

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

- M. N. SULE

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CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

Human societies differ from animal groups in at least one important respect. According to Otite and Ogonwo (1985), even the simplest human society appears to be more internally differentiated than the most complex animal 'society'. In every human society thus, significant differences can easily be seen among human beings. Some of these differences are biological variations (e.g. some are tall while others are short, some are male and others female). In addition to these inherited differences, people in society are as well differentiated by many acquired social differences.

In every human society, people differ from one another in many regards, such as in their interests, attitudes and beliefs. These individual differences become the basis of different social positions or roles (e.g. lawyer, emir, teacher, and engineer), and also of distinctive social functions in a society (e.g. the lawyer helps to allay our fears of conviction in a pending court case).

The division of each human society into distinctive social roles and functions, based on both inherited and acquired differences is what is referred to as social-differentiation. This is a universal characterization of human societies. Social differentiation is necessary for the survival and functioning of society.

While differential evaluations in society are linked to social differences in all human societies, it is found that most, though not all, societies elaborate the ranking process significantly by arranging certain social positions in a graded hierarchy of socially superior and inferior ranks. Where a society displays a graded series of ranks, it is said to be socially stratified.

Social stratification is thus a special type of social differentiation that involves the existence of a systematic hierarchy of social positions whose members are treated as superior, equal or inferior to one another.

When applied to society, the term "stratification" uses an analogy from geology. It refers to the way layers of rock are laid on top of each other. Society is thus divided into layers and we can identify some layers, or groups of people which are in socially superior positions to others.

Max Weber, the German sociologist, identified three separate elements of social stratification, namely:

- i) *Class* which means the relative amount of money, wealth and other economic goods that a person or social group possesses.
- ii) *Status* - the relative degree of prestige or deference and privilege that a person or social group can successfully claim from other members of the society;
- iii) *Power* - the capacity a person (or a social group) has to control the lives of others.

Social stratification is one manifestation of the sociologists general interest in the basic principles of social organization. It is a particular kind of social differentiation that necessarily conveys the notion of hierarchical ranking; a ranking which produces strata into one of which all members of the society under investigation fall and within which all are equal but between which there are recognized and sanctioned differences which place one higher or lower than another in the admitted social order.

An American sociologist Talcott Parsons, defines social stratification as the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior, relative to one another in certain socially important respects.

Basic Views of Social Stratification

Every known human society, of whatever size, is certainly stratified. That means, the hierarchical evaluation of persons in different social positions is apparently inherent in all social organizations. There seem to be three distinct views of social stratification. These are:

- i) Stratification as an integral element of human nature;
- ii) Social inequality as a historical stage or phase in history
- iii) Stratification as a functional necessity.

i) Stratification as an Inevitable Element of Human Nature

This view has a conservative political undertone and has been held by many scholars - Aristotle, Plato, Adam Smith, Graham Sumner, Pareto and Mosca. This view sees classes as inevitable in any society. Social-class has

been perceived here as a group of relative equals within a graded hierarchy of higher and lower positions. This view sees stratification as related to factors of the economy of a country. The latent causes of stratification have been adduced to the unequal distribution of property as the most common and enduring source of factions (or classes). Unequal distribution of property in society results from differences in the faculties and abilities of men to acquire property.

Those who have the faculty to acquire property will always be opposed in their interests to those who have not been able to acquire property. It is thus argued that, the causes of stratification cannot be removed. However, government in every society is to try to control its effects on the people which does not mean equality in whatever regard.

ii) Social Inequality as a Historical Stage

This view has its root in the conflict theory, as elucidated by Karl Marx. Stratification is seen as an artificial phenomenon that will eventually disappear and give way to a new era of equality and freedom. Otite and Ogonwo (1985, p.33), identified the distinctive features of Marx's view of stratification as:

- a) that the conception of social classes is in terms of the system of production, and;
- b) that the idea of social development through class conflict is to culminate in a new type of society without classes.

