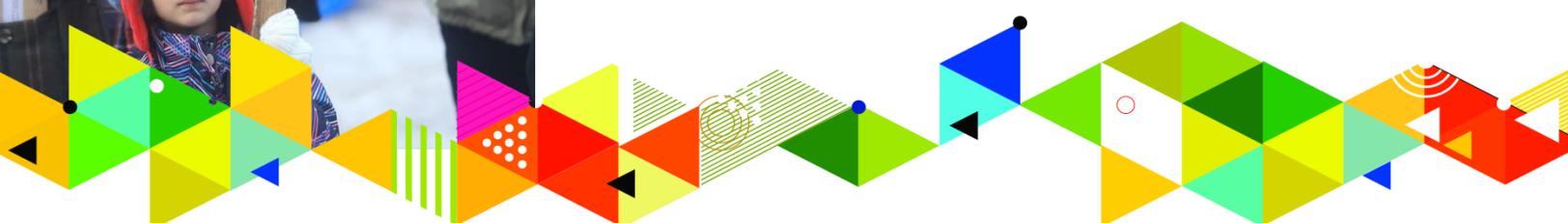




Social Inequality



Learning Objectives

After having read chapter 7, you will be able to

- explain Marx’s binary definition of class in reference to the historical context in which that definition emerged.
- distinguish between Marx’s class consciousness and false consciousness.
- compare and contrast Marx’s and Weber’s definitions of class.
- discuss contemporary expansions of Marx’s class conception.
- outline key characteristics of social stratification.
- compare and contrast dominant, liberal and counter ideology using examples.
- critically discuss the contrast between poverty and wealth in Canada.
- demonstrate how social inequality shapes individuals’ life chances, for example in education or health care.

Chapter Summary

The study of social inequality is a longstanding sociological tradition. **Social inequality** is the long-term existence of significant differences in access to goods and services among social groups. Social inequality is a function of many factors, including ethnicity, “race”, and gender. A central term used in discussing social inequality is **class**. Karl Marx defined class as **relational**, meaning it reflects a person’s relationship to the **means of production**, or resources required to produce **capital**—funds and properties needed for large-scale manufacturing and trading.

Karl Marx identified two main classes based on their relationship to the means of production. The **bourgeoisie** is a collective of **capitalists** who own the means of production. On the other hand, the **proletariat**, a collective of **workers**, do not own any means of production, but work for those who do. Marx also identified two sub-classes: the **petty bourgeoisie** (small-scale owners with little capital) and the **lumpenproletariat** (small-time criminals, beggars, and the unemployed).

According to Marx, a class has a **corporate** (or organic) **identity**, meaning that there is a sense of common purpose among members of each class. One aspect of corporate identity is **class consciousness**, an awareness of what is in the best interest of one’s class. Marx argued that the bour-

geoisie had always had class consciousness, while the working class often had **false consciousness**, the belief that something is in its best interest when actually it is not.

Marx's class binary has to be understood in the context of the industrial revolution, laissez-faire market principles and ongoing struggles between capitalist interests and workers' rights of the time. However, Max Weber, another early sociologist who examined social class, argued that Marx's approach was too simplistic. Like Marx, Weber believed that society was divided into distinct economic classes, but they are not solely organized around access to the means of production. Weber also focused on wealth, prestige, and power as elements that contributed to social inequality. In Weber's view, wealth did not just include capital, but also qualities respected by society.

The classical Marxist model of class does not neatly apply to modern Canadian society, as most Canadians do not fit into the capitalist–worker binary. There are many wealthy people who are technically employees (such as CEOs) and many small-business owners who do not have the income or control typically associated with capitalists. Also, Canada has a fairly large middle class that too has a strong sense of self. Therefore, Curtis, Grabb, and Guppy (1999) expanded Marx's class paradigm by dividing people into three classes instead of two: a **dominant capitalist class** (who own or control large-scale production), a **middle class** (small business people, educated professional-technical or administrative personnel, credentialed salaried employees, and wage earners), and a **working class** (who lack resources or capacities apart from their own labour power).

Not all forms of social inequality are rooted in social class, however. **Class reductionism** is an important concept to consider in sociological research. This occurs when an individual studying a situation of inequality attributes all forms of oppression to class, ignoring or minimizing the impact of other social factors such as ethnicity, “race,” age, and gender.

Contemporary examinations of class structure focuses on social stratification. Social stratification describes society as a series of equal layers, or strata. In sociology, **strata** are levels or classes to which people are assigned for research purposes, based on social status, education, or income. Most studies of social stratification in Canada divide the population into quintiles. A **quintile** is each of five equal groups into which a population is divided according to the distribution of values of a particular variable, such as income. Quintiles are useful for comparisons within a society and also across time periods and geography. By examining quintiles we can see that the top 20 per cent of Canadians receive nearly half of all income in Canada, while the bottom 20 per cent account for under 5 per cent of all income.

