A2 Sociology for AQA

Chris Livesey & Tony Lawson

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Finally, to paraphrase the mighty Arcade Fire:

Consider this text a tunnel.
Yeah, a tunnel – From my window to yours.
Meet me in the middle, the empty middle ground.
And since there's no one else around,
We'll let our time grow long,
And remember everything we've come to know.

Chris Livesey

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About This Book

In writing this book we have tried to satisfy two main aims:

First, we wanted to retain a sense of continuity between this and our previous (AS) text in terms of both overall structure and scope, mainly for the benefit of those students and teachers who've used the AS text in their first year of the A-level course. In terms of structural continuity, therefore, the general layout will be familiar to anyone who has used **AS Sociology for AQA** (although it's not, of course, necessary to have used this AS text to get the most from the A2 text). More specifically, we've once again chosen to tie the text closely to the **AQA Specification** (highlighting, where appropriate, **synoptic links** within and between the A2 and AS Modules) and we've retained the basic structure of the AS text by dividing the sections into two parts: introductory material (**'Preparing the Ground'**) provides a general overview of a section and is broadly aimed at students of all abilities, while more challenging material (**'Digging Deeper'**) is included to both develop the initial material and stretch the more able student.

In addition, we've retained a couple of features we believe worked well in the AS text:

The **Key Word** focus, whereby the text is structured around significant concepts – a system designed to both help students to focus on the most important ideas in a particular area and encourage planned examination answers.

Integrated exercises designed to achieve a variety of aims (mainly relating to the development of the interpretation, analysis and evaluative skills required at A2). These exercises involve three main types:

- **Warm-up** exercises appear at the start of a section and are designed to ease students into a topic by getting them to think about it in a way that builds on their existing knowledge. The basic idea here is to identify the knowledge students already possess about a topic or issue, something that provides a foundation for building a more sociological level of understanding. This type of exercise also serves as a whole-class ice-breaker for each new section of the course.
- **Growing It Yourself** exercises are more focused and, in general, they're designed for small group work. They usually require students to generate and discuss information, although, reflecting the increased demand for evaluative skills at this level, many of these exercises require students to make decisions about the information generated through discussion. This type of exercise is normally closely integrated with the surrounding text and is designed to complement student reading and note-taking by requiring

them to reflect on – and expand – the information presented through the text. Each exercise has been designed to flow naturally from the text and generally requires little or no prior preparation by students or teachers. Having said this, some of the exercises take the form of **simulations** that require students to take on various roles as part of the overall discussion process; these, reflecting the fact they are slightly more complex than the standard exercises, require a relatively simple level of prior organisation and preparation.

- **Discussion Points** provide opportunities for students to discuss or debate different ideas – something we felt would be useful to build into the overall design to help students clarify and express their thinking in a relatively structured way. Some of the discussion points are tightly-constructed around a particular issue, while others are more loosely constructed to allow students greater scope for discussion and debate.

In terms of our **second** aim, although structural continuity was important when designing this text, we also wanted to reflect the fact that A2 study involves both greater theoretical and evaluative depth.

In relation to the former we were conscious of the need to strike a balance between classical (Marx, Durkheim, Weber and the like) and contemporary sociological theory (writers such as Luhmann, Baudrillard and Foucault), on the basis that, while it's important for students and teachers to have access to contemporary material, we shouldn't lose sight of the classical origins of sociology (something we feel is generally reflected in the structure of AQA A2 examination questions).

In terms of the latter we decided to add a couple of extra features to the A2 text.

The Potting Shed involves questions that reflect the structure of the smaller-mark exam questions (requiring students to 'identify and explain' something, for example). These short, relatively simple, questions have also been designed to help students make **synoptic links** between, for example, A2 and AS modules (once again reflecting the general structure of the smaller-mark AQA exam questions).

Weeding the Path: The most significant change between the A2 and AS text, reflecting the fact that A2 study requires students to use evaluation skills more rigorously than at AS, is the addition of clearly-signposted evaluation material. Although such material runs throughout the text (at its most basic, of course, being by juxtaposition) we felt it would be helpful to draw students' attention more specifically to this type of information.

Finally, although this A2 text, like its AS counterpart, is focused around helping students work their way successfully through the AQA A-level Sociology course, we hope we've managed to produce a text that, while informative and challenging to all abilities and interests, is one you will enjoy reading – not only because (we trust) it will help you achieve the best possible grade in your examination but also, more importantly perhaps, because we firmly believe that Sociology is a fascinating subject to study in its own right.

CHAPTER 6

Stratification and differentiation

This chapter examines concepts of *social stratification* and *differentiation* through a range of ideas, from definitions of stratification and the measurement of social class, through the impact of stratification on *life chances* and *social mobility,* to an assessment of how and why the class structure in contemporary British society is changing.

We can begin, however, by thinking initially about the meaning of differentiation and stratification before exploring both class- and status-based theories in more detail.

1. Different theories of stratification

Preparing the ground: Differentiation and stratification

To say there are many ways that people are 'different' is an interesting (if not particularly profound) observation, the validity of which is evidenced by simply looking around – something we can do in the warm-up exercise below.

When we talk about 'difference', therefore, we're making a fairly *neutral comparison* between 'things that are not the same' in the sense that all we're effectively saying is that differences exist (in much the same way as we might observe that 'daylight' is different to 'darkness'). The fact of human difference is not, in itself, particularly significant. What is significant, however, is the:

Meaning of these differences. A teacher, for example, is different to the students he or she teaches. However, if a teacher can direct and control the behaviour of their students *because* of this difference, this becomes something of greater significance because it involves:

- **Social differentiation**: When we *socially differentiate* between, say, a teacher and their students, we make a *judgement* about

WARM-UP: SPOTTING THE DIFFERENCE

In small groups, make two lists of 'differences between people', based on the following categories (we've given you a couple of examples to get you started):

Physical/Biological differences	Social differences
Hair colour	Level of income

As a class, combine your ideas to produce an overall list of these differences.

their relative worth (or *status*). We are saying, in effect, that these people are not merely 'different', but that the difference is significant because it's rooted in the nature of their relationship, considered, for example, in terms of:

- **Inequality**: A teacher has a different social status to their students, one that allows them to do things (such as direct the behaviour of the class) that students are not allowed to do. This, in turn, is related to concepts of:
- **Ideology** because social differentiation involves ideas about how teachers and students should behave in terms of:
  - **Values** relating to the teacher and student roles, and
  - **Norms** that operate within the classroom.
- **Power**: Social differentiation involves the idea that people of different statuses have differential access to power. A teacher may, within reason, punish a student, but the student has no such power.

The potting shed

From any *two* areas of the Specification (except education), give *one* example from *each* area of inequality based on social differentiation.

If social differentiation relates to the idea that some forms of difference have a higher level of social significance (*status*) than others, it's a short step to think about their *relative status* in *hierarchical* terms, which is where we can start to talk about:

Social stratification: This represents a process whereby different social groups are ranked higher or lower on some form of scale, usually, but not exclusively, in terms of categories such as *class*, *age*, *gender* and *ethnicity*. Sociologically, **Giddens** (2001) defines stratification as 'structured inequalities between different groupings' while **Crompton** (1993) argues it involves 'a hierarchical system of inequality (material and symbolic), always supported by a meaning system that seeks to justify inequality'.

Historically there have been a number of different:

Types of stratification, involving major forms such as:

- **slave** systems that have appeared throughout human history (from Ancient Greece and Rome to eighteenth/nineteenth-century Britain and the USA)
- **caste** systems (characteristic of some parts of South East Asia)
- **estates** systems (characteristic of feudal or early modern societies) and, of course,
- **class** systems, which characterise stratification in modern societies such as Britain. In this respect, class stratification *in our society* is conventionally considered a:

Primary system of stratification (with stratification based around age, gender and ethnicity being *secondary* forms), on the basis that economic rankings (and their associated inequalities) have greater impact on people's lives than inequalities associated with non-economic differences in *status* (which may, of course, develop alongside primary systems – upper-class men, for

Growing it yourself: Who goes? Who stays? You decide

This exercise requires students, initially in small groups, to both differentiate (or assess the relative worth of) and stratify (divide into categories) a group of people with varying social characteristics.

Following a devastating shipwreck, 15 survivors have managed to scramble into a small lifeboat. Unfortunately, with no hope of immediate rescue and sufficient provisions to support only 9 survivors until they reach landfall, you have to decide which 6 of the following must be thrown overboard:

Prostitute (36): Both parents are dead. A paramedic nurse.
Multimillionaire industrialist (57). Will give you £1 million to stay in the lifeboat.
Catholic priest (64): History of mental illness and depression.
Muslim cleric (46): Has extensive knowledge of the area in which you are now travelling.
Shoe salesman (33): Divorced. Has some navigation skills.
Young child (5): Parents still alive but both HIV positive.
Black male (29): Married with three young children.
Research biologist (69): Unmarried, with adult daughter. On the boat has worked out how to produce cheap, effective AIDS vaccine.
Married couple (23 and 25): She is an alcoholic. Two young sons at home.
Male (43): Suspected child abuser (unproven). Unmarried. A sail-maker.
White male (28): Has history of drug abuse and petty crime. Good fisherman.
Senior diplomat (59): Returning home with agreement to avert war between two countries.
Cabaret artist (32): Transvestite. Excellent storyteller and singer.
Olympic rower (20): Studying medicine at Oxford and recently diagnosed as typhoid carrier.

Once the choices have been made, each group should report back to the class, justifying why they chose some people to survive and some to be sacrificed.

example, may have a different social status to upper-class women).

Scott (1999), for example, argues *social stratification* '... emphasises the idea that individuals are distributed among the levels or *layers* of a social hierarchy because of their *economic* relationships'. For **Scott**, social stratification is a *particular form* of **social division** that differs from other types of division on the basis that it is 'solidly based in *economic relations*'.

Digging deeper: Types of stratification

We can outline the general characteristics of the different types of stratification we've just identified in the following terms.

Slave systems

Slavery is one of the oldest (and most persistent) forms of stratification that involves, according to **Mazur** (1996), a situation in which one group claims

ownership over another, such that the former take upon themselves 'the right to use, abuse and take the fruits of the latter's labour'. The slave, therefore, is the:

- **Property** of their owner. Slave systems arguably reached their height in Europe and the USA between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when the capture and shipment of slaves from Africa (in particular) took on a global dimension. Perhaps the most familiar example of a slave-based modern society is that of the US southern states in the nineteenth century, a tightly regulated system supported by a variety of laws governing the behaviour of the *enslaved* (whether they could marry, where they could live, when and if they could travel and so forth).

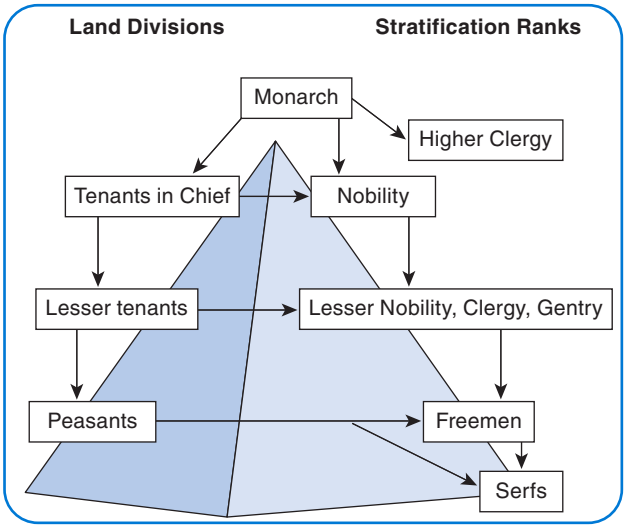
Although opinions differ as to whether slaves can be considered a 'class' in the same way that slave owners were a class – **Gingrich** (2002), for example, suggests slaves are a *status group* because, in **Weberian** terms, 'they have nothing to sell' and hence have no *market situation* – it's clear that, in status terms, slaves were always at the very bottom of society, or even outside it. Slave status was also:

Ascribed – children born to slave parents also became slaves. Slaves could, however, be given their freedom by their owners.

The basic belief system (ideology) underpinning slavery, at least in early modern society, was usually one of *biological superiority* – slaves were 'naturally inferior' to their owners.

Feudal (estate) systems

Estate systems characterise *pre-modern*, *pre-industrial*, *agrarian* (agricultural) societies,



The estates system (feudalism)

such as Britain in the sixteenth century, and are based around:

- **Land ownership**: In agricultural (or *feudal*) societies, where there are no factories or machines to produce goods, farming is the main economic activity, which makes land the single most important commodity. To own land, therefore, is to be powerful, since you control something vital to the lives of thousands, if not millions, of people. Land ownership was not distributed fairly or equally and, in feudal Britain, land could not be *legally owned*; it was considered the property of God and, as such, was held 'in trust' by the monarch, as God's earthly representative. Land was delegated, initially by the monarch, in a:
- **Pyramid structure** of land divisions and stratification ranks.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: The feudal (estates) system links into elite theories of the state.

The system was based on a strong structure of *rights and duties*, underpinned by:

- **A religious belief system** that stressed its 'divine nature'. The Church taught that God had created the world in His image and, since God was all-powerful, it was not for mere mortals to question or challenge the social order.
- **Military might**, consolidated in the hands of the nobility and their knight-retainers.
- **Legal sanctions**: different levels in the structure had different legal rights – serfs, for example, although not slaves, were under the control and patronage of their feudal lord, who could impose restrictions on their behaviour: whom they could marry, where they could live and so forth.

Caste systems

The caste system has existed for around 3000 years, mainly in India, where the influence of the *Hindu religion* has been traditionally strong (although, as **Kane** (2004) notes, variations have appeared in countries such as Brazil). The system involves the division of society into five major caste groups (*varna*), each traditionally associated with a particular form of work. Each major caste is sub-divided into thousands of different sub-castes (*jatis*).

The caste (varna) system

Major castes	Example caste occupations
Brahmin	Priest, teacher
Kshatriya	Soldier, landowner
Vaishya	Businessman, farmer
Shudra	Manual worker, servant
Harijan ('**Untouchables**')	Roadsweeper

Conventionally, the caste system is portrayed as a:

Closed system of stratification (no individual movement up or down the class structure), with a couple of exceptions:

- **Sub-castes** (*jatis*) can improve their social status in the hierarchy (they can move up or down within the major caste categories).
- **Individuals** can lose their caste position by breaking caste law (such as marrying outside their caste). When this occurs, they become 'out-caste' – in effect, relegated to the lowest position in the caste hierarchy (*harijan* or, as it was formerly known in the West, '*Untouchable*').

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: Caste systems are examples of absolute social mobility.

Ascribed: Caste positions are given at birth, based on parental caste position. Each caste is, therefore, *endogamous* – self-contained and allowing marriage only between members of the same caste.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Families and households: Note the association between religious beliefs (Hinduism) and the concept of the arranged marriage.

The system, although based around *occupational groupings*, is underpinned by a Hindu religious belief system that stresses two important concepts:

- **Reincarnation** (*kharma*) – the belief that once someone dies they are reborn.

- **Caste mobility** – the individual is reborn into a higher or lower caste on the basis of how well they performed the religious duties associated with their caste position in their previous life.

Weeding the path

Although this brief outline necessarily oversimplifies what was, in practice, a highly complex system (and one that continues to evolve in India, even though it is officially banned), it does raise a couple of interesting questions.

First, do we conceptualise caste as a *class system* based on occupational inequality and hierarchy (an interpretation favoured by *Marxists*) or as a *status system* based on cultural (religious) differences (an interpretation favoured by *Weberians*)?

Second, there are interesting similarities between aspects of the caste system (particularly its basis in shared (*endogamous*) lifestyles and honour systems) and life in *postmodern* society. **Waters** (1997) argues that contemporary Western societies are:

Post-class societies in the sense that the significance of economic class has diminished as it is gradually replaced by:

Status-conventional forms of stratification. These are based around – and expressed through – *lifestyles* and *values*, focused mainly on *consumption differences* (as opposed to the *production differences* on which social class analysis is conventionally based) and the increasing importance of:

Ascribed status-group memberships – especially those related to gender and ethnicity.

This raises important questions about the nature of stratification in contemporary society – not least concerning the conventional wisdom that such societies are:

- **Class societies**: As we've suggested, stratification in *modern society* is conventionally characterised by social class as the dominant (primary) form – a system based on differences at the level of economic *production* (the origins of class stratification are located 'in the workplace' and the differential relationships experienced therein). Given its significance in modern societies, we examine social class in more detail in the next section.

Preparing the ground: Modernist theories of stratification

For most of the twentieth century theories of social stratification and differentiation have focused on two general areas:

- **Economic relationships** as the focal point for our understanding of how individuals and groups are differentiated at a fundamental level – one that sees the organisation of work as the most significant area of theoretical concern, mainly because it represents an institution organised around the means of human survival.
- **Social class/status** as the basis for stratification within a social system.

We can begin, therefore, by outlining three major types of 'modernist' theory of stratification.

Functionalism

Classical functionalist theories such as those advanced by **Parsons** (1971) or **Davis** and **Moore** (1945), focus on the idea of 'society' as a *social system* consisting of a number of different:

Institutions (family, work, education and so forth), functionally interconnected in terms of two ideas:

- **Purpose**: Each institution performs certain 'essential (or *core*) functions', such as providing the means of survival (work) or primary socialisation (the family).
- **Need**: To perform these functions, each institution *needs* certain things from other institutions. In this example, work needs primary socialised individuals and, in modern societies where the complexity of the workplace requires a certain level of knowledge and skill, secondary socialised individuals (a purpose performed by an educational institution).

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two 'functional interconnections' between the institution of work and any of the following institutions: family, education or politics.

These ideas are indicative of a further significant concept:

Functional differentiation involves the idea that various institutions develop to perform particular 'specialised functions' (such as work and socialisation). This is significant because, when tensions occur within the system (the needs of one institution are not being adequately met, for example), balance and stability are restored when either a new institution *arises* to 'fulfil the need' or an existing institution *evolves* to perform the required function.

An example of the former is the development of education systems in modern societies. In terms of the latter, differentiation occurs *within* individual institutions; different roles need to be performed if the institution is to function properly, and an example here might be the development of primary, secondary and tertiary (post-16) education in our society, an idea that points to the way classical functionalists see the development of:

Social stratification: In the organisation of the modern workplace, for example, roles are necessarily differentiated – in simple terms we could point to differences between 'managerial roles' and 'non-managerial roles' – and **hierarchical**: for a *system* (such as the workplace or a society) to function, something must give coherence and drive to people's relationships – there must be some way of:

- **motivating** people to perform certain roles
- **rewarding** them for role performance.

As **Harris** (2005) notes, classical functionalists, such as **Davis** and **Moore**, put forward a range of reasons for institutions to develop a 'system of rewards and distributions'. Some roles, for example, are simply 'more agreeable' (it might be preferable to work in a warm office than on a cold street), require 'special talents, training, skills or knowledge' or are 'functionally more important than others' – pivotal organisational roles that must be performed by well-qualified, well-motivated, talented individuals.

Stratification, therefore, develops out of the way people have to be encouraged to perform different roles, some of which are more important, skilled and time/effort-consuming to learn than others. Higher levels of status, income and job satisfaction,

therefore, represent *necessary* motivations and rewards that lead to the development of inequalities and social hierarchies. For **Davis** and **Moore**, these represent 'an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified people'.

Weeding the path

Support for classical functionalism has, in recent times, come from writers such as **Lenski** (1994), whose analysis of 'Marxist social systems' (such as China and North Korea) suggested that social stratification, developed along classical functionalist lines, was inevitable, necessary and functional – 'incentive systems' are required to motivate and reward the 'best qualified people' for occupying the 'most important positions' within a social system. Conventional criticisms of this general approach, however, have focused on two main areas:

- **Empirical**: **Tumin** (1953) questions the idea that we can measure differences in the 'functional importance' of different roles.
- **Subjectivity**: Concepts of 'functional importance' are, at root, value judgements about the relative worth of different roles (is a well-paid company director a more 'functionally important' role than that of a nurse?).

More fundamental criticisms of this approach can be examined through the work of (neo-functionalist) writers such as **Alexander** (1995) and **Luhmann** (1997). However, since these apply equally to other types of 'modernist theories of stratification' we can examine them in a moment, after we've outlined a couple of alternative explanations.

Marxism

Marxist theories: Social stratification from this position is an:

Inevitable feature of contemporary capitalist societies, based around *economic* relationships and inequalities related to *social classes* – broad groups that share a common economic, political and ideological background. We can identify a range of ideas generally characteristic of Marxist analysis in the following terms:

Economic behaviour is the most significant activity in any society because, as we've previously suggested, it is through work that people produce the means of survival on which all other forms of behaviour (politics and culture, for example) are dependent.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Religion: This idea is related to the '*economic base/political and ideological superstructure*' distinction we outlined in relation to exclusive approaches to religion.

Different types of society (such as *feudalism* and *capitalism*) organise economic behaviour in significantly different ways, but all are characterised by a specific:

Mode of production that, for our purposes, consists of two broad ideas:

- **Means of production** refers to the things (such as land, machinery, buildings and investment capital) used to produce commodities. People are not part of the means of production, since their role is played out in terms of:

- **Social relations to production**: This refers to the relationships that exist *within* a mode of production. In capitalist societies, for example, the main social relationship is 'employer–employee' and it derives from the important distinction between two ideas:
  - **ownership** of the means of production (the sphere of *capital*), and
  - **non-ownership**, a sphere consisting of people who sell their ability to work (their *labour power* – in capitalist societies people are neither *slaves* nor *serfs*; they are 'free' economic actors in the sense that they can 'choose' to whom they sell their labour power for the best possible wage).

Social stratification is based around the economic system (into which people are born and socialised), structured in terms of these relationships to the means of production. In *classical Marxism*, the economic structure gives rise to *two basic classes* (owners and non-owners, or the *bourgeoisie* and the *proletariat*); for *neo-Marxists* the *growth* of a 'third class' in modern capitalism (the 'middle' or 'petit bourgeoisie') – consisting of intellectuals, knowledge workers, professionals and managers at the higher levels and the self-employed at the lower – complicates the general class picture since this class involves people who *neither* wholly own the means of production *nor* are simply 'waged workers'. Writers like **Poulantzas** (1974) generally refer to this class as occupying a *contradictory* class position.