Marx had argued that social classes were the inevitable consequences of social and economic forces set in motion by the prevailing system of production in a society. In the process of surveying the historical development of various societies and eras, Marx concluded that beneath the apparent variation between one society and another, and one era and another exists the desire to satisfy the minimal requirements of human survival by supplying the necessary goods and commodities needed for life. The system of the production and distribution of goods varied between societies in all cases but the central consequences are the same. The method of production necessarily divided society into two antagonistic classes, each with its characteristic interests and needs.

iii) Stratification as a Functional Necessity

The functionalist view of social stratification is also presented by renowned scholars in the field. Talcott Parsons and Kingsley Davies see social inequality as serving a necessary purpose in society. These social functional-

ists argue that the existing differential distribution of privilege and disprivilege are derived from the effort of a society to fulfil its necessary goals for survival.

For instance, a social organization or society requires the services of lawyers, medical practitioners, engineers and teachers. These members of society require substantial periods of training and they must defer gratification of their immediate wants and needs in order to undergo the needed training to fill up the social positions that go with such training. As a result of these training and the value of the services performed, these professionals receive the privilege of higher income, prestige and societal recognition.

Not everyone in society has the necessary physical stamina, intellectual capacity and emotional attributes to undertake these training. Accordingly, in every society, there are members who perform tasks that are of superior nature and those that perform tasks which are of inferior nature (e.g. the task of a night soilman).

Forms of Social Stratification

Although all societies seem to be stratified, the actual, concrete forms of stratification vary greatly from one society to another and from one era to another. These differences are related to other cultural variations. However, in spite of the great number of variations, there appear to be certain common systems of stratification that can be identified.

In this circumstance, a few of the types are examined and it may be possible to see their basic relatedness or differences.

1. The Caste Model:

A pure caste system is rooted in the religious order and may be thought of as a hierarchy, endogenous, occupational group with positions fixed and mobility barred by ritual distance between each caste. A perfect caste model is realizable in a society where each son inherited the social rank of his father. A person's position in the stratification system is thus determined by ascription and not achievement.

Inter-marriages between castes is not allowed. An example of a pure caste is the classical Hindu system of India which is the approximated most closely to pure caste. This system existed for some 3,000 years and continues today despite many attempts to get rid of some of its restrictions, although some modest alterations have been recorded. It is essentially connected with Hinduism and members have exclusive social and religious practices. However, in India today, urbanization and democratic institutions have created new positions of power and wealth which are accessible to

persons irrespective of their caste affiliations. It has been reported that caste members in Indian villages are found to be engaging in occupations that are traditionally not those associated with their caste.

The following characteristics can be said to be typical of the Indian caste model:

1. Membership is purely ascriptive or hereditary and fixed for life;
2. Intra-caste marriage is permitted and not inter-caste marriage (i.e. your marriage partner must be a member of your caste);
3. There is restriction on contact with other caste members especially on touching, dining or eating food cooked by outsiders;
4. Consciousness of one's caste membership is emphasized, for instance absolute submission to the dictates of the caste-model. Since castes are in hierarchy, it is generally believed that where a member exhibits profound loyalty and obedience to the castes' rules and regulations, that member is likely to be born into a higher caste at reincarnation. Caste members hold this belief very strongly and it checks their excesses in their bid to conform to caste rules and regulations;
5. The caste is united by a common traditional occupation and a common religious sect (Hinduism). This religious sect engages in the worship of the cow and so members do not eat meat;
6. The relative prestige of the different castes in any locality is well established and jealously guarded.

In very practical terms, considerable variations are found in these rules as obtainable within the different castes models. For instance, there are a few castes that admit new members into its system.

2. The Estate Model:

Whilst the strata of castes are an interpretation of the laws of religious ritual, the strata of systems of estates are defined by the laws of man in societies for whose ruler's divine authority is commonly claimed. An estate system is composed of a hierarchy of several social strata which are closely distinguished and rigidly separated from one another by law and custom. A person's position in a stratified system is dependent on his relationship to the land. It is thus a stratification based on agrarian consideration. In estates, movement between unequally ranked strata takes place but it is always a rare manifestation.

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Like the caste system, the estate model had institutionalized barriers to social-mobility but whilst the barriers in the caste system rest on ritual impurity, the barriers of systems of estates are legal, and being man-made can be modified in particular circumstances.

