

Important Determinants of People's Life Chances

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

Determinants, or influencing factors, are present in all types of human cultures. Inequalities exist in the simplest societies where differences in wealth do not exist. In these societies, there are still differences between old and young and between women and men. Even in primitive cultures an individual, for example, might be especially skilled in hunting while others may possess particular powers of healing. These abilities differentiate them from everyone else. Sociologists use the term 'social divisions (stratification) to describe inequities in society. The idea of social stratification is the very essence of the sociology discipline. Social inequality is the most basic characteristic of almost all social behaviors and where a person lies in the stratification system is the most reliable way to predict the individual's behavior, attitude and life chances. Abbott writes, "Social stratification is a characteristic of society, not simply a reflection of individual differences." It can persist from generation to generation and involve beliefs in addition to inequalities. Guillén asks us to think of social stratification like the layering of geologic strata in the earth's surface. In this way, cultures can be thought of in terms of those who are more at the top and those who are less on the bottom.

Abram de Swan argues that it is not so much about how people look at each other, but rather how groups are distinguished from each other. As a result, inequality is the problem and the types of social stratification represent the differences between people. While these differences may begin at birth there are some variables. Max Weber identified three variables that determined the way in which people are treated. These variables are: power, wealth and prestige (Weber). These three variables are examined in this paper in the context of social divisions other than social class that is important determinants of people life chances.

Power

One would be hard-pressed not to find power relations everywhere in society. According to de Swan:

People differ in all sorts of ways. There are differences between adults and children, men and women, employee and employer, the highly educated and uneducated, the light-skinned and dark-skinned and so forth. The perceptible differences that exist between people are socially formed: meaning that within each society certain significance and certain expectation will be attached to them, and these will help determine the impact.

When looking at power in terms of social stratification, we see that there are dependency relationships and a balance of power within a network. Certain people are dependent on other individuals who in turn are dependent on them, and so on. So it follows that power can be defined as the position within a network of dependence relations. Swan writes that people hold power for as long as they are in the positions of power. In order to remain in power, they are dependent on the very people who are dependent on them. Many sociologists have a

distinctive way in which they look at the power. They believe everyone has a role to play in obeying laws and keeping peace in society.

They also look at functional relationships. For example if students did not exist, there would not be a need for universities. Swan concludes, "In modern societies, governments often control their armed forces from separating them: army, navy, and air force compete for funding from the budget, which stops them forming a united front against the government."

When people are in positions of power, they can take advantage of their position to make it stronger, thus making them more powerful. In most cultures, people who hold positions of power are celebrated as individualists and achievers. Those not in positions of power generally do not hold the same social standing or sense of worth. Macdonald and Plummer state, "Inequality is not always injustice; on the contrary all societies endorse some dimensions of inequality as fair while condemning others as wrong. Justifications for social stratification then, from place to place." "Most members of society accept power as legitimate and proper. Power is accepted as a genuine necessity that serves the interests of all society's members. It is also accepted that some people have power and some do not. This leads to an inequity in society and to a way in which people are judged. Another social inequity is the ownership of property or wealth.

Wealth

"Property entails the actual power to dispose of goods, including land and livestock," writes de Swan. Property is not just power over things, but also involves people having goods at their disposal. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines wealth as, "Abundance of valuable material possessions or resources." It can also mean having goods and keeping others from using them. This is known, from a sociological standpoint, as 'exclusive power of disposal.' People often employ their wealth to make others reliant on them. Property can be a very powerful resource and a form of power relationship. This was not always the case. Swan writes, "In nomadic societies - comprising itinerant hunter-gatherers, who feed off the animals and plants they encounter on their travels - no crops are sown, and the land is not cultivated." These nomadic societies did not have the tools we use today. In their society, there was hardly any question of property. They discarded tools after use to dissuade envy and competition for property. Today, the accumulation of property is seen as positive.

Some sociologists suggest that the middle class today gets their life chances from three assets: property assets, organizational assets and cultural assets. The members of the middle class with property, the self employed and small employers would be higher in worth than others. De Swan explains:

Because property implies by definition the exclusion of others, property relations can only endure when this exclusion can be effectively maintained. Property also calls for a non-aggression pact with other possessors and means that possessors must defend their goods from the property less - in agricultural societies this means that the landless,

and in industrial societies it means that those who do not possess land, factories, or machinery, or financial assets.

The ownership of property can have its own relationships of power. Farmer believes the land is their most valuable asset because it can not only take care of their immediate needs but also provide for others. Industrial property is comprised of factories, machines and vehicles. Most people's property consists of their homes and other durable goods. The amount of this type of property that one possesses can raise their worth in terms of social stratification. Learning and knowledge has become an increasingly valuable asset. Acquired skills are valued as important in industrial society. These skills are generally acquired through education. Wealth and property can be measured in terms of money, while power cannot. Often, in order to hold wealth, one must have skills and the commensurate prestige.

