CHAPTER 12 Inequalities of Social Class

Lecture Outline

I. Dimensions of Social Inequality in America

A. The basic and most readily available measures of inequality in any society are wealth, income, occupational prestige, and educational attainment.

1. In the United States the distribution of educational attainment and occupational prestige is more equal than the distribution of wealth and income.

2. Educational attainment refers to the number of years of school completed by an individual. Educational achievement refers to skill in reading, writing, and mathematics.

3. Occupational prestige is measured by conducting surveys of how people throughout a society rate different jobs.

B. Changing Views of Social Inequality

1. In the Jeffersonian view of America, rural farmers and town-dwelling tradesmen had similar degrees of power and prestige.

2. In the Depression era, there was heightened conflict between workers and the owners of businesses.

3. In the mid-twentieth century, studies of inequality in American communities revealed the existence of a complex social-class system as well as a racial caste system.

4. Technological and social changes have affected stratification in the United States.

   a. Many sociologists believe that we now live in a “postindustrial society” in which scientific, technical, and financial information are more highly valued than manual skills.

   b. Some sociologists argue that class boundaries have been blurred and class conflict diminished by the complicated overlapping of many dimensions of stratification. Others believe that inequalities in income, wealth, and family status still produce clear social-class divisions.
C. The analysis of social inequality has traditionally employed two research methods. The *subjective method* is based on respondents' personal opinions; the *objective method* uses a composite index of indicators of rank.

1. Social-class rankings are based on *socioeconomic status*, or SES, which is derived primarily from occupational status but also from family prestige, education, and earned income.

II. **Social Class and Life Chances in the United States**
A. One's social class tells a great deal about how one will behave and the kind of life one is likely to have. Social class influences health and health care, education, and political preferences.

1. The impact of disparities in health due to social class is referred to as the SES gradient in health.

B. The upper class accounts for about 4 percent of the U.S. population.

1. The upper class may be divided into two subgroups: the elite and the "newly rich."
2. Sociologists continually debate whether the upper class in America is also the society's "ruling class."
   a. According to some, the "power elite," composed of politically active, high-level government and military figures, is the leadership arm of the ruling class.
   b. Others contend that there is no single cohesive ruling class or power elite. Instead, there are competing centers of power and differing views on social policy within the upper class. This is known as the pluralist concept.

C. The middle class is characterized by varying combinations of wealth and prestige.

1. Those who consider themselves to be members of the upper-middle class tend to be highly educated professionals.
2. Another segment of the middle class is composed of independent small-business owners.
3. Economic changes are producing two increasingly distinct groups within the middle class: a more secure segment and a stratum of less skilled, less educated people who are experiencing economic insecurity.

D. The most important characteristic of the working class is employment in manual occupations.
1. The industrial working class consists of blue-collar workers in large manufacturing industries.
2. Another group is composed of workers employed in skilled crafts, especially in the construction trades.
3. There is more racial and ethnic diversity in the working class than in other classes.

E. Studies of subjective class membership usually underestimate the poor population.
   1. A major cause of poverty is that people who are working full-time are not being paid wages high enough to raise them above the poverty line.
   2. A large portion of the poor population consists of female-headed families with young children.

F. Homelessness is one of the most visible effects of severe poverty.

G. Although many rural communities are experiencing renewed economic growth, poverty rates are increasing in communities based on agriculture. Many farm families are deeply in debt. To hold on to their land, about half of all farmers farm part-time and work full-time at wage-paying jobs.

III. More Equality?
A. Debates over poverty often fail to distinguish between equality of opportunity (equal opportunity to achieve material well-being and prestige) and equality of result (actual equality in levels of material well-being and prestige).
B. Conservative social scientists believe that public funding to provide a “safety net” is necessary, but they hold that programs to redistribute wealth infringe on individual freedom and the right of private property.
C. In 1996 Congress enacted major changes in the welfare laws, which now require each state to ensure that an increasing percentage of its adult aid recipients engage in approved work.
   1. The extent to which declines in the income and well-being of poor children in the United States are a consequence of changes in the welfare system is an extremely controversial subject.
   2. Some argue that the new welfare policies are designed to promote competition for low-wage jobs, which will ensure that the working poor remain poor.