Weeding the path

Marxism offers a way of understanding stratification and differentiation in a way that is both:

- **objective**, in the sense that class positions in a stratification system can be 'read off' from people's economic relationships, and
- **empirical**, in the sense that social class can be linked objectively to social inequalities that derive from different class positions.

However, a major criticism relates to ideas about alternative forms of stratification/inequality based around:

Gender and **ethnicity**: **Dahrendorf** (1959), among others, argues that economic and political power are not necessarily the same thing. In other words, the question arises as to whether economic divisions are the only (or main) basis for social stratification in modern societies. As in the example of the *caste system*, Marxists generally explain ideas like *sexual* and *racial discrimination* in *economic* terms – as developments from the unequal distribution of power in society based ultimately (or 'in the last instance', as neo-Marxists such as **Poulantzas** (1974) like to put it) on unequal economic positions. Other *conflict theorists* have argued this is a mistaken interpretation.

Weberian

Weberian theories of stratification are based on two fundamental ideas:

- **Social resources** (anything that is valued in a society). Where competition exists in any society, some people will have greater access to, ownership of and control over social resources, which **Weber** (1922) classified as belonging to three main types:
  - **class** (or **economic**) resources, such as income, wealth, possessions and so forth

- **status** (or **social**) resources, involving ideas such as honour, prestige and respect – these can be given and gained in a wide variety of ways, such as through physical or intellectual abilities
- **power** (sometimes called '**party**') resources that relate to the ability to influence the behaviour of others (through authority or coercion, for example).

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: Weber argued there were two main types of power – ***coercion*** and ***authority*** (which in turn was based on ideas like ***charisma***, ***tradition*** or ***rationality***).

How social resources are *distributed* relates to the second idea:

- **Social inequality –** defined, by *Weberians*, in terms of 'the unequal distribution of resources between individuals and groups'. *Inequalities* neither automatically nor easily translate directly into social *stratification*, for a couple of reasons:
- **Conditions**: For differences and inequalities to become stratification requires:
  - **identifiable groups** with demonstrable inequalities
  - **structured** (or **systematic**) inequalities involving some kind of hierarchical connections between different groups; those at the top *always* do better, as a group, than those below them
  - **a belief system** (ideology) that both justifies and explains inequality and stratification
  - **resources** with a society-wide value: higher social groups always have greatest access to, ownership of and control over the most valued resources (such as wealth, status, and power).
- **Dimensions**: Stratification can have many dimensions – economic ownership and divisions, for example, are not necessarily the only basis for stratification, since such systems, for *Weberians*, may be:
  - **status-based**, in terms of gender or ethnicity (as in, for example, the *caste* system, or *apartheid* as it operated in countries like South Africa (1945–1994) under white rule)
  - **multidimensional**, whereby different groups in the same society experience different forms of stratification, depending on a combination of class, status and power – people, for example, may have a high income (class), but low status (and vice versa). However, class, status and power can also combine, such that those with high levels of wealth can use this situation to enhance their status and increase their levels of power and influence (to become wealthier, for example).

Digging deeper: Modernist theories of stratification

Thus far we've outlined a general set of modernist approaches to stratification that adopt a:

Systems approach, in the sense that stratification is theorised in terms of social structures within which people are variously located. **Luhmann** (1997), however, while

Growing it yourself: Classroom stratification

We can apply Weberian ideas to an 'everyday situation', such as your school or college, to understand how inequalities can translate into social stratification. In small groups, use the following table to identify conditions under which stratification occurs in relation to your school/college (the questions we've posed are simply to get you thinking along the right lines).

Each group could focus on one of the following areas:

Age Gender Ethnicity Academic ability

Conditions	Example
Identifiable groups	What are the different groups?
Structured inequality	Are these groups ranked hierarchically? If so, how?
Justifying beliefs	How are different groupings justified by 'those in authority'?
Valued resources	What are the 'valued resources' people compete to gain?

Each group should present its findings to the rest of the class.

agreeing with the basic idea of a systems approach, argues that to understand social divisions in late modernity we need to adopt a *different kind of perspective* – one we can illustrate using an analogy with *physics*, where, until the early twentieth century, the structure of the natural world was conceptualised in terms of a:

Newtonian model involving, as **Sandomierski** (2003) notes, '… a view of the natural world as a machine', with characteristics like:

- **independent existence** from people
- **objectivity**: the idea of 'reality … as something entirely independent of the observer'
- **linearity**: governed, for example, by universal laws of cause and effect.

This view, however, was challenged by the:

Einsteinian model of *quantum theory*, characterised by **Capra** (1982) as a perspective where 'the universe … consists of an infinite number of minutely small particles operating in infinitely complex relationships. No longer could the universe be predicted based upon universal mechanistic laws'. Just as both Newtonian and quantum physics address the same problem from the same general perspective (the natural world as a system), but interpret the problem differently, **Luhmann's** take on

systems theory is similarly very different in that he sees society as a:

Communication network of variously connected individuals – 'society' conceived as a quantum universe of 'infinitely complex relationships' rather than a mechanistic, unified system operating in broadly predictable ways and containing broadly predictable connections. For **Luhmann**, individuals exist *outside* the network, although they operate *within* it (just as, for example, when you communicate by phone you are *outside* the system but still *within* it). An alternative way to grasp this idea is to think about 'society' in terms of:

The internet – a *communication network* connecting people in ways that position them *outside* the network (they're not a physical part of it); people only *enter* the network at particular points to communicate and there is, in this sense, no such '*thing*' as 'the internet' – all that 'exists' are connected global channels of communication with two major characteristics.

- **Autopoiesis**: The network, as **Maturana** and **Varela** (1980) put it, is *self-reproductive* – independent of people (autonomous) and self-maintaining once it has been designed and created.
- **Functional differentiation**: The internet is a system of related parts, each performing different functions that, in total, contribute to the existence and maintenance of the whole (*email*, for example, is functionally different to *blogging* or *instant messaging*).

The key point here, however, is that the internet is *neither* stratified nor *hierarchical*, although at points there may be:

Local hierarchies *within* the system (some channels of communication – such as password-protected sites or intranets – are *not* open to all). In principle, however, the internet is a *non-hierarchical network* – an idea that illustrates **Luhmann's** key criticism of modernist theories of stratification because they represent models of social systems that are essentially 'mechanical'; the social system *exists* (it has unity and coherence *as a system*) and people are allotted places within it (*stratified*) depending on various subjective criteria (such as economic ownership). **Luhmann's** argument is that stratification and hierarchy are:

Subjective rationalisations applied 'after the event' (*imposed categorisations*) to support the idea of a rational, unified social system. As he argues: 'At the end of the 20th century . . . In vain we try to use the leftover vocabularies of a tradition [modernism] whose ambition it was to define the unity, or even the essence of the social.' The problem, for **Luhmann** (1997), was that of:

Defining difference and 'marking off a space in which we can observe the emergence of order and disorder' – and this, he suggests, can be achieved by thinking in terms of:

- **Inclusion** and **exclusion –** as being 'connected' or 'not connected to the network'. As he argues: 'The predominant relation is no longer a hierarchical one, but one of inclusion and exclusion; and this relates not to stratification but to functional differentiation.'

Preparing the ground: Age, gender and ethnic stratification

We can examine some further theories of stratification in terms of what **Piskorski** and

Anand (2002) term '*prestige inequality*' and its relationship to status positions within modern societies based around age, gender and ethnicity. In this respect, the work we did on *Weberian* theory suggests that, even in modern societies, *status-based divisions* remain an important area of study because stratification is a complex mix of:

- **class**, considered in terms of market situation and general life chances
- **status**, that takes account of lifestyle and consumption differences, and
- **power**, where the focus is on differential levels of decision-making.

Age

In this respect:

Age stratification is an idea frequently reflected in:

Common-sense ideas about age-related differences – for example, we tend to recognise that 'age-related categories' (such as 'child' or 'youth') both exist and have a status-based meaning. In addition, rightly or wrongly, age categories are both:

Labelled and **stereotyped** in a variety of ways, both *positively* ('childhood' perceived as a time of 'innocence and purity', for example) and *negatively* (such as 'old age' as a time of physical and mental decline).

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Some age-related labels are so powerful they assume what **Becker** (1963) has called the status of 'master labels'.

Gender stratification: The main question here, perhaps, is the extent to which modern societies consider gender as a:

Dimension of class stratification – the idea that social classes are themselves stratified along gender lines (with men occupying the top positions within each class), which reflects the idea of:

Inter-class status – the argument that even where class is the *main* determinant of *status* we can have a situation where, for example, upper-class women have lower status than upper-class men but higher status than lower-class men.

Against this, feminists such as **Millet** (1970) have argued that *historically* gender has been – and continues to be – a major form of stratification in its own right, based around concepts of:

- **patriarchy** (male domination), and
- **sex class** – the idea that men and women are different, gendered, classes in society.

The concept of *sex class* is also reflected in some parts of the *Men's Movement*, where one argument is that biological sex differences translate into cultural (gender) differences. **Bly** (1990) has argued for a version of *masculinity* that, according to **Wolf-Light** (1994), is '. . . authoritarian and autocratic, impersonal, contemptuous and violent. In short, the very image of patriarchy'.

Feminists such as **Dunbar** (1970) and **Hacker** (1951) have also drawn attention to the:

Caste-like status of women in modern societies. **Hacker**, in particular, drew a parallel between the status of women and blacks in US society (although much has changed in the 50 years since her original article). She argued, for example, that men represented a 'dominant, majority group' to which women accommodated themselves 'by using the same tactics that racial minorities

. . . use to get along with the dominant groups about them'.

Ethnicity

Ethnic group stratification: An initial problem we face is how to define reliably and validly the concept of 'an ethnic group', where 'ethnicity' conventionally refers to:

Cultural differences between groups (such as religion, family structures and organisations, ideological beliefs, values and norms). Part of the reason for this approach is to distinguish ethnicity from:

Race – an academically discredited concept that refers to supposed *genetic* or *biological* differences between 'racial types' (white, black, Asian and so forth). Although there is a general sociological consensus that ethnicity is more useful than race in the differentiation of social groups, problems with the concept of ethnicity relate to ideas like:

- **Categorisations**: In particular, differences between the way sociologists conceptualise ethnic groups and the way these groups label both themselves and each other.
- **Heterogeneity**: As with any classification system, it's easy to assume that ethnic groups are homogeneous categories – something that's rarely the case. Just as groups like 'working class' or 'men' have a wide range of differences within them, the same is true for ethnic groups. Clear, precise and unambiguous culture-based definitions of ethnic groups are, in reality, extraordinarily difficult to construct. This difficulty also makes it hard to distinguish in meaningful ways between different 'ethnic groups'.
- **Boundaries**: Two problems present themselves here. First, how do we define the boundaries *between* different ethnic groups (and is it possible for people to belong to *different* ethnic groups at the same time)? Second, to what level of depth do we go when classifying ethnicities – do they, for example, exist as international, national or local forms?

Growing it yourself: Defining ethnicity

Think about how to define the idea of an 'English' ethnic group:

- **What are the unique cultural characteristics of this group that clearly distinguish it from other ethnic groups?**
- **What problems are involved in creating a precise definition of this group that clearly marks it as a coherent group, different from other ethnic groups in our society?**

Types

Notwithstanding the difficulties of differentiation, stratification systems involving ethnic hierarchies can be divided, historically, into two main types:

- **Biological** systems where things like skin colour have been used to determine an individual's stratification position. A recent example here is the South African *apartheid* system where three classifications were used (white, coloured and black).
- **Ethnic systems** that involve the use of *cultural characteristics* (such as religion) to discriminate against individuals or groups,

such that they are denied equality of status, income, opportunity and the like. These take two basic forms: societies where discrimination is overt and legally tolerated (such as the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany or the practice of 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia in the 1990s) and societies where racist ideas and practices contribute to minority ethnic groups being in the lowest positions in the stratification system.

Digging deeper: Age, gender and ethnic stratification

We can dig a little deeper into this area by thinking about possible theoretical explanations for status-based stratification:

Age

Theoretical explanations for the presence, persistence and general form of age stratification in contemporary societies fall into three broad categories:

Modernisation theory suggests that the significance – or otherwise – of age stratification varies in relation to *social change* and, in particular, the transition from pre-industrial (pre-modern) to industrial (modern) society. In the former, where class-based forms of stratification are absent, some type of:

- **Age-grading** system tends to develop. This involves peer groups forming *age-sets*, where, as **Giddens** (2001) notes, each generation has certain rights and responsibilities that change with age. In the modern period age-setting is still common in some *traditional societies*, such as the Maasai in modern Kenya, according to **Johnson** and **Tumanka** (2004), but *rigid* age-grading is not the norm in modern societies. This isn't to say age-grading doesn't occur in modern societies, but its general form is different – it is, for example, not as *systematic* as an *age-set* system.

Within modernisation theory, economic changes produce cultural changes; for example, the need for trained labour produces an education system that, in turn, creates age-stratified concepts (such as 'youth'). Similarly, at the opposite end of the age scale, longer life expectancies and the idea of 'retirement' produce concepts of old age. In this respect, age boundaries are marked by:

- **Rites of passage** that include, for instance, an eighteenth birthday party as formally marking the transition from 'youth' to 'adult' status, just as retirement marks the passage into formal old age.

Weeding the path

Modernisation theory is strongest when it focuses on areas like the elderly as a distinctive status group in modern societies since 'old age' is marked by a relatively strong *rite of passage* (retirement). **Avramov** and **Maskova** (2003) argue that modernisation theory has successfully identified '. . . changes in society that are likely to reduce the status of older people', such as those suggested by **Cowgill** (1974) – the elderly as 'underemployed, untrained in the latest technologies and separated from family/community webs of relationships'. However, it's arguable this boundary has grown fuzzier in recent times and **Kiemo** (2004) also suggests that social and economic

changes do not impact uniformly on this age group, which makes it difficult to see 'the elderly' as a distinctive stratum in modern societies in any but the broadest sense.

Cohort (age stratification) theory focuses on societies having what **Marshall** (1996) terms an 'age structure associated with different roles and statuses'. In this respect 'age' is considered as a *group*, rather than an individual, construct; the relative status of whole groups (cohorts) changes with age – think, for example, in terms of broad categories like child, youth, adult and elderly (with a range of subdivisions within each category – youth can involve subdivisions like 'teen', for example) and the different statuses they attract. Age stratification by *cohort*, therefore, is a flexible interpretation of structural differences in age groups; as each cohort ages (biologically/chronologically) they attract a range of socially produced roles, self-concepts and identity changes in the form of:

- **Normative expectations** associated with age. **Zhou** (1997) suggests 'age is a basis for acquiring roles, status, and deference from others in society. When people become old, they exit roles as workers and take on roles as retirees'. In addition, **Riley** (1994) argues that people born into the same cohort have similar '. . . experiences in time and may share meanings, ideologies, orientations, attitudes and values'.

Weeding the path

One strength of this interpretation is that cohort theory reflects the way social changes impact on different cohorts in different ways at different times. As **Riley** suggests, the life experiences of a young adult today are very different to those of a young adult a century ago.

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two possible differences between the lives of a 15-year-old in your society and someone of the same age 100 years ago.

Life course theory: Although related to cohort theory, life course perspectives suggest the concept of:

- **Chronological age** is increasingly fuzzy and unhelpful in modern societies (for the sorts of reasons **Riley** (1994) suggests) and has developed the concept of:
- **Social age** – the idea that, over an individual's lifetime, certain structured 'life events' mark the transition to different life phases and experiences. **Mitchell's** (2003) summary of life course theory suggests three related areas of interest:
- **Transitions**: The study of major 'life events' (starting and leaving school, marriage, starting work, retirement and so forth) and their impact on individual identities.
- **Norms**, in the sense of both general social perceptions of 'age-related appropriate or inappropriate' behaviour and the specific sense of how individuals interpret, incorporate or reject these norms.
- **Perceptions**: Societies not only develop ideas about normative rules associated *with* age categories, but they also develop ideas *about* age categories – the point at which youth changes to adulthood and so forth.

In general, therefore, this position synthesises concepts of individual age identities (how they develop and change) within the general structure of a (loose) age-related stratification system based around normative and status considerations and expectations.

Weeding the path

While there is evidence of age-related grading systems in modern societies, there are doubts about whether this relates specifically to *social stratification*, as opposed to age-based *social inequalities* – the fact that some, but not all, elderly people in our society live in poverty illustrates this idea. The situation is further complicated by age-grading being both subtle and flexible – there are few, if any, rigid normative/status associations in our society wholly related to age. More specifically, however, problems with conceptualising age stratification revolve around:

- **Boundary marking** – where does one 'age group' begin and end, for example, and to what extent are age boundaries subjectively constructed?
- **Group composition and definition**: Age groups, however defined, invariably encompass a wide variety of behaviours.
- **Fragmentation**: Although we can identify general normative expectations relating to age as a status system ('big boys don't cry'), policing and enforcement are rudimentary and largely informal, even in terms of rites of passage – does adulthood begin at 16, 18 or 21? This suggests that age stratification, at least in modern societies, is not a particularly consistent concept.

Gender

Gender stratification: Although gender in contemporary societies is, as **Ferree et al.** (2005) argue, '. . . recognised as a major social force . . . a core institution of all societies and the location of significant structural inequality', a key question is the extent to which *gender inequalities* are based on *gender stratification* – the answer to which involves considering a variety of theoretical positions:

Traditional approaches to gender stratification have generally taken two forms:

- **Marginalisation**: Characteristic of neo-functionalist approaches, this position

Growing it yourself: Normative expectations

In small groups, identify as many different normative expectations as you can for the following age statuses in our society.

Baby Child	Teenager Youth	Young adult Middle-aged	Elderly

As a class, consider how these expectations may vary in terms of gender and over time.

divided male and female roles into 'expressive and instrumental functions' that relegated women to a 'supporting role' within the family.

- **Conflation**: This position focuses on stratification as a *group* phenomenon in the sense that individual status positions are mediated by social relationships. Stratification, in this respect, is theorized in terms of partnerships – based, for example, on the concept of 'a family group' sharing the same general status regardless of the individual statuses of its members. **Goldthorpe** (1983) argues this is not unreasonable given such groups are likely to share broadly similar social/market situations. **Parkin** (1971) supports this general approach when he argues that, although 'female status carries with it many disadvantages . . . inequalities associated with sex differences are not usefully thought of as components of stratification. This is because for the great majority of women the allocation of social and economic rewards is determined primarily by the position of their families and, in particular, that of the male head'. Conversely, **Ferree et al.** argue that this approach ignores marked male and female status differences (even within the same general class position).

Cross-difference models reflect a more contemporary approach to gender stratification. **Eichler** (1980) argues that gender stratification tends to be obscured by class stratification and 'female exploitation' within the home is not the same as 'employee exploitation'. Women, in particular, suffer dual forms of stratification:

- **class-based** in the workplace as they increasingly occupy paid work roles
- **quasi-feudal** within the home where men and women take on a form of 'master–serf' relationship – each partner has certain rights and responsibilities towards the other, but ultimately it is men who gain most benefit.

Intersections

This approach, therefore, suggests we need to understand stratification in terms of the way class and gender intersect.

Individual models, as **Stanworth** (1984) has argued, see *social* stratification as involving more than a 'simple economic relationship'; that is, we need to think about how every individual in a society is open to a range of defining memberships of different stratifying forms – from economic class, through gender and ethnicity, to age. This, as **Ferree** and **Hall** (1996) argue, would avoid the still common sociological practice of placing 'gender as a micro-level issue . . . ethnicity as a mid-level problem and only class as a macro-level structure relevant for organizing a whole society'.

Class accentuation models, as developed by writers such as **Bonney** (1988), focus on the decline in the 'male breadwinner' in our society (**Creighton**, 1999) and suggest that dual-earner families have a distorted (*accentuated*) position in any stratification structure. The position of family partners (male or female) may be *accentuated* or *devalued* by the fact of their association – individual social statuses, therefore, are affected not just by 'who they are' and 'what they do', but also by 'whom they are with'. Theories of stratification, therefore, must take into account the different ways concepts like class, gender and ethnicity intersect and interact.

Weeding the path

Although it's not difficult to find evidence of gender inequalities, both male and female, in contemporary societies, the question remains one of whether these are structured in ways that mean men and women occupy different hierarchical positions in society on the basis of gender alone. Although the picture is complicated by variables like social class, there is evidence at least to suggest gender stratification exists in two spheres:

- **The public**, illustrated by **Husmo** (1999) in relation to Norwegian fish processing, where the 'division of labour . . . is based on an idea of gender-related characteristics which make men and women suitable for different tasks'. This idea of 'biological difference' leading to different gender capabilities still resonates in modern societies and arguably forms the basis for gendered (horizontal and vertical) stratification within the workplace.
- **The private** (mainly the home) where stratification based on patriarchal ideologies is evidenced by the fact that women generally play a *service role* (subservient to the requirements of male partners) within the family.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Family: This sphere provides numerous examples of a gendered division of labour in modern society (involving ideas such as women's double/triple shift).

Ethnicity

Ethnic stratification: Two initial concepts are useful here:

- **Institutionalised racism** involves the idea of ethnic status differences being built into the structure of society (such as the *apartheid* system in South Africa) or organisations (such as the police).

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: The **Macpherson Report** (1999) into the police handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence identified 'institutional racism' as a factor in the unsolved killing.

- **Disproportionate representation** involves an ethnic (usually minority) group being over-represented at the bottom of the stratification system as the result of a complex interplay of factors involving class, status and power.

Perspectives

These ideas are not mutually exclusive, of course, and we can explore them in more detail through a range of different perspectives on ethnic stratification:

Marxist perspectives: Although **Hall** (1980) has argued that ethnicity is a significant dimension of stratification in capitalist societies, it is generally seen by Marxists as a secondary form – one that exists within (and because of) class stratification. As **Leonardo** (2004) puts it, ethnicity in 'orthodox class analysis is significant but secondary at best'. This follows because ethnic distinctions (like those of the concept of race it replaced) are created from the exercise of power. That is, for *status* discrimination to occur – to place, in **Hall's** terms, *social distance* between hierarchically arranged groups – a discriminating group has to be initially more

powerful, and the source of such power is economic organisation and relationships. Thus, although:

Ethnic inequality reflects status differences manufactured within a stratification system, the concept of *ethnic stratification* itself is relatively meaningless. As **Leonardo** notes: 'The racial experiences of African-Americans, Latinos, Whites, and Asian Americans determined by the economy' are reduced to a:

Reflex status: Ethnic discrimination and secondary stratification occur, in other words, as a consequence of economic factors, something evidenced by the:

Fragmented nature of ethnic stratification in contemporary societies. The status position of individuals within different ethnic groups is, first, determined by their class relationships and *then* by their ethnicity – the emergence of a 'black middle class' in countries like Britain and the USA is instructive in this respect.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Education: From this position, ethnic group success or failure is explained mainly in terms of their relative class positions.