Prestige

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines prestige as, "standing or estimation in the eyes of people: weight or credit in general opinion." The amount of esteem, honor related with social positions, an individual's quality and life style can determine a person's prestige. Prestigious people can be described as prominent, highly placed or even grand. Prestigious people are often looked up to as people pay attention to what they are saying. People are usually ranked by the position they hold. The higher the rank, the more prestigious. Prestige is the value that others assign to a particular position. Sociologists have been looked at the prestige of numerous occupations for more than fifty years. Generally, people tend to consider medicine, law and engineering as the highest professions. People also tend to attach prestige to professions that generate a high income. Prestige also is attached with occupations requiring considerable ability and education. Prestige is always noticeable and is considered by the receiving of awards. For example, when a person receives an award we look at them with pleasure and respect. Some people like to show-off they prestige by driving expensive cars or by wearing expensive jewelry. Driving a Ferrari is considered by most as recognition of achieving a higher level of social stratification.

Our modern culture places a high value on working hard and being persistent in reaching the top. For some, the mere appearance on television is sufficient to consider someone prestigious. Comparison is the basis for assigning prestige. For example, the medical doctor would be automatically given greater prestige than the factory worker or social worker. This comparison scale is ingrained in us, although it does change over the years. It is almost impossible to avoid comparisons within the social arrangement. Prestige comes more from personal achievement than from inherited positions in our society. In earlier societies prestige was bestowed based on one's family status. Sometimes people who hold power are considered prestigious, while others in power are not. One position may be more powerful and another more prestigious without any power. According to Macdonald and Plummer:

High prestige and high income go hand in hand. Occupational prestige ranking are much the same in all industrial societies. In almost every society, the more highly ranked work that involves the mental activity from extensive supervision confers greater prestige than lower class occupations that require supervised manual labor.

It is not automatic, but prestige is often associated with the ownership of property or assets. Inconsistencies can occur if a person has power and property but no prestige and vice-a-versa. Esteem can be gained by people who have a great deal of wealth and show off that wealth. Also, society can see the transformation of prestige into power or prestige into.

Conclusion

Central to our understanding of social divisions and life chances is an understanding of social inequalities. There is more to the understanding of social stratification than inequalities in life chances though. All individuals find themselves somewhere among the layers of social hierarchy because of their economic relation to others as well as their social relations and interactions with others. Everyone is forced into real social groupings that continue to duplicate over time. Employment in like jobs and having interactions with others, marriage and kinship all help us to build barriers that close out our social layer from others. Most sociologists think that social divisions comprise a central characteristic of all societies. It shapes both our lives as well as the characteristics of society. Social mobility can be horizontal or vertical. Jon Shepard writes:

Horizontal mobility involves changing from one occupation to another at the same social class level, as when an Army captain becomes a public school teacher, a minister becomes a psychologist, or a restaurant server becomes a taxi driver. Because horizontal mobility involves no real change in occupational status or social status, sociologists are not generally interested in investigating it. Vertical mobility, however, is another story. With vertical mobility, a person's occupational status or social class move upward or downward. When the change takes place over a generation, it is called intergenerational mobility. If a plumber's daughter becomes a physician, upward intergenerational mobility has occurred. If a lawyer's son becomes a carpenter, downward intergenerational mobility has occurred.

While much effort has been made to distribute these equally, they remain as they always have been. A large amount of resources has been expended to educate people about social stratification and for proposed changes. Some sociologists believe that social stratification guarantees that the most capable individuals fill the most important jobs. These qualified individuals are then rewarded for performing their required tasks. In the process, they may achieve power, wealth, prestige or all of them. Some jobs require special talents and skills. Not everyone is capable of learning these skills or developing special talents. Society awards people who are willing to make sacrifices in order to fill these jobs with wealth and prestige. This is why doctors make more money than a construction laborer. A high level of skill is need to be a doctor, while being a construction laborer does not require much skill.

Most people accept the existing social stratification structure. School children are taught that with education and hard work they can succeed. They learn that people on the top of the social stratification have worked hard and applied their abilities, resulting in high self-esteem. Those on the bottom of the social stratification do not have the talent or motivation to succeed and suffer from low self-esteem.

We have examined Max Weber's three kinds of social inequalities: power, wealth and prestige. Society functions because of these inequalities. Power, wealth and prestige are achievable from any social status. It is clear though that these variables are important determinants of people life chances. Looking at Weber's ideas ones comes to the conclusion that in order to achieve social status and power, one must work at it. Just being born into wealth or power does not automatically guarantee power or prestige. It also follows that one can lose prestige by behaving in a manner not acceptable to society, while retaining wealth. Prestige often depends on profession, but also on power and wealth, which tend to follow one's profession, which tends to improve life chances.

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