

How Does Your Rank Affect You?

The importance of the study of stratification in sociology is apparent from the wide use of stratification variables as explanatory factors in social research. Each of the eight power hierarchies discussed represents a distinct variety of structured inequality that can have consequences for a whole range of social phenomena. The literature that has developed around the effects of social stratification is massive. Here, we can briefly examine some of the work that has been done, to illustrate the effects of stratification position on the lives of Canadians. We focus specifically on differences across socio-economic strata in life chances, lifestyles, values, and beliefs.

Life chances

Probably the most crucial consequence of social stratification concerns the life chances of people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Generally, the term *life chances* refers to the ability to lead a healthy, happy, and prosperous existence. Studies show consistently that life chances decline as one moves down the socio-economic ladder. As will be discussed in Chapter 15, Demography and Population Study, lower-status individuals have shorter life expectancies (National Council of Welfare, 1993). They are more susceptible to a broad spectrum of physical and mental health problems (Clarke, 1990). The poorer strata also are more likely to suffer

malnutrition, are less likely to use medical facilities and services, and experience poorer and more hazardous working conditions (Forcese, 1986). All of these elements, coupled with lower economic resources and fewer educational opportunities, lessen the quality of life in the lower strata and make the chances for a satisfying and rewarding existence less likely than they are for the higher strata.

Lifestyles

Stratification position also has a bearing on lifestyle. Differing economic resources, education levels, and life experiences lead to variations in a host of phenomena: consumption habits, manner of dress, speech patterns, and leisure activities, to name just a few. Generally, life in the lower strata is more restrictive than in the upper strata: less leisure time, less freedom of action, less flexibility in daily routine, and less variety in experiences and interests. The limited activities and experiences of working-class people are revealed in a number of ways. People from the lower strata are less likely to belong to clubs and organizations, do less reading, and participate less in community life than do other people (Eichar, 1989; Kohn et al., 1990; Chui et al., 1993). Instead, home life tends to receive greater emphasis. Nevertheless, even home activities often are disrupted by the need for working-class parents to work overtime or take part-time jobs

to supplement incomes (see, for example, Rinehart, 1996: 122).

Values and beliefs

Another important consequence of social stratification is the tendency for different values and beliefs to be generated within social strata. Some studies suggest that greater economic deprivation and occupational instability in the working class lead its members to place a high value on material success, good pay, and financial security (Form, 1985).

Other research indicates that differences in the nature of the jobs done by people from different classes can lead to important differences in values and beliefs. For example, studies in several countries suggest that, because members of the working class have little personal freedom at work or control over their job environment, they place a lower value on individual independence or "self-direction" than do people in middle-class occupations. It appears that working-class parents are, in turn, more likely than middle-class parents to teach their children such values as obedience and conformity, rather than self-direction or independence (Kohn et al., 1990). In a similar way, other research has revealed that people in working-class occupations may place a somewhat lower value on individual achievement or "self-actualization" than do people in other classes (Grabb and Waugh, 1987)