Hall (1996) summarises this general position when he argues: 'Race is a mode of how class is lived.' In other words, ethnic minority experience of discrimination and inequality is a manifest expression of latent *class inequality*.

Functionalist/New Right

Functionalist perspectives generally – and neo-functionalist forms of **New Right** theorising in particular – focus on the problem of:

Integration in relation to ethnic forms of stratification, conventionally in ways relating to the failure or inability of minority groups to become fully integrated into the value and normative system of the *dominant culture*. This is particularly apparent in relation to New Right theories of the:

Underclass advanced by writers like **Murray and Phillips** (2001) in the USA and **Saunders** (1990) in the UK. The 'disproportionate representation' of ethnic minorities in the underclass is related to failures in their:

Cultural organisation – the argument that some ethnic minorities 'disadvantage themselves' through things like:

- **Family organisation**: Some groups adopt (through choice or necessity) a family form (single parenthood) that disadvantages them in the labour market. This disadvantaged *market situation* is reflected, for the New Right, in a couple of ways:
- **Welfare dependency**, a situation where the 'cultural choices' of some minority groups (the source, it's argued, of their low social status) are supported by the welfare state, leading to a situation that *reinforces*, rather than improves, their status.
- **Cycle of deprivation**: For **Saunders**, *dependency cultures* involve a passive and fatalistic acceptance of low status that is, in turn, transmitted through different generations (from parents to children) in the form of low educational and work expectations. This, in turn, leads to minorities taking on an:
- **Outsider status**: A failure to *integrate* with a dominant culture by taking advantage of opportunities for status advancement (through education, for

example) inevitably places such groups in a weak market situation, where their failure to compete successfully leads to cultural separation – different ethnic groups move in different economic and cultural spheres.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Family/wealth, poverty and welfare: New Right ideas about the underclass can be related to family organisation and diversity as well as to explanations of poverty based around ideas such as cultures of poverty.

Weeding the path

New Right explanations focus on how different ethnic groups (and groups within these groups) are differently placed in stratification systems. Asian Indians in the UK, for example, achieve higher than average educational qualifications and are proportionately over-represented in professional occupations; yet this group also has higher than average levels of educational underachievement. These observations suggest, for the New Right, that explanations for status positions are to be found mainly within the social organisation of minority groups themselves – a position that does involve a number of problems.

Blaming the victim: By starting from the assumption that stratification is both *functional* and *inevitable*, this form of explanation is forced to focus on the *cultural attributes* of those groups within the stratification system. Thus, if those at the top have different attributes to those at the bottom, it simply becomes a matter of identifying cultural characteristics that are: **Structurally functional** and **dysfunctional** and attributing causality accordingly. By focusing on the (supposed) dysfunctional qualities of those at the lowest levels of any stratification system, this process effectively 'blames the victims' for their subordinate position and ignores the role of economic, political and ideological forms of discrimination in the creation of such characteristics.

Integration: This idea raises two main questions. First, is there a *dominant culture* into which subordinate groups can *integrate?* And second, is the stratification system open to *assimilation* – do dominant ethnic groups, for example, attempt to enhance their status at the expense of subordinate ethnic groups?

Social closure: In this respect we need to consider how dominant groups may operate in terms of closing off entry; rather than, for example, 'blaming minorities' for their failure to integrate, it might be more fruitful to investigate how dominant groups prevent integration through their individual and collective behaviours.

Weberian

This general perspective, as we've suggested, examines the interplay between concepts of class, status and power and how they impact on the social standing of ethnic groups in a number of ways:

- **Class**: Ethnic minorities are concentrated in low-pay, low-skill, non-unionised work, as well as having a disproportionate presence among the unemployed.
- **Status**: Racial discrimination is a form of *status discrimination*, since an individual is considered to have a lower social status if they are part of a 'despised/hated' social group. In this respect, discrimination

lowers the status of ethnic minorities and contributes towards their differential treatment in all areas of society (especially employment) as well as preventing integration by forcing such groups to find status within their own particular cultural settings.

- **Power**: Partly as a result of their lower class and status positions, ethnic groups are:
  - **Politically marginalised**: Trade unions, for example, find it difficult to recruit among ethnic minorities because the nature of their employment tends to be in small, non-unionised companies, while in Britain, for example, no major political party *directly* represents the interests of ethnic minorities.

Ethnic groups, therefore, generally occupy a weak market position; on the one hand, they may lack the technical skills and qualifications required to improve this situation, while on the other they suffer higher levels of implicit and explicit racial discrimination that reinforces this weak position.

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two ways ethnic minorities in our society are portrayed as 'a social problem'.

Moving on

In this section we've suggested that the main form of social stratification in our society is based on social class. In the next section we can examine this position in more detail by looking first at how we define class in modern societies, and second at the relationship between occupation and class position.

2. Different ways of measuring social class and the relationship between occupation and social class

This section examines the concept of social class as an important dimension of stratification in modern societies, something that involves thinking about how that class can be defined (both objectively and subjectively) and measured using a range of classification scales.

Preparing the ground: Measuring social class

In the previous section we suggested that social classes can be seen as relatively permanent, homogeneous, social divisions to which individuals sharing similar values, lifestyles, interests and behaviours can be assigned. There are, however, two immediate problems we face:

Defining classes: We need to develop a practical definition that can be applied to the problem of:

Measuring class: It would be useful, when talking about social stratification, to clearly identify different class positions and the characteristics of the individuals and groups that occupy them.

In this respect, we can begin by suggesting three related dimensions to class:

- **Economic**: **Scott** (1999) argues this is a *primary dimension* of class and can be measured by indicators such as wealth, income and occupation.

- **Political**: This *secondary dimension* of class can be measured by indicators of status and power on the basis that economically successful groups tend, in the main, to have higher levels of associated status and to command greater levels of power.
- **Cultural**: This is a further secondary dimension that can be measured by indicators relating to lifestyle, values, beliefs, norms and level of education. Economic position influences this aspect through the development of cultural lifestyles (associated with the type of status symbols people acquire, their leisure pursuits and so forth).

These dimensions – and how they interrelate – are important here because, as **Barratt** (2005) puts it: 'Economic capital alone does not make one upper class . . . it provides experiences and opportunities that enhance cultural, social, and academic capital.' In other words, social class is 'something more' than a level of income or wealth and, if this is the case, how we measure class must reflect this idea.

Digging deeper: Measuring social class

The concept of class can't, in itself, be measured empirically because there's nothing concrete in the social world we can clearly identify as 'social class'. This is not, of course, a problem unique to class (many sociological concepts cannot be measured directly) and to solve it we need to refer to:

Indicators of class (such as occupation).

WARM-UP: THE STATUS OF SYMBOLS

Many of the cultural aspects of class we are familiar with in everyday life are more correctly considered to be indicators of *social status* (although, as we've argued, status can be an important *indicator* of class).

As a class, consider the following categories (or develop your own if you prefer):

- cars
- houses
- alcohol
- clothing
- holidays
- television programmes

and for each identify some different types (for example, different types of car = Lada, Range Rover and Porsche 911).

In small groups, discuss the following: Do you associate the types you've identified in each category with any specific social class (for example, is a Porsche 911 'upper class')?

If the answer to this question is 'yes', briefly explain why you have made this association.

As a class, discuss your findings about the relationship between status symbols and social class.

Initially we can note two basic types of indicator (*objective* and *subjective*).

Objective indicators involve identifying things common to the whole population being classified, normally but not necessarily, with the proviso that they can be *quantified*. This potentially includes a range of *indicators* (occupation, income, education, housing, language and so forth) either considered:

- **individually**, such as occupation, or
- **relationally** – combining different objective indicators (such as occupation, education and income) to create a more rounded picture.

From this position, class is an *objective category* because it exists *independently* of individual social actors; people can be assigned to class positions regardless of their personal feelings about such things – and while a subjective sense of class position may be important (it will affect the way people behave), this is more properly related to *status* (a dimension of class) rather than class itself.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and method: Objectivity can be linked to questions of whether or not sociology can be considered scientific and to different sociological methodologies (such as positivism and realism).

Weeding the path

Objective class measurements have a number of distinct sociological advantages:

- **Consistency**: Once the measurement indicators/criteria have been selected they can be applied consistently in terms of:
- **Definition**: Because class is defined by the person measuring it, there is no inconsistency of definition – it will mean the same thing however and whenever it is applied (as with using occupation as a class indicator, for example).
- **Data collection**: With a consistent, objective definition, control over how and when data are collected can be effectively determined – something that allows:
- **Comparisons** to be made over time. We could, for example, track:
  - **Class patterns** – the relative size of different classes, for example.
  - **Class positions** – such as changes to the way different classes relate to one another hierarchically as the class structure changes.
- **Exteriority**: If the way people are assigned class positions is outside the control of (exterior *to*) those being classified, class represents something you *are* – whether or not you realise or accept your class position. This can be demonstrated empirically in terms of:

  Correlations between, for example, class *position* and class *effects* – we can, for example, empirically demonstrate a strong and consistent relationship between social class and areas like crime, health, life expectancy and so forth.

The potting shed

For any two areas of the Specification, identify one way for each that class position has a demonstrable effect on an individual's life.

A second type of indicator, as we've suggested, involves:

Subjective definitions and measures of class, something **Bulmer** (1975) characterises as people's '. . . own conceptions of the class structure and their position in it'. In other words, subjective measure uses class indicators that, by and large, develop out of how people define both their own class position and, by extension, their class relationship to others – or, as **Liu** (2004) puts it, subjective class conceptions involve 'a personal perception of available resources and opportunities'.

Although subjective measures allow people to both define class and locate themselves on a class scale (or not, as the case may be), we need to avoid thinking that simply because social class is defined subjectively (by people themselves) it cannot be *objectively* measured using these criteria.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: The idea of 'objectively measuring' subjective criteria relates to ideas about *personal objectivity* and a *scientific ethos* developed in this chapter.

We can illustrate this idea by noting three basic 'subjective class' indicators:

- **Class consciousness** involves ideas about people's *awareness* of belonging to a particular class. In terms of *measuring* class consciousness, **Evans** (1993) points to the idea of measuring:
  - **Attitudes and beliefs** about a range of 'class-typical ideas' (such as opinions about welfare provision, the distribution of wealth and income and so forth).

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Religion: Bruce (1994), for example, found that working-class Protestants in Northern Ireland had a well-developed level of awareness about their class position, both in relation to other religious groups and, as **Duffy** and **Evans** (1997) argue, 'relative to their own middle class'.

- **Class identification** relates to how closely people associate themselves to particular social classes, and such identification may involve a range of levels, from a fairly basic identification with a 'lower-' or 'upper-class' position to more sophisticated understandings of specific classes and their relationship.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Religion: Duffy and **Evans** (1997), in a study of class and religious affiliation in Northern Ireland, found that 80% of Catholic males identified themselves with the working class.

- **Oppositional consciousness** involves an awareness of class *conflict* – the idea that different classes can have different (opposed) interests. This type of awareness ranges from a simple 'us and them' dichotomy to more sophisticated understanding of the association between, for example, different economic (Marx) or market situations (Weber) and different types of class.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: Note how even when subjective indicators are used it is possible for the sociologist, as an outside

observer/researcher, to maintain an objective research position. It is, for example, possible to objectively categorise how people (subjectively) view their class position.

Weeding the path

Although not always as straightforward as objective measures, measuring and categorising social class subjectively adds a different dimension to our understanding of class in a number of ways:

- **Consciousness**: People's class perceptions are important since how they think and feel about class will affect their behaviour (and that of others) in a variety of ways – from how people vote, through the schools they choose to where they want to live.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: What people understand about class, in terms of awareness, identification and opposition, for example, may have consequences for voting behaviour. *Expressive* theories, for instance, link social class background to how people vote, as do some *instrumental* theories (such as *partisan alignment*) of voting behaviour.

- **Meaning**: A potential drawback of objective class measures is that they tell us little or nothing about what class *means* to people. Class, in this respect, runs the risk of being reduced to relatively simple *statistical categories* (such as 'middle class' or 'working class'), something that reflects what **Mills** (1959) called:
  - **Abstracted empiricism** – 'belabouring irrelevant minutiae', as he put it, or the classification of the social world for no good reason or purpose. For example, you might want to count the number of cracks on a pavement and at the end of the exercise you will know precisely how many cracks there are; however, the key question is how significant or useful will this knowledge be?

Problems

Subjective categorisations do, however have significant disadvantages:

- **Understanding**: 'Social class' may have different meanings to people, making it difficult to arrive at any real understanding of the concept, beyond the idea that its meanings are many and varied. This 'confusion' is not simply sociological, but is also rooted in the public consciousness. The polling organisation **MORI** (2003) found that, in 1999, 65% of respondents agreed with the statement, 'I don't feel that I belong to any particular social class'. In 2000, however, 76% disagreed with the statement, 'Britain is now a classless society'. These types of contradictions and confusions make it difficult to draw:

  Comparisons between social classes since, if there are many different (personal) meanings to class it is difficult to compare 'like with like'. For some (postmodern) theorists this situation simply reflects the 'reality of class' in contemporary societies – a fragmented concept that holds a variety of meanings. Yet it is clearly possible to *correlate* objective social class with a range of class-based *life chances* (such as levels of income and wealth).

- **Categorisation**: As we've suggested, when people are asked to think about 'social class' they tend to see it in *status* terms (class and status are frequently confused). While status may be an important *indicator* of class, it is *not* class itself (in a similar way to the idea that while occupation can be used as an indicator of class, individual occupations are not themselves social classes).

Preparing the ground: Occupation and social class

Although there are different ways of defining and measuring social class, over the past 100 years in the UK one of the most common forms of classification has been to use occupation as a:

Single proxy measure that allows *statistical quantification* of class groups. In other words, occupation has generally been considered a *reliable* indicator of social class for a range of reasons:

- **Objectivity**: Class groups can be created using criteria that do not rely on either *individual self-assessment* or *self-assignment* of class position. The ability to *quantify* class through occupation is a significant basis for sociological *comparisons*, both *historical* (changing class structures and identities) and *cross-cultural* (different forms of class structure in different societies).
- **Life chances**: Occupation is related to other aspects of an individual's life and, as such, allows us to make *informed guesses* about income, wealth, education and the like. In addition, *empirical correlations* can be made between occupation-based classes and individual/group life chances.
- **Identity**: Although ideas about gender, ethnicity, age and so forth all contribute to individual identities, occupation arguably remains the single most important source of identity over an individual's lifetime.

Occupational scales

We can examine a range of 'occupation-based class scales', focusing initially on official government categorisations before exploring a selection of alternative ('unofficial' or non-governmental) class scales. We can begin, therefore, by noting an occupational scale used in the UK for most of the twentieth century (from 1911 until 1980), namely:

Social class based on occupation (more commonly known as the *Registrar General's* Social Class scale). A relatively simple occupational measure of class, this scale divided the population into five basic classes (with class 3 split into two subcategories).

This scale was developed around two forms of measurement:

- **Skill**: Each class consisted of occupations with similar levels of skill, such as professional workers (class 1), skilled manual workers (class 3 manual) and the like.
- **Status** – an important dimension because it introduced an:
  - **Ordinal** element into a *nominal* scale. *Nominal* refers to the idea of grouping similar occupations without making any *judgement* as to their relative worth, whereas *ordinal* refers to the

Registrar General's classification (social class based on occupation)		
Social class		**Example occupations**
Non-manual [middle class]	1. Professional	Accountant, doctor, clergyman, university teacher
	2. Intermediate	Pilot, farmer, manager, police officer, teacher
	3N. Non-manual skilled	Clerical worker, sales rep., shop assistant
Manual [working class]	3M. Manual skilled	Butcher, bus driver, electrician, miner
	4. Semi-skilled	Bar worker, postal worker, packer
	5. Unskilled	Labourer, office cleaner, window cleaner

idea that skill groups can be placed in some sort of *rank order*.

The scale explicitly ranked different class groups *hierarchically* on the basis of 'their standing within the community' – in other words, a *judgement* was made about the relative *status* of each group (class 1 being occupations with the highest social status). In addition, the scale explicitly divided the class structure into two groups:

- **middle-class** occupations involved non-manual work
- **working-class** occupations involved manual work.

Weeding the path

When assessing this type of scale we need to remember that, at the time of its original development, British society was *qualitatively* different from our contemporary experience. Concepts of class, for example, were more rigidly embedded at the start of the twentieth century and ranking different occupations in terms of their manual/non-manual components was considered more plausible than perhaps it is now (due to the way the occupational structure has changed – something we discuss in more detail in relation to the changing class structure). This type of classification, however, does have some distinct advantages:

- **Simplicity**: The scale was relatively easy to understand and, more importantly perhaps, apply. It also reflected a 'common-sense view' of social class based on occupational status differences.
- **Comparison**: As a widely used scale it was possible to compare both occupational changes over time and changes in class-related life chances (in areas such as health and family life).

Despite the fact this scale was used extensively for many years in official studies, it had a significant range of weaknesses that led, eventually, to its replacement.

Categorisation: For individuals to be classified they required, by definition, an occupation, and this effectively excluded parts of the population, including the:

- **wealthy** who live off investments rather than income
- **unemployed/never employed,** such as

those excluded because of age (the very young and the elderly) and disability

- **non-employed** (in the sense of paid work): This excluded, at different times, substantial numbers (mainly women) who worked within the home and who were dependent on their partner's income.

To bring categories like 'unemployed' into the general occupational scheme a range of assumptions was built into the model – the retired, for example, were classified on the basis of their 'final occupation' and 'dependent partners' were classified on the basis of their *partner's* occupation. This assumption may have been reasonable at a time when only one partner was usually in paid employment (and reflected the idea that everyone in a household shared the same general class), but, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the increasing number of:

Dual-earner families led to a marked decrease in the validity of the scale.

Subjectivity: Although the scale had a certain logic (splitting occupations into manual/non-manual categories), two problems are apparent. First, assigning specific occupations to a class owed more to the *subjective judgements* of civil servants. Second, as **Rose et al.** (2005) argued: 'The manual/non-manual divide is simply not a meaningful distinction given the nature of work and occupations in 21st-century market economies.'

Intra-occupational status: The simplicity of the scale was a weakness because it failed to take account of status differences *within* occupations – a probationary teacher, for example, was classified as having the same general class status as a fully qualified teacher. In addition, although income is an important dimension of individual life chances, the same occupational group could include people with widely differing incomes (accountants and the clergy, for example).

Partly as a response to internal criticisms and partly as a response to the changing nature of work, occupations and the class structure generally, a new scale (the **National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification**) was developed for use in the 2001 census. It was based on the work done by sociologist John **Goldthorpe** (see below) and represented the culmination of a radical reappraisal of the purpose and use of official statistical class scales.

We can note, in passing, that two different types of 'occupational scale' were originally developed to replace the Registrar General scale. In 1990 the **Standard Occupational Classification** (SOC) was introduced as a way of reclassifying occupations on the basis of both their *skill* element and the *educational qualifications* they generally entailed. The **SOC** underwent a number of revisions over a 10-year period.

Although interesting for the way it classifies different broad occupational groups, this was intended to be a *nominal* scale (occupations were not meant to be ranked hierarchically), and is used by government departments for research involving the need for an extensive occupational classification (the nine major categories are subdivided to cover the majority of UK occupations).

The most recent official occupational class scale is the **National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification** (NS-SEC) which has three versions (8, 5 and 3 classes respectively), something that makes it:

Collapsible – although the eight-class version is a *nominal* scale, it can be 'collapsed'

Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)	
1990	**2000**
1. Managers/Administrators 2. Professional 3. Associate professional/technical 4. Clerical and secretarial 5. Craft and related 6. Personal and protective services 7. Sales 8. Plant and machine operative 9. Other	1. Managers and senior officials 2. Professional 3. Associate professional and technical 4. Administrative and secretarial 5. Skilled trades 6. Personal service 7. Sales and customer service 8. Process, plant and machine operatives 9. Elementary

into a three-class scale that, according to **Rose et al.**, 'has a hierarchical element'.

Weeding the path

A major difference between the **NS-SEC** and traditional forms of government class/occupational measurement scale is its:

Relational basis: As **Rose et al.** (2005) note, it's designed to measure 'employment relationships' and reflects a **Weberian** approach to classification by combining two ideas:

- **Labour market situation** includes assessments, for each occupational group, of income levels, relative levels of work security and promotion/career development prospects, and is linked to:
- **Work situations** that involve ideas about different levels of power, authority and control within the workplace (the extent

NS-SEC classes and collapses (source: Rose et al., 2005)		
8 classes	**5 classes**	**3 classes**
1. Large employers, higher managerial and higher professional 2. Lower managerial and professional 3. Intermediate 4. Small employers/self-employed 5. Lower supervisory and technical 6. Semi-routine 7. Routine 8. Never worked and long-term unemployed	1. Managerial and professional 2. Intermediate 3. Small employers/self-employed 4. Lower supervisory and technical 5. Semi-routine and routine	1. Managerial and professional 2. Intermediate 3. Routine and manual

to which workers in each occupational category are autonomous, for example).

The scale also reflects contemporary workplace relationships with regard to how work is contractually regulated in terms of:

- **Service relationships**: *Typical* of class 1, an employee provides a service for an employer and, in return, receives a range of short-term (salary) and long-term benefits (promotion opportunities, for example).
- **Labour contracts**: *Typical* of classes 5–7, the employee receives a wage in return for completing a certain amount of work or by working a certain number of hours.
- **Intermediate** contracts involve employment regulation that combines both of the above and is *typical* of relationships in class 3.

Problems

This scale, while avoiding some of the problems of previous occupational scales and reflecting the various ways work and occupational structure have developed in recent times, is not without its problems:

Class structure: The underlying logic of the scale is a familiar one, in that it reflects the distinction between:

- **employers** – those who buy the labour power of others
- **employees** – those who sell their ability to work
- **self-employed** – those who sit 'between' these two groups.

