matter what your education, motivation, or aspirations. Indeed, most observers believe that changes in the nation's economic structure and labor market will offer fewer opportunities for upward mobility over the next generation.

The proportion of positions at the top of the U.S. occupational structure has increased dramatically over the last century. Not everyone, however, has benefited equally from these new opportunities for upward mobility. Although women and minorities now have an easier time entering high-earning occupations, they tend to find themselves in the lower-earning positions within those occupations. They are more likely to be public defenders than corporate lawyers, more likely to be pediatricians than surgeons.

Labor market theorists suggest that the United States has a *segmented labor market*: one labor market for good jobs (usually in the big companies) and one labor market for poor jobs (usually in small companies). Women and minorities are disproportionately directed into companies with low wages, low benefits, low security, and short career ladders.

The American Dream: Ideology and Reality

In any stratification system, there are winners and losers. Why do the losers put up with it?

The answer lies in **ideology**. Ideology refers to any set of beliefs that strengthen and support a social, political, economic, or cultural system. Each stratification system has an ideology that rationalizes the existing social structure and motivates people to accept it. In India, for example, the Hindu religion teaches that if you are in a low caste, you must have behaved poorly in a previous life, but that if you live morally in this life, you can expect to be born into a higher caste in the next life. This ideology offers individuals an incentive to accept their lot in life.

In the United States, the major ideology that justifies inequality is the *American Dream*. This ideology proposes that equality of opportunity exists in the United States and that anyone who works hard enough will get ahead. Conversely, anyone who does *not* succeed must be responsible for his or her own failure. Belief in this ideology is considerably stronger in the United States than anywhere else in the world (Kohut & Stokes 2006; Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). Yet ironically, social mobility is *lower* in the United States than in most comparable Western nations (Figure 7.4 on the next page). For example, compared to the United States, social mobility is 1.4 times greater in Germany, 2.5 times greater in Canada, and more than 3 times greater in Denmark (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). Studies consistently find that about 50 percent of individual Americans' incomes can be explained by their parents' incomes (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). So, for example, two-fifths of those born into the poorest 20 percent of families and two-fifths of those born into the richest 20 percent of families remain in the same bracket as their parents when they grow up (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008).

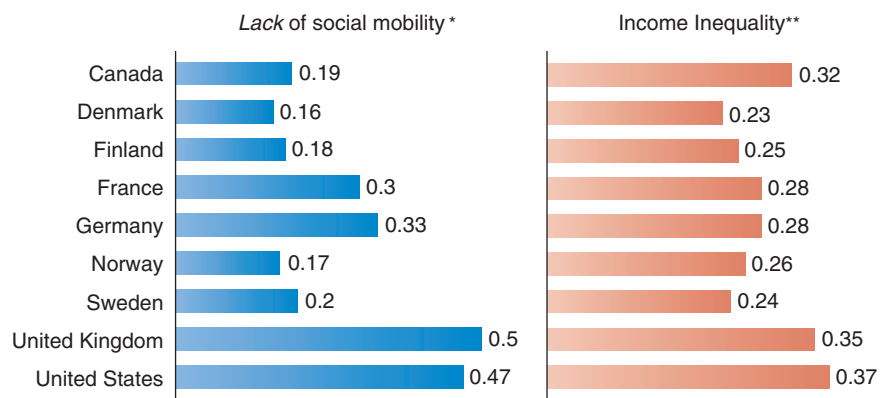
Nevertheless, the American Dream is, for some, a reality. One-third of Americans are upwardly mobile (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). For immigrants especially, the United States remains a land of opportunity: Well-educated immigrants on average earn more than other Americans, and poorly educated immigrants earn considerably more than they would have if they had stayed in their home countries. But another one-third of Americans are downwardly mobile, and the rest remain in the same social class as their parents.

An **ideology** is a set of norms and values that rationalizes the existing social structure.

FIGURE 7.4 Income Inequality and Lack of Social Mobility

Both income inequality and *lack* of social mobility are much higher in the United States than in most other comparable nations. The red bar for each country shows the extent of income inequality; the blue bar shows the extent to which men's incomes match their fathers' incomes (that is, the extent to which the country *lacks* social mobility).

SOURCE: Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008; Luxembourg Income Study 2009.



*Extent of match between incomes of fathers and their adult sons.

**Scale ranges from 0 (no income inequality) to 0.6 (highest inequality).

Explaining Upward Mobility

A major reason that the American Dream ideology can survive is because there is, indeed, some upward social mobility. Given all the social forces that hinder mobility, how can we explain why some people do indeed rise above their parents' social class?

It would be easy to assume that the reason some rise and others don't is because of intelligence and hard work, and certainly these factors matter. Most importantly, poor children who graduate college have much more upward mobility than do other poor children (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). But many very intelligent poor children have no chance of going to college. And some of the hardest-working people earn the lowest incomes.

Sociologist Julie Bettie's ethnographic research is particularly useful for understanding upward social mobility. Bettie (2003) spent nine months intensively observing and interviewing at a predominantly working-class high school. Overwhelmingly, she found, teachers and schools treated students in ways that reinforced the students' class status: Middle-class "preps" were tracked into advanced classes and celebrated for their academic achievements, students from stable working-class homes were encouraged to take vocational classes, and students from poorer homes were ignored, marginalized, and expected to fail. In addition, minority students also suffered discrimination and low teacher expectations, whether they were middle class or poorer.

Nonetheless, some working-class students seemed destined for upward social mobility. All of these upwardly mobile students were smart and hard-working. But they also benefited from resources not available to other working- and lower-class students. Some had become part of middle-class peer groups and received "middle-class treatment" from teachers and advisors because they belonged to mostly middle-class athletic teams or had attended middle-class elementary schools. Some had older siblings who had gone to college and could help them both financially and culturally (by, for example, explaining the importance of earning a four-year degree). All benefited from attending a high school that included college-track, middle-class students rather than a school that was uniformly working- or lower-class. Finally, some students were the children of immigrants who had belonged to the middle class before coming to this country. Although these students lacked the financial resources available to middle-class students, they still had the cultural resources that come with college-educated parents.

