

A-Level Sociology Teaching Notes

Social Inequality: Gender

Gender Stratification

To fully understand this particular section of the course it will be useful if you have a good understanding of:

- a. Feminist perspectives.
- b. The social construction of gender.

If you feel that you do not know enough about these two ideas you should work your way through the "Family Life" Study Packs on gender before proceeding with these Notes.

In addition, as I have suggested throughout this section of the course, there are marked similarities between ethnic group stratification and gender stratification and this should be kept in mind when considering the relationship between various forms of social stratification...

Gender and Class

One of the first problems we encounter when studying gender stratification in modern industrial societies such as Britain is the relationship between social class and gender-based forms of stratification. In pre-capitalist societies the class dimension is relatively insignificant and in many such societies when can view gender as one of the primary forms of social stratification (that is, the idea that the concept of patriarchy is very important in relation to our understanding of power structures in such societies). This "problem" concerning the relative significance of class and gender has several related dimensions:

1. Firstly, what we might call "conventional" analyses of social stratification in modern societies tend to use occupation as primary indicator of an individual's position in the stratification system. traditionally, this has tended to mean "male occupation", with female partners being relegated to either:

- a. A dependent position (as housewife, for example) or
- b. A subservient position (as a lesser wage wage-earner within a family group, for example).

In this respect, women have tended to be classified in terms of a "derived class position"; that is, a class position determined by the position of their (male) partner.

2. Many feminists have challenged the assumption that economic class is the primary (often sole) determinant of positions within a stratification system. While there is no simple "feminist perspective" in this respect, there is a general consensus that even where economic class is important, gender inequalities need to be considered as a means of understanding the true nature of social stratification.

3. The assumption that the "family group" or "family unit" is (indeed, should be) a primary unit of analysis (where the class, status and power of the subservient partner (usually considered to be female) is conveniently considered to be more-or-less statistically equivalent to the dominant partner) has been questioned by a number of feminist writers.

When attempting to study the significance or otherwise of gender as a unit of stratification in modern social systems, we can delineate three basic theoretical positions that have been taken-up by sociologists (each of which will be discussed in greater depth):

- a. Firstly, one that argues that economic class is the primary system of stratification; family partners, in this respect, is assumed to be of the same status.
- b. Secondly, one that argues that we should ignore the family unit when considering social stratification and create a system of measurement that focuses upon individuals in the class structure.
- c. Thirdly, one that holds that we should attempt to create a well-rounded picture of social stratification by attempting to consider both individual and their group membership when assessing the nature of social stratification.

In the above respect, there are a number of models of class / gender stratification that we can examine, but before we do this, it might be useful to draw your attention to the way in which some feminist writers (most notably Helen Hacker) have attempted to show how both women and ethnic minorities have a great deal in common in terms of their treatment in modern industrial societies. In this respect, the argument you might like to consider is the extent to which the experience of being female and the experience of being black are two sides of the same coin (both, in effect, represent "minority status groups").

This parallel is interesting for two main reasons:

- a. It links forms of ethnic group and gender stratification in a way that might allow us to develop general "principles of stratification" that can be applied to all minority status groups in our society.
- b. It highlights the extent to which social stratification takes place within an already (class) stratified system. In effect, we get a "double jeopardy" effect, where women, for example, are classified on the basis of both occupational and gender status, whereas men are classified only on their occupational status.

One of the most interesting things, sociologically, in relation to concepts of gender and ethnicity is the way in which the treatment of ethnic groups and women in our society has shown a marked pattern of similarity. Considering the two concepts refer to quite different ideas, this similarity of treatment is remarkable and perhaps points one way forward in our analysis of status discrimination - by suggesting that there may be universal features to forms of discrimination which, on the face of things, may appear to be very different.

In the next section of these Notes we are going to look, with varying levels of depth, at five basic sociological models of gender stratification:

- a. **The Conventional model.**
- b. **The Cross-class model.**
- c. **The Individual model.**
- d. **The Radical Feminist model.**
- e. **The Class accentuation model.**

However, before we look at each of these models it is important to be clear about what we are and are not discussing in this context. Each of the models suggests ways that we can study the relative positions of males and females in a stratification system (in simple terms, whether we should consider them as a "family unit", as individuals or as a combination of both (see my earlier comments above). In this respect, we are not concerned with an evaluation of the relative merits of patriarchal or class-based analyses of male / female gender relationships. This has been considered in some depth in the Family Life Study Pack "Feminist Perspectives" and you should work your way through this if you are unfamiliar with the sociological arguments surrounding the concept of patriarchy.

