The Importance of Social Stratification
Theoretical Explanations of Stratification
Individuals’ Social Status: The Micro Level
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So What?

In rich countries, like U.S., Canada, Japan and Western European nations, we assume there are many economic opportunities, and we like to believe that anyone can become rich and famous, but the reality is that our social world is very brutal for many people, and what they experience is rags and famine.
Think About It . . .

1. Why are some people rich and others poor?
2. Why do you buy what you buy, believe what you believe, and live where you live?
3. Can you improve your social standing? If so, how?
4. How does the fact that we live in a global environment affect you and your social position?
Not just anyone can belong to a royal family. One must be born as royalty or marry into it. Members of royal families—such as Prince William and Prince Henry of Britain—grow up in a world of the privileged: wealth, prestige, all doors open to them, or so it appears. Their lifestyles include formal receptions, horse races, polo games, royal hunts, state visits, and other social and state functions. The family has several elegant residences at their disposal. However, like most royalty, William and Henry also live within the confines of their elite status, with its strict expectations and limitations. They cannot show up for a beer at the local pub or associate freely with commoners, and their problems or casual antics are subject matter for front pages of tabloids. In today's world, some royalty are figureheads with little political power; others—such as the Ashanti chiefs in West Africa, King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, King Sihanok of Cambodia, and Emperor Akihito in Japan—have great influence in state affairs.

In Newport, Rhode Island, spacious mansions are nestled along the coast, with tall-masted sailboats at the docks. These are the summer homes of the U.S. aristocracy. They do not hold royal titles, but their positions allow for a life of comfort similar to that of royalty. Members of this class have an elegant social life, engage in elite sports such as fencing and polo, patronize the arts, and are influential behind the scenes in business and politics.

Hidden from the public eye in each country are people with no known names and no swank addresses; some have no address at all. We catch glimpses of their plight through vivid media portrayals, such as those of refugees in Darfur, Sudan, and of impoverished victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 along the Gulf of Mexico coast. They are the poor; many of them live in squalor. Economic hard times have pushed some of them from their rural homes to cities in hopes of finding jobs. However, with few jobs for unskilled and semiskilled workers in today's postindustrial service economies, many of the poor are left behind and homeless. They live in abandoned buildings or sleep in unlocked autos, on park benches, under bridges, on beaches, or anywhere they can stretch out and hope not to be attacked or harassed. Beggars stake out spots on sidewalks, hoping citizens and tourists would give them a handout. In the United States, cities such as Houston; Los Angeles; Washington, DC; and New York try to cope with the homeless by setting up sanitary facilities and temporary shelters, especially in bad weather; cities rely on religious and civic organizations such as churches and the Salvation Army to run soup kitchens.

In some areas of the world, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and India, the situation is much more desperate, and families are actually starving. Every morning at daybreak, a cattle cart traverses the city of Calcutta, India, picking up bodies of diseased and starved homeless people who have died on the streets during the night. Mother Teresa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with those in dire poverty, established a home in India where these people could die with dignity; she also founded an orphanage for children who would otherwise wander the streets begging or die.
Survival, just maintaining life, is a daily struggle for the 37 million people (up 1.1 million from 2003) who live in poverty-stricken parts of the world (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b). (See Map 7.1.) These humans are at the bottom of the stratification hierarchy.

This raises the following question: Why do some people live like royalty and others live in desperate poverty? Most of us live between these extremes. We study and work hard for what we have, but we also live comfortably, knowing that starvation is not pounding at our door. This chapter discusses (1) some explanations of stratification systems, (2) the importance and consequences of social rankings for individuals, (3) whether one can change social class positions, (4) characteristics of class systems, (5) social policies to address poverty, and (6) patterns of stability and change.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATIFICATION**

Social stratification refers to how individuals and groups are layered or ranked in society according to how many valued resources they possess. Stratification is an ongoing process of sorting people into different levels of access to

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**Map 7.1** Gross National Income per Capita, 2003

Source: Finfacts (2005).

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Many mansions in places like Newport, Rhode Island, cost several million dollars, and these may be only summer homes for the owners. For people born into wealth, such opulent living seems entirely normal.

Source: © Nicole K Cioe.
resources, with the sorting legitimated by cultural beliefs about why the inequality is justifiable. This chapter focuses on socioeconomic stratification, and subsequent chapters examine ethnic and gender stratification.

A displaced woman and her children sit beneath a temporary shelter at a refugee camp in South Darfur. A disproportionate number of displaced civilians in the camps are women and children. Although such refugees are clean and tidy people, their disrupted lives often result in illness and famine.

Source: USAID.

Even in affluent North America, some people are homeless and spend nights on sidewalks, in parks, or in homeless shelters that are often dangerous, very noisy, and have no privacy. Sleeping on a sidewalk actually offers more safety than being in an isolated area.

Source: © Thania Navarro.

Three main assumptions underlie the concept of stratification: (1) people are divided into ranked categories; (2) there is an unequal distribution of desired resources, meaning that some members of society possess more of what is valued and others possess less; and (3) each society determines what it considers to be valued resources. In an agricultural society, members are ranked according to how much land or how many animals they own. In an industrial society, occupational position and income are two of the criteria for ranking. Most Japanese associate old age with high rank, while Americans admire and offer high status to those with youthful vigor and beauty.

What members of each society value and the criteria they use to rank other members depends on events in the society’s history, its geographic location, its level of development in the world, the society’s political philosophy, and the decisions of those in power. Powerful individuals are more likely to get the best positions, most desirable mates, and the greatest opportunities. They may have power because of birth status, personality characteristics, age, physical attractiveness, education, intelligence, wealth, race, family background, occupation, religion, or ethnic group—whatever the basis for power is in that particular society. Those with power have advantages that perpetuate their power, and they try to hold onto those advantages through laws, custom, power, or ideology.

Consider your own social ranking. You were born into a family that holds a position in society—upper, middle, or lower class, for instance. The position of your family influences the neighborhood in which you live and where you shop, go to school, and attend religious services. Most likely, you and your family carry out the tasks of daily living in your community with others of similar positions. Your position in the stratification system affects the opportunities available to you and the choices you make in life. The social world model at the beginning of the chapter provides a visual image of the social world and socioeconomic stratification; the stratification process affects everything from individuals’ social rankings at the micro level of analysis to positions of countries in the global system at the macro level.

**Micro-Level Prestige and Influence**

Remember how some of your peers on the playgrounds were given more respect than others? Their high regard came from belonging to a prestigious family, a dynamic or domineering personality, or symbols that distinguished them—“cool” clothing, a desirable bicycle, expensive toys, or a fancy car. This is stratification at its beginning stage.

Wealth, power, and prestige are accorded to those individuals who have cultural capital (knowledge and access to important information in the society) and social capital (networks with others who have influence). Individual qualities such as leadership, personality, sense of humor, self-confidence, quick-wittedness, physical attractiveness, or ascribed characteristic—such as gender or ethnicity— influence cultural and social capital.
Meso-Level Access to Resources

Often, our individual status in the society is shaped by our access to resources available through organizations and institutions. Our status is learned and reinforced in the family through the socialization process; we learn grammar and manners that affect our success in school. Educational organizations treat children differently according to their social status, and our religious affiliation is likely to reflect our social status. Political systems, including laws, the courts, and police, reinforce the stratification system. Access to health care depends on one’s position in the stratification system. Our positions and connections in organizations have a profound impact on how we experience life and how we interact with other individuals and groups.

Macro-Level Factors Influencing Stratification

The economic system, which includes the occupational structure, level of technology, and distribution of wealth in a society, is often the basis for stratification. Haiti, located on the island of Hispanola, is the poorest country in the western hemisphere and one of the poorest countries in the world; it has little technology, few resources, and an occupational structure based largely on subsistence farming. Even its forest resources are almost gone as desperately poor people cut down the last trees for firewood and shelters, leaving the land to erode (Diamond 2005). The economy is collapsing, leaving many already poor people destitute and in the lowest rungs of the world’s stratification system.

The economic position and geographic location of nations such as Haiti affect the opportunities available to individuals in those societies. If the economy is robust and diverse, there is more opportunity for people to raise their status than in poor or stagnant economies. There are simply no opportunities for Haitians to get ahead. Thus, macro-level factors can shape the opportunity structure and distribution of resources.

One problem for Haiti is that it has few of the resources that many other countries in the global system take for granted—a strong educational system, well-paying jobs in a vibrant economy, productive land, an ample supply of water, money to pay workers, and access to the most efficient and powerful technology. Almost all societies stratify members, and societies themselves are stratified in the world system; each individual and nation experiences the world in unique ways. Stratification is one of the most powerful forces that we experience, but we are seldom conscious of how it works or how pervasive it is in our lives. This is the driving question sociologists ask when developing theories of stratification: how does it work?

In India, many people must bath every day in public in whatever water supply they can find. Homeless people must bath this way, but here in Calcutta, even some people with homes would not have their own water supply.

Source: Photo by Elise Roberts.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF STRATIFICATION

Why do some people have more money, possessions, power, and prestige than others? We all have opinions about this question. Sociologists also have developed explanations—theories that help explain stratification. Theories provide a framework for asking questions to be studied. Just as your interpretation of the question may differ from your friends’ ideas, sociologists have developed different explanations for stratification and tested these with research data. These explanations of social rankings range from individual micro-level to national and global macro-level theories.