Similarly, Dalton Conley (2004) found that differential access to resources explains differences in social mobility *within* families. A son who is already in college when his parents divorce or his father loses his job is more likely to graduate college than is his younger brother who was still in high school when these events occurred. Conversely, when parents' incomes rise over time, they are better able to support their last child through school than their first child. By the same token, when parents lack the money to invest in all their children's education, they may pay for their sons' education but not their daughters' education, pay for their first child but run out of money for the rest, or invest only in the child who seems most likely to succeed. Those who receive the most help from their parents are the ones most likely to experience upward social mobility. As with the students studied by Julie Bettie, social mobility depends on access to resources.

Social Class and Social Life

To a large extent, your social class determines how you live your life. This section briefly reviews the special conditions of each of the classes in the United States.

The Poor

Each year, the U.S. government sets an official *poverty level*, or poverty line: the minimum amount of money a family needs to have a decent standard of living. The poverty level adjusts for family size, and as of 2009 is \$21,834 for a family of two adults and two children. In 2007, 37 million people—12.5 percent of Americans—lived in households that earned below the poverty level and were classified by the government as poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009c). Undoubtedly the rate has increased since then, given current economic conditions, but these are the latest data available as of 2009.

Who Are the Poor?

Poverty cuts across several dimensions of society. It exists among white Americans as well as among nonwhites, in small towns and big cities, among those with and without full-time jobs, and in traditional nuclear families as well as in female-headed households. But poverty does not affect all groups equally. As Table 7.1 on the next page indicates, African Americans and Hispanics are far more likely to be poor than are whites or Asians; children are more likely to be poor than are middle-aged or elderly persons; noncitizens (whether native-born or not) are more likely to be poor than are citizens; and households run by single mothers are more likely to be poor than are households run by single fathers or by two parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009c).

Those who live in poverty face crises every day: Parents go hungry so their children can eat, finding clothing for growing children is a nightmare, and a simple cold can easily turn into pneumonia because everyone is under stress and undernourished and no one can afford a doctor's visit. The worst off of the poor have nowhere to call home: About 3.5 million Americans—almost 40 percent of them children—are homeless, and this number is likely to increase, given current economic conditions (National Coalition for the Homeless 2008).

Poor Americans suffer not only because of their *individual* poverty but also because most live in areas of **concentrated poverty**. In these areas—whether rural or urban—schools are typically lower quality, community services are low-quality or non-existent, and jobs are few and far between. As a result, young people not only can't find work, but have few models to suggest that doing so is a reasonable goal.

Concentrated poverty refers to areas in which very high proportions of the population live in poverty.

TABLE 7.1 Americans Living below the Poverty Level

	Millions of People	Percentage of Group in Poverty
Total	37.3	12.5
Ethnicity		
White non-Hispanic	16	8.2
African American	9.2	24.5
Hispanic	9.9	21.5
Asian/Pacific	1.3	10.2
Age		
Under 18	13.3	18.0
18–64	20.4	10.9
65 and older	3.6	9.7
Citizenship/nativity		
Native-born	31.1	11.9
Naturalized citizen	1.4	9.5
Noncitizen	4.7	21.3
Household composition		
Married couple	2.8	4.9
Female-headed, no husband	4.1	28.3
Male-headed, no wife	0.7	13.6

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009c.

In addition, concentrated poverty breeds violence, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse. These problems lead parents to keep their children inside and to stick to themselves, putting the whole social network of a community at risk.

Causes of Poverty

Earlier in this chapter, we said that both micro- and macro-level processes determine social-class position. The causes of poverty are simply a special case of these larger processes. At the micro level, some believe poverty can be explained by various “cultures of poverty”; at the macro level, some believe poverty is better explained by the lack of adequate opportunities.

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY The idea that poverty is caused (or perpetuated) by a culture of poverty was first promoted by anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1969). Lewis argued that poor people hold a set of values—the culture of poverty—that emphasizes living for the moment rather than thrift, investment in the future, or hard work. Recognizing that success is not within their reach and that no matter how hard they work or how thrifty they are, they will not make it, the poor come to value living for the moment.

Other scholars have argued that families remain in poverty over generations because a lack of “family values” promotes teen pregnancy and single motherhood or

The culture of poverty is a set of values that emphasizes living for the moment rather than thrift, investment in the future, or hard work.

because children raised on welfare conclude that it's smarter to have babies and stay on welfare than to seek employment (Mead 1986, 1992; Murray 1984). Still others argue that poor youths (especially nonwhites) grow up to be poor adults because they actively reject work, education, and marriage as symbols of a middle-class culture that they despise.

Comprehensive reviews of 30 years of research on poverty provide little support for any of these culture of poverty theories (Corcoran 1995; Small & Newman 2001; Newman & Massengill 2006). Researchers have found that poor people overwhelmingly share the same attitudes toward welfare, work, education, and marriage as do middle-class people. This research suggests that teen pregnancy and a “live for the moment” culture is a *result* of poverty, not a cause (Edin & Kefalas 2006; Newman & Massengill 2006).

THE CHANGING LABOR MARKET The culture of poverty theories implicitly blame the poor for perpetuating their condition. Critics of these theories suggest that we cannot explain poverty by looking at micro-level processes. To understand poverty, they argue, we need to look at the changing labor market. If there are no well-paying jobs available, then we don't need to psychoanalyze people in order to figure out why they are poor.

The changing labor market is particularly critical for understanding contemporary poverty. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the shift from an agricultural to an industrial society allowed many people to move upward in social class. In recent decades, however, the *deindustrialization* of the United States has eliminated many of the jobs that once paid good wages to people who had little education (Newman 1999a, 1999b; Newman & Chen 2008). Instead of the good union jobs that their parents and grandparents held, today's high school dropouts and graduates often find themselves working at dead-end jobs, with no benefits, at minimum wages that pay too little



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Although we usually associate poverty with minorities, most Americans who live in poverty are white.

