

**Lesson
Twelve**

Functionalist Theories of Stratification

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- describe the functionalist theories of social stratification
- consider the work of Davis and Moore
- compare the functionalist theories of stratification with Marxism and feminism

Context

In this lesson we look in more detail at *why* societies become stratified and especially at theories put forward by functionalists, Marxists and feminists.



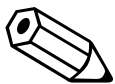
Introduction

The term 'social stratification' is used in every element of sociology. It refers to the way society is structured into layers, known as a hierarchy. Each layer of the hierarchy is ranked above the one below it. The most privileged group in society is at the top of the hierarchy. Sociology is concerned with the inequality between the different groups at different levels. Therefore, social stratification is the way in which people in society are allocated to a group.

The **functionalist perspective** was one of the first perspectives in sociology. Everything functionalists look at is in terms of how it fits into the wider society and the function it performs. So in the case of social stratification, functionalists look at how it benefits society and the function it has for society as a whole. This lesson looks at this theory in more detail, with a special focus on the work of Davis and Moore, two of the leading functionalist sociologists in the area of stratification. We will also look at evaluations of this perspective and compare it with the views of Marxists and feminists.

Activity 1

Look at the jobs below and answer the questions that follow.



Surgeon	Teacher	Professional footballer
Politician	Nurse	Refuse collector
Shop assistant	Reality TV star	Police officer

- a) Which three jobs require the highest levels of talent or education?
- b) Which three contribute the most to society?
- c) Which jobs are usually the highest paid?
- d) Did any of the jobs come up in all your answers to the questions above?
- e) What do you think was the point of this activity?

The Functionalist Theory

Functionalists argue that inequality benefits society. Some positions are seen as more valuable than others because they fulfil a more important function. People filling the highest roles require higher education and more technical skills than people in lower level roles. The higher levels require more training and time to develop the skills needed for their role.

Because committing this time means sacrifices, they deserve the rewards they obtain from these roles. This is a central concept for the functionalists. Talented people are prepared to spend years studying and training because the rewards at the end make it worth their while. The rewards motivate them to make the sacrifices which are essential to their training. Obvious rewards are high salaries, bonuses, pension schemes etc.

Therefore, inequality is necessary. If all jobs were seen as equal, there would be no motivation for the most talented people to aim for the highest jobs. Functionalists see this system as fair because everyone has an equal chance to achieve these top jobs.

Talcott Parsons was one of the leading functionalist sociologists when the perspective was at the height of its popularity. He argued that society is based on value consensus, that there is agreement between different members of society about what is important. This includes agreement on which roles are most important. The values of society decide which order different roles are ranked in and those ranked at the top are most likely to receive the highest rewards.

This theory can be applied to different types of society as each society has a different value system. Parsons uses the example of the Sioux Indians in North America. They placed value on bravery and the warriors who proved themselves to be the bravest held the highest positions in the stratification system of the Sioux. If one warrior was rewarded for bravery, other warriors would strive to achieve the same reward through brave acts of their own. In modern society, value is placed on individual achievement, so individuals who show the most ambition and talent receive the greatest rewards.

On this basis, every society has social stratification. Value consensus is a fundamental part of every society, which results in social stratification in every society. This theory also assumes that everyone is happy with the system because it is based on agreement on what roles are the most important and valuable.

Functionalists believe that each social group co-operates with the others. One group on its own cannot fulfil all its needs to inter-dependence with other groups is essential. In complex industrial societies, the large scale organisations need specialised roles. Some people will take the lead in the planning whilst others follow this lead. As a result, there is some inequality in terms of power. However, as these inequalities are based on value consensus, it does not lead to conflict. People in the highest roles have more power, but as they are using this power to benefit society as a whole, it is acceptable. It serves the interests of society.

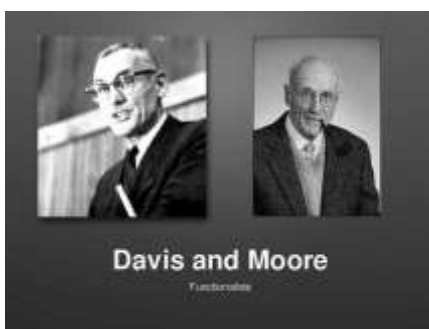
Marxists and feminists both strongly criticise this argument. Marxists see stratification as divisive and disagree that it is a positive process. Feminists also see stratification as divisive because it restricts the position of women and maintains the focus of women in the domestic sphere. Both these perspectives are discussed in more detail later on in this lesson.