Micro-Level Theory

Symbolic Interaction

Most of us have been at a social gathering, perhaps at a swank country club or in a local bar, where we felt out of place. Each social group has norms learned by members through the socialization process; these norms are recognized within that group and can make clueless outsiders feel like space aliens. People learn what is expected in their groups—family, peer group, social class—through interaction with others; for instance, children are rewarded or punished for behaviors appropriate or inappropriate to their social position. This process transmits and perpetuates
social rankings. Learning our social position means learning values, speech patterns, consumption habits, appropriate group memberships (including religious affiliation), and even our self-concept.

Consider the example of different school socialization experiences of children. Students bring their language patterns, values, experiences, and knowledge they have learned with them from home. These attributes are referred to as their cultural capital. Schools place children into classes and academic groups based in part on the labels they receive due to their cultural capital. Home environments can help children by expanding vocabularies; developing good grammar; experiencing concerts, art, and theater; visiting historical sites; providing reading materials; and modeling adults who like to read. The parents of higher-class families tend to stress thinking skills as opposed to simply learning to obey authority figures. The result of this learning at home is that members of the middle and upper classes or higher castes get the best educations, setting them up to be future leaders with better life chances (Ballantine 2001). In this way, children’s home experiences and education help reproduce the social class systems.

Symbols often represent social positions. Clothing, for example, sets up some people as special and privileged. In the 1960s, wearing blue jeans was a radical act by college students to reject status differences; it represented a solidarity with laborers and a rejection of the prestige and status games in our society. Today, the situation has changed; young people wear expensive designer jeans that low-income people cannot afford. Drinking wine rather than beer, driving a jaguar rather than a simpler mode of transportation, and living in a home that has six or eight bedrooms and 5,000 square feet is an expression of conspicuous consumption—displaying goods in a way that others will notice and that will presumably earn the owner respect. Thus, purchased products become symbols that are intended to define the person as someone of high status.

Interaction theories help us understand how individuals learn and live their positions in society. Next, we consider theories that examine the larger social structures, processes, and forces that affect stratification and inequality: structural-functional and various forms of conflict theory.

**Meso- and Macro-Level Theories**

**Structural-Functionalism**

Structural-functionalists (sometimes simply called functionalists) view stratification within societies as an inevitable—and probably necessary—part of the social world. The stratification system provides each individual a place or position in the social world and motivates individuals to carry out their roles. Societies survive by having an organized system into which each individual is born and raised and where each contributes some part to the maintenance of the society.

The basic elements of the structural-functional theory of stratification were explained by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945), and their work still provides the main ideas of the theory today. Focusing on stratification by considering different occupations and how they are rewarded, Davis and Moore argue the following:

1. Positions in society are neither equally valued nor equally pleasant to perform; some positions—such as physicians—are more highly valued because
people feel they are very important to society. Therefore, societies must motivate talented individuals to prepare for and occupy the most important and difficult positions, such as being physicians.

2. Preparation requires talent, time, and money. To motivate talented individuals to make the sacrifices necessary to prepare for and assume difficult positions such as becoming a physician, differential rewards of income, prestige, power, or other valued goods must be offered. Thus, a doctor receives high income, prestige, and power as incentives.

3. The differences in rewards in turn lead to the unequal distribution of resources for occupations in society. The result—stratification is inevitable. The unequal distribution of status and wealth in society provides societies with individuals to fill necessary positions—such as willingness to undertake the stress of being chief executive officer of a corporation in a highly competitive field.

In the mid-twentieth century, functional theory provided sociologists with a valuable framework for studying stratification (Tumin 1953), but things do change. In the twenty-first century, new criteria such as controlling information and access to information systems has become important for determining wealth and status, making scientists and technicians a new class of elites. The society also experiences conflict over distribution of resources that functionalism does not fully explain.

Conflict Theory
Conflict theorists see stratification as the outcome of struggles for dominance and scarce resources, with some individuals in society taking advantage of others. Individuals and groups act in their own self-interest by trying to exploit others, leading inevitably to a struggle between those who have advantages and want to keep them and those who want a larger share of the pie.

Conflict theory developed in a time of massive economic transformation. With the end of the feudal system, economic displacement of peasants, and the rise of urban factories as major employers, a tremendous gap between the rich and the poor evolved. This prompted theorists to ask several basic questions related to stratification: (1) How do societies produce necessities—food, clothing, housing? (2) How are relationships between rich and poor people shaped by this process? and (3) How do many people become alienated in their routine, dull jobs in which they have little involvement and no investment in the end product?

Karl Marx (1818–1883), considered the father of conflict theory, lived during this time of industrial transformation. Marx described four possible ways to distribute wealth: (1) according to each person’s need, (2) according to what each person wants, (3) according to what each person earns, or (4) according to what each person can take. It was this fourth way, Marx believed, that was dominant in competitive capitalist societies (Cuzzort and King 2002; Marx and Engels 1955).

Marx viewed the stratification structure as composed of two major economically based social classes: The haves and the have-nots. The haves consisted of the capitalist bourgeoisie, while the have-nots were made up of the working class proletariat. Individuals in the same social class had similar lifestyles, shared ideologies, and held common outlooks on social life. The struggle over resources between haves and have-nots was the cause of conflict (Hurst 2004).

The haves control what Marx called the means of production—money, materials, and factories (Marx 1964/1844). The haves dominate because the lower class have-nots cannot earn enough money to change their positions. The norms and values of the haves dominate the society because of their power and make the distribution of resources seem “fair” and justified. Social control mechanisms including laws, religious beliefs, educational systems, political structures and policies, and police or military force ensure continued control by the haves.

The unorganized lower classes can be exploited as long as they do not develop a class consciousness—a shared awareness of their poor status in relation to the means of production (control of the production process). Marx contended that, with the help of intellectuals who believed in the injustice of the exploited poor, the working class would develop a class consciousness, rise up, and overthrow the haves, culminating in a classless society in which wealth would be shared (Marx and Engels 1955). These are some basic ideas underlying Communist philosophy today.
Unlike the structural-functionalists, then, conflict theorists maintain that money and other rewards are not necessarily given to those in the most important positions in the society. Can we argue that a rock star or baseball player is more necessary for the survival of society than a teacher or police officer? Yet the pay differential is tremendous. Conflict theorists are not convinced that our social reward system (levels of payment) are rooted in enticing people to make sacrifices to obtain the “most important” tasks in the society. These high prestige positions often go to sons and daughters of elites.

Not all of the predictions of Karl Marx have come true. No truly classless societies have developed: labor unions arose to unite and represent the working class and put them in a more powerful position vis-à-vis the capitalists, manager and technician positions emerged creating a large middle class, some companies moved to employee ownership, and workers gained legal protection from government legislative bodies in most industrial countries (Dahrendorf 1959).

Even societies that claim to be classless such as China have privileged classes and poor peasants. In recent years, the Chinese government has allowed more private ownership of shops, businesses, and other entrepreneurial efforts, motivating many Chinese citizens to work long hours at their private businesses to “get ahead.” Only a few small hunter-gatherer societies with no extra resources to allow some to accumulate wealth are classless.

Some theorists criticize Marx for his focus on only the economic system, pointing out that non-economic factors enter into the stratification struggle as well. Max Weber (1864–1920), an influential theorist, amended Marx’s theory by considering other elements in addition to economic forces. He agreed with Marx that group conflict is inevitable, that economics is one of the key factors in stratification systems, and that those in power try to perpetuate their positions. However, he added two other influential factors that he argued determine stratification in modern industrial societies: power and prestige, discussed later in this chapter. Sometimes, these are identified as the “three Ps”: property, power, and prestige.

Recent theorists suggest that using three Ps we can identify five classes rather than just haves and have-nots: capitalists, managers, the petty bourgeoisie, workers, and the underclass. Capitalists own the means of production and purchase and control the labor of others. Managers sell their labor to capitalists and manage the labor of others for the capitalists. The petty bourgeoisie, such as small shop or business owners, own some means of production but control little labor of others; they have modest prestige, power, and property (Sernau 2001). Workers sell their labor to capitalists and are low in all three Ps. The underclass has virtually no property, power, or prestige.

In the modern world, as businesses become international and managerial occupations continue to grow, conflict theorists argue that workers are still exploited, but in different ways. Owners get more income than is warranted by their responsibilities (note the differential in pay for chief executive officers, CEOs), and better educated and skilled people get more income than is warranted by the differential in education (Wright 2000). Moreover, the labor that produces our clothes, cell phones, digital cameras, televisions, and other products are increasingly provided by impoverished people around the world working for low wages in multinational corporations (Ronacich and Wilson 2005). Service providers in rich countries receive low wages at fast food chains and box stories such as WalMart (Ehrenreich 2001, 2005). One controversial question is whether multinational corporations are bringing opportunity to poor countries or exploiting them as many conflict theorists contend (Wallerstein 2004).

Is it possible for a society to be truly “classless” with shared wealth? Why or why not? What empirical evidence might support your position?

The Evolutionary Theory of Stratification: A Synthesis

Evolutionary theory (Lenski 1966; Nolan and Lenski 2005) borrows assumptions from both structural-functional and conflict theories in an attempt to determine how scarce resources are distributed and how that distribution results in stratification. The basic ideas are as follows: (1) to survive, people must cooperate; (2) despite this, conflicts of interest occur over important decisions that benefit one individual or group over another; (3) valued items such as money and status are always in demand and in short supply; (4) there is likely to be a struggle over these scarce goods; and (5) customs or traditions in a society often prevail over rational criteria in determining distribution of scarce resources. After the minimum survival needs of both individuals and the society are met, power determines who gets the surplus: prestige, luxury living, the best health care, and so forth. Lenski believes that privileges (including wealth) flow from having power, and prestige usually results from having access to both power and privilege (Hurst 2004).