The loss of many good jobs has forced increasing numbers of Americans into poverty.



Joe Raedle/Getty Images

to pull someone out of poverty. In sum, a major cause of poverty is the absence of good jobs.

The Near Poor

The **near poor** are those who live in households that earn from just above the poverty level to twice the federal poverty level, that is, from about \$22,000 to \$44,000 currently. Most observers believe that they should also be considered poor, since they still find it very hard to maintain a decent standard of living. However, the lives of the 57 million near-poor Americans differ in important ways from those with incomes below the poverty level (Newman & Chen 2008).

Compared to the poor, the near poor live in safer neighborhoods with better schools (although near and thus exposed to the dangers of poor neighborhoods). Unlike the poor, near-poor adults typically work full-time (or even two jobs), have a roof over their heads, and usually have enough food to eat. On the other hand, their jobs do not pay well, offer few or no benefits, and offer little security (Newman & Chen 2008). They are unable to save much, and so a lost job, work furlough, or week off due to illness may leave them unable to pay their bills. Because they have little or no health insurance, they have to think long and hard before going to a doctor, and often will lose some teeth because they can't afford dental care. Although the government does not consider them poor, they lack much of what others regard as a decent standard of living.

The near poor have been at the heart of the current financial crisis (Newman & Chen 2008). Because near-poor persons live and work around people with higher incomes, they experience relative deprivation (discussed in Chapter 5) whenever they compare themselves to those others. At the same time, they live in neighborhoods with few reputable banks or lending services. As a result, near-poor Americans have been especially targeted by “payday” check-cashing services and by “predatory lenders,”

The **near poor** live in households earning from just above the federal poverty level to twice the poverty level.

such as credit card companies that charge exorbitant fees and mortgage brokers that charge exorbitant interest rates to people they know will end up losing their houses (Newman & Chen 2008).

The Working Class

Who are the members of the working class? The answer is determined partly by income but mostly by occupation, education, self-definition, and lifestyle. Generally, the working class includes those who work in blue-collar industries and their families. They are the men and women who work in factories, on loading docks, and in beauty parlors; they drive trucks, work as secretaries, build houses, and work for maid services. Although they sometimes receive excellent wages and benefits, it is the working class that has 10 to 30 percent unemployment during economic recessions and slumps. And although a majority are high school graduates, an eleventh-grade education is more common than a year of college.

Quite a few members of the working class have incomes as good as or better than those at the lower end of the middle-class spectrum. Truck drivers, for example, often make more than do nurses and public school teachers. As a result, working-class families may live in the same neighborhoods as middle-class families. Their economic prospects differ, however, in three ways.

1. Working-class people have little or no chance of promotion, and their incomes rarely rise much over their lifetimes.
2. Working-class jobs are rarely secure, especially now that the American economy is shifting away from manufacturing to service industries.
3. Working-class people are much less likely than members of the middle class to receive pensions, health insurance, and other benefits.

For these reasons, working-class people are much less likely to have savings or other assets. As a result, layoffs, illnesses, or injuries can quickly drive working class families into poverty (Newman 1999a).

As a result of low prospects and economic uncertainty, members of the working class tend to place a higher value on security than do others. Whereas middle- and upper-class people typically associate having choices with having freedom and control, working-class people associate having choices with insecurity, doubts, and fear (Schwartz, Markus, & Snibbe 2006). So, for example, middle-class Americans more often enjoy rock music and its celebration of individual freedom, whereas working-class Americans more often enjoy country music, which frequently warns about the dangers of choices (such as when George Jones sang “Now I’m living and dying with the choices I’ve made.”). Cultural differences between working- and middle-class Americans are explored further in Focus on Media and Culture: Karaoke Class Wars on the next page.

The Middle Class

The middle class is a large and diverse group. Ranging from professionals with graduate degrees to some salespersons and administrative assistants, middle-class workers have widely varying incomes, with some earning less than the typical working-class individual. Compared with those in the working class, however, middle-class workers tend to have more job security and more opportunities for promotions and raises. Until recently, middle-class workers also could expect to have important benefits such as health insurance and sick leave. The middle class is also united by having at least a high school education and, in most cases, at least some college.

focus on



MEDIA AND CULTURE

Karaoke Class Wars

Prior to the 1990s, sociologists consistently found that the cultural taste of the middle and working classes not only differed significantly, but that middle-class Americans used their cultural taste to distinguish themselves from the working class. Having an original oil painting on the wall, for example, or listening to classical music, not only *showed* that someone was middle-class but was *intended* to have that effect (if only subconsciously).

By the 1990s, however, analysts noticed that middle-class Americans seemed increasingly to be adopting aspects of working-class culture (Peterson & Simkus 1992; Brooks 2000). Listening to hip-hop or country music and wearing “bohemian” clothes signaled that a person might be middle-class, but was still “hip.”

Research by Rob Drew (2005), however, questions the extent to which these two cultures are actually blurring. Based on participant-observation at 30 karaoke bars around the country, as well as questionnaires and many informal conversations with participants, Drew found that when middle-class individuals adopt working-class culture (in this case, performing karaoke), they do so in ways that identify them as really middle class.

Karaoke first took root in the United States in working-class neighborhoods. Middle-class commentators reacted with scorn, lambasting the “no-talent” singers and the “death” of true music (Drew 2005). More recently, however, karaoke has become increasingly popular among middle-class Americans. As Drew notes, though, whereas working-class karaoke singers and audiences regard karaoke as a skill deserving of

respect, middle-class participants regard karaoke as acceptable only if treated as an object of humor. They typically sing in comic voices, sing parodies of the lyrics rather than the real lyrics, sing in intentionally inappropriate styles (for instance, singing a ballad in a hard rock voice), or simply burst into laughter throughout their performances. In all these ways, Drew concluded, middle-class performers not only make fun of the songs (most of which come from “working-class” genres like country music and heavy metal), but also make fun of the very idea of a karaoke singer.

