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## SECTION 1

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### The Process of Stratification

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If you took a walk around your community, you would probably notice differences among the people. People differ in the clothes they wear, the cars they drive, their houses, who their friends are, and what they do for a living. They differ in wealth, prestige, popularity, and many other factors.

We are talking here about differentiation. **Differentiation** is the process of describing people in terms of certain social characteristics and then classifying them into social categories based on these characteristics. Differentiation does not involve ranking these categories. For example, we may describe people according to sex, age, occupation, education, religion, race, intelligence, wealth, and so on. We then place them in a particular social category. We do not, however, attempt to arrange these categories according to prestige or respect.

The layering of these social categories into higher and lower positions of prestige or respect is called **social stratification**. The more desirable social categories are placed in higher positions. The less desirable categories are put in lower positions. For example, if the stratification were based on occupation, professions would be higher than clerical occupations. Skilled blue-collar occupations would be higher than unskilled blue-collar occupations. Steady laborers would be higher than part-time laborers.

Americans are by no means alone in assigning rank to various social and economic positions. Social stratification occurs in every society. All societies, primitive and modern, communist or capitalist, Eastern or Western, are affected by differentiation and social stratification. These processes are not limited to adults, either. Children and adolescents are also involved in differentiation and social stratification.

#### Status

The higher or lower positions that come about through social stratification are called statuses. A **status** is the individual's position in the social structure. For example, some people are Supreme Court justices. Others are salespeople, electricians, teachers, or garage mechanics. Each of these persons has a status in the society in relation to other persons. Statuses do not relate to the individuals themselves but rather to the social category or position into which they have been placed. For example, the status of a senior in high school does not apply to an individual's personality. Rather, it is a social category to which the individual belongs.

Not all statuses are the same. We get different statuses in different ways. Some are **ascribed statuses**, which are assigned by the society or group on the basis of some fixed category, without regard to a person's abilities or performance. For example, you have the status of a teen-ager because of your age. You did nothing to earn this status. Neither can you change it. Other factors, such as sex, family background, race, and ethnic heritage, may affect your status in a group or the society. Yet you have no control over these characteristics. You had no opportunity to choose your family, your sex, or your race.

On the other hand, you have achieved some of your statuses for yourself. **Achieved statuses** are earned by the individual. You are on the basketball team because you have the skills to make the team. You have the lead part in the school play because your acting skills have been judged superior to those of other students who auditioned for the part. You have an after-school job because the quality of your work satisfies your employer. With achieved statuses, then, you determine which statuses you want. Often you compete with others to obtain them.



*Not all jobs have equal prestige. Being a zoo worker, for example, carries little prestige no matter how well the workers do their jobs. In contrast, being a scientist carries high prestige regardless of job performance.*

**Prestige and esteem.** Not all statuses are equal. Some are ranked higher than others. **Prestige** is the evaluation of status. You have prestige according to your status. For example, say that you are a senior. You have the prestige of a senior at your school. The prestige is not applied directly to you as an individual but to the social category to which you belong, the senior class. It doesn't matter whether you passed your junior year with all C's or all A's. You still have the prestige of a senior. Or suppose you are president of the student government. You have the prestige of president, whether you do a good job or a poor job. The evaluation is of your status as president, not of your individual personality or ability.

However, people are also evaluated on what they do. Certain behavior is expected of individuals because of their statuses. For example, you have the status of student. The expected behavior of a student is to learn. As you know, not all students carry out their expected behavior, or role, in the same way. Some students always turn in their assign-

ments on time, study carefully for tests, and do not skip classes. Others cram at the last minute. Still others do not study enough even to pass the courses. We are evaluated or judged on how we actually carry out our role. This evaluation of our role behavior is called **esteem**. The amount of esteem we have depends on how well we carry out our role. If you study hard, make good grades, and receive an academic scholarship to college, you have high esteem.

We need to make a distinction between prestige and esteem. Prestige is based on your status, and esteem is based on your role behavior. For example, if you barely passed the 11th grade, you still have the prestige of a senior. But you do not have high esteem. On the other hand, you can have high esteem without having high prestige. The job of school custodian does not carry a high status or high prestige in our society. Nevertheless, a particular custodian may have very high esteem. That person may always keep the classrooms and halls neat and clean, and may always be ready and willing to help

others. School administrators, teachers, and students may think highly of the custodian.

These, then, are some of the concepts involved in the processes of differentiation and social stratification. We will now consider how social stratification developed.

## Cause of Social Stratification

According to the revolutionary thinker Karl Marx (1818–1883), the organization of a society is determined by economic forces. Marx said that the Industrial Revolution divided society into two social classes. A **social class** is usually defined as a number of people who are grouped together because they have similar occupational statuses, amounts of prestige, or lifestyles. Marx believed that the Industrial Revolution created a capitalist class of wealthy people who owned the factories, mines, railroads, and other forms of production. It also created a class of workers, who were used by the capitalists and were dependent on them for wages.

According to Marx, members of each social class shared many interests. The problem, as Marx saw it, was that the workers tended to mistake the interests of the capitalists for their own. For instance, the workers accepted the capitalist belief that success was a product of hard work and ability. The rich were rich because they deserved to be. The poor were poor because of their own fault. Marx felt that the working class didn't realize that their own class interests were fundamentally different from the interests of the capitalist class.

Although the theories of Karl Marx have not gained general acceptance, Marx did contribute to the study of social stratification the concept of "social class." Social class is an objective measure of stratification. It is objective in that we can measure it by external means. For example, people either are or are not owners of productive capital. They either have or do not have capital investments, such as stocks, bonds, and real estate. There are differences in the amount of wealth and income that people have. And we can measure these differences.

## KEY TERMS

differentiation	achieved status
social stratification	prestige
status	esteem
ascribed status	social class

## SECTION REVIEW

1. Distinguish between differentiation and social stratification. How do they work together to help us identify and evaluate social and economic positions?
2. What is the difference between ascribed status and achieved status?
3. How do prestige and esteem differ? Give an example of how a person might have one but not the other.
4. Into what two social classes did Karl Marx divide industrial society? What did Marx's theory of social classes contribute to the study of social stratification?

You can look at your high school as a case study in the processes of differentiation and social stratification. If you answer the following questions, you should have a better understanding of these processes.

What are some characteristics that give students status at your high school? For instance, do seniors have more status than juniors or sophomores? How much status does participation in sports give? Do some sports give more status than others? How important are grades in determining status? What is the relative importance

of such things as popularity, talent, extracurricular activities, and material possessions? Do students at your high school classify other students into categories that differ from these? If so, what criteria are used? And what labels are applied to these categories of students? Perhaps you can see how students at your school rate one another on the basis of certain characteristics and then put these ratings in order from higher to lower. If so, you will have some insight into how the processes of differentiation and stratification work in the society as a whole.