However, the former exist only within the scale 'by implication', in the sense that the very wealthy, who do not have a conventional occupation, are excluded. This highlights a further problem in terms of the 'never worked' category – presumably representing a residual, *underclass* category, that groups a range of people who may have little in common, such as those who:

- have no intention of working
- cannot work (the long-term sick)
- want to work but cannot find employment.

As with all occupational scales there are a number of generic problems:

Paid employment: Because occupation is defined in terms of paid employment, a 'class' of unpaid workers (domestic labourers, for example) is excluded.

Intra-occupational differences are not adequately theorised. This relates not only to the type of problem we identified in relation to the *Registrar General* scale, but also to the status of:

Service workers: Changes in the organisation of work (and the effects of globalised competition) means some service workers (such as management consultants) can be characterised as 'short-term, self-employed, contract workers', but their pay and conditions are very different from those of, for example, service workers in the catering industry. This idea reflects a:

Class boundary problem, both in terms of thinking about where one class ends and another begins and, more importantly perhaps, the idea that social classes cannot be neatly encapsulated in occupational scales.

Digging deeper: Occupation and social class

Official class categorisations, although useful, are not the only way class can be measured

Erikson–Goldthorpe Class Scheme (1992)		
Service class	1. Service class (higher grade) 2. Service class (lower grade) 3. Routine non-manual	Company director, senior manager Manager small business, supervisor Clerical, sales
Intermediate class	4. Small proprietor/self-employed 5. Lower technician/supervisor 6. Skilled manual 7. Semi-unskilled manual	Small farmers, electrician, plumber Lower-level supervisor Electrician, butcher Farm labourer

and we can identify a number of occupational class scales, beginning with the:

Goldthorpe Schema: Although this has undergone a number of developments over the years, beginning with the **Hope-Goldthorpe** scale for the **Oxford Mobility Study** (1972), the most widely used variant is the **Erikson–Goldthorpe** Class Scheme (1992).

Weeding the path

The scale has a number of versions (12, 9, 7, 5 and 3 classes, for example) and takes a **Weberian** *relational* approach to understanding class through occupation by including both work and market situations in its assignment of class positions.

Market situation takes into account ideas about:

- **self-employment/employment** – an important distinction in terms of skilled manual occupations, such as electrician and plumber
- **income** levels from different occupations
- **promotion prospects** and **career progression** – the higher up the scale, the greater the likelihood of promotions, increased levels of income and work benefits ('perks' such as share options).

Work situation refers to power and status in both the workplace and society – the higher up the scale, the greater levels of *personal autonomy* (freedom of action and decision-making) and power over the working lives of others.

A further interesting feature is the development of a:

Dual-structure model, involving a distinction between a *service* and an *intermediate* class, reflecting the changing nature of the organisation of work in contemporary Western societies. Some versions of the **Erikson–Goldthorpe** scale include a third class (*working*) to characterise classes 6 and 7.

Status: The scale recognises the significance of different types of workplace/occupational status:

- **Cross-category**: Self-employed skilled manual workers, for example, generally have a higher social status than those who are not self-employed.

Wright and Perrone's class schema (1977)				
	Class position criteria			
Class	Own means of production	Buy labour of others	Control of others	Sell own labour
Capitalist	✓	✓	✓	✘
Higher middle class	✘	✘	✓	✓
Self-employed/small proprietors	✓	✘	✘	✘
Labour	✘	✘	✘	✓

Source: Adapted from **Persell** (2000): www.nyu.edu/classes/persell/Table93.html

- **Supervisory**: Occupations with supervisory functions (however minor) are qualitatively different to those that do not have this element of power and control.

Some potential weaknesses in this occupational schema involve:

- **Terminology**: Despite the use of terms like 'service' and 'intermediate' classes, the schema still reflects a 'traditional' model of class – a basic 'middle/working class' split by another name. In addition, potentially significant class groupings (the very wealthy or the unemployed) are excluded.
- **Situations**: Although the 'work/market situation' basis of the scheme reflects important class/occupational differences, some groupings reflect a 'manual/non-manual' split (such as the placing of 'routine non-manual' in the service class) that is difficult to justify if the scale is used hierarchically. In addition, the status of 'routine clerical work' has declined significantly in recent times, with the stripping away of any supervisory functions it may once have had.
- **Gender**: This type of occupational scale does not accurately reflect the lives and experiences of women (who are either ignored or lumped together under their (male) partner's occupational class). **Goldthorpe** has argued, however, that in dual-worker families, women by and large adopt the class identity of their male partner.

Alternative

An alternative class scale, constructed from a *neo-Marxist* perspective, is provided by **Wright** and **Perrone** (1977), in terms of a basic *four-class model* which is constructed around the concept of:

Social relations to production: Individual positions in the class structure are based on things like ownership and control of the means of production, and the most important variable is represented by the social relationships that surround the

production process (the major class groupings – whether you buy, control or sell labour, for example), with occupation being a relatively subsidiary category.

Weeding the path

Although **Wright** later added a further set of criteria to the schema (to include ideas like *decision-making* and level of *authority* over others), these represent refinements to the basic model rather than substantive changes. This model suggests a different way to measure social class, one that establishes a general set of *class relationships and processes* around which a range of occupations can be slotted.

This basic idea, albeit developed from a theoretically different position, is reflected in the work of **Hutton** (1996), an economist who uses the concept of:

Dual labour markets to develop an occupational schema, based around occupational changes in contemporary economies, reflected in the development of two distinct sectors:

- A **primary** or **core** sector consisting of full-time, well-paid employees with high levels of job security and job status.
- A **secondary** or **peripheral** sector consisting of part-time/casual employees, with low pay, little or no job security and low job status.

Young (2000) characterises the above in terms of a 'shift from *Fordism* to *Post-Fordism* . . . where the primary labour market of secure employment and "safe" careers shrinks, the secondary labour market of short-term contracts, flexibility and insecurity increases as does the growth of an underclass of the structurally unemployed'. **Hutton** argues that all modern economies (partly under the influence of *globalisation*) are *converging* around what he terms a '**40–30–30**' occupational model.

In the UK, as **Young** (2000) argues, post-Fordism crystallised in the 1980s around the *New Right* (Thatcherite) government policies that helped create what **Hutton** argued were 'deep, long-lasting and profound changes' in the economic and class structure. These policies involved, for example, legal changes to:

- **employment** that made it easier for employers to dismiss workers. Levels of unemployment also rose significantly in the early 1980s
- **workplace organisation and representation** that made it difficult for trade unions to organise employees and take effective industrial action. Legal limits were placed on actions that could be taken against an employer, secret ballots for strikes were introduced, individuals were given the right to sue unions – backed up with massive fines for 'illegal' industrial action
- **taxation** that reduced the top rate of income tax to 40%.

✲ SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: Hutton's argument had a significant input into the development of Labour Party thinking in the mid-1990s, especially in terms of ideas about social inclusion and exclusion.

The 40–30–30 Society: Hutton (1995)	
Top 40%	**The Advantaged:** Full-time/self-employed – held their job for two years Part-time workers – held their job for five years Strong/effective unions/professional associations Range of work-related benefits Mainly male workers
Intermediate 30%	**The Newly Insecure:** Part-time/casual workers Declining employment protection/few benefits Large numbers of female workers Self-employed (especially manual workers) Fixed-term contract workers
Bottom 30%	**The Disadvantaged** Unemployed (especially long-term) Families caught in poverty trap (e.g. single parents) Zero-hours contract workers People on government employment schemes Casual part-time workers

Weeding the path

Hutton's slightly unconventional method of measuring class is interesting for the way it attempts to relate class to:

Occupational security rather than status. The schema does, implicitly, have a *hierarchical element* (the *Advantaged* are, for example, better placed than the *Disadvantaged*) but this is seen in *relational* rather than *absolute* terms. The schema reflects a broadly *Weberian* approach by empirically identifying individual market and work situations to describe the class structure of modern Britain – although this is limited because of its relatively simple, descriptive, format.

The schema has some clear advantages in that it is:

- **Not occupation-specific**: This avoids some (if not all) of the problems associated with trying to locate specific occupations on a class scale.
- **Multidimensional**: It incorporates inequalities based around *age*, *gender* and *ethnicity* in a way that many other scales do not. It recognises, for example, that the young and elderly, women and ethnic minorities are more likely to be found in the *secondary labour market*.

The schema does, however, have some limitations we should note:

- **Breadth**: The three groupings are too broad in their scope – each contains a wide range of people who may have little, if anything, in common. The 'Advantaged', for example, could include everyone from the super-rich (people like Richard Branson or Roman Abramovich)

to relatively minor civil servants, teachers and the like.

- **Ownership**: The scale doesn't really address issues of ownership, power and so forth, mainly because it focuses on *individual market situations*.

The potting shed

What, if anything, does Phillip Green (current wealth: £5 billion) have in common with someone like your teacher?

Status: It's debatable whether the schema measures *class*, as opposed to *market*, status. The latter is a significant aspect of class, but **Hutton** presents it as the *only* aspect of any importance. However, it could be argued that **Hutton's** schema represents a different way of looking at class relationships in contemporary societies.

Individuals: The focus on individual occupational positions tells us little about class positions based around family groups. Someone in part-time/casual employment with a partner in secure, full-time employment is considered to be 'disadvantaged' – yet this may not be the case. Given a significant proportion of the workforce consists of married/cohabiting partners, this should be an important consideration.

Moving on

In this section we've looked at examples of how governments and sociologists have tried to define and measure class in occupational terms, using a variety of class schema. In the next section, however, we can examine how changes in the class structure impact on both our understanding of class and, by extension, our ability to define and measure this concept.

3. Different explanations of changes in the class structure and the implications of these changes

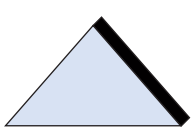
In the previous section we identified the different ways social class has been operationalised in our society over the past 100 years – something that reflects the changing ways we think about class and how it can be defined and measured. This section continues the theme of change, this time through an examination of how political, economic and cultural changes have contributed to changes in the class structure.

Preparing the ground: Explaining change

We can begin by thinking about how we can both identify and understand the implications of change:

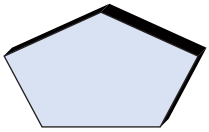
WARM-UP: REPRESENTING CLASS STRUCTURES

These graphics are different visual representations of the class structure (if none represents your idea of class, create your own representation). In small groups decide:



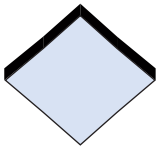
Upper / middle / working class

Class no longer significant



Small upper class with expanded middle class

1 Which, if any, in your opinion best represents the class structure in our society:
   - now
   - 100 years ago.
2 Your reasons for choosing a particular representation.
3 Possible explanations for change/continuity in the class structure over the past century.



Overclass, expanded middle class and underclass

Identification: When thinking about changes in the class structure over the past century we need to think about organisational changes within capitalism (the *dominant* mode of production in this period), on the basis that changes to the way work and the workplace are organised will produce adjustments – and possibly wholesale changes – in the nature of the class structure. In this respect we can identify the following broad changes to the way goods and services have been produced:

- **Industrial society**: For the first part of the twentieth century in England, manufacturing industry was the dominant form of employment in terms of numbers. This period saw the development of *mass production* techniques (*Fordism*), automation (machines controlling machines) and, in the latter part of the century, *post-Fordist* forms of industrial organisation based around computer technology.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: The discussion of modernity and postmodernity includes an explanation of concepts like Fordism, post-Fordism and global Fordism in the context of globalisation.

- **Post-industrial society**: Although *service industries* were significant in employment terms in the early twentieth century, the latter part of the century saw a marked increase in this type of work, especially in areas like financial services (banking and insurance) and, of course, information technology. **Hicks** and **Allen** (1999) summarise these general changes when they note: 'The most significant occupational changes have gone hand in hand with a decline in traditional industries and growth in new areas, especially services.' The **Office for National Statistics** (2002) puts figures to this change: financial and business

services now account for 20% of UK employment, compared with 10% in 1981 – 'This sector saw the largest increase in jobs between 1981 and 2001, part of the post-war growth in the service industries and the decline in manufacturing.'

Manufacturing and service employment: percentages

	1911	2004
Manufacturing	55	11
Services	35	75

Source: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (2005)

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: This chapter provides an extended analysis of the concept of post-industrial society.

- **Knowledge society**: A late-twentieth-century development, closely related to both the decline of manufacturing and the rise of service occupations. The **Economic and Social Research Council** (2005) characterises this type of society in the following terms: 'In today's global, information-driven society, economic success is increasingly based upon … intangible assets such as knowledge, skills and innovative potential … The term "knowledge economy" … describes this emerging economic structure and represents the marked departure … from [the economic structure] of the twentieth century industrial era.'

Trends

Implications: The above ideas convey a *broad picture* of the type of occupational changes in our society over the past century and, as such, provide a basis for thinking about two ideas, namely how the class structure of our society has evolved and the implications of these changes over this period (as **Nyíri** (2002), for example, argues, the '… transition from industrial to knowledge-based societies is characterised by major changes in working conditions and labour-market requirements'). We can start by noting some general trends at each level of the class structure.

- **Upper levels**: There has been a general decline in numbers at this level, partly because of greater ownership diversity through wider share holding (that is, whereas in the past shareholding was concentrated in the upper levels, it is increasingly a feature of the middle levels). However, this group has become increasingly influential on a global level.
- **Middle levels**: One feature of a service/knowledge economy is the expansion of middle-ranking occupations (managerial, technical and intellectual). While there has been an increase in higher-level (well-paid, high-status) service work associated with activity in the 'knowledge economy', there has also been an expansion of routine service work (call centres, McDonald's and the like) that is little different to the routine types of manual work this has replaced. Thus, while some see middle-class expansion as a fundamental change in the class structure, others see it as a simple redefinition of existing class relationships (what were once working-class

The decline of UK mining

1920 – 1,250,000 miners
1998 – 9000 miners
Source: Hicks and Allen (1999)

occupations have been redefined as middle class).

- **Lower levels**: The decline in manufacturing has led to a general contraction at this level, although there are debates in two main areas: whether routine service jobs are part of a 'new working class' or 'old middle class' and the existence or otherwise of an underclass.

In this respect, therefore, we need to consider not only the *nature* of the changes to the class structure of modern Britain, but also the *meaning* of such changes.

Digging deeper: Explaining change

We can look more closely at explanations for change at each of the levels we've just noted.

Upper levels

We can pinpoint two key changes here:

- **Ownership** and **control**: From a *pluralist* perspective a major change has been a blurring of ownership and control, partly due to the rise of the:
- **Joint stock company** – a company owned by *shareholders* rather than single individuals. This, it can be argued, has spread the ownership net and effectively *fragmented* the upper levels because ownership extends across the class structure in two ways:
  - **Pension funds** that invest the pension payments of a wide variety of workers (both public and private sector)
  - **Middle-class** managers and professionals increasingly own part of the company for which they work.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Mass media: Debates over the relationship between ownership and control are discussed in greater depth in relation to the media.

On a day-to-day level, control of businesses is increasingly in the hands of managers rather than owners, the argument here being that the 'upper class' is effectively disappearing from the class structure, to be replaced by a *managerial elite* who, however well remunerated, remain employees rather than employers – an idea we can examine in terms of key changes like the:

Managerial revolution, a *pluralist* concept developed by **Burnham** (1941), who located the 'rise of managerial control' in the idea that, in a competitive world, the consumer exercises a huge (collective) influence over organisational behaviour – if prospective buyers don't like what's on offer then an organisation must either reassess its business strategy to become more responsive to

consumer demands or risk being driven out of business by other companies. **Burnham** argued that 'modern capitalism' was a *cooperative process* – managers were indispensable to modern corporations, whereas 'individual owners' were not (a corporation could function effectively without 'identifiable owners', but not without a wide range of managerial expertise, from the highest levels of decision-making to the lowest supervisory levels). On a more contemporary note, **Galbraith's** (1967) concept of:

Technostructure developed these ideas by arguing that modern corporations develop a 'technocratic structure' whereby effective control is in the hands of a managerial/scientific/technological elite, ultimately responsible to shareholders but, in effect, making all the important decisions about the running of a company. In the context of modern media corporations, for example, **Demers et al.** (2000) argue that, while 'corporate news organizations tend to be more profitable than entrepreneurial news organizations', they '. . . place less emphasis on profits and more on product quality and other non-profit goals' – a tendency that's sometimes called the development of *soulful corporations*.

Weeding the path

Davis and **McAdam** (2000) summarise the change to the class structure suggested by *managerialism* in terms of a change from a 'Marxian society-wide conflict of workers versus owners to a Weberian conflict of workers versus managers'.

Globalisation: The second key change relates to the organisation and behaviour of modern corporations – what **Davis** and **McAdam** term a 'new economic shift'; the gradual replacement of organisations based around mass production (and the type of class structure and composition this has traditionally entailed) with:

Network structures operating across national boundaries and maintaining a fluid organisational structure that makes them responsive to new technological developments. These organisations normally have shareholders, but rarely have individual owners. As **Davis** and **McAdam** put it: 'Owners are not wealthy individuals but financial institutions', such as banks and pension funds, and they argue that modern corporations are structured and behave less like 'traditional companies' and more like:

Social movements – loose conglomerations with multiple internal and external structures, rather than a relatively simple internal hierarchical structure – a complex idea that an example should clarify. **Nike** is a global company that designs and markets footwear, but it owns no production facilities; rather, it contracts out the production of footwear across the world to smaller companies. In this way **Nike** both 'buys its own products' cheaply (by manufacturing in countries such as China and India, where labour costs are low) and encourages competition *between* producers by being able to source products from different countries – if companies in India can't manufacture the footwear cheaply enough Nike can switch production to a cheaper country/supplier.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: The characteristics of social movements are discussed in more detail in this chapter.

Increasingly, therefore, major global corporations own:

Intellectual property rights – the design of a trainer or computer software. **Sabel** (1991) refers to such organisations as belonging to:

Unbounded networks: Unlike traditional, national organisations, global corporations are neither bound by national borders nor constrained by traditional forms of manufacturing. *Unbounded networks* take a number of forms:

- **Global Fordism**: Instead of mass production taking place in a single space, the manufacturing process can be distributed across the world – a factory in Germany makes one thing, a factory in Peru another and the final product is assembled in France for export to the USA.
- **Flexible specialisation** reflects the type of process adopted by companies like **Nike** – sourcing completed products from wherever is cheapest.
- **Modular consortiums**: **Volkswagen's** assembly plant in Brazil was the first to be run entirely by *multinational subcontractors*. Cars marketed and sold by Volkswagen are produced by 20+ transnational companies in a single assembly plant.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: A further example, discussed in relation to postmodernity, is the idea of agile corporations.

These ideas have a number of possible consequences for our understanding of class structures in late/postmodern society:

Transnational class structures: Super-rich company directors, for example, are technically employees and hence part of the traditionally defined *middle class*. However, they occupy an ambivalent class position in the sense that they function as owners (and usually own shares in the company for which they work), but, in occupational terms, are members of an (elite) middle class.

Fragmentation: At the upper levels of the class structure there are considerable differences between people who, nominally at least, are in a similar class position. There is also, in terms of global forms of capitalism, a blurring of the boundaries between owners and controllers.

Middle levels

One of the most striking changes in the class structure over the past century has been the relative growth of the middle classes at the expense of both the working and upper classes, although, as we've seen, how we define and interpret 'middle class' is significant – something that suggests the:

Fragmentation of middle class *identities*: **Draper** (1978) compared the 'new middle class' to a 'dish of herring and strawberries', by which he meant the various groups occupying this class position had very little cohesion or things in common – and it's not too difficult to see why. At one extreme, perhaps, we have the kind of 'super-rich elite middle class' we've just described and, at the other, a whole range of low-level, routine occupational positions that, although defined as middle class, are difficult to distinguish from their working-class counterparts in terms of things like *income*, *status* and general *life chances*. It may be possible to find a dividing line in terms of attitudes, values and *lifestyles* (in the way

Goldthorpe and **Lockwood et al.** (1968) found lines of demarcation between the *affluent working classes* and the lower middle classes in 1960s Britain), but even this source of difference is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain in twenty-first-century Britain.

Weeding the path

Although the idea of a fragmentation appears to usefully describe contemporary class structures, the concept has two major problems:

- **Lifestyle structures**: If, for example, 'the middle class' in late/postmodern society is defined by a wide variety of lifestyles, it calls into question two things: first, the idea of classifying them as 'middle class' (rather than class categories in their own right), and second, the basis for operationalising the concept of class – if 'lifestyle differences' classify people, we could delineate hundreds – if not thousands – of different 'lifestyles' (the ultimate logic here being that since everyone lives their own unique lifestyle, everyone is their own class).
- **Class is dead**: If lifestyles are so different and unique, the concept of a 'class' – a group who share certain economic, political and cultural characteristics – no longer has any significance (as writers like **Pakulski** and **Waters** (1996) argue). There are two general problems here. First, using different criteria to classify people (such as lifestyle over occupation/income) still involves *classifying* people. Second, it may be possible to identify broad 'lifestyle groupings' and shape them into *classes*; this follows because lifestyles are responsive to things like occupation and income – I can't, for example, adopt a similar 'celebrity lifestyle' to **David Beckham** because I don't have his income to support that lifestyle – the best I could do is *simulate* such a lifestyle, but that's hardly the same as *living* that lifestyle.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Mass media: This links into **Baudrillard's** (1998) concept of ***simulacra*** – 'representations that refer to other representations'.

Debates about the significance (and implications) of *class fragmentation* are important, but possibly *overstated*. While we may have to change our thinking about classes (crude upper/middle/lower distinctions may no longer be much use) it doesn't necessarily follow that there are no differences between, say, middle-class and lower-class lifestyles, especially when we think in terms of something like:

Resource control as an indicator of class. Class position is not simply a question of how you choose (or are forced through lack of choice) to live; rather, it reflects the different economic, political and cultural resources different groups are able to command.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Education: Vincent et al. (2000) have noted how middle-class parents bring higher levels of capital – 'material (goods and finances), social (networks and relationships) and cultural (knowledge and skills)' – to bear on their children's schooling than their lower-class counterparts.