Lenski (1966; Nolan and Lenski 2005) tested his theory by studying societies at different levels of technological development, ranging from simple to complex. He found that the degree of inequality increases with technology until it reaches the advanced industrial stage. For instance, in subsistence-level hunting and gathering societies little surplus is available and everyone’s needs are met to the extent possible. As surplus accumulates in agrarian societies, those who acquire power also control surpluses, and they use this to benefit their friends and relations. However, even if laws are made by those in power, the powerful must share
some of the wealth or fear being overthrown. Interestingly, when societies finally reach the advanced industrial stage, inequality is moderated; this is because there is greater political participation from people in various social classes and because there are more resources available to be shared in the society.

Lenski’s 1966; Nolan and Lenski 2005) theory explains many different types of societies by synthesizing elements of both structural-functional and conflict theory. For instance, evolutionary theory takes into consideration the structural-functional idea that talented individuals need to be motivated to make sacrifices by allowing private ownership to motivate them. Individuals will attempt to control as much wealth, power, and prestige as possible, resulting in potential conflict as some accumulate more wealth than others (Nolan and Lenski 2005). The theory also recognizes exploitation leading to inequality, a factor conflict theorists find in capitalist systems of stratification. The reality is that while some inequality may be useful in highly complex societies, there is far more stratification in the United States than seems necessary. Indeed, extraordinary amounts of differential access to resources may even undermine productivity; it may make upward mobility so impossible that the most talented people are not always those in the most demanding and responsible jobs.

The amount of inequality differs in societies, according to evolutionary theorists, because of different levels of technological development. Because industrialization brings surplus wealth, a division of labor, advanced technology, and interdependence among members of a society, no one individual can control all the important knowledge, skills, or capital resources. Therefore, this eliminates the two extremes of have-nots and have-nots because resources are more evenly distributed.

The symbolic interaction, structural-functional, conflict, and evolutionary theories provide different explanations for understanding stratification in modern societies. These theories are the basis for micro- and macro-level discussions of stratification. Our next step is to look at some factors that influence an individual’s position in a stratification system and the ability to change that position.

According to the theories discussed above, what are some reasons for your position in the stratification system?

**INDIVIDUALS’ SOCIAL STATUS: THE MICRO LEVEL**

You are among the world’s elite. Only about 3 percent of the world’s population ever enters the halls of academia, and less than 1 percent has a college degree. Being able to afford the

Philadelphia Eagles Terrell Owens is paid millions of dollars each year to carry a football for 16 weeks, while the public school teacher on the right would take 30 years teaching hundreds of children to read before her total cumulative income for her entire career would add up to one million dollars.

Source: © Tim Shaffer / Reuters / Corbis; © Paul Almasy / Corbis.
time and money for college is a luxury; it is beyond the financial or personal resources of 99 percent of individuals in the world. Spending time and money now to improve life in the future has little relevance to those struggling to survive each day. Considered in this global perspective, college students learn professional skills and have advantages that billions of other world citizens will never know or even imagine.

In the United States, access to higher education is greater than in many other countries because there are more levels of entry—technical and community colleges, large state universities, and private four-year colleges, to name a few. However, with limited government help, most students must have financial resources to help pay tuition and the cost of living. Many students do not realize that the prestige of the college makes a difference in their future opportunities. Those students born into wealth can afford better preparation for entrance exams and tutors or courses to increase SAT scores, attend private prep schools, and gain acceptance to prestigious colleges that open opportunities not available to those attending the typical state university or non-elite colleges (Persell 2005).

Ascribed characteristics, such as gender, can also affect one’s chances for success in life. In Japan and a number of other countries, the imbedded gender stratification system makes it difficult for women to rise in the occupational hierarchy. Many Japanese women earn college degrees but often leave employment after getting married and having children (Japan Institute of Labor 2002). Of 2,396 companies surveyed, the number with women directors was just 72 (less than 3 percent). Furthermore, Japanese women hold only 2 percent of all corporate board seats, and few are on boards of directors (Globe Women's Business Network 2002). Issues of gender stratification will be examined in more depth in Chapter 9, but they intersect with socioeconomic class and must be viewed as part of a larger pattern of inequality in the social world.

Individual Life Chances and Lifestyles

Life chances refer to your opportunities, depending on your achieved and ascribed status in society. That you are in college, probably have health insurance and access to health care, and are likely to live into your late 70s or 80s are factors directly related to your life chances. Let us consider several examples of how placement in organizations at the meso level affects individual experiences and has global ramifications.

Education

Although education is valued by most individuals, the cost of books, clothing, shoes, transportation, childcare, and time taken from income-producing work may be insurmountable barriers to attendance from grade school through college. Economically disadvantaged students in most countries are more likely to attend less prestigious and less expensive institutions if they attend high school or university at all.

One’s level of education affects many aspects of life, including political, religious, and marital attitudes and behavior. Generally speaking, the higher the education level, the more active individuals are in political life, the more mainstream or conventional their religious affiliation, the more likely they are to marry into a family with both economic and social capital, the more stable the marriage, and the more likely they are to have good health.

Health, Social Conditions, and Life Expectancy

Pictures on the news of children starving and dying dramatically illustrate global inequalities. The poorest countries in the world are in Sub-Saharan Africa, where most individuals eat poorly, are susceptible to diseases, have great stress in their daily lives just trying to survive, and die at young ages compared to the developed world. (See Table 7.1.)

If you have a sore throat, you can usually get an appointment to see your doctor. Yet many people in the world will never see a doctor. Access to health care requires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poorest Countries</th>
<th>Life Expectancy, 2005 (in years)</th>
<th>Per capita GNP ($)</th>
<th>Infant Mortality</th>
<th>Richest Countries</th>
<th>Life Expectancy, 2005 (in years)</th>
<th>Per capita GNP ($)</th>
<th>Infant Mortality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>36.97</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>103.32</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>81.15</td>
<td>37,050</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>40.32</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>130.79</td>
<td>San Marino</td>
<td>81.62</td>
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<td>5.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>43.93</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>48.98</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>81.62</td>
<td>24,760</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>42.13</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>121.69</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>80.39</td>
<td>49,600</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
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<td>210</td>
<td>98.23</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>35,840</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
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<td>400</td>
<td>88.29</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>77.71</td>
<td>41,440</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: Infant mortality is per 1,000 live births. (In Canada, the life expectancy is 80.1 years, gross national income is $28.310, and infant mortality rate is 6.5 per 1000 live births.)
doctors and medical facilities, money for transportation and
treatment, access to child care, and released time from other
tasks in order to get to a medical facility. The poor some-
times do not have these luxuries. By contrast, the affluent eat
better food, are less exposed to polluted water and unhy-
gienic conditions, and are able to pay for medical care and
drugs when they do have ailing health. Even causes of death
illustrate the differences between people at different places
in the stratification hierarchy. For example, in developing
countries shorter life expectancies and deaths, especially
among children, are due to controllable infectious diseases
such as cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis, and other respiratory
ailments. By contrast, in affluent countries, heart disease
and cancer are the most common causes of death, and
most deaths are of people over the age of 65. So whether
considered locally or globally, access to health care resources
makes a difference in life chances. To an extent, a chance of
a long and healthy life is a privilege of the elite.

The impact of social conditions on life expectancy
is especially evident if we compare cross-national data.
Countries with the shortest life expectancy at birth illus-
trate the pattern. These countries lack adequate health care,
immunizations, and sanitation; have crises of war and
displacement of population resulting in refugees; and
experience illnesses, epidemics, and famine. Even a drought
has more tragic impact with no other aid resources to help
families cope. By studying Table 7.1, you can compare life
expectancy with two other measures of life quality for the
poorest and richest countries: the GNP per capita income—
the average amount of money each person has per year—and
the infant mortality rates (death rates for babies).

What questions do these data raise regarding mortality and
life expectancy rates?

Note that average life expectancy in poor countries is
as low as 37 years, income as low as $180 a year (many of
the people in these populations are subsistence farmers), and
infant mortality is as high as 139 deaths in the first year of
life for every 1,000 births. Numbers for the richest countries
are dramatically different.

The United States has much larger gaps between rich
and poor people than most other wealthy countries, resulting
in higher poverty rates (more people at the bottom rungs of
the stratification ladder). This is, in turn, reflected in health
statistics. Sweden has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world, a measure of a country’s health
standards, while the United States trails 40 other developed
nations in infant mortality rates (World Fact Book 2005).
The life expectancy of men living in Harlem, a predomi-
nantly poor African American section of New York City,
is shorter that the life expectancy of men living in the
developing country of Bangladesh. By the age of 65, 55 per-
cent of men in Bangladesh are still alive, but only 40 percent
of men in Harlem survive to that age (Himmelstein and
Woodhandler 1992). This evidence supports the assertion
that health, illness, and death rates are closely tied to socio-
economic stratification. Race and gender interact with social
class in ways that often have negative results; these connec-
tions are complex, and many white Anglos experience some
of the hardships that people of color endure.