Arguments and ideas pertaining to social inequality are shaped by ideology. An **ideology** is a set of beliefs about society and the people who make up society, usually forming the basis for economic or political theories. There are three main types of ideologies. A **dominant ideology** is a set of beliefs put forward by, and generally supportive of, society's dominant culture and/or classes, for example, the idea of a “trickle down economy.” **Liberal ideology** is a dominant ideology that focuses on the individual as an independent player in society. Liberal ideology involves a belief in **social mobility**, suggesting that, with effort, any individual can move from one class to another, achieving the **American Dream**. This ideology minimizes criticism of social inequality and ignores social factors related to class. **Blaming the victim** involves attributing failure to achieve success entirely to the individual, despite broader social causes. A **counter ideology** is one that critiques and challenges the dominant ideology and is promoted by those seeking social change, for example the Occupy movement or Idle No More.

In most societies, the ruling class does not rely on military or police force alone to maintain control. Political theorist Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of **hegemony**, which he defined as a set of relatively non-coercive methods of maintaining power used by the dominant class. Hegemony can be reflected in education, media, and the legal system. People can be influenced to accept dominant ideologies through these institutions even if they are not in their best interest.

The study of social inequality often involves looking at the extreme ends of poverty and wealth. Statistics on the use of food banks can provide information on the poor in Canada. A **food bank** is a not-for-profit organization that collects, stores, and distributes food to those without, free of charge. Food bank use increased dramatically in 2009, during the worst of the recession. An increase in first-time users suggests that food bank use will continue to increase. The situation of food bank users contrasts starkly with that of Canada's wealthiest CEOs, demonstrating further inequality. While poverty and food bank use have gone up, so have the salaries of the highest paid Canadian CEOs, with the top CEO making 189 times the average Canadian salary in 2010, up from 85 times the average in 1995.

Post-secondary education presents an avenue for upward social mobility in Canada, providing people from lower strata the opportunity to secure employment in high-prestige, high-paying jobs. However, when the cost of education is too high, lower-income individuals can be blocked from attending college or university, or must take on high student debt. Tuition fees have risen dramatically in Canada over the last two decades due to a reduction in government funding. Thus, it is not surprising that students from low-income families are underrepresented in higher education. In addition to this general increase, various post-secondary programs have different costs. The increasing cost of professional schools, including law and medicine, has decreased the proportion of students from lower-income families in these programs. In the case of dentistry, not only do high tuition fees limit low-income individuals' access to the profession, but high costs of dental care also limit their access to good quality dental work.

Study Questions

1. How did Karl Marx define class? Make reference to means of production, bourgeoisie, and the proletariat and explain how they are related.
2. Why are the Highland clearances a good example of class consciousness? Contrast this with an example of false consciousness.
3. List and describe the three different classes of modern-day Canada as defined by Curtis, Grabb, and Guppy (1999).
4. Define dominant ideology, counter ideology, and liberal ideology and provide one example for each.
5. What is hegemony? How is it manifested within our society? Provide two examples.
6. What is class reductionism and why is it problematic?

7. Discuss the relationship between social inequality, social mobility and education. Include professional schools, such as medicine, law, etc. in your discussion. Use information from the text book as well as your own experiences to illustrate your points.

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. How have you experienced social inequality in your life? Using Marx's theory of the means of production and capital, describe which class of individuals you fit into. Have you ever faced a change in social class (social mobility)? Explain.
2. Another characteristic of Marx's view, false consciousness, involves the working class believing that something is in its best interest when, in reality, it is not. On this topic, explore the symbolism of designer purses or athlete endorsed running shoes. Why do working class people sometimes buy such expensive items? Furthermore, why do fake designer purses or fake designer branded athletic shoes exist?

Further Readings

Andersen, R. and J. Curtis (2013). *Public Opinion on Social Spending 1980–2005. Inequality and the Fading of Redistributive Politics.* K. Banting and J. Myles. Vancouver, UBC Press: 141–164.

An examination of changes in Canadian public opinion on welfare spending under consideration of economic and political context

Clément, D. (2008). *Canada's Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change, 1937–82.* Vancouver, UBC Press.

Provides an examination of the history of human rights violations and human rights activism in Canadian history as well as a discussion of social movement organization as motors of social change

Sharma, R.D. (2012). *Poverty in Canada.* Don Mills, Oxford University Press.

A short introduction to poverty in Canada that includes a discussion of theoretical approaches, groups most affected by poverty and the working poor.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs.* New York, Columbia University Press.

An examination of class reproduction through socialization within a context of limited opportunities.

Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness: <http://caeh.ca/>

Hub for information pertaining to homelessness in Canada

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/ceo>

This online real-time pay clock tracks the average incomes of CEOs and average Canadians. CCPA also provides a number of different poverty-related reports

Canadian Policy Research Network: <http://cprn.org/index.cfm>

Archived information about public policy and social inequality

The Homeless Hub: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/>

Extensive resource hub for research pertaining to poverty and homelessness

Film tip: *No Place Called Home*: https://www.nfb.ca/film/no_place_called_home/

This film chronicles the trials and tribulations of a poor Canadian family the face homelessness after being evicted from their home