Two related concepts impact on our understanding of changes in the middle/lower-class structure:

Proletarianisation involves the idea that many 'middle-class occupations' are no longer easily distinguishable from 'working-class occupations' in terms of pay and working conditions. One aspect of this, as **Whitehead** (1997) notes, is that the 'job security' that was once a feature of middle-class occupational life 'has now virtually disappeared, if not forever, then certainly for immediate future generations'. Associated with this process is:

Deskilling: On a basic level, deskilling relates to skills being lost, for whatever reason (such as lack of practice or use). For our purpose, however, it suggests certain skills (such as those possessed by craftspeople) lose their economic value when the work to which they once applied can be performed more easily and cheaply by machines.

Example

An extreme but illustrative example is car manufacture; where once it involved numerous skilled craftspeople, the automation of factories has *deskilled* such workers by replacing them with robots.

From a Marxist perspective, **Braverman** (1974) argued that the introduction of new technology into the workplace has been felt in two main ways:

- **Inter-class boundaries**: The occupational distinction between manual and non-manual progressively breaks down for two reasons. First, the industrial skills that distinguished the upper working class are made redundant by technology. Second, various forms of middle-class work (clerical, financial and the like) are also deskilled through computer technology. Typing, for example, was once a valuable skill now largely deskilled through the development of word processors.
- **Intra-class boundaries**: Within the working class, deskilling takes away the thing (skill) that separates the relatively highly paid, affluent worker from their low- and no-skill counterparts.

The potting shed

The human input into making cars has been largely replaced by machines. Identify and briefly explain two other examples of deskilling in our society.

Weeding the path

Neville (1998) is critical of this interpretation when he argues that 'class struggle is both out of date and, in many cases, merely fictional, an ideology to be learnt off by heart but not a picture of reality' – mainly because, he maintains, 'the traditional proletariat . . . is almost dead or

more properly solely male … except on British TV soaps such as *EastEnders*'.

Lower levels

For **Braverman,** *deskilling* produces an *expansion* of the working class as routine white-collar workers are *proletarianised* and distinctions *within* the working class break down. Other writers, however, have interpreted economic/technological change in a different way to emphasise a process of:

Embourgeoisement – a concept introduced by **Zweig** (1961) to represent the idea that the class structure was becoming *increasingly middle class* as the working classes took on similar income, status and lifestyle characteristics – a picture successfully demolished by **Goldthorpe et al.** (1968) with their 'Affluent Worker' research. They did, however, suggest that a 'new form of working class' was emerging, one where affluent, home-centred (*privatised*) workers displayed different lifestyles to their less affluent, working-class peers.

✲ SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: Embourgeoisement has been used (with limited success) to explain some forms of class-based voting behaviour.

More recently this general concept has been revived in a different and more sophisticated form, focused around:

Reskilling: Service and knowledge economies need workers with different skill sets – hence the idea of reskilling; the sons and daughters of manual workers who at one time, would have similarly gone into manual work can no longer do so. Instead, they enter the service economy at a variety of points – most at the low level of physical services (shop workers, for example), others in the higher level of knowledge services.

This interpretation suggests a massive contraction in the working class and a massive expansion of the middle class that, as **Hauknes** (1996) notes, involves '… a shift towards higher skilled white collar employment in most industries, away from low and unskilled blue collar employment. This is accompanied by an increase in flexible, service-like production methods in several manufacturing industries, the evolution of "post-Fordist" production'.

Finally, we can note a further example of possible change in the class structure at its lower levels involving the idea of an:

Underclass – a group who are, at best, the very bottom of the class structure and, at worst, entirely outside it.

✲ SYNOPTIC LINK

Wealth, poverty and welfare/education/ stratification and differentiation: The concept of an underclass – usually associated with New Right perspectives – is a theme running through these areas of the Specification. In terms of welfare, for example, we can note ideas about dependency cultures and social exclusion.

Preparing the ground: Implications of changes

In the final part of this section we can consider the implications of changes in the class structure in two ways:

Structural change perspectives focus on understanding and explaining 'how and why' the class structure has changed and the

Discussion point: Representing class structures

At the start of this section we asked you to think about representations of class; based on this work:

1 Has your opinion about the shape of the class structure in our society changed (and, if so, in what way)?

2 Thinking again about the idea of change/continuity in the class structure over the past century, has the class structure changed (and, if so, rank the reasons for any change in order of their importance)?

significance or otherwise of such changes. If the middle class, for example, is expanding, we need to understand what this means in terms of both class positions and *processes* (how the members of different classes relate to one another).

The death of class

For writers like **Waters** (1997), the question of class structure changes has become, in the early twenty-first century, a relatively unimportant issue because class as a unit of social analysis is largely rejected. The 'implications for change' here are that class has lost whatever meaning it once had and this makes arguments over 'how and why' it has changed largely redundant.

If we assume, for the sake of argument, that social class still has some meaning and significance to people (as opinion polls continue to show – **ICM** (1998), for example, found a 98% class identification), one major change over the past century has been what **Mortimore** and **Robinson** (2003) pinpoint as the 'loss of a rigidly-structured class basis to British society'. In other words, one general implication we can draw is that class divisions have:

Weakened – in the respect that an *overt* sense of class structure and position is no longer as strong as it once was. This is not to say, however, that class and class relationships have necessarily ceased being significant – a weakening of overt class differences isn't the same as saying class, per se, has lost its influence on both individual and cultural relationships. What has changed, as **Mortimore** and **Robinson** suggest, is that 'the old sense of a structured class system – in which there was a definite right or wrong answer to which class you belonged to – has disappeared'.

Erosion

Ainley (2004) suggests that not only has the '. . . previously clear-cut distinction between the non-manual middle class and the manual working class been eroded', but occupational changes have resulted in a '. . . much more fluid social situation that has eroded the old clearly differentiated "upper", "middle" and "working" classes'. This idea has implications for our understanding of a changing class structure – on a theoretical level, for example, we encounter problems of:

Boundary-marking: The question of where one class ends and another begins has always been a problem for sociologists. Traditionally, a manual/non-manual distinction has been used with some success, but even in a society with relatively clear distinctions between these two types of work, some forms of *boundary-blurring* still existed (as reflected in something like the Registrar General's class scale where class 3 – skilled manual and routine non-manual –

was categorised as both 'separate' and occupying the same general class position). In contemporary societies, as we've suggested, this simple distinction can no longer be supported.

More generally, class structure changes have involved:

Realignments that run in three possible directions:

- **Convergence**, whereby the class structure is gradually 'flattening' (the vast majority of people in our society fill the 'middle-class' band).
- **Polarisation**, whereby, the class structure is increasingly 'stretched' between two extremes: those fully included in the normal, day-to-day functioning of the society in which they live and those who are fully excluded from such participation.
- **Polarised convergence** whereby, although there is a general class *convergence*, *polarisation* is in evidence 'at the edges'; there are, in other words, 'spikes' at either extreme of the class structure – with the super-rich at one end and the underclass at the other. **Ainley** (2004) expresses this idea when he notes that partly as a result of new technology, 'a new respectable "middle-working class" is no longer divided in employment between mental and manual labour but now finds itself insecurely between the super-rich of large employers and their direct agents (a so-called "service class") above and a "socially excluded", unemployed, or "unemployable", so-called "underclass" beneath'.

Digging deeper: Implications of change

We can explore a couple of the themes we touched on earlier in terms of two basic positions relating to changes in the class structure.

Modernism: Although there is a broad agreement among what we might term modernist sociologists that the class structure has undergone a range of changes over the past century, there are differences of interpretation as to the extent and significance of such change.

Persistence: For neo-Marxists such as **Poulantzas** (1974) or **Wright and Perrone** (1977), the question is not so much whether these changes have rendered class a redundant concept, as how to theorise the growth of the 'middle classes' in late capitalism. The problem, therefore, is how to both account for and theorise class structure changes.

Postmodernism

For non-Marxists, class structure changes are significant in terms of the way class has generally:

Declined in significance in terms of how it impacts on people's lives and behaviour. In this respect, the study of class and class relationships has shifted from attempts to understand the significance of class in *objective* terms (how class position impacts on life chances) to thinking about class as a:

Subjective concept – in the sense of focusing on how people perceive class both individually and culturally.

Postmodernism, however, involves two broad positions relating to class:

Class is dead: The relevance of class as either an explanatory concept for sociologists or to people generally in terms of

their attitudes and behaviours is questioned in a couple of forms:

- **The end of history**: **Fukuyama** (1989) argues that 'class analysis' has lost whatever meaning it may once have had because 'class contradictions and struggles' no longer exist (**Marx** argued that 'all history is the history of class struggle' – hence **Fukuyama's** ironic reference). The failure of alternative political ideologies (such as communism) to effectively challenge the political hegemony of social democracy has, in this view, put an end to class struggles and, thus, to class forms of analysis.
- **Identities**: This position, while not proclaiming the death of class, as such, removes it from its privileged position in much sociological analysis by, at best, relegating it to the position of 'one more source of identity' in postmodern society (competing for attention with concepts like culture, age, gender and sexuality).

For both these positions the 'decline of class analysis' is not synonymous with social equality; inequalities still exist in contemporary societies, but how we think about them has changed – it is no longer possible to talk about social inequality in any meaningful way at a general 'group level'. This follows because class is shot through with different meanings and interpretations that make it, for postmodernists, an interesting but largely irrelevant concept.

Weeding the path

Parenti (1997) has been critical of the above position, something he labels:

'ABC' theory: He argues that some versions of postmodernism 'avoid the concept of class' by simply *relabelling* 'class processes'. As he puts it: 'They'll tell you that culture is important, group identity politics is important, personal psychology is important – *Anything But Class*'.

Hendricks and **Vale** (2004) develop this idea by arguing that class is still a significant concept, albeit one that raises important questions in contemporary societies, such as how to incorporate the idea of *lifestyle pluralities* (the multitude of lifestyle choices people are able to make) and *identity politics* – the idea that other forms of identity are important – into the overall concept of class.

Identity

This reflects a second postmodernist position on class, that of:

Identities: Postmodernists who see class as having a significant part to play in identity politics generally reject traditional ways of defining class in terms of it being:

Centred: In other words, they argue it is impossible to anchor the concept on a set of slowly evolving social *characteristics*, such as occupation, or *attributes*, such as income. Class, like any form of identity, is a fluid, ever-changing concept that, for the vast majority, reflects a:

Decentred lifestyle: In other words, the 'lack of rigidity' in the class structure observed by **Mortimore** and **Robinson** (2003) is a feature of postmodern society – there are no 'absolute structures' (such as those of class, gender, age, ethnicity or whatever). There are, however, constantly shifting sands of identity – of which perceptions of class are, at any given time, more or less important to people. Class and class structures, therefore, can't be conceived in *objective* terms; rather, class is an

inherently *subjective* concept that means different things to different people at different times and in different situations.

Savage et al. (2001) capture the flavour of this idea when they talk about the 'ambivalent nature of contemporary class identities' and suggest we 'should not assume that there is any necessary significance in how respondents define their class identity in surveys'. This follows, they argue, because people understand class in different ways; it's frequently seen less as an *attribute* and more as 'a marker by which people relate their life histories'. In other words, people in contemporary society have an awareness of the concept and terminologies associated with class that leads them to see it as a political concept loaded with cultural baggage; defining oneself in class terms, in this respect, is seen as a political statement most people are unwilling to make, for a variety of reasons.

Moving on

In this section we've noted a range of changes, both national and global, in the economic organisation of our society over the past century – changes that have prompted debates not just about the changing nature of class and class structures, but also about the continued utility of these concepts.

In the next section, therefore, we can develop these ideas and debates by relating them to the concepts of *life chances* and *life choices* as a way of assessing how class and class structures affect people's behaviour.

4. Differences in life chances by social class, gender, ethnicity and age

In previous sections we've drawn a careful distinction between social *inequality* (defined as differences in the distribution of social resources between individuals and groups) and social *stratification* (the idea that inequalities are built into the social and economic structure of different societies).

This distinction is important because how we theorise the relationship between inequality and stratification has significant implications for how we study and explain social behaviour. The question here, therefore, is deceptively simple: is social stratification a cause of inequality or is it merely a *statistical exercise* that 'represents difference' in the way that classifying people by eye colour or height 'reflects difference'?

One way to resolve this question is to examine the relationship between social stratification in modern societies – both *primary* (in the sense of social class) and *secondary* (in terms of categories like age, gender and ethnicity) – and social inequality, something we can do using the concepts of *life chances* and *life choices*.

Preparing the ground: Chances or choices

Life chances: At their most basic, life chances represent, according to **Dahrendorf** (1979), an individual's 'long-term prospects' in any society; that is, their *relative chances* of gaining the kinds of things a society considers *desirable* (such as a high standard of living) and avoiding those things a society

WARM-UP: PERSONAL AND CULTURAL VALUES

We can think about life chances by identifying some of the things our society considers both desirable and undesirable (and since, in some respects, individual value systems are important in this context, we can also identify the things you value and find undesirable).

Use the following table as a template for your ideas.

Society		You	
Desirable?	**Undesirable?**	**Desirable?**	**Undesirable?**
Money Loads of money	Ill health	?	?
Further examples?			

considers *undesirable* (such as going to prison).

For **Mills** (1951), *life chances* include 'everything from the chance to stay alive during the first year after birth to the chance to view fine art; the chance to remain healthy and if sick to get well again quickly; the chance to avoid becoming a juvenile delinquent; and very crucially, the chance to complete an intermediary or higher educational grade' – social inequalities he explicitly relates to social stratification when he argues: 'These are among the chances that are crucially influenced by one's position in the class structure of a modern society.'

Gershuny (2002) suggests that life chances is a wide-ranging concept we can use to relate stratification explicitly to inequality and to measure in an *empirically verifiable* way (such as through levels of income, health and life expectancy) the effects of this relationship. This concept, therefore, is generally favoured by sociologists who argue that stratification is both a causal factor in the relative distribution of life chances (those at the top of a stratification system generally possess more of the desirable things society has to offer and avoid the majority of the undesirable things) and something more than just a statistical description of inequality.

Choices

Life choices reflects a different take on the relationship between the two and is generally associated with sociologists who dispute the causal connection between the two. In this respect inequality is *not* the outcome of structural factors, but rather the result of the *choices* people make about their life. This concept, therefore, symbolises the dynamic range of choices that circulate around the general:

Lifestyles available in Western societies – ways of living and behaving that free people from traditional (or modernist) associations of class, gender, age and ethnicity.

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two different types of lifestyle in our society.

Weeding the path

Before we examine these positions further, we can note a couple of qualifying points:

- **Life chances**: Although this approach focuses on how social inequality is structured, life choices may still play a part in some areas of social behaviour. An obvious example here might be the *choices* we make relating to health, such as whether or not to smoke, that affect things like illness and longevity.
- **Life choices**: Although the emphasis is on understanding how and why people in contemporary societies make behavioural choices, in some circumstances, as **Gauntlett** (2002) argues, such choices may be constrained or limited. For example, an individual with a low level of income will have a lesser range of choices in relation to areas like education (those on low incomes will not be able to afford the fees charged by public schools, for example), housing and lifestyle.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Family: The idea of life choices can be applied to the way people are able to choose different forms of sexuality in our society.

Digging deeper: Choices or chances

Grusky (1996) suggests three general ways it's possible to theorise the concepts of life chances and choices:

- **Structuralism** focuses, as we've suggested, on life chances, based on the assumption that social categories like class are relatively coherent groupings based around things like:
  - **endowments** – such as the level of people's education
  - **working conditions**, involving assessments of *physical environment* (the actual condition of the workplace, for example) and *political environment* (such as levels of control over others and personal autonomy)
  - **reward packages**, relating not only to income but also to other work-related benefits.

From this position, life chances combine *market situation* (or class, in *Weberian* terms), *status* and *power* – ideas that can be fairly easily translated to life chances based on gender, age or ethnicity as well as class. In this respect, the structural aspect of social inequality relates to what **Grusky** terms:

Inequality space: That is, the idea that people with similar life chances can actually be *mapped* to similar positions ('spaces') in any stratification system. This position argues that stratification is a *causal factor* in inequality, since if inequality simply resulted from individual life choices it is unlikely that people with similar life chances would occupy the same general social space.

- **Culturalism**: Although related to structuralist positions, culturalist

perspectives add a further dimension by seeing stratified groups as not only sharing a similar structural location (in class terms, for example, upper, middle and working), but also a general set of cultural beliefs and assumptions. In other words, something like a middle class not only has things like similar levels of income, personal autonomy in the workplace and educational qualifications in common, they also share a similar:

World view, involving broadly similar attitudes, behaviours, values and norms. Class-specific *cultures* are, therefore, 'a defining feature of inequality systems'. In addition, the cultural dimension of stratification filters through to life chances in numerous ways – **Bourdieu's** (1986) concept of:

Cultural capital, for example, demonstrates a causal relationship between stratification and inequality in the sense that it provides a mechanism for explaining how each successive generation is advantaged or disadvantaged by their inherited cultural capital.

Postmodernity

Postmodernism, meanwhile, questions the supposedly static, coherent nature of social stratification; writers like **Pakulski** and **Waters** (1996) argue that both class and status groupings (and, by extension, stratification based around these concepts) are little more than convenient assumptions made by (modernist) sociologists to support their particular interpretation of the relationship between sociocultural structures and inequality. As we've noted, from this position a significant variable is:

Lifestyle, which **Harrison** and **Davies** (1998) define as 'patterns of actions that differentiate people', in the sense that 'lifestyles are sets of practices and attitudes that make sense in particular contexts'. Lifestyle, in this respect, reflects:

Identity choices in postmodern society, relating to 'how individuals wish to be, and be seen by others'. For **Gauntlett** (2002), our identity choices are made on the basis of broad:

Lifestyle templates that provide individuals with a set of *narrative guidelines* telling them what they have to do – and how they have to do it – to live out a particular lifestyle. These templates, although similar to the concept of role, differ in that the adoption of any given 'lifestyle template' does not force the individual into any specific forms of 'expected behaviours'. **Gauntlett** likens these templates to *film genres*: 'Whilst movie directors can choose to make a romance, or a western, or a horror story, we – as "directors" of our own life narratives – can choose a metropolitan or a rural lifestyle, a lifestyle focused on success in work, or one centred on clubbing, sport, romance, or sexual conquests.'

Lifestyles and identities are, in many respects, unique to the individuals who construct them and, consequently, defy easy classification. As **Harrison** and **Davies** argue, although lifestyles can be 'mapped onto conventional social categories of class, income, age, gender and ethnicity', they also 'transcend them'. Thus, while social inequalities exist (the resources I have at my disposal to play the role of 'film star', for example, are far fewer than someone like Brad Pitt), it doesn't mean I can't act out my interpretation of a 'film-star lifestyle'. While it is possible, as with film genres, to classify

people in terms of general lifestyle, these are the result of *life choices* rather than different life chances.

Weeding the path

We can summarise the difference between the two approaches to understanding inequality in terms of the idea that:

- **Life chances** operate at a structural level and determine individual experiences. An individual's position in a stratification system determines their life chances.
- **Life choices** operate at the individual level and determine structural experiences. Our individual life choices, therefore, determine our structural location in society.

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two differences in people's life chances from any two areas of the Specification.

In the remainder of this section we can explore in more depth ideas about life chances and life choices in relation to concepts of class, age, gender and ethnicity.

Preparing the ground: Social class

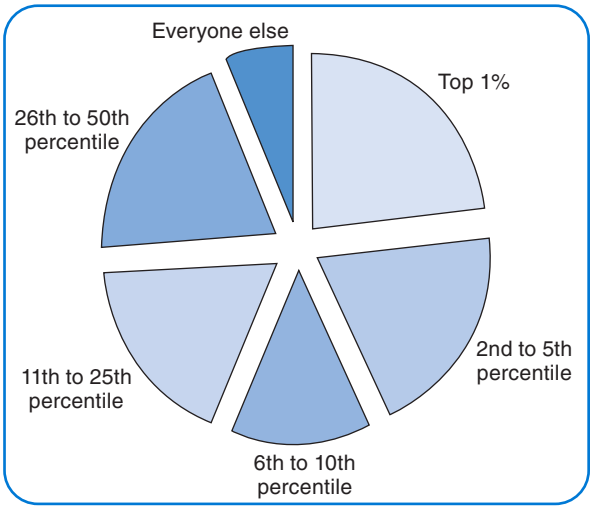
Inequalities relating to social class are many and varied in our society, but we can note some examples across a range of selected categories – see the table on the following page.

These examples show a clear relationship between class and a range of social inequalities. The main question, however, is whether this relationship is best explained in terms of life chances or life choices.

Digging deeper: Social class

Life chances: The explicit relationship between class and inequality (across just about every indicator) seems to be clear evidence of differential life chances. As **Savage** (2002) expresses it: 'Class – in terms of economic position – matters greatly for people's life chances. Measured by any material category – health, wealth, income, social mobility, morbidity, education – class represents a continuing and fundamental social division.' We can identify a number of reasons for this:

Wealth and income inequalities are obvious reasons for a class-based disparity in life chances, mainly because they impact on a range of social categories (from the ability to buy educational advantage, through private health care to buying protection against crime). Their importance is not



Distribution of wealth in the UK, 2002
Source: Economic and Social Research Council

Class inequality: Selected examples	
	The higher the class, the more likely you are to:
Family	Inherit substantial amounts of money Access significant social and financial networks
Health	Live longer Have lower levels of illness, child and infant mortality rates
Wealth and income	Own significant quantity of shares, savings and disposable income Have higher levels of pay/rising income
Welfare	Avoid living on state benefits Avoid poverty
Work	Have higher status/control over others Be employed/avoid unemployment
Crime	Avoid a criminal record Avoid victimisation
Politics	Have access to the powerful Participate in electoral processes
Education	Complete your schooling (less risk of exclusion) Leave school at 18 Achieve higher-level qualifications (GCSE, A level, degree)
Housing	Live in better-quality housing Have greater privacy

Source: National Statistics Online (2005)

simply restricted to economic life chances, however, since we can characterise them as being central pillars in:

Regimes of privilege: A high class position has ramifications across other areas, such as status and power. High status, for example, confers access to top-level social networks (the most powerful business people, high-ranking politicians, civil servants and so forth), and once connected to such networks, a range of power possibilities flow freely – ideas that link into the:

Cultural components of class privilege: These operate on a number of levels, but some examples we can note include:

Cultural capital: In the same way different classes have different access to financial resources (such as income and wealth), **Bourdieu** (1977) argues they have access to different cultural resources that include both *material resources* (various types of consumer goods) and *non-material resources* (such as higher education). As

Heath (2002) notes, cultural capital reflects the idea that class backgrounds confer certain advantages and disadvantages in terms of life chances.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Education: Numerous writers have used a version of cultural capital to explain educational differences between, for example, working-class and middle-class children. **Farkas** and **Beron** (2001) claim that linguistic and vocabulary differences confer educational disadvantages on lower-class children.