What are some factors that affect life expectancy in your
family, community, and country?

Family Life and Child-Rearing Patterns
In many countries, higher social class correlates with later
marriage and lower divorce rates. Members of lower classes
tend to marry earlier and have more children, because of
tensions from life stresses including money, problems lead
to less stable marriages and more instances of divorce
and single parenthood.

Child-rearing patterns are also affected by social rankings
and serve to reinforce one’s social class status. For instance,
lower-class families in the United States tend to use more
physical punishment to discipline children than middle-
class parents, who use guilt, reasoning, time-outs, and other
noncorporal sanctions to control children’s behavior.
Lifestyles
This includes attitudes, values, beliefs, behavior patterns, and other aspects of your place in the social world; they are shaped through the socialization process. As individuals grow up, the behaviors and attitudes consistent with their culture and family’s status in society become internalized through the process of socialization. Lifestyle is not a simple matter of having money. Acquiring money—say by winning a lottery—cannot buy a completely new lifestyle (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This is because values and behaviors are ingrained in our self-concept from childhood. You may have material possessions at your disposal, but that does not mean you have the lifestyle of the upper-class rich and famous. Consider some examples of factors related to your individual lifestyle: attitudes toward achievement, political involvement, and religious membership.

Attitudes toward Achievement
These differ by social status and are generally closely correlated with life chances. Motivation to get ahead and beliefs about what you can achieve are in part products of your upbringing, what opportunities you think are available. Even tolerance for those different from yourself is influenced by your social status.

Religious Membership
This also correlates with social status variables of education, occupation, and income. For instance, in the United States upper-class citizens are found disproportionately in Episcopalian, Unitarian, and Jewish religious groups, whereas lower-class citizens are attracted to Nazarene, Southern Baptist, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other holiness and fundamentalist sects. Each religious group attracts members predominantly from one social class, as will be illustrated in Chapter 12 on religion (Kosmin and Lackman 1993; Roberts 2004).

Political Behavior
This is also affected by social status. Around the world, upper-middle classes are most supportive of elite or pro-capitalist agendas because these agendas support their way of life; lower working-class members are least supportive (Wright 2000). Generally, the lower the social class, the more likely people are to vote for liberal parties (Kerbo 2001), and the higher the social status, the more likely people are to vote conservative on economic issues consistent with protecting wealth (Brooks and Manza 1997).

In the United States, members of the lower class tend to vote liberal on economic issues, favoring government intervention to improve economic conditions; however, they vote conservatively on many social issues relating to minorities and civil liberties (e.g., rights for homosexuals) (Gilbert and Kahl 2003; Jennings 1992; Kerbo 2001). The 2004 U.S. presidential election created a conflict for those who vote liberal on economic issues and conservative on moral issues because voters had to make choices about which of these was more important.

The reality is that some people experience high status on one trait, especially a trait that is ascribed, but may experience low status in another area. For example, a professor may have high status but low income. Max Weber called this unevenness in one’s status status inconsistency. Individuals who experience such status inconsistency, especially if they are treated as if their lowest ascribed status is the most important one, are likely to be very liberal and to experience disconson with the current system (Weber 1946).

People tend to associate with others like themselves, perpetuating and reinforcing lifestyles. In fact, people often avoid contact with others whose lifestyles are outside their familiar and comfortable patterns. Life chances and lifestyles are deeply shaped by the type of stratification system that is prevalent in the nation. Such life experiences as hunger, the unnecessary early death of family members, or the pain of seeing one’s child denied opportunities are all experienced at the micro level, but their causes are usually rooted in events and actions at other levels of the social world. This brings us to our next questions: Can an individual change positions in a stratification system?

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY
Describe your own lifestyle and life chances. How do these relate to your socialization experience and your family’s position in the stratification system? What difference do they make in your life?

SOCIAL MOBILITY: THE MICRO-MESO CONNECTION
The film Hoop Dreams followed the story of two talented black teenagers as they pursued their dreams to rise in the basketball world and escape from their bleak neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago (Berkow 1994). Although they faced daily threats from robberies, drug dealers, and peer pressure to commit crimes and to join gangs, the hope of making it big in basketball against astronomical odds drove them on. Such hopes are some of the crudest hoaxes faced by young African Americans, according to sociologist Harry Edwards (2000), because the chances of success or even of moving up a little in the social stratification system through sports are very small. For example, neither of the young men in Hoop Dreams went beyond partial completion of college.

Those few minority athletes who do “make it big” and become models for young people experience “stacking,” holding certain limited positions in a sport. When retired from playing, black athletes seldom rise in the administrative hierarchy of the sports of football and baseball, although basketball has a better record of hiring black coaches and managers. Thus, when young people put their hopes and energies into developing their muscles and physical skills, they may lose the possibility of moving up in the social class.
system, which requires developing their minds and their technical skills; misplaced focus thwarts their dreams of upward social mobility. Of course, systematic discrimination, discussed in the next chapter, also makes upward mobility—even in the world of sports—a difficult prospect.

The whole idea of changing one’s social position is called social mobility. Social mobility refers to the extent and direction of individual movement in the social stratification system. What is the likelihood that your status will be different from that of your parents over your lifetime? Will you start a successful business? Marry into wealth? Win the lottery? Experience downward mobility due to loss of a job, illness, or inability to complete your education? What factors at the different levels of analysis might influence your chances of mobility? These are some of the questions addressed in this section and the next.

Three issues dominate the analysis of mobility: (1) variations in types of social mobility, (2) factors that affect social mobility, and (3) whether there is a “land of opportunity.”

Types of Social Mobility
Most people believe that they can improve their social class ranking with hard work and good education. Intergenerational mobility refers to change in status compared to your parents’ status, usually resulting from education and occupational attainment. If you are the first to go to college in your family and you become a computer programmer, this would represent intergenerational mobility. The amount of intergenerational mobility in a society measures the degree to which a society has an open class system—one that allows movement between classes. In technologically developed countries, there is a severe lack of mobility at the two extremes of the occupational hierarchy—the upper-upper and lower-lower classes—but considerable movement up, down, and sideways in the middle group (Grusky and Hauser 1984; Hauser and Grusky 1988; Slomczynski and Krauze 1987; Treiman 1977). This movement perpetuates the belief that mobility is possible and the system is fair.

Intragenerational mobility (not to be confused with intergenerational mobility) refers to the change in position in a single individual’s life. For instance, if you begin your career as a teacher’s aide and end it as a school superintendent, that is intragenerational mobility. However, mobility is not always up. Vertical mobility refers to movement up or down in the hierarchy and sometimes involves changing social classes. You may start your career as a waitress, go to college part-time, get a degree in engineering, and get a more prestigious and higher paying job, resulting in upward mobility. Alternatively, you could lose a job and take one at a lower status, a reality for many when the economy is doing poorly.

Factors Affecting Mobility
Mobility is driven by many factors, from your family’s cultural capital to global economic variables. One’s chances to move up depend on micro-level factors such as your socialization and education and macro-level factors such as the following: the occupational structure and economic status of countries, population changes and the numbers of people vying for similar positions, discrimination based on gender or ethnicity, and the global economic situation.

Socialization
In industrial societies, change of jobs is most likely to occur at the same socioeconomic level because our socialization and training are most applicable to similar jobs (Sernau 2001).

Education, Skills, and Social Ties
Many poor people lack education and skills such as interviewing and getting recommendations needed to get or change jobs in the postindustrial occupational structure ( Ehrenreich 2001, 2005). Isolated from social networks in organizations, they lack contacts to help in the job search. The type of education system one attends also affects mobility. In Germany, Britain, France, and some other European countries, children are “streamed” (tracked) into either college preparatory courses or more general curricula, and the rest of their occupational experience reflects this early placement decision in school. In the United States, educational opportunities remain more open to those who can afford them.

Occupational Structure and Economic Vitality
The global structure, a country’s position as a rich or poor country in the world system, affects the chances for individual mobility. As agricultural work is decreasing and technology jobs increasing (Hurst 2004), these changes in the
composition and structure of occupations affect individual opportunity. The health of a country’s economy in the global system shapes employment chances of individuals.

Population Trends
The fertility rates, or number of children born at a given time, influence the number of people who will be looking for jobs. The U.S. nationwide baby boom that occurred following World War II resulted in a flood of job applicants and downward intergenerational mobility for the many who could not find work comparable to their social class at birth. By contrast, the smaller group following the baby boomer generation had fewer competitors for entry-level jobs. Baby boomers hold many of the executive and leadership positions today, so promotion has been hard for the next cohort. As baby boomers retire, opportunities will open up and mobility should increase.

Gender and Ethnicity
Many women and ethnic minority groups, locked in a cycle of poverty, dependence, and debt, have little chance of changing their status. Women in the U.S. workforce, for instance, are more likely than men to be in dead-end clerical and service positions with no opportunity for advancement. In the past three decades, the wage gap between women and men has narrowed and women now earn 81 percent of what men earn (U.S. Census Bureau 2005b; U.S. Department of Labor 2005) compared to 60 percent in 1980. The competition for jobs among baby boomers is more intense because more women are looking for jobs; in most cases, the economy has adjusted to the larger workforce. Special circumstances such as war have often allowed women and others who were denied access to good jobs to get a “foot in the door” and actually enhance the upward mobility prospects of women and ethnic groups.