Membership of estate strata is also hereditary, whereby persons are born into groups with either large or little landownerships. The estate model is typically found in feudal societies. An example is the medieval position in England. While it is not very clear, it may help to illustrate an estate system where the king, lords and common comprised the main estate divisions. The other was a less clearly defined division into clergy. As practised in various parts of Europe, according to Otite and Ogiwo (1985), around the time of the crusades, the system had the following features:

1. a royal family and a hereditary military aristocracy who were the large landholders;
2. below them were the merchants and craftsmen and their helpers that comprised a very small proportion of the population;
3. free peasants and unfree serfs who constitute the major proportion of the population. These people not only provided the necessities of life for themselves and their superiors but also created conditions for their superiors (the nobility) to live without working. Compared to this group, all others were small minorities.

3. The Class Model:

Since in both caste and estate systems, social position is normally ascribed, it follows that both will be undermined by pressures tending to promote the value of individual merit and its regular reward. Hence, both systems disintegrate under the impact of capitalism and of industrial capitalism. These require both specialization of function and efficiency of performance.

According to Karl Marx, social classes emerge between which there are no legal barriers to social mobility. Classes, he argued, are defined in terms of their relationship to the instruments of production and the distribution of wealth. Essential to Marx's thesis are the twin ideas of class-conflict and class consciousness, both of which arise from the comparisons that can be made between class-membership and power. This class model is the most used today where social hierarchy is based on differences in monetary wealth and income. These differences are expressed in different styles of living, for instance in patterns of consumption and manners, speech and dress.

In this system, four distinct classes could be identified:

1. *An Upper Class*: The most superior, hence wealthy and frequently did not work (approx. 25% of the population).
2. *Upper Working Class*: Mostly skilled workers.
3. *Middle Working Class*: Unskilled workers and domestic servants. Children usually work to earn money in order to augment family income.
4. *Lower Working Class*: Unskilled workers who are predominantly poor. They experience very low standard of living. Children work from very early age to support themselves and their families.

Impact of Social Stratification on Education

Education is an important instrument of change in modern societies. With education, an individual or group of individuals can rise towards more valued positions and rewards in society. Unfortunately, all societal membership do not usually attain the highest pinnacle of educational excellence. Researches have shown that even children with well above average genetic intelligence fail to attain significant levels of educational success. Where this is the case, a thorough examination of the environmental situation is necessary as against over-emphasis on psychological traits.

Social stratification as a factor of environmental consideration has been perceived as an important variable of education generally. It has shown its influence on both school enrolment and achievement. For instance, the socio-economic backgrounds of children often affect the life of school and children's academic programmes. There are children from lower peasants and from upper social class of society who attend school.

It has been observed by school teachers that children from lower social classes often lack facilities at home and the expected exposure meant to enhance their school academic progress, while those from privileged or upper classes have facilities at their disposal that can enhance school learning. Children that are socially privileged eat good food, live in houses with electricity, water supply and listen to radio and watch television. Their houses are well-ventilated and there may be a study. These no doubt stimulate intellectual development for a child that is either attending school or prepares him for school.

On the other hand, the less-privileged families are often crowded in a one-room apartment without adequate ventilation. Since these families are

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poor, they may not be able to rent accommodation in reserved areas where the supplies of electricity and water are adequate. They cannot afford to buy radios and televisions. At school age, therefore, their children are less prepared for school and lack the required head-start.

There is always a low rate of school enrolment amongst the lower-class members in most societies. The provision of schools, therefore, varies and are not equally available for all members of society. The method of school selection may not be according to natural ability, such as intelligence, but according to the social positions of parents. This can be seen in the establishments of certain special schools in Nigeria. For instance, the federal unity schools across the country and the gifted-children secondary school at Suleja.

There may not be direct restrictions but they exist by implication. Where there are high fees, for instance, those parents who cannot afford to pay are excluded. Some poor parents cannot even afford to pay for the entrance examination fees not to talk of the exorbitant school fees that can only be afforded by the privileged parents.

These special schools are usually more funded than the others. The existence of "day secondary" schools is a case in point. They have no facilities to cope with the large population of the students. Their teachers are not well trained while the special schools can boast of the best well-trained teachers.

Primary schools in the present day Nigeria are a sorry-sight; they are without desks for children to sit on, no windows, while the buildings are in states of decay. These schools are mostly attended by children of low-income earners. Due to the nature of these schools, parents of the privileged class prefer to send their children to private nursery schools that charge exorbitant fees.

These factors may have far-reaching effects on the educational delivery system. However, all the aspects as discussed require detailed research efforts to basically ascertain their effects on education. The general comments are by no means conclusive remarks about the effects of social stratification on education.

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