Weeding the path

Sullivan's (2001) testing of the concept of cultural capital in an educational context (the possible effect on GCSE performance) concluded that cultural capital (such as families providing books and educational support materials, cultural activities – such as theatre-going – and discussions) '… is transmitted within the home and does have a significant effect on performance'. However, she also concluded that *cultural capital* itself may have a lesser influence on attainment and life chances than other class factors (such as high or low income).

Social capital: For **Cohen** and **Prusak** (2001), social capital relates to how individuals are connected through social networks in that it '… consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks'. In terms of life chances it works on a couple of levels. **Coleman** (1988) argues that middle-class parents develop cooperative *educational networks* with their children (supporting them in both material and non-material ways). In addition, *business networks* develop within companies, with the middle and upper classes better positioned to exploit their connections.

The general idea here is that cultural and social capitals promote both:

- **inclusion** among a particular class that, in turn, promotes
- **exclusion** through:

Social closure: **Heath** (2001) argues that workplace interaction is a major source of social closure. Higher social classes can enhance their life chances by restricting and closing access to networks of mutual self-interest (economic and political).

Life choices: The idea that inequalities result from the choices people make is, at first sight, *counter-intuitive*, given the seemingly self-evident relationship between inequality and life chances. However, theories of life choices fall into two main camps:

New Right

New Right theories rest on the (familiar) idea of:

Rational choice – people act in what they see as their own best interests, weighing up the relative costs and benefits of their behaviour. People therefore make *choices* and, as a consequence, live with the outcome. **Murphy** (1990) argues that where an education system provides *equality of opportunity* (everyone has the chance to participate), differences in achievement are the result of unsuccessful students (based on categories such as class, ethnicity and gender) *choosing* not to participate in the way successful students participate. A related idea here is:

Meritocracy: **Miliband** (2005) argues that life *choices* refer to the ability of people to

make informed decisions in the context of 'equality of opportunity'. In other words, this position sees the role of the state as one of helping to maintain a 'level playing field' by creating the conditions under which individual life chances relate to choice – people, in other words, accepting or declining opportunities for 'self-improvement' on the basis of their individual merits (hard work, positive attitudes and the like) rather than ascribed characteristics (such as family background or gender).

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Education: Evidence for this interpretation, in terms of class, might be the fact that in 2002, 50% of children of skilled manual workers gained five or more GCSE grades A*–C (**Department for Education and Skills**, 2004) and, as **Summerfield** and **Babb** (2004) note, 20% of working-class children participate in HE.

Postmodernism

Postmodern explanations also focus on the idea that contemporary societies are constructed around the choices made at the individual level – something we can illustrate by noting the difference between modernist and postmodernist concepts of class and lifestyle classifications. For the former, as we've seen previously, class is generally defined in terms of:

Production: Class positions are based around work relationships (what people do) and how these involve differences of status, power and, in this context, life chances. For postmodernists, however, lifestyles can be classified in terms of:

Consumption: Social positions are related to what people *do* with what they *have*, an idea based around the different ways people perceive and pursue their life choices. There are numerous lifestyle scales in existence, an example of which is the Insight Value Group: Lifestyle Classification (2004) (see the chart on the following page).

Grusky (1996) notes the postmodern focus on consumption is based on the argument that 'class-based identities become ever weaker', for a couple of reasons:

- **economic** – a gradual decline in workplace conflicts
- **political** – a move away from class-based politics to identity politics (political representation based around 'values and lifestyles'). In this situation, social inequality becomes:

Individualised: Where people increasingly exercise choice (ranging from whether – and when – to have children, to sexuality) they construct different types of (personalised) lifestyles. The weakening of traditional ties of class, for example, contributes to this process by breaking down conventional barriers, a process further promoted by:

Cultural globalisation: People are

Discussion point: Do people get what they deserve?

In small groups, identify arguments for and against the idea that, in our society, people receive rewards (high incomes and status, for example) on the basis of their individual merits rather than their class, gender or ethnic background.

As a class, discuss your arguments in the context of the concept of meritocracy.

The Insight Value Group: Lifestyle Classification (2004)	
Lifestyle group	**Example traits**
Self-Actualisers	Individualistic and creative, enthusiastically exploring and embracing change
Innovators	Self-confident risk-takers, constantly seeking new experiences
Esteem Seekers	Motivated by success and prestige
Strivers	See image and status as important while also holding traditional values
Contented Conformers	Content to establish secure lifestyle that generally reflects the behaviour and tastes of 'normal society'
Traditionalists	Risk-averse, with behaviour-guided traditional norms and values
Disconnected	Socially detached, resentful, embittered and apathetic

increasingly exposed to different cultures and ideas, some of which they accept and others of which they adapt to create *cultural hybrids* (identities that form out of a mixing of different cultural styles).

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two examples of *cultural hybrids* in our society.

Weeding the path

One way of understanding the difference between life chance and life choice positions is to relate them to concepts of:

Risk: Life chance theorists (both structural and cultural) view this in terms of:

Unconscious risk – the extent to which individuals are exposed to risk without necessarily being aware of such exposure. For example, such risks relate to things like infant mortality rates – the lower your social class, the higher the level of risk of infant death. However, since some forms of unconscious risk can be identified (as with infant mortality), we need to refine the concept by noting that even where we are aware of this type of risk there is little or nothing we can consciously do, as individuals, to lessen the risk – it can only be reduced at the group level (in this instance by improvements in hygiene, welfare provision and the like).

For postmodernists, however, all forms of risk are in theory *calculable*, hence life choices involve:

Conscious risk: Examples here relating to health might include knowledge of the health risks associated with smoking or those associated with particular sexual lifestyles (for example, the risk of HIV or a sexually

Growing it yourself: Constructing age

A simple piece of sociological research might involve asking people in your school/college when they believe categories like 'childhood', 'youth', 'adulthood' and 'old age' begin and end (answers could also be correlated to categories like age, gender and ethnicity).

transmitted disease). It doesn't necessarily follow that people take steps to limit risk – there may be reasons why they trade increased levels of risk for some sort of pay-off, an idea related to:

Risk management: This relates to both the *choices* people make and their perception of the levels of *risk* (and consequent costs and potential benefits) involved. For example, some people choose to remain in education whereas others choose not to – choices that have consequences for future lifestyles. Similarly, some choose to risk starting their own business, whereas others choose to pursue careers, or not, as the case may be – just as some people choose criminal behaviour over conforming behaviour.

Preparing the ground: Age

There are a couple of problems to note when identifying examples of age inequality:

Social construction: Age has different meanings in different societies at different times, which makes comparisons difficult. **Abrams** (2005), found 'massive differences in perceptions of when youth ends and old age begin' and that, 'on average, people felt that youth ended at 49 and old age began at 65'.

Blurred boundaries: Currently (2006), aside from a couple of relatively strong age boundaries (16–18 when a range of 'adult' privileges are granted and 65+ when retirement comes into effect), most age boundaries in our society are fairly fluid – something that, once again, makes it difficult to identify precise forms of age-related inequality.

There are, however, some examples of specific age inequalities we can note – see the table on the following page.

Digging deeper: Age

Life chances: Explanations for age-related inequalities focus on how societies are structured to reflect:

Ageism: It is not illegal to discriminate by age in our society (although it will be from October 2006) and **Abrams** (2005) argues that 'age prejudice between the generations' is more common than sex or race discrimination, something that holds true across both gender and ethnic boundaries. Age discrimination in our society takes two major forms:

- **Childhood**: Children are treated differently in a variety of ways (although their general life chances are influenced by factors such as class, gender and ethnicity), not the least being their compulsory attendance in education between 5 and 16. They are also prohibited from a range of activities (such as drinking alcohol) permissible in adulthood. In the period of transition from childhood to adulthood (youth),

Age inequality: selected examples	
	The older you are the more likely you are to:
Family	Provide unpaid family care Own family home Live alone
Health	Suffer serious, life-threatening, illness/long-term illness or disability
Wealth and income	Have accumulated wealth Have higher income up to retirement See income decline after retirement
Welfare Work	Live in poverty after retirement Have higher work-related status Work part-time/be self-employed
Crime	Avoid being a victim of crime Commit fewer crimes
Politics	Vote Participate in electoral processes
Education	Have fewer qualifications
Housing	Live in substandard accommodation

Source: National Statistics Online (2005)

Discussion point: R U ageist?

In small groups: when you hear the following words, what thoughts do you immediately associate with them?

Baby	Child	Youth	Adult	Elderly	Pensioner

As a class: what do your word associations tell us about perceptions/labelling of age groups?

young people are accorded a slightly different status to adults, something reflected in their lower earning power, ineligibility for state welfare payments and lower work-related status.

- **The elderly**: 'Old age' is increasingly difficult to define in modern societies – improvements in life expectancies, for example, have increased the length of time people can expect to be labelled as 'old'; medical developments have also increased the period during which the elderly can expect to be physically and mentally active.

Meadows (2003) argues that job performance doesn't significantly deteriorate with age and 'there is no evidence to support the view older workers are inherently less productive than younger workers, except in a limited range of jobs requiring rapid reactions or physical strength, and people tend to move out of these as they become harder for them'. She notes, however, that older workers don't always receive the same levels of workplace investment and training as younger colleagues – where they do receive training they 'reach the same skill standards'.

A key marker – and *rite of passage* – for the elderly in our society is the official retirement age (currently 65 for men and 60 for women – although, as **Ahmed** (2002) notes, the European Union has put forward proposals to scrap compulsory retirement ages across the board). This idea leads us into a set of explanations based around *status* and control over:

Social resources: The argument here is that life chances in modern societies are based not so much around age, but rather the different levels of resources controlled by different age groups. Thus, two people of the same age can have different life chances based around their differential access to social resources.

Political economy

Political economy theory relates age to work – the generally lower status of the elderly, for example, comes, **Townsend** (1986) argues, from their 'progressive removal from the workplace' – something, **Hockey** and **James** (1993) note, that denies them social resources such as an earned income. Lower status levels among the young fits into this general theory because they have failed, as yet, to develop work-related status resources. These ideas can be related to:

Cultural capital in the sense that lower-status age groups lack the general social resources to improve their life chances.

Exchange theory: **Turner** (1989) argues the *marginalisation* of different age groups can be related to a general failure to control a variety of social resources, not just those relating to work. The stigmatisation of 'young, unmarried, mothers' is a case in point here.

Choice

Life choice perspectives flow, to paraphrase **Mae West**, from the idea that 'you're only as old as the person you feel'. In other words, although certain *age markers* still exist, the meaning of age in late/postmodern society is increasingly fluid – people are no longer restricted to rigid, age-categorised role behaviours since, as **Grusky** (1996) suggests, concepts of age – like those of gender and ethnicity – no longer have a 'privileged position'. Postmodern positions, for example, argue that individuals are:

Congeries of **situationally invoked statutes**: In other words, identity is an

aggregation of many different ideas and statuses that shift and change depending on the situation – you may, for example, define yourself as a student in the classroom, a friend outside the classroom, a consumer when you go to the shops and so forth. This means *identity* (who and what we believe we are) is not fixed and unchanging (*centred*) in postmodern society; rather, different identities are invoked at different times and in different places – in short, we exercise choice over how age-specific identities are constructed.

Weeding the path

This idea *contrasts* with *life chance* interpretations whereby various age-categories are seen as:

Master statuses that define how others both see us in terms of age and interpret our behaviour as appropriate or inappropriate to the master status.

From a life choice position, ideas about age-related characteristics and statuses are more fluid in contemporary societies because traditional ideas and associations are gradually broken down by, for example:

Cultural globalisation – the idea that we are exposed to alternative lifestyles relating to age. As traditional notions of age-related roles and statuses break down and fragment, changing lifestyle choices come to the fore and open up new:

Social spaces – 'non-traditional behaviours', for example, that different cultural/age groups claim as their own. This is illustrated by the changing appearance of *youth subcultures*; the well-documented 'spectacular subcultures' of the recent past (mods, rockers, punks and hippies, for example) have given way to less spectacular, more individualised subcultural groupings that develop around particular forms of music, dress and lifestyle – an idea we can briefly outline in relation to three theories of ageing:

Disengagement

Disengagement theory suggests that as people age biologically they progressively disengage from social relationships, both:

- **consciously**, in the sense of a gradual withdrawal from extended social networks (work being the most obvious, perhaps), and
- **unconsciously**, in the sense that the older one becomes, the greater the likelihood of family and friends disengaging through death.

Disengagement is a two-way process. The individual progressively disengages from their general involvement with society (through retirement, for example) and society disengages from the individual (people interact with the elderly on increasingly fewer occasions).

Activity

Activity theory focuses on the way people learn and choose to play age-related roles (such as 'youth' or 'elderly'). From this position, *disengagement* from social relationships occurs continuously as we make different choices about our behaviour and the groups to which we belong. This process represents 'active reengagements' in social interactions as we leave some groups and join or develop others.

Weeding the path

While *disengagement* theory suggests that the gradual *decoupling* of the individual from social groups is a progressive experience, *reengagement* theory takes a more flexible approach to understanding how and why we form and disengage from social groups.

Generational

Social generational theory examines the impact the biological ageing process has on individual self-perceptions and identities; in particular, it suggests our behavioural choices are conditioned by values that fail to adapt to social and technological changes; the elderly, for example, become, in **Dowd's** (1986) phrase, 'immigrants in time' – they are different because their life experiences are rooted in the values, norms and customs of the *past*. As society moves on, they remain trapped in the identity conferred by their past experiences (both in their own eyes and those of others). Cultural separation between age groups occurs and is mirrored by a *social distance* between those 'from the past' and 'those in the present', something that, in turn, reinforces cultural differences.

Preparing the ground: Gender

Historically our society has seen marked gender inequalities, with the emphasis, by and large, being on the different ways women have suffered various forms of:

Patriarchal discrimination across a range of areas and activities (from family life, through education, to the workplace).

As the following table suggests, women still experience a range of inequalities in modern Britain, but it's also important to point out that inequality is not simply one-way; in some areas – such as *health*, where women generally have a longer life expectancy, and *education*, where, as **Office for National Statistics** (2005) data demonstrate, 'girls outperform boys at GCSE and A level' – men have lower life chances than women.

Inequalities

Gendered inequalities are also affected by concepts of class, age and ethnicity – upper-class boys generally achieve higher educational qualifications than lower-class girls, for example.

Conventional explanations of gender inequality in our society focus on concepts of:

Sex discrimination as a relatively straightforward process involving both conscious and unconscious levels of discrimination, directed, in the main, towards women and based around:

Patriarchy that has taken a number of related forms, from outright discrimination at one extreme to more subtle forms of ideological control through which women 'collude' in their own inequality – such as the idea that in a *patriarchal society* men consistently exploit women in areas like:

Family life, where female responsibility for childcare and domestic labour has served to limit economic participation. Housework and childcare have historically had lower status in our society and such work is unpaid, ideas which in combination define female lives in terms of their *service role* and lower their general life chances.

Gender inequality: selected examples	
	Women are more likely to:
Family	Have childcare/domestic labour responsibilities (dual/triple role) Marry/divorce/be widowed Be a lone parent
Health	Live longer Drink less alcohol/not be overweight
Wealth and income	Have lower levels of wealth while partner still alive Have lower average income (currently 18% less)
Welfare	Depend on welfare payments Experience poverty in adulthood/old age
Work	Have lower occupational status/not be managers Work part-time
Crime	Avoid criminal record/prison Avoid victimisation (except for sex crimes)
Education	Have higher educational qualifications Not be excluded from school

Source: National Statistics Online (2005)

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Family life: Feminist explanations for differing levels of male/female status are discussed in more detail in this chapter.

The workplace: Men and women have traditionally accessed and controlled different types of resources in our society; men, for example, have traditionally controlled economic resources, whereas women, to some extent, have traditionally controlled domestic resources. Both forms of resource control confer status, but at different levels. The increased involvement of women in paid work over the past 25 years has, to some extent, increased both female status and life chances through the control of economic resources, but the main question here is why female life chances have not improved significantly relative to those of their male counterparts. An answer is found in a number of different explanations:

Workplace stratification: Concepts of *vertical* and *horizontal* workplace stratification have been applied to explain greater male status and income. In relation to the former, the concept of a:

Glass ceiling has been used to explain lower female life chances, although this idea is gradually giving way to the idea of a:

Glass trapdoor: Some women are able to progress to higher levels in the workplace, particularly in areas (such as human resource departments) dominated by women. The majority of women, however, are 'left behind', for a couple of reasons:

- **Disrupted career development**: Where women periodically have to leave employment through pregnancy (and, in many cases, care for a family), they are placed at a disadvantage to their male peers in terms of career advancement.
- **Part-time work**: Women are more likely to work part-time, combining work with family and childcare duties. This, once again, puts them at a relative disadvantage to their male peers.

These ideas, in combination, have frequently been expressed in terms of a:

Double shift – women as both paid employees and unpaid domestic workers, or even, as **Duncombe and Marsden** (1993) argue, a:

Triple shift – the third aspect being emotional labour (the investment of time and effort in the psychological well-being of family members).

Weeding the path

Traditional explanations for gendered life chance inequalities tend to focus on various forms of overt and covert discrimination, and although these explanations have some currency (gender inequality and discrimination clearly does exist, as the previous table demonstrates), they suffer from a couple of major problems:

Homogeneity: They generally treat men and women as coherent groups, such that gender inequalities are translated equally to 'all men' and 'all women'. This, however, is clearly not the case – all women, for example, are not the same in terms of their market situation – a single, well-educated woman has very different life chances to a female single parent with low or no educational qualifications.

Social class: Although class is traditionally seen as a factor in differential gender life chances, it is frequently difficult to operationalise the precise extent of its influence in situations where women do not fit clearly and neatly into economic categories (either because they do no paid work or because paid work is part of a double or triple shift).

Digging deeper: Gender

Life chances: One major problem with explanations for gendered inequalities that focus on ideas like patriarchy and discrimination in a relatively simple and straightforward way is that they have difficulty explaining why discrimination seems to be selective – if 'patriarchal practices and ideologies' were sufficient forms of explanation for inequality we would reasonably expect *all women* to have lesser life chances than their male counterparts (which is evidently not the case). One way to resolve this problem – while still working within a general life chances perspective – is to use the concept of:

Embodied capitals – a generic term for a range of forms of capital (*human*, *cultural* and *social*). **Gershuny** (2002a) suggests *embodied capitals* reflect 'personal skills, knowledge and experience, which give individuals access to participation in the activities of specific social institutions', and he uses this concept to explain and account for subtle,

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two examples of embodied capitals you employed to achieve your current level of educational participation.

but significant, differences in the 'gendered lives' of men and women of different class, age and ethnic groups.

In this respect, **Gershuny** (2002b) focuses on the idea of:

Human capital – a term he defines as the economically relevant skills that give people access to different kinds of paid employment; the '. . . personal resources that give people material advantages or disadvantages, now and in their futures – those skills and experiences that determine their earning capacity'. These include level of education, employment and unemployment records and, most significantly, the level of jobs people can manage effectively after taking into consideration their other social responsibilities (such as childcare).

Gershuny relates gender inequalities to life chances in two ways:

First, women as a *group* in contemporary Britain have comparatively *fewer* life chances than either men or, most significantly, their parents' generation; and, second, on an *individual* level, *some* women have better life chances than other women, or, indeed, many men.

Weeding the path

Gershuny presents a:

Fragmented picture of relative life chances based on both *historical* (generational) and *contemporary* (within the same generation) evidence.

Human capital represents a way of determining an estimate of 'the hourly wage respondents receive or would receive if they had jobs'. Thus, by focusing on 'marketable skills' (such as level of education), it's possible to overcome one of the general problems of static class scales – the fact that many people (especially women) either do not have paid employment or, where they do, work at a level (part-time, for example) that doesn't reflect their true economic worth.

For **Gershuny**, one of the major reasons for lower (if fragmentary) female life chances is marital instability. When contemporary married/cohabiting women enter the paid workforce they do so on two levels: those with relatively low and those with relatively high human capital.

For the first (majority) group childbirth and childcare result in one partner (generally the mother) either dropping out of the workforce or participating at a lower level (since childcare costs are generally too prohibitive for this group to afford). This reduction in human capital places her at a relative disadvantage, in terms of life chances, to marriage partnerships where the mother can afford to pay others for childcare while she continues to work (and the family draws two incomes).

Generation

However, increasing family instability and breakdown creates a *generational decline* in comparative female life chances (a female child compared with her mother, for example), because when a family splits the female partner generally takes custody of any

children. The male partner is free to continue working while the female partner cannot because of childcare responsibilities and this leaves her reliant on state benefits. Compared with her mother's generation – where women normally stopped work to look after children and consequently relied on the partner's income – contemporary women have fewer life chances as a result of family breakdown.

Gershuny argues that we have a situation where the *majority* of women have lower life chances than their mother's generation. At the same time, a significant *minority* of women have improved life chances because educational and workplace opportunities have opened up for women who can display similar levels of commitment and motivation to their male counterparts. As **Gershuny** puts it: 'From a mid-20th century position in which most people lived in single-earner households, we move to a present with at one extreme, more high-skilled two-earner households from privileged backgrounds and at the other, more no-earner female-headed households from disadvantaged backgrounds.'

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: The processes **Gershuny** describes can be related to questions of both social class and social mobility. Embodied capital explanations, he suggests, '. . . are very closely related to the operations of what was once thought of as social class'.