Some people experience privilege (e.g., white, European-born, native-speaking males who are in the middle class or higher); some experience disprivilege due to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, or a combination of these. Be aware that various forms of inequality intersect in our society in highly complex ways.

The Interdependent Global Market and International Events
If the Asian stock market hiccupps, it sends ripples through world markets. If high-tech industries in Japan or Europe falter, North American companies in Silicon Valley, California, may go out of business, costing many professionals their lucrative positions. In ways such as these, the interdependent global economies affect national and local economies, and that affects individual families.

Whether individuals move from “rags to riches” is not determined solely by their personal ambition and work ethic. Mobility for the individual, a micro-level event, is linked to a variety of events at other levels of the social world model.
Do you know individuals who have lost jobs because of economic slowdowns or gotten jobs because of economic booms and opening opportunities? What changes have occurred in their mobility and social class?

Is There a “Land of Opportunity”?

Cross-Cultural Mobility

Would you have a better chance to improve your status in England, Japan, the United States, or some other country? If there is a land of opportunity where individuals can be assured of improving their economic and social position, it is not simple to identify. Countless immigrants have sought better opportunities in new locations. Perhaps your parents or ancestors did just this. The reality of the land of opportunity depends on the historical period and economic conditions, social events, and political attitudes toward foreigners when the immigrants came, their personal skills, and their ability to blend into the new society.

During economic growth periods, many immigrants have found great opportunities for mobility in the United States and Europe. Early industrial tycoons in railroads, automobiles, steel, and other industries are examples of success stories. Today, the number of millionaires in the United States has skyrocketed to 5 million, four times the number a decade ago. Yet such wealth eludes most people who immigrate and must work multiple low-paying jobs just to feed their families and stay out of poverty.

Opportunities for upward mobility have changed significantly with globalization. Many manufacturing jobs in the global economy have moved from developed to developing countries with cheap labor, reducing the number of unskilled and low-skilled jobs available in developed countries (Krymkowski and Krause 1992). Multinational corporations look for the cheapest sources of labor, mostly in developing countries with low taxes, no labor unions, few regulations, and workers needing jobs. Today, only 14 percent of United States workers are in manufacturing jobs, while the percentage of workers grows in low-level service jobs and in high-skilled, high-tech jobs careers. The high-tech positions are good news for those with college degrees and technical skills, but the loss of laboring positions and replacement in fast-food and box store chains (e.g., WalMart, K-Mart, Home Depot, Lowe's) means a severe loss of genuine opportunity for living wages.

Although the new multinational industries springing up in developing countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines provide opportunities for mobility to those of modest origins, much of the upward mobility in the world is taking place among those who come from small, highly educated families with “get-ahead” values and who see education as a route to upward mobility (Blau and Duncan 1967, Featherman and Hauser 1978; Jencks 1979; Rothman 2005). They are positioned to take advantage of the changing occupational structure and high-tech jobs. As the gap between rich and poor individuals and countries widens, more individuals are moving down than up in the stratification system.

What Are Your Chances for Mobility?

College education is the most important factor in moving to high-income status in developed countries. In fact, the
economic rewards of a college degree have increased; those with degrees become richer, and those without become poorer. This is because of changes in occupational structures, creating new types of jobs and a new social class with skills for the computer information age. These “social-cultural specialists” who work with ideas, knowledge, and technology contrast with the old middle class of technocrats, manufacturers, business owners, and executives (Brint 1984; Florida 2004; Hurst 2004).

With the rapid growth of postindustrial economies and computer technologies, fewer unskilled workers are needed, resulting in underemployment or unemployment for this group, who will continue to live at the margins in information societies, forming the lower class. Do you know individuals who are being nickel-and-dimed in today’s economic environment? The next Sociology in Your Social World discusses this situation.

**MAJOR STRATIFICATION SYSTEMS: MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS**

Barak’s family works on a plantation in Mozambique. He tries in vain to pay off the debts left by his father’s family. However hard he and his wife and children work, they will always be in debt; they cannot pay the total amount due for their hut or food from the owner’s store. Basically, they are slaves—they do not have control over their own labor. They were born into this status, and there they will stay!

Imagine being born into a society in which you have no choices or options in life. You could not select an occupation that interested you, could not choose your mate, could not live in the part of town you favor. You would see wealthy aristocrats parading their advantages and realize that this would never be possible for you. You could never own land or receive the education of your choice.

The situation described above is reality for millions of people in the world; the situation into which they are born is where they spend their lives. All individuals are born with certain characteristics over which they have no control.
**Sociology in Your Social World**

### Nickel-and-Dimed

Have you or has someone you know held a minimum wage job? Did you have to support yourself and maybe other family members on that wage, or was it just pocket money? Millions in the United States live in this world of unskilled laborers, getting from $5.15 to $7 an hour for their work. Author Barbara Ehrenreich asked how individuals and families, especially those coming off welfare and onto workfare programs, survive on these wages. To find out, she tried it herself. Living in several cities—Key West, Florida; Portland, Maine; and Minneapolis, Minnesota—she held jobs as a waitress, retail clerk at WalMart, hotel housekeeper, and nursing home aide. Each job demanded special skills, and each was physically and mentally demanding.

After describing the details of each job and the lives of her coworkers, Ehrenreich concludes that people are earning far less than they need to live on. Her coworkers struggled to meet minimum housing costs (sometimes living in cars), bought cheap food, shopped at thrift stores, and often had to piece together their lives. Transportation, child care, and health care were problems, and these individuals and families were constantly in debt.

“The Economic Policy Institute recently reviewed dozens of studies of what constitutes a living wage and came up with an average figure of $30,000 a year for a family of one adult and two children, which amounts to a wage of $14 an hour” (Ehrenreich 2001:214). This budget includes health insurance, a telephone, and child care, but no extras, and more than most minimum wage workers have. Upward mobility for this large group in the population is difficult if not impossible. Ehrenreich’s research makes it clear: to be a society of at least minimal opportunity for all, we must reconsider economic policies to better address underpaid workers as well as the unemployed.

*Source: Ehrenreich (2001).*

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(e.g., family background, age, sex, and race); in **ascribed stratification systems**, these characteristics determine one's position in society. In contrast, **achieved stratification systems** allow individuals to earn positions through their ability and effort. For instance, in a class system, it is sometimes possible to achieve a higher ranking by working hard, obtaining education, inheriting wealth, gaining power, or doing other things that are highly valued in that culture.

**Ascribed Status: Caste and Estate Systems**

Caste systems, the most rigid ascribed systems, are maintained by cultural norms and social control mechanisms that are deeply imbedded in religious, political, and economic institutions. Individuals born into caste systems have predetermined occupational positions, marriage partners, residences, social associations, and prestige levels. A person's caste is easily recognized through clothing, speech patterns, family name and identity, skin color, or other distinguishing characteristics. Individuals learn their place in society through the process of socialization that begins in their earliest years. To behave counter to caste prescriptions would be to go against religion and social custom, and religious ideas dictate that one's status after death (in Christian

The caste system, which prevailed in India for many years, has weakened with influence from the global social system.

*Source: Photo by Elise Roberts.*
The Outcastes of India

The village south of Madras in the state of Tamil Nadu was on an isolated dirt road, one kilometer from the nearest town. It consisted of a group of mud and stick huts with banana leaf thatched roofs. As our group of students arrived, the Dalit villagers lined the streets to greet us—and stare. Many had never seen Westerners. They played drums and danced for us and threw flower petals at our feet in traditional welcome.

Through our translator, we learned something of their way of life. The adults work in the fields long hours each day, plowing and planting with primitive implements, earning about eight cents from the landowner, often not enough to pay for their daily bowl of rice. Occasionally, they catch a frog or bird to supplement their meal. In the morning, they drink rice gruel, and in the evening eat a bowl of rice with some spices. Women and children walk more than a kilometer to the water well—but the water is polluted during the dry season. There are no privies but the fields. As a result of poor sanitation, inadequate diet, and lack of health care, many people become ill and die from easily curable health problems. For instance, lack of vitamin A, found in many fruits and vegetables to which they have little access, causes blindness in many village residents. Although the children have the right to go to the school in the closest village, many cannot do so because they have no transportation, shoes, or money for paper, pencils, and books. Also, the families need them to work in the fields alongside their parents or help care for younger siblings. Many taboos rooted in tradition separate the Dalit from other Indians. For instance, they are forbidden to draw water from the village well, enter the village temple, or eat from dishes that might be used later by people of higher castes. The latter prohibition eliminates most dining at public establishments. Ninety-five percent are landless and earn a living below subsistence level.

Dalits who question these practices have been attacked and their houses burned. In one instance, 20 houses were burned on the birthday of Dr. Ambedkar, a leader in the Dalit rights movement. Official records distributed by the Human Rights Education Movement of India state that every hour, two Dalits are assaulted, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit houses are burned (Dalit Liberation Education Trust 1995; Thiagaraj 1994; Wilson 1993). This group in the bottom rung of the stratification system has a long fight ahead to gain the rights that many of us take for granted.

A few Dalit have migrated to cities where they blend in, and some of these have become educated and are now leading the fight for the rights and respect guaranteed by law. Recently, unions and interest groups have been representing the Dalit, and some members turn to religious and political groups that are more sympathetic to their plight, such as Buddhists, Christians, or Communists.

denominations) or one’s next reincarnation or rebirth (in the Hindu tradition) might be in jeopardy. Stability is maintained by the belief that one can be reborn into a higher status in the next life if one fulfills expectations in their ascribed—socially assigned—position in this life. Thus, believers in both religions work hard in hopes of attaining a better life next time around. The institution of religion works together with the family, education, economic and political institutions to shape (and sometimes reduce) both expectations and aspirations and to keep people in their prescribed places in caste systems.