In sum, far from suggesting the blurring of class boundaries in cultural taste, middle-class adoption of karaoke has reinforced those boundaries.

Middle-class culture differs from both elite upper-class culture and working-class culture. Compared with working-class individuals, middle-class individuals are less likely to decorate their homes with religious icons or to belong to bowling leagues and are more likely to value education and equality between the sexes; compared with upper-class individuals, members of the middle class are less likely to decorate their homes with modern art or to belong to golf leagues (Halle 1993). Middle-class parents spend time explaining to their children why they need to follow rules and consider themselves responsible for shepherding their children to activities and providing them with entertainment (Lareau 2003). In contrast, working-class parents more often expect children to entertain themselves and to obey orders.

The Upper Class

In 2007, a family living in the United States required an income of \$177,000 to be in the richest 5 percent of Americans (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a). Thus, a variety of more or less ordinary salespersons, doctors, lawyers, and managers in towns and cities across the nation qualify as very rich compared with the majority. Although their incomes are nothing to sneeze at, most of this upper 5 percent is still middle class. Like members of the working class, they would have a hard time making their mortgage payments if they—or their spouses—lost their jobs and were out of work for a few months. This is because although their current income is quite high, their wealth—their investments, savings, and assets they could easily sell—may not add up to much more than their debts.



Only a small elite ever have the opportunity to drink champagne and eat hors d'oeuvres in a skybox at a football game.

© Gard Ludwig/Woodfin Camp & Associates

The true upper class, on the other hand, consists of two overlapping groups: those whose families have had high incomes and statuses for more than a generation and those who themselves earn incomes in the millions of dollars. The central institution that cements the first group, whose upper-class status is inherited from their parents, is the private preparatory school, especially New England boarding schools such as Andover, Exeter, and Choate (Higley 1995). Many graduates of these schools attend Ivy League colleges, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. After graduation, they are likely to join selective country clubs and high-status Episcopalian or perhaps Presbyterian churches, and to serve on the boards of high-culture organizations such as art museums, symphonies, opera companies, and the like.

Unlike those who inherit their millions, other members of the true upper class earned at least part of their wealth. There are about a half million millionaires in the United States. Few went from rags to riches, however. Most had middle- or upper-class parents who sent them to excellent schools and helped them financially in many ways (Table 7.2 on the next page).

Social Class and Public Policy

If the competition is fair, inequality is acceptable to most people in the United States. The question is how to ensure that no one has an unfair advantage. Politicians, activists, and social scientists have promoted various approaches to fostering equality. Two of these are fair wage movements and increasing educational opportunities.

Fair Wage Movements

One obvious way to foster income equality is to add income to those on the lower end of the social scale. Since the nineteenth century, labor unions have worked to increase wages for American workers, especially in working-class occupations

TABLE 7.2 The Ten Richest People in the United States

Four of these fabulously wealthy individuals inherited their fortunes. Five played a large role in generating their vast wealth but also began their careers with many advantages. Only one—Lawrence Ellison—is truly a self-made man.

Rank	Name	Net Worth (\$ million)	Source of Wealth
1	William Henry Gates III	57,000	Microsoft, affluent parents
2	Warren Buffett	50,000	Berkshire Hathaway, affluent parents
3	Lawrence J. Ellison	27,000	Oracle Corporation
4	Jim C. Walton	23,400	Wal-Mart inheritance
5	S. Robson Walton	23,300	Wal-Mart inheritance
6	Alice L. Walton	23,200	Wal-Mart inheritance
7	Christy Walton	23,200	Wal-Mart inheritance
8	Michael Bloomberg	20,000	Bloomberg media companies, affluent parents
9	Charles Koch	19,000	Inherited and greatly expanded Koch Industries
10	David Koch	19,000	Inherited and greatly expanded Koch Industries

SOURCE: The Forbes Four Hundred (2008).

(Lichtenstein 2003). Unions have used such tactics as boycotts, strikes, and collective bargaining to pressure employers to meet what the unions consider fair demands for fair wages. Unions played a major role in improving the working and living conditions of workers during the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, however, manufacturing industries have declined, taking many union jobs with them.

Currently, many who are interested in income equality are focusing on raising the federal minimum wage (Waltman 2000). After adjusting for the effects of inflation, the value of the minimum wage (\$7.25 per hour as of 2009) is now worth about 10 percent *less* than in 1979 (Economic Policy Institute 2009).

Individuals who work full-time, year-round at minimum wage jobs earn far less than is needed to move themselves out of poverty, let alone to support even a small family. Raising the minimum wage would at least lighten their burdens.

Increasing Educational Opportunities

Research suggests that education is key to reducing income inequality (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins 2008). Pre-kindergarten classes designed to provide intellectual stimulation for children from deprived backgrounds, special education courses for those who don't speak standard English, and loan and grant programs to enable the poor to go as far in school as their ability permits—all these are designed to increase the chances of students from lower-class backgrounds getting an education.

These programs have had some success: Colleges and universities have many more students from disadvantaged backgrounds than they used to. Because children spend only 35 hours a week at school, however, and another 130 hours a week with their families and neighbors, the school cannot overcome the entire deficit that hinders disadvantaged children. For example, researchers have found that during the school year, poor children and better-off children perform at almost the same level in first- and second-grade mathematics. For poor children, however, every summer means a loss in learning, whereas every summer means a gain for wealthier children (Entwisle & Alexander 1992). The home environments of poorer children rarely include trips to the library or other activities that might encourage them to use and remember what they learn in school. As a result, many scholars and activists now support year-round schools or summer enrichment programs for students from poorer families.

Inequality Internationally

In the same way that inequality can exist *within* a nation, inequality also exists *between* nations. Indeed, a central fact in our world today is the vast international inequality. For example, gross domestic product per capita is \$41,890 in the United States but only \$806 in Sierra Leone (United Nations Development Programme 2007). Average life expectancy in the United States is 77 years; the average in Sierra Leone is 41. The massive disparities not only in wealth and health but also in security and justice are the driving mechanism of current international relationships.