Cultural capital: **Scott** (2004) adds a further dimension to arguments about human capital by suggesting this concept is increasingly significant for women in terms of:

Linked lives: That is, how female life chances are enhanced or inhibited by their relationship to – and responsibilities for – *significant others* (such as children, partners, the sick and the elderly). The main argument here is that the 'linked lives' of male and female partners are subtly different; primary responsibility for the care of others still falls predominantly on women (even more so when families break down). These linkages, **Scott** argues, help to explain how female life chances are affected by:

Asynchronies – the idea that female family linkages restrict opportunities for the synchronisation of one's life with the requirements of wider society and, in particular, work. Childcare, for example, doesn't synchronise easily with full-time work; it also restricts opportunities to develop the social networks that ease many men through the various promotion and career ladders in the workplace – an idea related to:

Social capital, in the sense of the various networks in modern societies that promote or inhibit life chances. In the workplace, for example, male social networks often involve work-related leisure (such as the 'golf club network'). Family networks rarely promote the life chances of those who play a central role in them – women, in the vast majority of cases.

Choices

Life choices: For **Hakim** (2000) the gender inequalities that exist in contemporary Western societies result from the *choices* people make – an idea she expresses as:

Preference theory: **Hakim** argues that a neglected area in the study of gender inequality are the *conscious choices* men and women make, especially in relation to two

crucial areas: family life and the workplace (or 'market work and family work' as she puts it). As the building blocks of preference theory, **Hakim** (2000) identified five:

Historical changes 'in society and the labour market' (cumalative in their effect) that resulted in women in Britain, for example, gaining an unprecedented range of life choices:

- **contraception**: The birth-control pill gave women 'reliable control over their own fertility for the first time in history'
- **equal opportunities laws** that opened up all aspects of the labour market to women
- **occupational change**: The decline of (male-dominated) manufacturing industries and the rise of service industries gave women greater economic opportunities
- **service industries** also provided 'secondary earners' (traditionally women who supplemented the *primary earnings* of their male partner) with a range of part-time employment that fitted around their 'other life interests'
- **choice**, reflected in the changing 'attitudes, values and personal preferences of affluent modern societies' that focuses on concepts of lifestyle based on a balance between work and family life.

Hakim identified three broad (*ideal type*) responses to these historical changes in terms of women's work–lifestyle preferences.

For **Hakim**, life chance inequalities are the result of different groups of women (across all class and age categories) making choices in relation to work and family – those women who choose a career are able to compete equally and successfully with men and, in consequence, experience similar life chances. Those women who choose not to be economically competitive (home-centred) have fewer life chances than their male counterparts because, for whatever reason, they have excluded themselves from a major source (work) of life opportunities.

Weeding the path

The strengths of **Hakim's** argument involve:

- **Preference**: Her focus on the *choices* people make in relation to a work–life balance is a significant attempt to redress a conventional sociological imbalance in the analysis of gender inequalities – an

Hakim's (2000) classification of women's work–lifestyle preferences in the 21st century

Home-centred (20%)	Adaptive (60%)	Work-centred (20%)
Family life and children are the main priorities	Diverse group: includes women combining work and family	Childless women concentrated here. Main priority is career
Prefer *not* to work	Want to work, but *not* totally committed to career	Committed to work
Qualifications obtained for intellectual dowry	Qualifications obtained with the intention of working	Large investment in qualifications/training

uncritical acceptance that social inequalities are *automatically* the result of structural forces and, as such, cast women in the role of *victims* of such forces.

- **Opportunities**: The focus on historical changes and how they affect individual lives is important, given that much sociological literature and analysis ignores the real changes in both society and economic behaviour that have occurred over the past generation.
- **Heterogeneity**: Women, for **Hakim**, represent a mixed group in contemporary society, with a range of preferences and commitments relating to economic activity. This contrasts with the generally *homogeneous* work preference of men that, **Hakim** argues, gives them certain economic advantages (something she interprets as a *cause*, not an *effect*, of *patriarchy*).

Problems

Hakim's arguments have not been received uncritically, however. **Man Yee Kan** (2005) has 'examined the major claims' of **Hakim's** theory and, while she generally supports the idea of reintroducing the concept of *choice* into the sociological analysis of inequality (rather than relegating it to an effect of structural/ideological forces), she suggests two potential weaknesses:

- **Constraints**: While choice is an important factor in determining life chances, **Man Yee Kan** argues that choice is always exercised within certain limitations. She disputes, for example, the idea that the labour market is 'gender blind' in the sense of imposing few, if any, barriers to female advancement. On the contrary, she argues, female awareness of sex segregation, glass ceilings and so forth act as 'disincentives to work'; in other words, *knowledge* of patriarchal ideas and practices may influence women's decisions to focus on family, as opposed to career.
- **Reciprocity**: **Hakim** assumes female preferences determine their attitudes towards and participation in different areas (such as family and work). In other words, choice is unidirectional (one-way). **Man Yee Kan**, however, argues the relationship is frequently reciprocal (two-way); that is, female work orientations are influenced by *experiences* in the workplace that, in turn, reflect back on their attitudes to work and family.

Preparing the ground: Ethnicity

When we consider ethnicity-related social inequalities we need to keep in mind a range of ideas:

Definitions: Ethnicity is not easy to define, mainly because there is a range of possible criteria we can use, from *country of origin* (English, Afro-Caribbean . . .), through *colour* (white, black . . .), to *cultural characteristics* (such as religion). In addition, official agencies may define ethnic groups in ways not recognised by those they are designed to define (the label 'Asian', for example, covers a wide range of different ethnic groupings).

Heterogeneity: We need to avoid the assumption of cultural homogeneity when examining ethnic inequalities; ethnic groups, like any other social group, are shot through with cultural differences related to class, age, gender and region. We need, therefore, to be aware of:

Intersections – differences *within* ethnic groups (*intra-group* differences) as well as differences *between* ethnic groups (inter-group differences). One of the problems we face is separating inequalities that stem from the fact of a particular ethnicity from those that stem from class or age differences. As **Westergaard** and **Resler** (1976) argue: 'Preoccupied with the disabilities that attach to colour . . . research workers have been busy rediscovering what in fact are common disabilities of class.'

We can, however, identify a range of social and economic inequalities relating to *minority ethnic groups* in our society.

Digging deeper: Ethnicity

Life chances: Explanations for different forms of ethnic inequalities in this section focus on *structural factors* affecting minority life chances – the first, and probably most obvious, being:

Racial discrimination: Following the lead of writers like **Modood et al.** (1997), **Moriarty**

Ethnic inequality: selected examples	
Family	Indians/white British most likely to provide informal, unpaid family care, black Africans and the Chinese least likely to provide such care
Health	Risk-taking behaviours: Bangladeshi men most likely/Chinese men least likely to smoke. White Irish/black Caribbean men most likely to drink above government recommendations Pakistani and Bangladeshi reported highest rates of ill health, Chinese men and women reported the lowest rates
Income	Minorities on average earn lower incomes Asian Indians have similar incomes to white majority
Work	Unemployment rates for minorities generally higher than for white majority (Bangladeshis have highest levels of unemployment at 18%). Indian men have similar level of unemployment to white men (7%) Horizontal occupational stratification: Bangladeshi men/women (66/40%) and Chinese men/women (40/40%) work in distribution, hotel and restaurant industry Chinese and white Irish have highest rates of professional employment. White women have higher rate of part-time working
Crime	Minorities more likely to be victims/arrested/remanded/imprisoned Young more likely to be victims across all ethnic groups Fear of crime greater among minority groups
Education	Boys: Chinese and Indian highest/black Caribbean lowest achievers at GCSE Girls: Highest achievers at GCSE within each ethnic group Black Caribbean had highest/Chinese and Indian lowest rates of school exclusion No qualifications: white Irish (19%), Chinese (20%), and Indian (19%)

Source: National Statistics Online (2005)

and **Butt** (2004) suggest racism '. . . is an important element of the processes that lead to typically poorer life chances for minority ethnic groups'. As an explanation, however, racism involves, as **Karlsen** and **Nazroo** (2002) suggest, a number of problems:

- **Interpretation**: The meaning of 'racist behaviour' varies considerably within and between groups and individuals.
- **Identification**: **Barker** (1981) makes a distinction between:
  - **old racism**, based on biological distinctions, that frequently involved overt forms of violent behaviour ('paki-bashing') and language, and a
  - **new racism**, based on cultural distinctions (ethnic minorities having different cultural attitudes and behaviours to the ethnic majority). This contemporary form, **Barker** argues, has evolved in subtle ways – partly because racism has become less acceptable in everyday life and partly as the result of legal proscriptions. Forms of cultural and institutional racism, for example, are especially difficult to prove.
- **Reporting**: Victims of racist behaviour are frequently reluctant to report their victimisation.

We can note two further points here:

- **Underestimation**: These problems make it impossible to determine the actual extent of racism in our society. **Modood et al.'s** (1997) research reported around 12% of their sample had experienced some form of racist behaviour in the previous year, whereas **Moriarty** and **Butt** (2004) reported 50% of their ethnic minority sample had 'experienced racism'.
- **Contexts**: A further problem is the extent to which experience of racist behaviour has different consequences in different contexts; for example, an employer's racist behaviour is likely to have a different impact on ethnic minority life chances than, for example, a casual racist remark.

Class

In addition, **Moriarty** and **Butt** (2004) found that, in relation to a range of life chances, '. . . ethnicity proved to be less important than socio-economic status'; in other words, differential life chances, although influenced in some way by racist behaviour and attitudes, are far more likely to be influenced by:

Social class: In relation to health, for example, they found the lowest social classes suffered similar levels of poor health – regardless of ethnic background. In terms of income they also reported wide differences in ethnic life chances, with 'Asian-Indians over-represented in managerial and professional occupations' and Asian-Pakistani and black Caribbeans 'clustering . . . in routine and semi-routine occupations'. The implication here is that income distribution differences may be more easily explained by class profiles than by ethnicity. In addition:

Human capital explanations, based on market capabilities, show clear correlations

between ethnic minority educational achievement (Asian Indians are above average and black Caribbeans below average) and future employment status. While this doesn't, of course, remove the possibility of racial discrimination in the education system being a factor in life chances, it's difficult to see why racism should be *selective* (black Caribbeans, but *not* Asian Indians, for example). Even more difficult to explain would be racism that targeted Asian *Pakistanis* but not Asian *Indians*.

Social capital: **Platt's** (2003) research found class background to be a significant factor in ethnic minority life chances, operating through social networks relating to family organisation and support. As she notes: 'Family background remains important in achieving occupational success and avoiding unemployment.' However, she also found differences across ethnic groups, with religion being a significant qualifying factor – Jewish and Hindu children, for example, had greater life chances than either their parents or their Christian counterparts, while the reverse was true for Muslim and Sikh children.

The significance of social capital for life chances is further evidenced by **Platt's** observation that many ethnic minority groups (Caribbean, black African, Indian and Chinese) achieved higher rates of social mobility (children, for example, moving from their parents' class to a higher class) than their white British counterparts. In a *cross-cultural context*, **Shapiro** (2004) has shown how 'racial inequality is passed down from generation to generation through the use of private family wealth' in the USA – with the white middle classes, in particular, being best placed to provide their children with social, economic and educational supports that give them a range of advantages over other ethnic groups.

Choices

Life choices: We can subdivide this area into two main types:

- **Rational choice** approaches focus on the ways ethnic minorities enhance or erode their general life chances through a range of choices.
- **Assimilation** arguments focus on ethnic minorities as 'outsider' and 'insider' groups. The former, through a failure, for whatever reason, to assimilate with the dominant (white, in the case of our society) culture place themselves at a cultural disadvantage by a failure to adopt norms, values and behaviours that would allow them to compete successfully in educational and economic markets. The latter, meanwhile, successfully integrate into the dominant culture and, in consequence, improve their general life chances to a level of, or in some cases beyond, those of the dominant culture.

Underclass

Underclass arguments suggest those at the very bottom of society (or, in some cases, actually outside the class structure) are in such a position through the general choices their members make about family life and structure, educational qualifications and achievement, crime, work and so forth. Writers such as **Murray and Phillips** (2001) and **Saunders** (1990) variously suggest the lifestyle choices of some – but crucially not all – ethnic minorities place them at a severe economic disadvantage that, in turn,

is passed on from one generation to the next. Thus, among Afro-Caribbeans, **Murray** argues, 'weak and unstable family structures' produce large numbers of single-parent families that lack the resources – or aptitude – to successfully control and motivate their offspring. This, in turn, leads to lower aspirations, educational failure, low work status and income that, in turn, perpetuate a *cycle of deprivation*.

Among Asian Indians, however, strong, extended family structures support offspring, instil a strong 'work ethic' and value educational qualifications as the means to improved social mobility and life chances. Thus, 'disproportionately lower life chances' among ethnic minority groups are not evidence of exploitation, discrimination and the like, but rather of cultural and family failings among such groups.

Labour markets

Labour market approaches focus on the various ways economic markets operate in terms of, for example:

- **primary labour markets** consisting of relatively secure, well-paid, long-term employment that has some kind of career structure, and
- **secondary labour markets** consisting of low wages, poor conditions, no job security, training or promotion prospects.

The over-representation of some ethnic minorities in the latter – with its consequent lower life chances – reflects a range of choices (some of which are the result of structural factors, others the result of agency) made by different individuals. The availability of free, compulsory education free from overt discrimination, for example, represents a:

Structure of choice in the sense that educational qualifications offer a potential way out of poverty, for example – a route taken by some ethnic minority and majority children, but not others.

Weeding the path

In relation to both of the above types of argument, **Heath** and **Payne's** (1999) analysis of government Labour Force Survey data suggests 'ethnic minorities have been able and willing to take advantage of the educational opportunities that Britain affords. The persistence of discrimination in the lower levels of the labour market looks on the current evidence to be the most likely explanation for the persistence of ethnic penalties'.

Moving on

In the final section we can relate the ideas in this section to a more generalised discussion of the concept of social mobility, mainly because movement up or down the class structure is indicative of improving or declining life chances.

5. The nature, extent and significance of patterns of mobility

Social mobility, according to **Aldridge** (2001), 'describes the movement or opportunities for movement between different social groups, and the advantages and disadvantages that go with this in terms of income, security of employment, opportunities for advancement etc', and in this respect links neatly to the work we've previously done in this chapter, in a number of ways:

- **Stratification**: To talk about social

WARM-UP: ARE YOU MOBILE?

We can construct a crude approximation of social mobility in the following way. Select one of the class scales (with sample occupations) we looked at in the section on measuring social class and complete the following table.

	Occupation	Class position
Your grandparents		
Your parents		
Your intended occupation		

Assuming you achieve your intended occupation:

1 Will you experience upward/downward mobility compared with your parents/grandparents?

2 As a class, is the general generational trend for upward/downward mobility/no change?

mobility makes sense only in the context of a system that ranks individuals and groups in some way.

- **Measuring class**: We need class scales against which to measure mobility.
- **Changing class structures**: If social movement is possible in class-based systems of stratification it helps us to visualise class structures as relatively fluid systems.
- **Life chances**: Mobility is a tangible measure of life chances in that where people experience upward mobility we might expect their life chances to improve (with the reverse being true, of course).

Preparing the ground: The nature of social mobility

To understand the nature of social mobility in our society we need to think about how it can be:

Operationalised: This involves understanding how it is both defined and measured. In this respect, *social* mobility (as opposed to other types, such as *income* mobility – the extent to which income rises or falls over a given period) is a measure of changing:

Status – in basic terms, the 'social standing' of an individual or group in a given society. More specifically, mobility studies focus on the idea of occupational status as the basic unit of measurement/comparison and in this respect social mobility has two major dimensions:

- **Absolute mobility**, according to **Lawson** and **Garrod** (2003), is a measure of the 'total number of movements up or down a class structure within a given period'. In other words, as **Chattoe** and **Heath** (2001) put it, 'absolute social mobility simply looks at the number of people moving from one class to another'.

Examples of absolute and relative mobility

We can use the example of **income differences and changes** to illustrate these ideas – Jill, who earns £200 per week, and Jack, who earns £100 per week.

Both receive a 10% pay increase (Jill now earns £220 and Jack now earns £110).

Absolute (income) mobility: *Both* Jack and Jill have experienced upward mobility.

Relative (income) mobility: Jill has experienced *upward* mobility compared with Jack, whereas Jack has experienced *downward* mobility compared with Jill.

Although we have used income for illustrative purposes (because it's easier to demonstrate mobility differences if we *quantify* changes), the basic *principle*, in terms of status differences, remains the same.

- **Relative mobility**, according to **Aldridge** (2001), '. . . is concerned with the *chances* people from different backgrounds have of attaining different social positions'. That is, a measure of the ways mobility varies according to someone's starting position in the class structure.

Weeding the path

The distinction between *absolute* and *relative* forms of social mobility is important for sociological analysis because we will arrive at different estimates of social mobility depending on how we measure it. It is, for example, possible for *absolute* forms of social mobility to increase in a society while *relative* mobility does not increase – an idea we can illustrate using the example of a:

Caste system where an individual cannot, during their lifetime, move upwards from one caste position to another – there is *no relative mobility* in this system. It is, however, possible for whole positions in the system to move up or down in status terms. A particular *occupation* can improve its caste position – *absolute* forms of social mobility *are* possible within this system.

In terms of actually *measuring* social mobility, we can note two different types of measurement:

- **Intergenerational** mobility refers to movement *between* generations (such as the difference between a parent's and a child's occupational position). For example, a manual worker's child who becomes a bank manager would experience upward social mobility, whereas a bank manager's child who became a bricklayer would experience downward social mobility.
- **Intragenerational** measures explore the progress made by an individual up – or down – the class structure over a *single generation*. This might involve, for example, comparing someone's *starting* occupation with their occupation on *retirement* (although a study of such length is quite rare – most mobility studies of this type tend to cover a period of 10–15 years).

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: Mobility studies, by definition, are ***longitudinal studies***; they compare changes in social mobility over a given time period.

Growing it yourself: Ascribing achievement

Even in relatively open, class-type systems mobility chances are not based purely on achievement – ascribed factors (such as family background) also play a part.

Using the following table as a guide, identify examples of different achieved/ascribed factors that potentially affect levels of social mobility in our society.

	Achieved factors	Ascribed factors
Family	Single parenthood	Parents' social class
Education	Qualifications	
Politics		
Work	Promotion	
Health		Illness
Wealth and poverty		Inheritance

Digging deeper: The nature of social mobility

We can note a range of factors that enhance or inhibit our ability to measure social mobility:

Stratification systems: Some systems have greater openness or closure than others; open systems (such as those based around social class) allow greater general levels of social mobility than closed systems (such as those based on caste or feudal principles). In this respect we can note two concepts affecting levels of mobility:

- **Ascription**: In societies and stratification systems based on ascribed characteristics (such as gender, age or ethnicity), *relative* social mobility will be difficult at best and impossible at worst. *Absolute* mobility does, however, remain a possibility (the status of one ethnic group, for example, may improve while the status of another declines).
- **Achievement**: In societies and stratification systems based on achieved characteristics (such as educational qualifications), both *relative* and *absolute* forms of social mobility will be possible.

Absolute

Absolute mobility is sometimes called *structural mobility* because it relates to changes in, for example, the class structure of modern societies. When we discussed explanations of changes in the class

structure we saw how the development of a *service economy* has led to an expansion of middle-class occupations at the expense of working-class (industrial) occupations. In this respect, therefore, we would expect to see an *increase* in structural social mobility over the past century simply because there are now more middle-class occupations in the economy. We would, on this basis, expect to see further (although perhaps smaller) increases in absolute mobility with the development of a knowledge economy.

Relative

Relative mobility is sometimes called *exchange mobility* because individuals 'exchange relative positions' in the class structure – as some people experience upward social mobility, others experience downward mobility. In some respects this type is related to *achieved* characteristics such as educational qualifications. As people become better qualified, for example, we might expect them to take higher positions to replace those with lower qualifications (a *meritocratic* explanation for exchange mobility). An example we could note is that of:

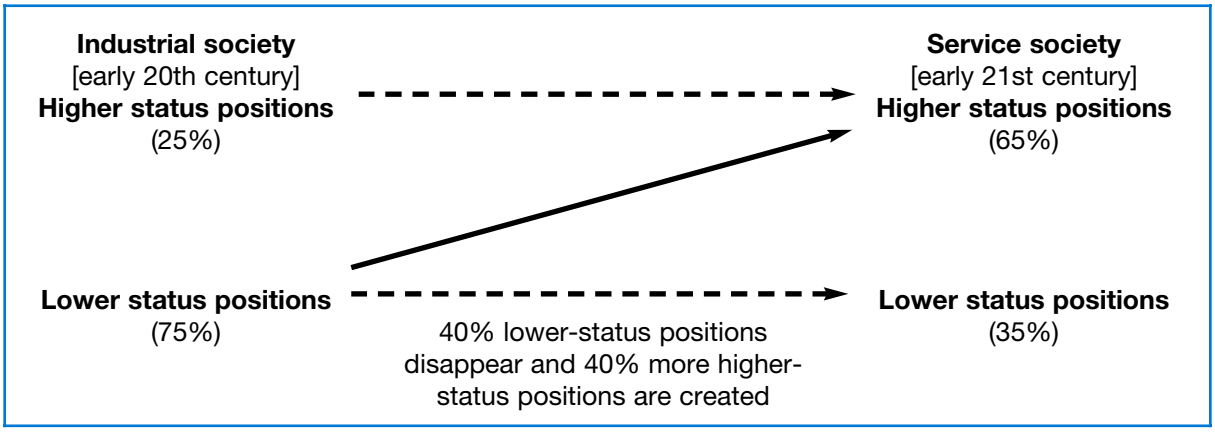
Demographic changes in society: Where women come into the workforce in increasing numbers (as has happened in our society over the past century) this creates, at various times, *exchange mobility*. A woman who in the past might have stayed in the home to care for her family now comes into the workforce to compete on equal terms.

Preparing the ground: The extent of social mobility

We can summarise some of the broad patterns of mobility that have emerged from a range of studies in the following terms:

- **Absolute (structural) mobility**: One of the major trends in our society over the past century has been the increase in absolute social mobility resulting from structural changes in economic organisation. **Gallie** (2001) cites the decline in manual occupations (from around 75% of the workforce in 1911 to around 35% in 2000) and the increase in

Absolute social mobility: diagrammatic representation



Source: Based on Gallie (2001)

managerial/professional occupations (from around 7% to 35%) over the same period. In other words, at the beginning of the twentieth century around three-quarters of the class structure consisted of jobs defined broadly as working class, whereas at the start of the twenty-first century the picture was reversed – around three-quarters of all occupations can be defined as middle class.