The clearest example of a caste system is found in India. The Hindu religion holds that individuals are born into one of four varna, broad caste positions, or into a fifth group below the caste system, the outcaste group. The first and highest varna, called Brahmans, originally was made up of priests and scholars; it now includes many leaders in society. The second varna, Kshatriyas or Rajputs, includes the original prince and warrior varna, and now makes up much of the army and civil service. The Vaishyas, or merchants, are the third varna. The fourth varna, the Sudras, include peasants, artisans, and laborers.

The final layer, below the caste system, encompasses profoundly oppressed and broken people—“a people put aside”—referred to as untouchables, outcasts, Chandalas (a Hindu term), and Dalits (the name preferred by many “untouchables” themselves). Although the Indian Constitution of 1950 granted full social status to these citizens, and a law passed in 1955 made discrimination against them punishable, deeply rooted traditions are difficult to change. Caste distinctions are still very prevalent, especially in rural areas, as seen in the discussion in the next Sociology around the World.
Just as the position of individuals in caste systems is ascribed, estate systems are similarly rigid in stratifying individuals. **Estate systems** are characterized by the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a small minority of political-military elite, with the peasantry tied to the land (Rothman 2005). During the Middle Ages, knights defended the realms and the religion of the nobles. Behind every knight in shining armor were peasants, sweating in the fields and paying for the knights’ food, armor, and campaigns. For framing the land owned by the nobility, peasants received protection against invading armies and enough of the produce to survive. Their life was often miserable; if the crops were poor, they ate little. In a good year, they might save enough to buy a small parcel of land. A very few were able to become independent in this fashion.

Estate systems are based on ownership of land, the position one is born into, or military strength; an individual’s rank and legal rights are clearly spelled out, and arranged marriages and religion bolster the system. Estate systems existed in ancient Egypt, the Incan and Mayan civilizations, Europe, China, and Japan. Today, similar systems exist in some Central and South American, Asian, and African countries with large banana, coffee, and sugar plantations, as exemplified in the opening example of Barak in Mozambique. Over time, development of a mercantile economy resulted in modifications in the estate system. Now, peasants often work the land in exchange for the right to live there and receive a portion of the produce.

**Achieved Status: Social Class Systems**

Social class systems of stratification are based on achieved status. Members of the same social class have similar income, wealth, and economic position. They also share comparable styles of living, levels of education, cultural similarities, and patterns of social interaction. Most of us are members of class-based stratification systems, and we take advantage of opportunities available to our social class. Our families, rich or poor, educated or unskilled, provide us with an initial social ranking and socialization experience. We tend to feel a kinship and sense of belonging with those in the same social class—our neighborhood and work group, our peers and friends. We think alike, share interests, and probably look up to the same people as a reference group. Our social class position is based on the three main factors determining positions in the stratification system: property, power, and prestige.

Compared with systems based on ascribed status, achieved status systems maintain that everyone is born with common legal status; everyone is equal before the law. In principle, all individuals can own property and choose their own occupations. However, in practice, wealth affords better legal representation; similarly, most class systems pass privilege or poverty from one generation to the next, and individual upward or downward mobility is never guaranteed.

**Property, Power, and Prestige**

This is the trio that, according to Max Weber, determines where individuals rank in relation to each other (Weber 1946, 1964). Positions in social stratification systems, according to Weber, are determined by these three elements and the opportunities the individual has to gain these. By property (wealth), Weber refers to owning or controlling the means of production. Power, the ability to control others, includes not only the means of production but also the position one holds. Prestige involves the esteem and recognition one receives, based on wealth, position, or accomplishments. Table 7.2 gives examples of households in the upper and lower social classes; it illustrates the variables that determine a person’s standing in the three areas listed above.

Although these three dimensions of stratification are often found together, this is not always so. Recall the idea of status inconsistency: an individual can have a great deal of prestige yet not command much wealth (Weber 1946). Consider winners of the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize such as Wangari Maathai of Kenya, Rigoberta Menchu of Guatemala, or Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan of Northern Ireland; none of them is rich, but each has made contributions to the world that have gained them prestige around the world. Likewise, some people gain enormous wealth through crime or gambling, but this wealth may not be accompanied by respect or prestige.
The Economic Factor
One's income, property, and total assets comprise one's wealth. These lie at the heart of class differences. The contrast between the royal splendor described in the opening of this chapter and the daily struggle for survival of those in poverty is an example of the differences extreme wealth creates. Another example is shown in the income distribution in the United States by quintiles (see Table 7.3). Note that there has been minimal movement between the groups over the years. Although income distribution in the United States has not changed dramatically over time, there has been an increase in overall inequality as the middle class has decreased by over 8 percent since 1969. Majority of the 8 percent have experienced a downward movement, although a few have moved up in the stratification system (Duncan, Rodgers, and Smeeding 1993; Rose 2000).

The Power Factor
Power refers to the ability to control or influence others, to get them to do what you want them to do. Positions of power are gained through family inheritance, family connections, political appointments, education, hard work, or friendship networks. Two theories dominate the explanations of power—power elite and pluralist theories.

We discussed previously the conflict theorists' view that those who hold power are those who control the economic capital and the means of production in society (Ashley and Orenstein 2005). Consistent with Marx, many recent conflict theorists have focused on a power elite—individuals with powerful positions in political, business, and military arenas (Domhoff 2001; Mills 1956). These people interact with each other and have a kind of conspiracy to ensure that their power is not threatened; they each tend to protect the power of the other. The idea is that those who are not in this interlocking elite group do not hold real power (Dye 2002).

Pluralist theorists argue that power is not held exclusively by an elite group but is shared among many power centers, each of which has its own self-interests to protect (Ritzer and Goodman 2004). Pluralists contend that well-financed special interest groups (e.g., dairy farmers or truckers' trade unions) and professional associations (e.g., the American Medical Association) have considerable power through collective action. Officials who hold political power

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**TABLE 7.2 Basic Dimensions of Social Stratification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Economic) Class Variables</th>
<th>Prestige Variables</th>
<th>(Political-Legal) Power Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Occupational Prestige</td>
<td>Political Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth</td>
<td>Subjective Development</td>
<td>Political Legitimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Consumption Participation in group life</td>
<td>Legislation and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Evaluations of Race, Religion, Ethnicity</td>
<td>Governmental Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Stability</td>
<td></td>
<td>Distribution of Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education of Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households in the upper social class</td>
<td>Affluence: economic security and power, control over material and human investment Income from work but mostly from property</td>
<td>More integrated personalities, more consistent attitudes, and greater psychic fulfillment due to deference, valued associations, and consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households in the lower social class</td>
<td>Destitution: worthlessness on economic markets</td>
<td>Unintegrated personalities, inconsistent attitudes, sense of isolation and despair; sleazy social interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Contains examples of values in the top and bottom classes within each dimension and examples of subdimensions. For expository purposes, religious and ethnic or racial rankings are omitted.

**TABLE 7.3 Share of Household Income in Quintiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quintiles</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowest quintile</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second quintile</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third quintile</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth quintile</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest quintile</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>49.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of highest fifth to lowest fifth</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau (2000, 2005b).
are vulnerable to pressure from influential interest groups, and each interest group competes for power with others. Creating and maintaining this power through networks and pressure on legislators is the job of lobbyists. For example, in the ongoing U.S. debate over health care legislation, interest groups from the medical community, insurance lobbies, and citizens’ groups wield their power to influence the outcome, but since these major interests conflict and no one group has the most power, no resolution has been reached.

**The Prestige Factor**

Prestige refers to an individual’s social recognition, esteem, and respect commanded from others. An individual’s prestige ranking is closely correlated with the value system of society; chances of being granted high prestige improve if one’s patterns of behavior, occupation, and lifestyle match those that are valued in the society. Among high-ranked occupations across nations are scientists, physicians, military officers, lawyers, and college professors. Table 7.4 shows selected occupational prestige rankings in the United States. Obtaining material possessions or increasing one’s educational level can boost prestige but in themselves cannot change class standing.

Describe your own wealth, power, and prestige in society. Does your family have one factor but not others? What difference does each of the factors make in your life?

### Social Classes in the United States

When asked about their social class, most people in the United States identify themselves as middle class, and in the current economic structure, most people are middle class. However, there is slight movement to the upper class and somewhat more movement to the lower class, resulting in a shrinking middle class. As noted previously, the U.S. system allows for mobility within the middle class, but there is little movement at the very top and very bottom of the social ladder. People in the top rung often use the power and wealth to insulate themselves and protect their elite status, and the bottom group is insulated because of vicious cycles of poverty that are hard to break (Gilbert and Kahl 2003).