Because massive inequality leads to political instability and to unjustifiable disparities in health and happiness, nearly every nation—whether more or less developed—supports reducing international inequality. The most accepted way to do this is through development—that is, by raising the standard of living of the less-developed nations.

What is development? First, development is *not* the same as Westernization. It does not necessarily entail monogamy, three-piece suits, or any other cultural practices associated with the Western world. **Development** refers to the process of increasing the productivity and the standard of living of a society, leading to longer life expectancies, better diets, more education, better housing, and more consumer goods.

Importantly, development is not a predictable, unidirectional process. Some countries, such as South Korea, have developed faster than others. Other countries, such as Russia and Argentina, have become *less* developed over time or have fluctuated over the years.

Three Worlds: Most- to Least-Developed Countries

Almost all societies in the world have development as a major goal: They want more education, higher standards of living, better health, and more productivity. Just as social scientists often think of three social classes in the U.S. stratification system—upper, middle, and lower—nations of the world can also be stratified into roughly three levels.

The **most-developed countries** are those rich nations that have relatively high degrees of economic and political autonomy. Examples include the United States, the Western European nations, Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Taken together,

Development refers to the process of increasing the productivity and standard of living of a society—longer life expectancies, more adequate diets, better education, better housing, and more consumer goods.

Most-developed countries are rich nations with considerable economic and political autonomy.

MAP 7.1: Most- to Least-Developed Nations

The most-developed nations lie in Europe, North America, and some parts of Asia. The least-developed nations primarily lie in Africa and other parts of Asia.

SOURCE: United Nations Statistics Division (2009).



these nations make up roughly 20 percent of the world's population, produce about 80 percent of the world's gross product, and own about 90 percent of the world's cars (Population Reference Bureau 2008).

Less-developed countries include the countries of Central and South America, plus various countries in Asia and elsewhere. These nations hold an intermediate position in the world political economy. They have far lower living standards than the most-developed nations but are substantially better off than the poorest tier of nations.

The remaining 75 percent or so of the world's population live in the **least-developed countries**. These countries are characterized by poverty and political weakness. Although they vary in population, political ideologies, and resources, they are considerably behind on every measure of development.

Less-developed countries are those nations whose living standards are worse than those in the most-developed countries but better than in the least-developed nations.

Least-developed countries are characterized by poverty and political weakness and rank low on most or all measures of development.

The Human Development Index

The differences among the world's nations are obvious: In the most-developed countries, people are healthier, more educated, and richer. But how important are these differences to the average person's life?

One approach to answering this question is to develop an index that measures the average achievements of a country along the basic dimensions of human experience: life expectancy, educational attainment, and a decent standard of living. Another approach not only focuses on these three aspects of development but also takes into account the unequal opportunities of men and women. Map 7.1 shows the location of the most- to least-developed countries worldwide. Table 7.3 compares several basic quality-of-life

TABLE 7.3 The Extent of International Inequality

Type of Country	GDP Per Capita (U.S. dollars)	Life Expectancy at Birth	Infant mortality Rate/1,000 live births	Human Development Ranking*	Gender-Related Development Ranking*
Most-developed countries					
Norway	\$53,690	79.3	3	2	3
United States	\$41,890	77.4	6	12	16
Canada	\$33,375	79.8	5	4	4
Japan	\$31,267	81.9	3	8	13
Rep. of Korea	\$22,029	77.0	5	26	26
Russian Federation	\$10,845	64.8	14	67	59
Less-developed countries					
Saudi Arabia	\$15,711	71.6	21	61	70
Brazil	\$8,402	71.0	31	70	60
China	\$6,757	72.0	23	81	73
El Salvador	\$5,255	70.7	23	103	92
India	\$3,452	62.9	56	128	113
Kenya	\$1,240	51.0	79	148	127
Least-developed countries					
Haiti	\$1,663	58.1	84	146	NA
Rwanda	\$1,206	43.4	118	161	140
Congo, Dem. Rep.	\$714	45.0	129	168	148
Ethiopia	\$1,055	50.7	109	169	149
Sierra Leone	\$806	41.0	165	177	157
Nigeria	\$1,128	46.6	100	158	139

SOURCE: United Nations Development Programme (2007).

*Out of 177 countries

indicators for various most-developed, less-developed, and least-developed countries. In addition to information about longevity and economic productivity, Table 7.3 also includes each country's overall ranking on the composite Human Development Index and the Gender-Related Development Index. These indexes are based on information about adult literacy rates and educational attainment, life expectancy, and per capita gross domestic product; the greater the disparity between men's and women's quality of life, the lower a country's Gender-Related Development ranking will be compared with its overall Human Development ranking.

Women and children are particularly at risk in poor nations. A half-million women in the developing nations die each year during pregnancy or childbirth, at rates up to 100 times those found in the most-developed nations. Worldwide, one out of every three preschool children suffer from malnutrition (United Nations Development Programme 2007). International inequality is indeed dramatic.

In general, the more productive a nation is, the better its quality of life. Norway, with a per capita gross domestic product of \$53,690, has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world: Each year, for every 1,000 live births in Norway, 3 children

die before their first birthday. In contrast, in the world's poorest nation—Niger—per capita gross domestic product is only \$630, and 81 out of every 1,000 children die before their first birthday (United Nations Development Programme 2007).

But economic productivity and quality of life do not align perfectly. For example, GDP per capita is 25% higher in the United States than Canada, but according to the United Nations Development Programme (2007), Canadians enjoy a higher quality of life than do Americans. In large part, Canada's rankings on human development reflect the fact that access to health care, education, and adequate nutrition is more universally available there than in the more affluent United States.

No nation wants to be poor and underdeveloped. Why are some nations poor, and what can be done about this? We examine two general theories of development—modernization and world-systems theory—and their implications for reducing global inequality.