Within this general trend, **Heath** and **Payne's** (1999) review of mobility studies in the twentieth century – from the early work of **Chapman** and **Abbott** (1913), through **Glass** and **Hall's** (1954) mobility studies of Britain in the 1940s, to **Goldthorpe et al.'s** (1980) studies of male mobility in England and Wales of the early 1970s and beyond (using data from the British Election Surveys) – found that:

Intergenerational mobility 'rose during the course of the century for both men and women'. In the latter part of the twentieth century, for example, around 40% of men and 36% of women experienced upward mobility (compared with their fathers) and 13% and 27% respectively experienced downward mobility.

Weeding the path

Figures for female mobility are likely to be biased by the fact that the majority of mobility studies have, as **Heath** and **Payne** note, 'regarded the family as the unit of class stratification and have taken the father's position to be the best guide to the social class of the household as a whole'. A more reliable measure of female mobility would be to compare 'like with like' by relating female children to their mother's occupation, although since women, for the majority of the twentieth century at least, were unlikely to have full-time paid occupations this would also produce biased results in this particular context.

Paterson and **Iannelli** (2004) confirm these conclusions about absolute mobility in the UK and, interestingly, extend it to include 'all developed societies' – something that suggests changes to the UK class structure are a trend extending across Western societies. As they suggest, experience of intergenerational mobility is something of a norm in the sense that 'it is normal for people to occupy a different class to that in which they were brought up'.

One interesting feature of structural mobility, however, is the distinction between:

- **short-range social mobility**, usually defined in terms of moving one adjacent position up or down the class structure – using the **National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification** (NS-SEC), this might involve moving from class 2 (lower managerial) to class 1 (higher managerial) – and
- **long-range social mobility**, usually defined as moving two or more positions up or down the class structure – using the NS-SEC, this might involve moving from class 6 (semi-routine occupations) to class 2 (lower managerial).

Heath and **Payne** found little evidence of *long-range social mobility* in Britain during the twentieth century – the majority of intergenerational mobility was short-range and **Yaqub** (2000) estimates around 'two-thirds of all mobility' in the UK (and the majority of Western societies) is short-range. What long-range mobility there was in the

UK (**Heath** and **Payne** estimate around 10% of working-class males move from the working class into the service class, with the reverse being true for service-class males) reflects:

Relative (exchange) mobility: **Paterson** and **Iannelli** (2004) note the available evidence suggests relative mobility in Britain was both small in scale and relatively unchanging throughout the 20th century. As they conclude: 'Between different classes of origin, the relative chances of being in one destination class rather than another have hardly changed at all.' In other words, the chances of an individual moving from the working class to the service class, for example, are extremely low. **Erikson** and **Goldthorpe** (1992) similarly conclude that exchange mobility in Western societies is both low and constant (when compared with *structural mobility*).

Weeding the path

This observation suggests Britain is *not* a particularly:

Socially fluid society: Outside of major structural changes in the class structure, the chances of both upward and downward social mobility are fairly small. In this respect, our society (in common, **Aldridge** (2004) argues, with countries like France, Germany and the USA) seems to exhibit:

Social closure in terms of occupational mobility: **Powell** (2002) defines closure in terms of 'restrictions placed on people's ability to engage in certain occupational endeavours' that are reflected by 'rules and criteria restricting entry into the practice of all but the most menial and unrewarding of occupations'. This results, he argues, in 'collective entry requirements for practising various occupations and professions that effectively work to limit social mobility'. In other words, one explanation for the lack of relative mobility is that it is restricted by the way certain occupational groups act to close off entry to 'outsiders'. In terms of professional work (such as dentistry or accountancy) this idea is sometimes expressed as:

Elite self-recruitment – the ability of elites to ensure their sons (and increasingly daughters) are recruited into the same, or higher, occupational levels as their parents. Recent evidence generally supports this argument. **Stanworth** and **Giddens** (1974) found clear evidence of elite recruitment among company chairmen in large corporations from 1900 onwards. Similarly, **Jeremy** (1998) observed that 'the typical 20th century business leader is upper- or upper middle-class by social origin, rising through the public schools and Oxbridge into the higher echelons of the business community', while **Nicholas's** (1999) survey of the social origins of business leaders from 1850 to the present concluded that his findings 'reinforce the majority case that British business is dominated by elite sub-groups of the population . . . the interconnected socio-economic characteristics of family wealth and a high status education precipitated unequal access to leading business positions'.

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two ways parents occupying elite occupational positions try to ensure the recruitment of their children into a similar class position.

Gallie (2001) identifies a further problem in relation to relative mobility when he notes differences in terms of 'opportunities for skill development . . . a majority of semi- and non-skilled employees are excluded from the broad process of rising skill requirements at work'. He uses the term:

Skill entrapment to suggest that where people receive little in the way of workplace training there are few opportunities to develop new or improved skills, something that, in turn, reduces the possibilities for relative (upward) social mobility (although, as he notes, the chances of downward mobility – through an increased likelihood of long-term unemployment among low-skill workers – is actually increased).

Intergenerational mobility

Aldridge (2004), like **Heath** and **Payne**, suggests this type of mobility has been the most common in our society over the past century and, similarly, suggests mobility has mainly been:

Structural, since 'economic and social change has increased employment opportunities in the professional classes'. This has not only increased the intergenerational mobility of former members of the working class, but also, **Aldridge** argues, 'allowed an increasing proportion of children whose parents were in the higher social classes to remain there'. If this is the case we would expect to see a slowdown in upward intergenerational mobility, as realignments in the class structure start to settle down and close off this particular avenue. In this respect we can note the influence of:

Globalisation in relation to structural mobility: At present economic globalisation in Western societies has had greater impact on the relationship between industrial-type and service-type economies (in terms of, for example, the relocation of (manual) manufacturing employment to developing societies with less government regulation, lower taxation and lower labour costs). However, we are already starting to see a further change with the relocation of mainly routine forms of service employment (such as call centres) to developing countries such as India, Burma and China. If this process continues (with the development of increasingly sophisticated forms of telecommunications and software, for example) it's possible to envisage a situation in which some higher forms of service employment (computer programming, management consultancy, accountancy and the like) are similarly relocated – a situation that may result in an increase in downward (structural) mobility as some parts of the service sector in Western economies contract.

Intergenerational mobility

Aldridge (2001) argues *economic mobility* (defined broadly in terms of income and earnings) has shown a great deal of fluctuation – both upward and downward – in recent years and although it's a narrower measure of mobility than its social counterpart, it still represents a useful indicator of general mobility trends at the *intragenerational* level. In this respect, economic mobility confirms the general trend of social mobility in Britain in that it is generally short-range – incomes tend to rise and fall (in relative terms) across a relatively narrow range. **Aldridge** also argues that upward intragenerational mobility – 'from manual occupations to higher status

professional and technical occupations' – has *declined* in recent years through a process of:

Professional (social) **closure**: A tightening of entry requirements across 'higher-status occupations' has effectively meant they are 'closed from below': in other words, it is impossible to enter these professions without having been through a certain level of education (from A levels, through an undergraduate degree) to professional entrance exams). Where outside entry is not possible, long-range intragenerational mobility across the class structure is curtailed – as indeed are certain forms of short-range mobility from within the middle classes, since transfers from lower status to higher status professions are similarly difficult (**Rajamanickam** (2004) notes the 'territorial struggle between the upstart, clinical psychology, and the established authority of psychiatry over the last three decades').

Digging deeper: The significance of social mobility

We can assess the significance of social mobility on a number of levels, the first of which being whether mobility does or doesn't exist within a society. In this respect, **Chattoe** and **Heath** (2001) argue mobility is important for two main reasons:

- **Pragmatic**: Modern societies require people with the skills and abilities to ensure economic systems function efficiently and this means that economies, if they are to develop and expand, have to make the best use of the talents available. Social mobility, therefore, represents an important mechanism through which people are encouraged to develop and use their talents since it rewards their efforts in various ways (through higher incomes, status and so forth).
- **Political**: Social mobility represents a form of social control for two reasons. At an *individual level* people appreciate their abilities and merits will be recognised and appropriately rewarded – the idea that promotions, for example, are based on merit as opposed to 'who you know' (*nepotism*). On a group level, if a particular section of society, such as ethnic minorities, finds its chances of advancement artificially blocked (through discrimination for instance), such people may develop behaviours that are both socially and economically disruptive.

The potting shed

Apart from rioting, identify and briefly explain one other form of 'social or economic disruption'.

Similarly, **Aldridge** (2001) suggests mobility is a significant concept in terms of what it tells us about:

Equality of opportunity: A lack of mobility in society 'implies inequality of opportunity'.

Social cohesion: This is more likely to be achieved in a situation where people believe they can 'improve the quality of life they and their children enjoy through their abilities, talents and efforts'.

In these terms, therefore, social mobility is both *culturally* and *individually* significant in terms of an ideology of:

Merit – the general idea that people should be rewarded for their efforts and abilities. This concept raises questions about the significance of mobility in terms of whether it is based on structural changes or meritocratic factors.

Disputes

As we've seen, there is no dispute that, over the past century, social mobility has occurred – and continues to occur – in our society. The nature and causes of mobility, and hence its cultural and individual significance, however, are a matter of dispute we can summarise in the following terms:

Absolute mobility: Over the past 25 years or so writers like **Goldthorpe** (1980), **Halsey et al.** (1980), **Marshall** and **Swift** (1996) and **Breen** and **Goldthorpe** (1999) have argued that social mobility has been predominantly *structural* in nature; in other words, mobility that resulted from changes in the economic and cultural organisation of our society (such as the change from a predominantly industrial to a predominantly service economy). In this respect, mobility has occurred almost 'by default' in the sense that it originates from a decline in (mainly working-class) manufacturing jobs and an increase in (mainly middle-class) service jobs – not to put too fine a point on it, there are more jobs defined as middle class in contemporary Britain than in the past.

Relative mobility: **Goldthorpe et al.** (1980) argue this has been both minimal and relatively unchanging (both nationally over the past 50–100 years and internationally among Western societies) – a significant claim because relative mobility is more likely to occur in meritocratic societies; if people are given the opportunity through their abilities, efforts and personal sacrifices to achieve upward mobility we should expect to see high levels of relative mobility (some members of the working class will, for example, work hard to achieve mobility, 'lazier' members of the middle class will experience downward mobility and the like).

Weeding the path

The relationship between absolute and relative mobility is significant for a couple of reasons:

- **Limited mobility**: At a time of rapid structural change mobility will increase; however, once an economy 'settles down' (for example, the change from an industrial to a post-industrial society is complete), levels of absolute mobility will necessarily fall.
- **Social closure**: For **Goldthorpe et al.** (1980) levels of relative mobility are more significant 'in the long run' because they tell us something about the nature of:
  - **society** – such as the extent to which it can be characterised as meritocratic

- **class structure** – the extent to which it is characterised by social closure, for example, and
- **life chances** – in terms of the relation between these and social mobility.

In other words, the significance of **Goldthorpe et al.'s** claim to have found little or no evidence of *relative mobility* is that it suggests that various forms of *social closure* are powerful mechanisms in our society that limit opportunities for mobility.

Weeding the path

Saunders (1995, 1997, 2002) has taken issue with the general body of research we've just outlined, and although the overall arguments about mobility are *very complicated* and *highly technical*; these relate to different ways of *reliably* and *validly* measuring mobility – the 'odds ratios' favoured by **Goldthorpe et al.** that calculate the chances of a child remaining in the class into which they were born as against 'disparity ratios' favoured by **Saunders** that calculate the relative chances of upward or downward mobility for children of various classes. However, interpretations of what constitutes 'merit' and how it can be calculated need not overly concern us here, and we can summarise **Saunders'** main arguments in terms of:

Absolute mobility: **Saunders** argues we shouldn't dismiss 'lightly' the extensive evidence for this type of mobility since it is indicative of a general rise in both living standards and life chances across the class structure. The implication here is that **Goldthorpe et al.** underplay the significance of structural mobility because it doesn't fit neatly with their general argument that mobility is heavily restricted by social closure.

Relative mobility, **Saunders** argues, is far more extensive than **Goldthorpe et al.** suggest, for two reasons. First, it is more difficult to define and measure than absolute mobility, and second, as we've just noted, different types of measurement produce different levels of mobility. A crucial difference here, between the two basic positions, is the assumptions each makes about the causes of mobility.

Goldthorpe et al. assume there are *no innate differences* in intelligence and aptitude between the members of different social classes; given the same levels of opportunity and social development, a working-class child *should* have the same relative mobility chances as a middle-class child, 'all things being equal' – that is, without the intervention of cultural factors, such as schooling differences, that give the latter certain 'mobility inhibitors' (things that prevent downward mobility). On the basis of this assumption (which **Marshall** and **Swift** (1996) argue is justified by the sociological literature surrounding the nature of intelligence and its distribution within the population), the argument here is that:

Educational achievement is a valid measure of 'intelligence and aptitude' as it is mediated through various social factors, such as class, parental income, type of schooling and so forth.

Saunders, however, argues that:

Intelligence, as historically measured through IQ tests, is both a significant variable and one that differs between social classes. Although stopping short of claiming IQ is determined at birth, **Saunders** argues that *social* and *developmental* factors effectively produce the *same* results –

middle-class children are, in general, more intelligent than their working-class peers. On this basis, therefore, **Saunders** claims two things. First, that relative social mobility would be higher in our society if it wasn't inhibited by variables such as class differences in intelligence (*social closure*, in effect, based on 'natural class differences').

Second, because on average middle-class children are more intelligent (and have more intelligent parents), it's not surprising that relative mobility (no pun intended) is not greater. Middle-class children and parents, for example, can insure against downward mobility through educational qualifications (and the fact they generally do better than their working-class peers), while the majority of working-class children are unable to achieve the levels of qualification they need to compete against their middle-class counterparts in the mobility stakes.

Weeding the path

In this situation we are faced with two different interpretations of the relationship between relative mobility and meritocracy. For **Breen** (1997) the absence of relative mobility represents evidence of a *non-meritocratic* society – there is little or no relative mobility *because* of various forms of social closure. For **Saunders**, meanwhile, the absence of large-scale relative mobility is taken as *evidence of* meritocracy – those who are 'most able' in society can, at the very least, insulate themselves against individual forms of downward mobility.

Although arguments about the nature, extent and types of mobility in our society are significant, it should be evident from the above that broad levels of agreement exist over the fact of mobility itself – Britain is, in this respect, a relatively *open system* in which social mobility is seen as both possible and, in many respects, desirable. Although debates over the significance of different *types* of mobility – and how they can be reliably and validly measured – are important, we can complete this section with a number of concluding observations about the *meaning* of social mobility in terms of what it does – and does not – tell us about the nature of our society.

Meaning

Social mobility: One of the problems we have is that mobility can be considered in terms of both the individual and society; in individual terms, for example, upward mobility is generally considered 'good and desirable', and downward mobility generally seen as being 'bad and undesirable'. However, as **Miles** (1996) notes: 'The significance of social mobility extends beyond the personal concerns of particular individuals and their families; for it is the *overall pattern of mobility* which gives shape and structure to society as a whole'. This idea relates, in part, to questions of:

Social cohesion: **Miles** suggests that while 'too little mobility is disruptive because it encourages distinct and potentially antagonist social identities', the opposite may also be true – *too much mobility* can be socially destabilising because it may result in 'disorientation and alienation' and thereby damage social stability.

Life chances and choices: Upward and downward mobilities impact on individual and group life chances both historically (in the sense of intergenerational differences in wealth, for example) and in terms of

intragenerational mobility; those who experience downward social mobility, for example, generally also experience a fall in their general life chances (and vice versa).

Meritocracy and **social closure**: The relationship between these ideas is a complex one – the two are not mutually exclusive in the sense that a 'meritocratic society' is not automatically one where individual life chances are free from various forms of social closure (such as sexual and racial discrimination). **Saunders** (2005) has noted that social closure remains 'a problem' in meritocratic societies in terms of the idea that 'the true test of the openness of a society is not the rate of upward mobility but downward mobility. The real question is whether successful people can help their kids cling on to their status, particularly if those kids are not very bright'. The fact that both merit and closure operate in our society suggests the class and mobility structure is not smoothly tapering but rather a:

Segmented structure: That is, some parts of the class structure are relatively more open (or closed) than others. Both **Marshall** and **Swift** (1996) and **Saunders** (2002) recognise the highest levels of the UK class structure are effectively *closed systems*; it is very difficult, if not impossible, for people from lower down the class structure to break into these higher levels since admission is not simply about wealth – it also involves a sense of culture and history.

Lower down the class structure merit becomes more important – a university education, for example, represents a *ladder* up which it is possible for working-class children to climb and gain entry to professional occupations.

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain two advantages enjoyed by middle-class parents that can be used to explain the relative success of middle-class children in our education system.

The concept of *segmentation*, although similar to that of *fragmentation*, differs in the way it is possible to talk about relatively coherent structures of class, gender, ethnicity and so forth. Within each of these structures different groups experience different levels of mobility based around concepts of *openness* (merit) and *closure* – but the important point is that, taken as a whole, each structure (whether it be middle class and working class, males and females or majority and minority ethnic groups) offers broadly similar experiences to its members. The idea of segmented mobilities, in this respect, can be illustrated by reference to areas like:

Gender, where, as we've seen, various forms of closure (such as glass trapdoors) operate. Nevertheless, new technologies and service industries have, to some extent, acted as *mobility facilitators* by not only opening up a range of occupations to women, but also opening up ways of working (part-time, home office and so forth) that fit with the various choices women make about their lives.

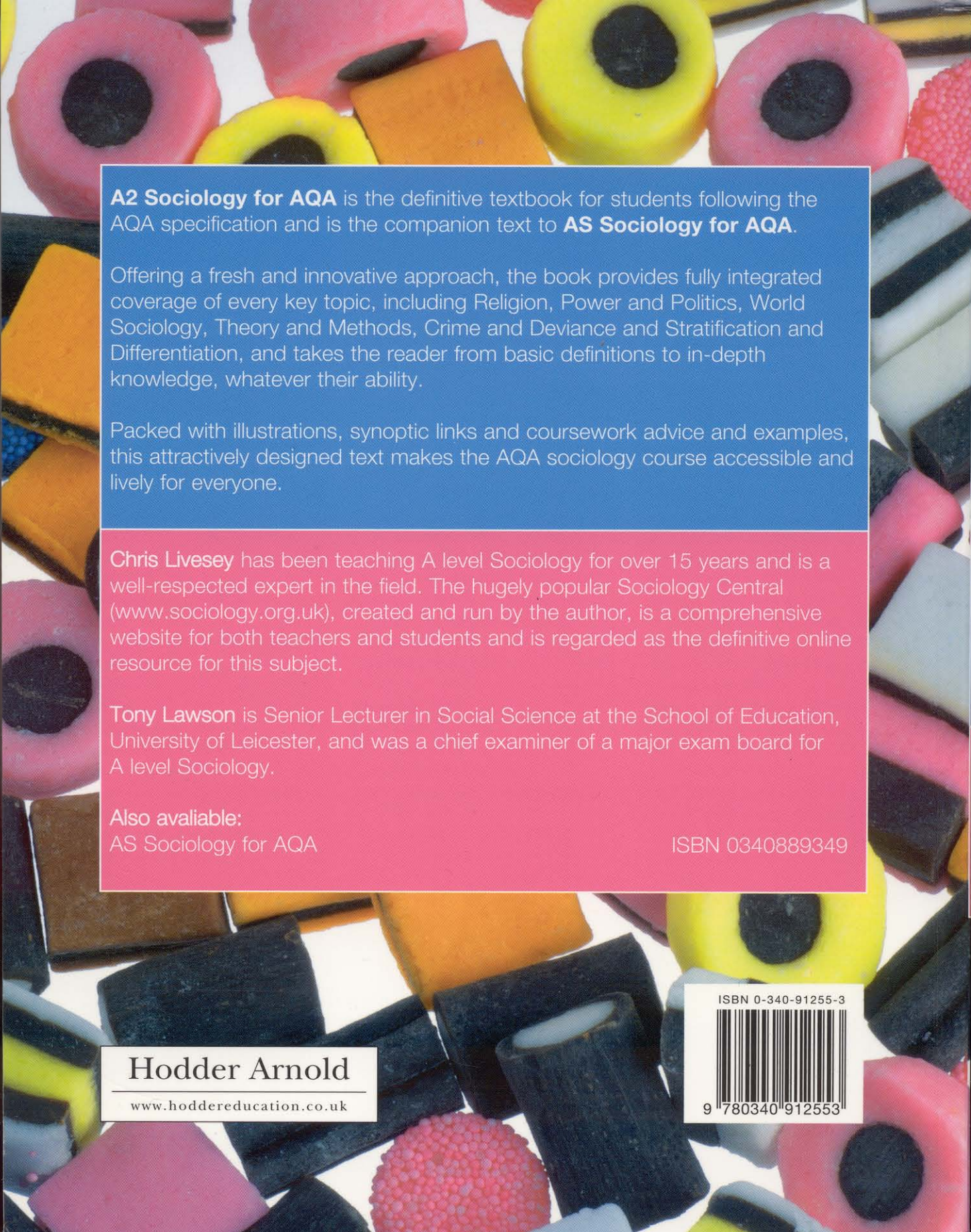
Ethnicity: Although it's possible to see:

Racial discrimination as a form of social closure that blocks off certain occupational levels for ethnic minorities, it's evident that segmented mobility is an increasingly significant concept in the explanation of different forms and levels of mobility among

different ethnic groups. This works in two ways:

First, different ethnic groups experience different levels of mobility, and second, *within* ethnic groups factors such as class, gender and age play a part in the explanation for different mobility rates and experiences. **Platt's** (2003, 2005) research into the relationship between ethnic migration and social mobility reveals a range of interesting facts about segmental mobility.

In terms of *migration*, *first-generation immigrants* from most ethnic groups frequently experienced high initial rates of *downward mobility* – leaving, for example, white-collar employment in their country of origin for manual work in their country of destination. However, the picture is reversed for subsequent generations, with increased levels of upward mobility. Both Indians and Caribbeans in **Platt's** study 'show distinctive patterns of intergenerational mobility' – much of it upward. She also argues that once structural changes have been taken into account, many ethnic minority groups show greater than expected levels of relative mobility.



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