1. The Conventional Model.

Although it's not as true now as it has been in the (recent) past, the conventional way for sociologists to discuss the significance of gender stratification was, not to put too fine a point on it, to ignore it. This was not, I hasten to add, to the extent of pretending that gender is not a significant sociological concept (both in itself and in relation to various forms of social stratification), but to the extent of arguing that gender is a secondary form of stratification in modern industrial societies and, consequently, not as significant as social class.

To some extent, modern feminist writers have changed this situation, as we will see in a moment, but it is nevertheless true that there are substantial sociological arguments behind the contention that, in sociological terms at least, class is a more significant concept in relation to stratification than gender. The basic arguments involved in the conventional model can be noted as follows:

1. The class position of a married / cohabiting couple is defined by the class position of the most occupationally active partner. While this does, on a number of occasions, mean the female partner, the structure of occupational activity in our society (indeed, in all modern industrial societies) usually means that the male occupation is considered of primary significance.
2. Single people - male or female - are assigned a class position on the basis of their occupation.

One of the foremost advocates of the conventional model is John Goldthorpe ("Women and class analysis: in defence of the conventional view", 1983) and he argues that there are three very good reasons for adopting this type of model:

- a. Males are more involved in the labour market than females, in the sense that they are more likely to have full-time continuous employment (this being especially applicable in terms of "husband" and "wife" roles).
- b. A wife's pattern of employment can be largely explained by the class position of her husband (in the sense that there is, according to Goldthorpe, a positive correlation between "married" female's patterns of employment and her husband's class).
- c. Contemporary marriages are largely homogenous with respect to class. Two points are noteworthy here:

1. People tend to marry someone of the same - or very similar - class. A marriage between two people of widely differing classes is extremely rare in our society (so rare that it becomes statistically irrelevant in this context).
2. Husbands and wives tend to have the same general class of occupation when both are in full-time work. It is very rare for a male manual labourer to be married to a female company director, for example, and this would suggest that where one partner is not in full-time employment it is a plausible assumption that they are of basically the same social class.

Frank Parkin ("Class, Inequality and Political Order") makes a similar point in the following way:

"Female status certainly carries with it many disadvantages compared with that of males in various areas of social life, including employment opportunities, property ownership, income and so on. However, these 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. Although women today share certain status attributes in common, simply by virtue of their sex, their claims over resources are not primarily determined by their own occupation but, more commonly, by that of their father or husbands. And if the wives and daughters of unskilled labourers have something in common with the wives and daughters of wealthy landowners, there can be no doubt that the differences in their overall situation are far more striking and significant. Only if the disabilities attaching to female status were felt to be so great as to override differences of a class kind would it be realistic to regard sex as an important dimension of stratification."

Both Goldthorpe's and Parkin's argument is not based upon a sexist ideology (that is, the belief that men are superior to women and this is right and proper). Rather, their argument is based upon what they interpret to be the empirical reality of male and female lives in modern social systems. In addition, this view is based upon the argument that, for the vast majority of women in our society, their primary role is still seen to be that of mother / child-rearer. Paid employment is invariably a secondary consideration in families where children are involved. Where married / cohabiting women do work, they are frequently required to perform a "dual role" - that of child-rearer and (mainly part-time) wage earner. Even amongst women at the higher end of the class structure, the female child-rearer role tends to be postponed until later in life rather than eliminated altogether.

There are a number of criticisms that we can note of the "conventional view", both theoretical and empirical.

- a. In an increasing number of households in Britain, the female's income is vital to the maintenance of a particular standard of living, not simply a pleasant "optional extra". In this respect, we could view female employment as being a key factor in determining the class position of a family unit.
- b. Where a married female works, the conventional view tends to assume that her occupation will be lower, in class terms, than that of her partner. This is not necessarily the case and in some instances a woman who works as a nurse, for example, will have a higher class position than a husband who is a bricklayer. In this instance, the female's occupational status might be said to set the standard for the class position of the family group.
- c. Many feminist writers have started to dispute the idea that women do not have a "life long commitment" to paid work. A major problem, for women, is the ability of men to "force" women into a non-paid work role within the family.
- d. There are numerous examples of "cross class" family units where one partner is in an occupation that is significantly higher in status than the other partner - something we will discuss in more detail in a moment.

To complete this section, we can note that the conventional model, for all its possible weaknesses, remains the most widely adopted model in sociology for several reasons:

1. There is a broad agreement across various sociological perspectives that this model is the best available.
2. It represents the traditional way in which class positions have been measured.
3. Although there will be instances which deviate from the norm (for example, an unemployed male as a househusband while his wife works full-time), these are considered to be fairly rare examples that do not invalidate the assumptions that underpin the conventional model of analysis.