Structural-Functional Analysis: Modernization Theory

Modernization theory sees development as the natural unfolding of an evolutionary process in which societies go from simple to complex economies and institutional structures. This is a structural-functional theory based on the premise that adaptation is the chief determinant of social structures. According to this perspective, developed nations are merely ahead of the developing nations in a natural evolutionary process. Given time, the developing nations will catch up.

Modernization theory emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, when many believed that developing nations would follow pretty much the same path as the developed nations. Greater productivity through industrialization would lead to greater surpluses, which could be used to improve health and education and technology. Initial expansion of industrialization would lead to a spiral of ever-increasing productivity and a higher standard of living. These theorists believed this process would occur more rapidly in the least-developed nations than it had in Europe because of the direct introduction of Western-style education, health care, and technology (Chodak 1973).

Events have shown, however, that development is far from a certain process. Some “developed” nations, such as those in the former Soviet Union, have regressed over time. Thailand and the Republic of Korea have modernized quickly, Haiti has modernized hardly at all, and Mexico has gone through wild economic upswings and downturns. The least-developed countries have not caught up with the developed world, and, in many cases, the poor have simply become poorer, while the rich have become richer.

Why haven't the less-developed nations followed in the footsteps of developed nations? The primary reason is that they encounter many obstacles not faced by nations that developed earlier: population pressures of much greater magnitude, environments ravaged by the developed nations since they were colonial powers, and the disadvantage of being latecomers to a world market that is already carved up. These formidable obstacles have given rise to an alternative view of world modernization—world-systems theory.

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Conflict Analysis: World-Systems Theory

Conflict theorists' interpretations of modernization begin by arguing that the entire world is a single economic system, dominated by capitalism for the past 200 years.



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Because of their economic and political power, transnational corporations based in the most-developed nations are able to capture markets in less-developed nations, as FedEx is trying to do in Vietnam.

Nation-states and large **transnational corporations** (that is, corporations that produce and distribute goods in more than one country) are the chief actors in a free-market system in which goods, services, and labor are organized to maximize profits (Chirot 1986; Turner & Musick 1985). This system includes an international division of labor in which some nations extract raw materials and others fabricate raw materials into finished products.

Nation-states can pursue a variety of strategies to maximize their profits on the world market. They can capture markets forcibly through invasion, they can manipulate markets through treaties or other special arrangements (such as NAFTA), or they can simply do the international equivalent of building a better mousetrap. The Japanese auto industry (indeed, all of Japanese industry) is a successful example of the last strategy.

World-systems theory is a conflict analysis of the economic relationships between developed and developing countries. It looks at this economic system with a distinctly Marxist eye. Developed countries are the bourgeoisie of the world capitalist system, and underdeveloped and developing countries are the proletariat. The division of labor between them is supported by a prevailing ideology (capitalism) and kept in place by an exploitive ruling class (rich countries and transnational corporations) that seeks to maximize its benefits at the expense of the working class (underdeveloped and developing countries).

World-systems theory distinguishes two classes of nations: *core societies* and *peripheral societies*. **Core societies** are rich, powerful nations that are economically diversified and relatively free from outside control. They arrive at their position of dominance, in part, through exploiting other (peripheral) societies.

Peripheral societies, by contrast, are poor and weak, with highly specialized economies over which they have relatively little control (Chirot 1977). Some of the poorest countries rely heavily on a single cash crop for their export revenue. For example, 80 percent of export earnings for the island nation of Sao Tome and Principe come from cocoa (Central Intelligence Agency 2008). The economies of these and

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focus on



A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Water and Global Inequality

Without water, human life is unsustainable. And without *clean* water (unpolluted by human waste), diseases such as cholera, typhoid fever, and dysentery soon follow. Similarly, unclean water leads to fatal attacks of diarrhea in 1.8 million children each year (Prüss-Üstün, Bos, Gore, & Bartram 2008).

About one-third of the world's population, almost all of them living in less-developed nations, have limited or no access to clean water. Yet even in these nations, the wealthy have easy access to safe bottled water. In many cases, they also have access to safe, municipal water systems. Due largely to government indifference, however, poor people—whether in rural or urban areas—lack such access (Watkins 2006). Unfortunately, water inequality

in less-developed nations is increasing, as wealthy corporations and neighborhoods pressure governments to divert water from poor, rural areas to their factories and homes (Watkins 2006).

Inequality between males and females also plays a role in water inequality. Men and boys typically receive more of their family's water supplies, even though women and girls often spend hours each day walking to rivers or water pumps and carrying water back to their homes (Watkins 2006). This situation reinforces as well as reflects inequality: When girls spend hours daily in search of water, it is impossible for them to go to school, let alone play or relax.

Ironically, although people in the United States have ready access to safe, virtually free water from their taps, millions instead purchase bottled water. Our ability to do so reflects global inequality: Only members of a very rich

country can afford to buy something that they could get for free and more safely from the government (National Resource Defense Council 2008). Producing, shipping, and disposing of all those bottles requires great amounts of oil; releases great quantities of dangerous chemicals into the air, land, and water; and adds significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Many of those processes are occurring in less-developed nations where the water is pumped, the bottles are produced, and, increasingly, the empty bottles along with other waste is sent for disposal (National Resource Defense Council 2008).

In sum, water inequality both reflects and reinforces inequality within the less- and least-developed nations and between these nations and the most-developed nations.

sociology and you

If you have traveled to a less-developed country, you have seen the consequences of economic dependence. You probably were warned not to drink the water, because these nations lack the economic resources to provide safe drinking water. Because wages are so low in these nations, you could buy meals, clothes, and souvenirs very cheaply and could purchase services like taxis that are too expensive to use at home. And because even at these low wages, many can find no jobs at all, you might have seen beggars or prostitutes and been warned about thieves.

A **war** is an armed conflict between a national army and some other group.

many other developing nations are vulnerable to conditions beyond their control: world demand, crop damage from infestation, flooding, drought, and so on.

