Unit 6 – Social class

Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the podcast for Unit 6 of Sociology 1101. Today, we will be discussing social class. Sociologists spend a fair amount of time examining how people get divided into categories, and how these categories then affect their lives. For example, being male or female means something in our society that goes far beyond reproduction. Men, for instance, typically make much more money in their lifetimes than do women. People don't choose to be born male or female, but the categories affect them nonetheless.

Another set of categories that sociologists pay a lot of attention to is social class. Just as we saw with deviance, sociologists use a slightly different definition of social class than is normally used in the media or in conversation. Typically, people talk about class as a continuum with three major categories: lower class, middle class, and upper class, with categories in between: lower-middle class, upper-middle class, and so on.

These categories are not incorrect, but they tend to be defined *the wrong way*. When people talk casually about social class, they tend to classify people according to **consumption**. For example, when people think about what it means to be "upper class", they tend to think about having a nice house, lots of disposable income, a nice car, fancy clothes, and so on. By contrast, "lower class" means being poor, barely making ends meet, wearing second-hand clothing, and so on. Between these two extremes are the middle class, who are thought of as living comfortably but not lavishly. Using these consumption-based definitions, it is no surprise that between 90-95% of people classify themselves as being "middle class".

Sociologists **don't** define social class according to consumption. Instead, we define social class according to a person's **relationship to the broader economy**. Back in the 19th century, the sociologist Karl Marx argued that there are in fact only **two main classes** in society.

Some people have a favourable relationship with the economy – that lets them exert a fair amount of control over their work and receive a high level of compensation, while others have a relationship that is more **exploitative**. Let's consider a few examples. A person who works as a CEO of a major company has a fair amount of control over his or her work. She is able to make decisions, use her judgement and skills, and tell other people how to do their own work. She is also paid very well, and likely receives bonuses and preferred stock market shares in the company she works for as part of her compensation package. This is a favourable position; a class of people that Marx called "the bourgeoisie".

Compare that to a factory worker who spends her day making widgets on an assembly line. First of all, she would have little control over her work – widgets and other manufactured goods have to be made to specification, so in a way her labour is like that of a machine – repeating set activities all day long. Nor is she able to exercise discretion, creativity, or control. In fact, even her body is not her own at work, as she has to seek permission to go to the bathroom or take a rest. Most sociologists would argue that this person is in an exploitative relationship with her employer. Exploitation can be a morally-loaded term, so here we are using it in the technical sense. Exploitation happens when the person doing the work receives only a fraction of that work's value as compensation. The widget maker is exploited because the widgets that she makes are then controlled by another entity (usually a company, which not a person but can nonetheless "own" things according to our current laws), and are then sold at a much higher value than she receives in pay. Marx called this class "the proletariat".

These classes have very different relationships to what Marx called, "the means of production". The means of production are the means by which wealth is created in a given society. In our society, the means of production are things like companies, factories, intellectual property, real estate, and technology. These things generate wealth, and so people who control them tend to accumulate a lot of money (or what Marx called "capital," which also includes property). People who don't have access to the means of production have to sell their labour to those who do in exchange for a wage. This immediately makes them less powerful and more vulnerable. In a recession, for example, workers who lose their jobs lose all their income. Members of the bourgeoisie, however, usually lose only part of their income, while retaining the property that they own – like stocks, bonds, real estate holdings and so on.

According to this definition, most people fall into the proletariat class, while only a small number of people are classified as members of the bourgeoisie. Marx also recognized that some people own their own small businesses but don't have a lot of power or capability to accumulate property. He called this group the "petit bourgeoisie", which is sometimes badly translated into English as the "petty bourgeoisie". He included tradespeople, contractors, and owners of mom-and-pop stores in this category. However, he didn't give them much credit in his overall theories. Marx was more concerned with how members of the bourgeoisie exploit members of the proletariat to build their own wealth – something he saw as immoral.

Few sociologists today follow Marx's thinking to the letter. The idea that there are only two real social classes – the exploiters and the exploited – is a bit outdated. We do retain though the notion that people have differential access to power and wealth based on their class position. There are some other problems with Marx's schema – like where do professionals such as

professors fit in? Professors have a fair amount of control over our work, enjoy a high degree of social status, but are not paid exceptionally well. Where do we fit in? Where too do people who don't work, like men or women who choose to stay at home? The article in the textbook by Erik Olin Wright gives an excellent overview of these issues.

Finally, sociologists study of social class as a way of understanding privilege and inequality. Inequality is a touchy subject. For example, Western societies tend to promote the idea that "all people are created equal". This idea underpins our legal system (that everyone is equal before the law), our democracy (one vote per person), and our commitment to human rights (that the integrity of the person is higher than any laws or powers of the state). At the same time, though, our society encourages us to accept inequality. For example, we send our kids to school knowing that they will be evaluated – and that some will receive "A"s, and others will receive "C"s. Essentially, we tend to think that inequality is OK so long as it is **fair.** If one child is smarter or harder-working than the other, then it's OK for them to be judged differentially. Ours is an individualistic society, and inequalities coming from fair competition are acceptable and even encouraged. Sociologists call these "inequalities of outcome".

Inequalities of outcome are different from "structural inequalities", which are deeper and more fundamental. For example, universities are institutions built around competition. Students enter and compete for grades, which are gateways for graduate school, careers, and so on. As such, universities encourage inequalities of outcome (hopefully fairly). But what about the fact that thousands and thousands of perfectly intelligent young people *don't come to university because they can't afford it*. They are excluded from the get-go; they never even get a chance to compete. This is an example of a "structural inequality", because this kind of inequality is *built into the structure of the system*. So long as it costs money to go to university, some people will be excluded based on inability to pay (or unwillingness to assume a mountain of debt to get a degree). This exclusion has nothing to do with talent. It is by definition **unfair**.

Now let's consider a more refined example. A university coming from a rich family is less likely to have to work during to school year to support their studies, while a student coming from a less wealthy family is. This means that the wealthier student can concentrate more on his or her studies, take their time doing assignments, and ultimately has a better chance of earning better grades and having access to post-graduate rewards. This is also a structural inequality that in this case directly affects inequalities of outcome. This is how social class reproduces itself over generations.