The middle class, as defined by sociologists, makes up about 40 percent of the population in the United States, depending on what economic criteria are used (Rose 2000). Since most people identify themselves as “middle class,” this section focuses on characteristics of that group, although much research has been done on each social class. Wages and salaries in the middle classes have declined since the 1980s, but those of the upper classes have risen. Reasons for middle-class decline include downsizing and layoffs of workers, technological shifts, competition, free trade, and trade deficits between countries, immigration, and deregulation—all macro-level economic trends that mean lower incomes for middle-class workers. The top 20 percent of income earners increased their percentage of the total income available in the United States by almost 6 percent between 1977 and 2005,

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**TABLE 7.4**  
**Prestige of 17 Professions and Occupations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base: All Adults</th>
<th>Very Great</th>
<th>Considerable</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>Hardly Any</th>
<th>Not Sure/Refused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prestige %</td>
<td>Prestige %</td>
<td>Prestige %</td>
<td>Prestige at All %</td>
<td>Refused %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientist</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military officer</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priest/minister/clergyman</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of Congress</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainer</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business executive</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union leader</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with the top 5 percent receiving 22 percent of all income. Changes in class groups are due largely to structural changes in society; the upward movement among the few who have received huge gains in earning power is causing wages and earnings to become more unequal.

Upper middle-class families typically have high income, high education, high occupational level (in terms of prestige and other satisfactions), and high participation in political life and voluntary associations. Families enjoy a stable life, stressing companionship, privacy, pleasant surroundings in safe neighborhoods, property ownership, and stimulating associations. They stress internalization of moral standards of right and wrong, taking responsibility for one's own actions, learning to make one's own decisions, and training for future leadership positions.

The lower middle class includes small businesspeople and farmers; semiprofessionals (teachers, local elected officials, social workers, nurses, police officers, firefighters); middle-management personnel, both private and public; and sales and clerical workers in comfortable office settings. Families are relatively stable; they participate in community life, and while they are less active in political life than the upper classes, they are more political than those in classes below. Children are raised to work hard and obey authority. Therefore, childrearing patterns more often involve swift physical punishment for misbehavior than talk and reasoning that is typical of the upper-middle class.

How does today's popular culture on TV, films, magazines, and popular music groups depict different social classes? How are poor people depicted, and who is responsible for their poverty? Do any forms challenge the U.S. class system? What kinds of music are class based?

Stories about hunger and famine in Third World countries fill the newspapers, but one hardly expects to see hunger in rich countries. Eighty-eight percent of U.S. households had enough food for the family in 2004. However, 13.5 million U.S. households (11.9 percent of all households) did not have enough food at some time during the year due to lack of money or other resources. In 4.4 million households (3.9 percent), some were hungry (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2005a). The poor come from disenfranchised groups such as the homeless, unemployed, single parents, disabled, elderly, and migrant workers. On average, about 23.9 million people living in 10.3 million households receive food stamps in the United States each month (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2005b). With downturns in employment, low wages, and reduced aid to poor families, hunger and poor health are likely to continue. Consider the case of adolescents growing up poor, discussed in the next How Do We Know?

The poor—the underclass—have no permanent or stable work or property based income, only casual or intermittent earnings in the labor market. They are often dependent on help from government agencies or private organizations to survive. In short, they have personal troubles in large part because they have been unable to establish linkages and networks in the meso- and macro-level organizations of our social world. They have no collective power and, thus, little representation of their interests and needs in the political system.

Sociologists recognize two basic types of poverty: absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty, not having resources to meet basic needs, means no prestige, no access to power, no accumulated wealth, and insufficient means to survive. While absolute poverty in the United
States is quite limited, the Dalit of India, described earlier in The Outcastes of India, provide an example; they often die of easily curable diseases because their bodies are weakened by chronic and persistent hunger and almost total lack of medical attention.

Relative poverty refers to those whose income falls below the poverty line, resulting in an inadequate standard of living relative to others in a given country. In most industrial countries, relative poverty means shortened life expectancy, higher infant mortality, and poorer health, but not many people die of starvation or easily curable diseases, such as influenza.

The feminization of poverty refers to the trend in which single females, increasingly younger and with children, make up a growing proportion of those in poverty. Vicki’s situation provides an example. Her life has been hard! After her parents divorced, she quit high school to take odd jobs to help her mother pay the bills. Eighteen, pregnant, and the baby’s father out of the picture, she lived on welfare, then workfare because without a high school degree she could not get a job that paid enough to support herself and her baby. She became homeless, living out of her defunct car that would not run because she lacked the money to repair it. Her life spiraled out of control, and she is now in a mental facility, her daughter placed in foster care.

While we do not like to admit that this can happen in the United States or Canada, and we try to blame the victim (why did she not just finish high school, not get pregnant, have an abortion), people do what they must to survive. The fact is that social policies such as workfare affect poor people’s
chances of success. This problem is heightened as many middle-class women are pushed into poverty through divorce; they sacrificed their own careers for husbands and family so their earning powers are often inadequate and many are unable to collect on child support. The numbers in poverty are highest in and around large central cities such as Paris, France; Mexico City, Mexico; Sao Paulo, Brazil; and Caracas, Venezuela. In the United States, numbers are highest in cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Los Angeles, where the percentage of poor African American families headed by females reaches close to 50 percent in some cities. Girls who grow up in female-headed households or foster homes, without a stable family model, are more likely to become single teen mothers and to live in poverty, causing disruption in their schooling, employment possibilities, and marital opportunities (Duncan et al. 1998; Gans 1999). Conflict theorists argue that poor women, especially women of color, in capitalist economic systems are used as a reserve labor force that can be called on when labor is needed and dismissed when not needed (Ehrenreich 2001). They are an easily exploited group (Newman 1999).

Why does poverty persist? The elite groups in each culture define what it means to be a success; one major way this is perpetuated is via popular entertainment, which is run and financed by wealthy companies and individuals (Aquirre and Baker 2000). Those who cannot live up to the expectations are labeled “failures” and blamed for their misfortune; they live under constant stress that can cause mental or physical breakdowns and humiliating alienation from the social system. Some turn to alcohol or drugs to escape the pressure and failure or to crime to get money to pay the bills. Poor physical and mental health, inadequate nutrition, higher mortality rates, obesity, low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, daily struggle to survive, and dependence on others are a few of the individual consequences of poverty within our social world. Costs to the larger society include the following:

- It loses the talents and abilities that these people could contribute.
- It must expend tax dollars to address their needs or to regulate them with social workers and police.
- People live with a contradiction of cultural values, which claim that all citizens are “created equal” and are worthy of respect, yet not all can “make it” in society.

Welfare programs in developed countries are often thought of as programs for the poor. However, there are massive programs of government support for people in all levels of the social system: university students pay nothing in some countries to roughly one-third of the cost of their education at other state-supported universities (taxpayers picking up the rest of the cost); grants and subsidies to farmers; and tax breaks for businesses. Interestingly, only the programs for the poor are stigmatized as unearned giveaway programs.

Why is it that only the programs to help the poor are stigmatized as unearned giveaway programs?

The elimination of poverty takes money and requires choices by policy makers to do something about poverty. Some argue poverty will never be eliminated because poor people are needed in society. Consider the position put forth in the accompanying Sociology in Your Social World.

Eliminating Poverty: Some Policy Considerations

Some policy makers suggest attacking the problem of poverty institution by institution, offering incentives for family stability, for students to finish high school, and for job training. The Joint Center for Poverty Research, among other think tanks, has set forth policies to reduce poverty based on research (Poverty Research News 2002). Yet all these programs, public and private, require either massive commitment of funds or remodeling of our social institutions. For instance, government programs in the United States and other countries are designed to help individuals through difficult times during economic downturns. The goal of most welfare programs is to eliminate poverty by changing the factors that perpetuate poverty, but without money and jobs, this is impossible. Can welfare reform plans such as workfare in the United States “end welfare as we know it” as policy makers claim?

Workfare and Other Aid Programs

For most societies, poverty means loss of labor, a drain on other members in society to support the poor, and extensive health care and crime prevention systems. Some of the U.S. Great Society programs of the 1960s and 1970s were successful in reducing poverty by attacking the root causes. The Women, Infants, and Children Program provides nutritional help, and Head Start provides early childhood education; both programs have received good grade cards for helping poor women and children, but funding to some of these programs has been cut back due to other funding priorities and their effectiveness reduced (which will surely lead to criticism of its ineffectiveness). Other programs—Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps—helped many who had short-term problems but were criticized as creating dependence of families on aid (Corbett 1994/1995).

Work incentive programs such as workfare offer job training and food stamps. Able-bodied unemployed or underemployed adults must work, be receiving on-the-job training, or be getting education in basic skills to qualify. Work incentive programs have gained adherents who argue that many welfare recipients would work if provided...
support and motivation. This idea works in theory, but success in helping people out of poverty depends on the macro-level economic conditions: Are there jobs available at living wages? When the public is attracted to politicians who cut taxes, there is no money for social programs and little hope of helping the “invisible” poor out of poverty. In fact, institutions such as prisons absorb public funds that could go to poverty reduction, yet crime is often a result of people feeling that they have no other options for survival.

Social research centers provide a major service to policy makers; data collected on social problems such as poverty, drug problems, and welfare affect governmental decisions about how to deal most effectively with problems. The next Applied Sociologist at Work provides an example of one research center and its work.

Recalling what you have learned about poverty, how would you develop a plan to attack the problem of poverty within your community or country? Is it a matter of job training, family values, breaking the cycle, welfare support, or something else?

The Functions of Poverty

Surely wealthy countries such as the United States have the means to eliminate poverty if they chose to. Its persistence is subject for debate. Some sociologists argue that poverty serves certain purposes or functions for society (Gans 1971, 1995), and these make it difficult to address the problem directly and systematically. Some people actually benefit from having poor people kept poor. Consider the following points:

1. The fact that some people are in poverty provides us with a convenient scapegoat for societal problems; we have individuals to blame for poverty—the poor individuals themselves—and can ignore meso- and macro-level causes of poverty that would be expensive to resolve.