A key element of world-systems theory is the connectedness between core society prosperity and peripheral society poverty. According to this theory, our prosperity is their poverty. In other words, our inexpensive shoes, transistors, bananas, and the rest depend on someone in a least-developed nation receiving low wages, often while working for a company based in one of the developed nations. Were their wages to rise, our prices would rise, and our standard of living would drop.

The interconnection between poverty and wealth around the world is explored further in Focus on a Global Perspective: Water and Global Inequality.

Global Inequality and Armed Conflict

Inequality can lead to armed conflict both when those who hold power use their resources to seek even more resources (as when most-developed nations invade less-developed nations to obtain oil, gas, or other valued commodities) and when those who lack power rise in revolt.

Global Inequality and War

Fights between two street gangs in Chicago, or between Hindu and Muslim citizens in India, may result in many deaths, but they are not wars. A **war** is an armed conflict in which at least one side is organized into an army working directly for a

government (Kestnbaum 2009). In the past, scholars tended to define a conflict as a war only if two national armies were involved. However, much current warfare is being fought between an army on one side and groups of armed civilians on the other.

War always reflects changing relations among three groups: the government, the armed forces, and the public (Kestnbaum 2009; Paret 1992; Geyer 2002). Governments can only engage in warfare when the armed forces support them or when the public is willing to take up arms to defend a government under siege. The armed forces can only engage in warfare when they have either the support of the government and public or sufficient power to ignore or kill their opponents. The public will support the army and government if it believes the army and government care about the nation's people; the public may rise up in resistance if it regards the army and government as its enemies and if it believes resistance is worth the cost. Public awareness of vast inequalities within nations have led to violent class, ethnic, or political struggles around the world (Kerbo 2005). During the last decade, such conflicts have occurred in Israel, Macedonia, Mexico, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

In addition to reflecting changing relations *within* a country, contemporary warfare—including civil warfare—often reflects changing relationships *between* countries (Kestnbaum 2009; Hironaka 2005). Sometimes one country seeks to grab resources directly from another country or from groups within its own country. These days, however, warfare often results when governments and business interests in the most-developed nations use their resources to bolster the power of corrupt, weak governments in the less-developed nations. Such situations have fostered armed revolts in Vietnam, Iran, and Iraq, among other places.

At the same time, governments in the less-developed countries are increasingly angry at the ways the most-developed nations have affected their economies, culture, and politics. Many observers believe that the greatest threats to the United States are posed by less-developed nations that either have or are attempting to develop nuclear weapons, such as Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan.

Global Inequality and Terrorism

On September 11, 2001, terrorists rammed two jets into the World Trade Center in New York City and a third into the Pentagon, outside Washington, D.C., killing almost 3,000 people. In November 2008, terrorists killed almost 200 civilians in a coordinated series of attacks in Mumbai, India. In July 2005, terrorists left bombs in the London public transit system that killed 52 people and injured about 700.

What do we mean when we call actions *terrorism*? To scholars, **terrorism** refers to the deliberate and unlawful use of violence against civilians for political purposes. Terrorism, however, is a social construction: One group's "terrorists" are another group's "freedom-fighters" or "martyrs" (Turk 2004). Which label sticks depends in part on who wins and gets to write the history books: The American Revolution looked very different to the British (who called it "The Rebellion"). The U.S. government typically has labeled only foreigners as terrorists, preferring to treat violence by Americans in the United States (such as murders of abortion providers and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombings) as the actions of individual, deranged, criminals rather than as terrorism (Turk 2004).

Why do individuals engage in terrorism? Surprisingly, *personal* experience of inequality plays little role: The poor are *less* likely than others to engage in terrorism. Instead, terrorism is largely rooted in perceived threats to *national* or *cultural* pride (Turk 2004). People from less-developed nations most often embrace international

Terrorism is the deliberate and unlawful use of violence against civilians for political purposes.

Anti-American sentiment in other countries reflects fear and resentment of American cultural, economic, political, and military power.



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terrorism when they believe their culture is being corrupted by Western culture, and their nation's economy and government are being unethically pressured or controlled by Western nations. They become willing to engage in terrorism when socialized to consider it the only means to right these injustices (Turk 2004).

Case Study: Islamic Terrorism

Around the world, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu terrorists have engaged in politically motivated violence. Recently, though, Islamic terrorism has dominated the headlines. But although religious ideology can play a role in terrorism, global inequality is also highly important (Amanat 2001; Barber 2001; Jacquard 2002; Stern 2003).

One underlying cause of Islamic terrorism is the deepening belief among many Muslims that their nations and religion are under political attack. This belief has roots in the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the civil war in Bosnia that pitted Muslims against Christians. Actions taken by the United States have also played a large role in creating this sense of victimization among many Muslims. The United States consistently has supported Israel against the Palestinians. It has also invaded Iraq, used economic blockades against Iran, and based military troops in Saudi Arabia near Islam's holiest sites. These actions have wounded the pride of many Muslims and left them with a sense that both Muslim governments and Islam itself are under attack.

Problems within the Muslim countries of the Middle East and Asia also have contributed to terrorism. Many of these countries have been wracked by war on and off for the last century. Poverty is very high, inequality is extreme, and governments by and large are corrupt. As a result, poor children often can only afford to attend free Islamic schools (*madrasas*) that teach little beyond extreme, fundamentalist versions of Islam. These forces have made it easier for the leaders of Al Qaeda and other similar groups to find foot soldiers for their battles. Meanwhile, although wealthier residents of Muslim nations are protected from the worst impacts of these forces, they still live in a culture of alienation, despair, and wounded pride. These are the individuals, like

Osama bin Laden and the 19 terrorists who attacked the United States on 9/11, who become the leaders and lieutenants in global terrorism.