2. The Cross-Class Model.

The conventional model is reasonably useful when we look at families where only one partner works or where both partners work in occupations that are of the same or very similar class status (for example, a labourer and a cleaner or a doctor and accountant). However, where partners have jobs that are of a different status, the conventional model makes two basic assumptions, either:

- a. The difference between the two jobs is negligible (for example, teacher and nurse are both defined as middle class occupations) or
- b. One partner's job (usually, but not necessarily, the man's) is considered to be of over-riding importance (for example, the job of the main wage-earner is held to define the overall class of the family unit).

The main problem here is extent to which we can assume that the "family group" is a social unit that combines "husband, wife and dependent children" into what can be effectively considered to be a single entity; different individuals perhaps, but all sharing the same basic norms and values. The validity of this assumption probably depends upon the depth of analysis you want or need to pursue. For example:

a. At the level of the "family group" it is clear that, as the group presents itself to wider society, it does so as a unit that combines individual consciousness into group consciousness. Decisions about such things as the education of children, patterns of consumption and the like are presented to wider society "as given"; that is, the result of a complex process of social interaction between the various members of the family unit is presented to wider society as a form of consensus amongst family members (whether this consensus is real or simply the result of one partner exercising power over the other).

As we have seen when looking at the conventional model of stratification, writers such as Erikson ("The Social Class of Men, Women and Families", 1984) and Goldthorpe and Payne ("On the Class Mobility of Women", 1986) have argued that when looking at the family as a group a "dominance principle" should apply; the class of the household should be based upon the class of the person who has the highest economic class position, providing that they work full-time and so forth. This can be either the male or the female - but in modern industrial societies this is, by and large, the male.

b. At the level of individuals - looking at the process whereby a "decision" is socially constructed through the interaction of family members - the evidence for "family unity" and consensus may be less clear-cut. If we look at individuals rather than the group as a whole, the argument here is that the "unity of outcomes" (that is, the decisions made within family groups as they are presented to the outside world) may be more apparent than real - that such consensus is the result of a "hidden" power struggle in which status (both economic and gender) is a significant variable.

If we are looking at things from this angle / perspective, individual class status will be considered very important, since this is a valuable social resource in any process of social interaction. In addition, because we are using class as an indicator / predictor of a range of likely attitudes and behaviours, we need to be certain that both males and females share very similar norms, values and concerns - and the evidence seems to suggest that this is by no means certain (for example, women tend to vote for more conservative political parties than men).

In this latter respect, therefore, Heath and Brittan ("Women's Jobs Do Make A difference") argue that it is wrong to simply assume that working women are insignificant in terms of class. they argue that, especially in cases of "cross class" (that is, where partners have occupations that are defined as belonging to different social class groupings - a solicitor and a bus driver for example), account should be taken of the "joint social class" when analysing social position.

Feminists such as Eichler ("The Double Standard. A Feminist Critique of Feminist Social Science", 1980) argues that whilst social stratification based upon class is both real and significant, so too, she argues, is stratification on the basis of sex. The main problem she sees, however, is the fact that whilst the former is relatively clear and open as a form of stratification, the sexual stratification tends to be obscured by class stratification. In this respect Eichler argues that sex stratification is hidden from view rather than non-existent.

This problem is related to the idea that "female exploitation" within the home, for example, is not the same as "employee exploitation" within the workforce (although there are evident similarities in terms of the ideologies surrounding each form of exploitation; for example, the idea that employer and employee work together to create "wealth for all" is mirrored by the idea that family partners compliment the primary roles played by each partner to create a "family environment").

As Eichler notes, however, one of the main difference between the two forms is that:

- a. An employee works for money.
- b. A housewife may do domestic labour for a variety of different reasons - love, duty, fear, choice or whatever.

For these reasons, Eichler argues that the family is a "quasi-feudal" institution, whereby the female is bound to the (dominant) male in a form of "master - serf" relationship - each partner has certain rights and responsibilities towards the other, but ultimately it is the male who benefits from this arrangement (however benign and understanding a position he adopts towards his partner).

Various Marxist Feminist writers have further argued that, to fully understand the significance of both class and gender in relation to social stratification we have to adopt a form of analysis that focuses upon both the paid work and unpaid work aspect of role relationships between men and women. In short, that we have to look at the position of individuals within the family unit as well as the unit as a whole. It is this model that we can now outline in a bit more detail...