2. Having poor people creates many jobs for those who are not poor, including “helping” professions such as social workers and law enforcement such as police, judges, and prison workers.

3. The poor provide an easily available group of laborers to do work; they serve as surplus workers to hire for undesirable jobs.

4. The poor serve to reinforce and legitimate our own lives and institutions. It also allows the rest of us to feel superior to someone, enhancing our self-esteem.

5. Their violation of mainstream values helps to remind us of those values, thereby constantly reaffirming the values among the affluent.

From this perspective, the poor serve a role in the structure of society, so some group of people will always be at the bottom of the stratification ladder.


NATIONAL AND GLOBAL DIGITAL DIVIDE: MACRO-LEVEL STRATIFICATION

Two of Jeanne’s African student friends, Mamadou from Niger and Eric from Ghana, answer their cell phones to the sound of chimes from London’s Big Ben clock tower and a Bob Marley song. One speaks in Kanuri and French and the other in Twi to friends thousands of miles away. They are the future generation of elites from developing countries, fluent in the languages of several countries, of computers, and of the digital age. Many of their fellow country citizens are not so fortunate; they live subsistence lives and have little contact with the digital world swirling overhead through satellite connections.

The global social world is increasingly based on producing and transmitting information through digital technology. Few tools are more important in this process than the computer, Internet, and cell phones. In nearly every salaried and professional position, computer knowledge and ability to navigate the Internet are critical employment skills; therefore, individuals with insufficient access to computers and lack of technical skills face barriers to many professions and opportunities. Since computer skills are important for
personal success, this is an important micro-level issue; the digital divide is breaking down for some young and elite members of developing society such as Mamadou and Eric, but few individuals and countries have sufficient technology and educated population to participate in this new economy (Drori 2006; Nakamura 2004).

The recent growth in both the development and use of technology has taken place mostly in developed countries and among well-educated elite from developing countries. The number of Internet users around the globe increased from 16 million in 1995 to over 500 million in 2001—in just six years (Drori 2006). As William Gibson (1999) put it, “The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed.” In the United States, the most wired country in the world, many poor people do not have access to computers or mentors to teach them how to use computers. This digital divide is beginning to close, but it still creates barriers for many (McChesney et al. 1998; Nakamura 2004; Shade 2004).

Comparing countries cross-nationally, only 5 percent of the world’s population is online, but 50 percent of those who are live in either North America or Scandinavia (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland). Seventy-nine percent of the online population lives in nations that belong to the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development—countries that comprise 14 percent of the people on the planet. By contrast, in Sub-Saharan Africa and in India, only 4 out of every 1,000 citizens uses the Internet (Drori 2006). Ninety-seven percent of Internet hosts are in the developed countries (which have only 16 percent of the world’s population), and 66 percent of income from royalties and licensing fees go to two countries: the United States receives 54 percent and Japan 12 percent. In some countries, the monthly access fee for hooking up to the Internet is stunningly high compared to monthly income: in Bangladesh, 191 percent; in Nepal, 278 percent; and in Madagascar, 614 percent. This may be why 35 of the poorest countries in the world have less than 1 percent of the Internet users (Drori 2006).

An additional difficulty is that most websites and e-mail services use English, the computer keyboards are designed with a Western alphabet, and some of the digital systems in computers are established on the basis of English symbols and logic. It is difficult to even use the Internet in other languages—a fact that many of us may not think about as we...
use the system (Drori 2006). For people who are struggling for the very survival of their culture, the dominance of English may feel like a threat, one more example of Western dominance. So resistance to the use of computers and the Internet is more than a matter of finances or technology; there may be cultural reasons as well.

Policy decisions at the international level affect the status of developing countries. The United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and other international organizations have pressured countries to develop their Internet capacities; indeed, this is sometimes used as a criterion for ranking countries in terms of their “level of modernization” (Drori 2006). Countries that have not been able to get “in the game” of Internet technology cannot keep pace with a rapidly evolving global economy.

Internet technology has created a digital divide, but it also has had some beneficial economic impact, stimulating jobs in poor countries. In 1999, computer component parts were a substantial percentage of production in some developing countries: 52 percent of Malaysia’s exports, 44 percent of Costa Rica’s, 28 percent of Mexico’s. The high-tech revenue for India increased from 150 million U.S. dollars in 1990 to 4 billion dollars in 1999. On the less positive side, e-waste from electronic equipment is extremely toxic, and it is almost always shipped to poor countries, where extremely poor people must deal with the consequences of toxic pollution (Drori 2006).

Digital technology is an example of one important force changing the micro- and macro-level global stratification system—a spectrum of people and countries from the rich and elite to those that are poor and desperate.

**Thinking Sociologically**

What evidence of the digital divide do you see in your family, community, nation, and world? For instance, can your grandparents program their VCR? Do they know how to work a cell phone or navigate the Internet?

**The Global “Digital Divide” and Policy**

As poor countries become part of the electronic age, some are making policies that facilitate rapid modernization. They are passing over developmental stages that rich countries went through. As an illustration, consider the telephone. In 2002, 90 percent of all telephones were cell phones, many using satellites. Some countries never did get completely wired for landlines, thus eliminating one phase of phone technology. With satellite technology in place, some computer and Internet options will be available without expensive intermediate steps (Drori 2006). Engineers in India, working through an organization called Simputer Trust, have been designing a simple computer (a “simputer”) that will be less expensive and will have more multilingual capacities than the PC. Such efforts will enhance access of poor countries to the computer and Internet and will provide the means for poor countries to become part of the competitive global stratification system; technology is leveling the world playing field (Drori 2006; Friedman 2005).

The changing global economic landscape is affecting nations’ internal economic competition as well. Bangalore is home to India’s booming digital industries that are successfully competing in the global high-tech market. Yet many villages and cities in India provide examples of the contrasts between the caste system and the emerging class system. In rural agricultural areas, change is extremely slow despite laws forbidding differential treatment of outcastes and mandating change. In urban industrial areas, new opportunities are changing the traditional caste structures; intercaste and intracaste competition for wealth and power is increasing with the changes in economic, political, and other institutional structures. The higher castes were the first to receive the education and lifestyle that create industrial leaders; now shopkeepers, wealthy peasants, teachers, and others are vying for power. Within the world system, India is generally economically poor but developing certain economic sectors rapidly. Thus, India is in transition both internally and in the global world system.

A small percentage of societies control most world resources. Because of this, the gap between the rich and poor countries is large and in most cases growing. Competition over unequal distribution of power, wealth, and resources
creates tensions between countries. These tensions can stimulate development or cause bitter conflicts and hostilities that include terrorism, civil wars, revolution, and other forms of hostility and protest. For instance, Middle Eastern countries have a key world resource at their core—oil. This creates the possibility of conflicts both between Middle Eastern countries and in the world, as exemplified by the 1989 Gulf War between Iraq and Kuwait and the current Middle Eastern conflicts involving Iraq, the United States, and the United Nations.

SO WHAT?
Perhaps your understanding of why you are rich or poor—and what effect your socioeconomic status has on what you buy, what you believe, and where you live—has taken on new dimensions. Perhaps you have gained some insight into what factors affect your ability to move up in the social class system. The issue of social stratification calls into question the widely held belief in the fairness of our economic system. By studying this issue, we better understand why some individuals are able to experience prestige (respect) and to control power and wealth at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the social system, while others have little access to those resources. Few social forces affect your personal life at the micro level as much as stratification. That includes the decision you make about what you wish to do with your life, who you might marry, and the fact that you are reading this book.

We leave this discussion of stratification systems, including class systems, with a partial answer to the question posed in the beginning of this chapter: Why are some people rich and others poor? In the next two chapters, we expand the discussion to include other variables in stratification systems—race and ethnicity, and gender. By the end of these chapters, the answer to the opening questions should be even clearer.

CONTRIBUTING TO YOUR SOCIAL WORLD

At the Local Level: Remember to tip generously when you are being served by people in minimum-wage jobs—housekeeping maids that have cleaned your room, breakfast servers at the continental breakfast, employees at fast food restaurants, and so forth. Volunteer to help or do an internship at a local homeless shelter or soup kitchen for the poor.

At the Organizational or Institutional Level: After graduation, consider doing a one-year service with AmeriCorp. The pay is not good, but the experience and contribution to those in need provides other rewards.

At the National and Global Levels: Consider doing a paid internship sponsored by Sociologists without Borders (or Sociólogos sin Fronteras; http://www.sociologistswithoutborders.org). This experience, or joining Peace Corps or another international agency, will give you a wonderful experience in an impoverished country helping people in need of resources. Grameen Bank (http://www.grameen-info.org/bank or www.grameenfoundation.org) was started in Bangladesh by Professor Muhammad Yunus. It makes small business loans to people who live in impoverished regions of the world and who have no collateral for a loan. The default rate on these loans is one of the lowest of any bank anywhere. Rather than collateral, the promise to repay is based on social ties to others in one’s community who will not receive loans unless the first party pays regularly on their loan. Consider doing a local fundraiser with friends for the Grameen Bank.

Purchase only coffee and chocolate that are Fair Trade products. Among other things, this will ensure that you are not supporting slavery someplace around the globe with your purchases.