Finally, because of the mass media and information technology, Muslims throughout the world are now inundated with American culture. In countries and cultures where women are expected to cover themselves from head to toe, American television shows display nearly naked women. Hip-hop music boasts of sexual conquests, and Hollywood romances feature independent women and men whose lifestyles are the antithesis of traditional Muslim values. Around the world, America has become the symbol of the good life, but also a symbol of materialism, violence, promiscuity, and the attack on traditionalism. Islamic terrorism has emerged in part as a way to counter all these facets of American culture.

Where This Leaves Us

Research on stratification leads to one basic conclusion: As long as some people are born in tenements to poorly educated parents who lack the time, money, and cultural resources needed to provide their children with intellectual stimulation, while others are born to wealthy, educated parents with excellent connections and “cultural capital,” there can never be true equality of opportunity. Similarly, as long as some nations have a greater share of resources—money, oil, media outlets, good schools—other nations can never flourish. Those nations that lack power will have lower life expectancies, many homeless people, and many who experience malnutrition or even starvation. Thus the only way to create equal opportunity, either within or across nations, is to attack these underlying problems. The question for Americans is, should we care?

To answer this question from a moral perspective, we might point out that quality of life among poor and affluent Americans and between poor and wealthy nations are directly related to each other. Wealthy Americans enjoy a good life because they can cheaply hire maids and taxi drivers and can buy houses and other goods produced by poorly paid American workers. Similarly, citizens of the United States and other developed nations enjoy raw goods and products obtained cheaply from countries where people work for pennies an hour, and enjoy the security of knowing that other nations cannot challenge our military and economic power. By the same token, American culture is spreading around the world in part because of our economic and political power and because other cultures lack the power to oppose it.

But this is a sociology textbook, not an ethics textbook. From a sociological perspective, perhaps the most important issue is how both individuals and societies can benefit from reducing inequality. Of course, few wealthy individuals or nations want to give resources away. On the other hand, inequality costs everyone. In nations where inequality is high, everyone—including the wealthy—experiences more stress, more crime, worse health, and lower life expectancies (Marmot 2004; Wilkinson 1996, 2005). It's just not as much fun being wealthy or even middle class when you have to lock your doors all the time, worry about crime, fear that you might lose your job to a cheaper worker, and fear that your standard of living might plummet if you were ill or injured. Similarly, wealthy nations can never relax their guard when other nations envy their economic and cultural position. The events of 9/11 demonstrate what can happen when resentment of wealthy nations rises.

Summary

1. Stratification differs from simple inequality in that (a) it is based on membership in social categories rather than on personal characteristics, and (b) it is supported by norms and values that justify unequal rewards.
2. There are two types of stratification systems. In a caste system, your social position depends entirely on your parents' position. In a class system, your social position is based on educational and occupational attainment and so you may wind up in a higher or lower position than that of your parents.
3. Marx believed that there was only one important dimension of stratification: class. Weber added two further dimensions, and most sociologists now rely on his three-dimensional view of stratification: class, status, and power.
4. Inequality in income and wealth is substantial in the United States and has increased steadily since 1970. Income inequality is higher in the United States than in any other industrialized nation. Wealth inequality is even greater than income inequality in the United States.
5. Structural-functional theorists argue that inequality is a necessary and justifiable way of sorting people into positions. Conflict theorists believe that inequality arises from conflict over scarce resources, in which those with the most power manipulate the system to enhance and maintain their advantage. Symbolic interaction theory focuses on how social status is reinforced through self-fulfilling prophecies.
6. Allocation of people into statuses includes macro and micro processes. At the macro level, the labor market sets the stage by creating demands for certain statuses. At the micro level, the status attainment process is largely governed by indirect inheritance.
7. Despite high levels of inequality, most people in any society accept the structure of inequality as natural or just. In the United States, the ideology that teaches people to accept inequality is the *American Dream*, which suggests that success or failure is the individual's choice.
8. Upward mobility is most common among those who have better access to economic, educational, and cultural resources, whether compared with their siblings or with children from other families.
9. Currently 12.5 percent of the U.S. population falls below the poverty level. Although some have argued that "cultures of poverty" explain why people stay poor, research suggests that the shrinking options provided by the current labor market is a more likely explanation.
10. Among the approaches proposed for reducing poverty are fair wage movements and increasing educational opportunities.
11. International inequality is a key factor in today's world. Reducing this disparity through the development of less-developed and least-developed countries is a common international goal. Development is not the same as Westernization; it means increasing productivity and raising the standard of living.
12. The world's nations can be divided into the rich, diversified, independent, most-developed core nations; the least-developed nations of the periphery; and the less-developed nations, which fall in between these two extremes.
13. The Human Development Index and the Gender-Related Development Index use literacy and educational attainment, life expectancy, and economic productivity to assess quality of life overall, as well as quality of life adjusted for the effects of gender inequality.
14. Modernization theory, a functionalist perspective of social change, argues that less-developed countries will evolve toward industrialization by adopting the technologies and social institutions used by the developed countries.
15. World-systems theory, a conflict perspective, views the world as a single economic system in which the industrialized countries, known as core societies, control world resources at the expense of the less-developed, peripheral societies.
16. Inequality within nations can lead to nationalist revolutions or violent class or ethnic struggles.
17. War always reflects changing relations among three groups within a country—the government, the armed forces, and the public—and can reflect changing relationships between countries.
18. Terrorism is the deliberate and unlawful use of violence against civilians for political purposes. It is also a social construction: The winners usually decide who is labeled a *terrorist*. Terrorism typically results from perceived threats to national or cultural pride.

Thinking Critically

1. Can you think of any ways in which the U.S. system of stratification resembles a caste system?
2. To what social class do you belong? How do you know? How are you affected by your social class?
3. What wealth does your family own? What cultural capital does your family have? How have your family's wealth and cultural capital, or lack of wealth and cultural capital, affected you?
4. You are a hundred times better off than the average person in Haiti. Is this a necessary and just reflection of your greater contribution to society? How do you benefit from this inequality? How are you harmed by it?
5. Critically evaluate the components of the Human Development Index. Which seems most important to you? Could this index be used to understand group differences in quality of life within the United States?

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