Davis and Moore: Role Allocation

Kingsley Davis and **Wilbert Moore** were two of the main functionalists to look at social stratification and their work has remained dominant ever since.

They studied the way that individuals obtain their role in society, in other words, role allocation. They argue that every known society, no matter where it is or how it is organised, has some form of stratification.

Every role in society needs to be filled by the people who are in the best position to fill them. This will involve some level of training and preparation in order for the role to be fulfilled properly.



Davis and Moore argue that every person in society has a different ability or talent. At the same time, the roles in society vary depending on their importance to society as a whole. The most important roles require a high level of skill but there are few people who are capable of fulfilling these important roles. The stratification system allocates people to the role best for them.

According to Davis and Moore, the higher rewards which motivate the most talented people to train for the highest jobs, result in the most talented people winning. This is essential to society because society needs the highest jobs to be filled by the most talented and able.

Criticisms of Davis and Moore

Davis and Moore base their theory on the idea that the highest positions in society receive the highest rewards. However, it could be argued that many roles in society are vital but do not receive much reward. According to Davis and Moore a doctor would be seen as more important than a farmer, but whether this is true or not is purely a matter of opinion. Critics of Davis and Moore argue that it is the higher power of some groups which grants them a higher reward, not their skills.

Many people would also argue that training and gaining a higher education is not a sacrifice that needs compensation. A few years in training does not justify years' worth of higher pay. It could also be argued that social stratification is actually a barrier to some people reaching the higher jobs. The need to train for certain jobs puts some people off from trying to achieve these jobs. This is reflected in the fact that far more middle class children are likely to attend university than working class children.

The Marxist Perspective

As the functionalists are focusing on the way that all parts of society work together, the Marxists are the opposite. They argue that some groups in society oppress other groups and that stratification is a way to keep society divided.


Marxists believe that it is a system that allows the rich to exploit the poor and the system is designed to help those at the top of the hierarchy to maintain their position rather than help society achieve its collective goals.

Marxists argue that there are strongly defined class divisions. In all class-based societies, there is a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class holds all the power because they own the means of production and the wealth. They use this power to exploit the subject class, which leads to conflict between the two groups. Marxists believe that every aspect of society is aimed at maintaining this system, from education to the criminal justice system.

Private property is the basis of socio-economic class divisions. It sets the conditions for two classes to emerge, producers and non-producers. The non-producers own the means of production whereas the producers only have their labour skills to sell.

Both classes are dependent on each other. The non-producers need workers to produce the goods for them, and the producers need the

jobs. However, Marxists argue that there is no equality in this mutual dependence. The non-producers exploit the producers and gain far more from the system.

Activity 2	What is the difference between the functionalist and Marxist perspective on social stratification?
	

The Feminist Perspective

The functionalist theories on social stratification largely ignore women. This is mainly because functionalism was most popular in the 1950s and 1960s when many families were still based on the male breadwinner and the female housewife and mother. However, as more and more women have entered work, feminists have been particularly interested in how gender affects social stratification.

Feminists argue that the sexist nature of society prevents women from reaching the same levels as men. In its most extreme form, girls are brought up to believe that marriage and children are their biggest aims whereas boys are brought up aiming for a career. This differs to the functionalists because feminists are arguing that social stratification is a way of keeping women oppressed rather than allowing people to be allocated to the role best suited to their talents.

Suggested Answers to Activities

Activity 1

The answer to the first few parts are your opinion.

- (e) This activity was designed to get you thinking about the different roles of different groups within society and comparing the value of that contribution. Hopefully, you've realised that this is a very subjective area and everyone will have their own opinions. Ultimately though, any discussion about social stratification is fundamentally about the contribution a particular group makes to society.

Activity 2

Functionalists look for the ways in which different parts of society work together to make up society as a whole. Stratification is an important part of this because it allows individuals to be allocated to the role which best suits them and makes sure that all roles in society are filled by the people best able to fulfil them. In contrast, Marxists believe that there is conflict between the two main social classes. The ruling class owns all the power and wealth and the working class are exploited into working for them in order to survive. The stratification system maintains this exploitation.