3. The Individual Model.

For a Marxist feminist perspective, Michelle Stanworth ("Women and Class Analysis") has argued that the various problems created by using both a conventional and cross-class model could be eliminated by the simple expedient of treating each individual in society separately; that is, we attempt to measure the class position of individuals, rather than "groups".

Basing her argument on official statistics showing that approximately 80% of families in Britain had more than one wage-earner, Stanworth further argues that the material position of marriage partners is not necessarily the same or even very similar, since it is not unusual for an unequal distribution of material resources to take place within the family unit - with the male usually taking the greater personal share of "family" resources.

Although this model has a number of advantages in relation to the way in which it might be possible to theorize the relationship between class and gender, there are also a number of possible disadvantages to this model:

1. Male and female involvement in and experience of family life tends to be rather different, insofar as female involvement tends to be rather more central (especially when the female takes-on the role of mother / child-rearer). Since family roles are clearly important an important consideration, we would have to find some way of classifying individuals (male or female) who were wholly dependent upon their partner's income.
2. The relationship between the sexes within a family group has significant consequences for the behaviour of males and females (the fact that two individuals become part of a "family group" changes the nature of their social relationship, for example). In this respect, the occupational class of women tends to be "false" in relation to their level of technical skills and qualifications, mainly because work roles have to be fitted around family child care commitments in ways that are applicable to very few men.
3. Women with children tend to have lower occupational status than single, childless, women. As above, the "social baggage" that many women want - or are "forced" - to carry with them has a direct affect upon their occupational status.

An alternative to this individual model proposed by various radical feminist writers is something that we can consider next.

4. The Radical Feminist Model.

This model has been put forward by various radical feminist writers (Millet, Firestone and so forth) and basically involves viewing women as a "sex class", whereby women are seen to have oppression by men in common (patriarchy).

This model has been fully explored in the Study Pack "Feminist Perspectives", so I do not propose to cover it in any detail here. The basic idea behind the model is that gender stratification is one of the oldest forms of social stratification (pre-dating social class as a form of stratification, for example) and it is seen by radical feminists as the cornerstone on which all other forms of stratification are built.

Thus, whereas, as we have seen, Parkin for example notes the presence of gender stratification but argues class is more significant, the reverse is true for radical feminists - while they note the significance of class, gender stratification is seen to be far more important.

Most criticisms of this model tend to focus upon the theoretical basis of much radical feminist writing, especially the tendency to insist on a "biological basis" to gender differences that has, ironically, a great deal in common with the sexist assumptions made by sociobiologists. For a more detailed evaluation of this perspective, the "Feminist Perspectives" Study Pack will be of use to you.

5. The Class Accentuation Model.

As formulated by Bonney ("Gender, Household and Social Class", 1988), this model has similarities to both:

- a. The conventional model - Bonney argues that most marriages / cohabitations in our society involve partners of the same economic class. The greater the "social distance" between prospective partners, the less the likelihood of their marrying (it is extremely rare, for example, for a working class male to marry an upper class female and vice versa).
- b. The cross-class model - at the margins of each class in the class structure, marriages between people of (slightly) different classes is more common (for example, an upper working class male marrying a lower middle class female).

In basic terms, the idea behind this model is that where family groups have two earners, this distorts (or accentuates) their class position. For example,

- a. A bricklayer with a partner who does not have paid employment will have a certain standard of living.
- b. A bricklayer with a partner who works as a shop assistant will have a different standard of living.

While both families will be classified as working class in occupational terms, their standard of living may be substantially different.

This "accentuation" is apparent throughout the class structure, although it is clear that the higher up the class structure you go, the more significant will be the accentuation. Professional couples (for example, an accountant and a lecturer) will have an even more accentuated class position over both their working class peers and their middle class peers where only one partner is working.

In basic terms, therefore, this model argues that in order to understand the relationship between class and gender we must take into account any "accentuations" to an individual's class position by their association with others (most significantly, their partner and any children they may have).

One of the problems with this model is the fact that it is extremely difficult to operationalise (and is not, therefore, a particularly useful way of measuring either class position or the relationship between class and gender); as incomes and occupational statuses change and as individual occupational status changes, so too must we adapt our measurement of class positions and relationships. In this respect, the very fluidity of this conception of class makes it very difficult to quantify (which is not, of course, to question its validity, only the degree of difficulty involved in operationalising it). In addition, whilst occupation and income are generally good indicators of social class, there are many other variables involved which may be equally significant in the equation.