

Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System

Douglas S. Massey

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Brief Summary

This book catalogues substantial research into the stratification system in the United States. The author explains that the populace is divided into categories along three major, easily recognizable, lines: race, gender and social status. Once the population has been divided into social categories based on these characteristics, various social and economic pressures are brought to bear to ensure that certain groups have abundant access to resources (economic, intellectual, or emotional) while other, less favored groups, have their access to those resources restricted.

Facts and Findings

As human society developed from nomadic hunters and gatherers into the industrial powerhouse that it is today, categorical stratification developed. No longer were people grouped into hunters or gatherers (with some categorization based mainly upon gender); gradually there evolved a much more complex social stratification based on factors such as race, profession, education, and many other characteristics. Massey illustrates how social categorization developed in this country and the various pressures that have made these categories rigid by looking at several disadvantaged groups: African Americans, women, Latinos, and the poor in general.

Stratification works in diffuse but powerful ways. People, by nature, categorize themselves into groups along easily recognizable lines like gender and race. Once someone has been sorted into a specific category, stereotypes come into play. “In making stereotypical judgments about others, human beings appear to evaluate people along two basic psychological dimensions: warmth and competence.” (11). “Warmth” is

defined as how likable and approachable a person is; we are attracted to people who are perceived as warm. “Competent” groups are perceived as purposeful and able to efficiently complete tasks. *Id.* People perceive other individuals within their own group to be high both in warmth and competence. Some social groups, like the old or infirmed, are seen as being high in warmth but low in competence, while other groups – like the Jews of medieval Europe -- are stereotyped as highly competent, but cold. At the bottom of the social ladder are the groups that are perceived as neither competent nor warm. Those people that fall into this last category are the ones most frequently relegated, through various discriminatory means, into the bottom (low wage) categories of society.

African Americans have been relegated to the bottom rungs of United States society from the beginning of their presence in this hemisphere. This comes as no surprise, as the first African Americans entered this country as slaves. (52). Even after the end of slavery in 1865, most southern states quickly put new legal barriers in place to limit the social mobility of the newly freed slaves. Reconstruction gave birth to Jim Crow laws and segregation. Whites were used to relegating African Americans to the reviled segments of society reserved for those who are perceived as cold and incompetent. For over 100 years whites had ruled over African Americans with an iron fist. They did not now want to compete with them in the labor market for the finite resources available.

Even in the North, where racism against African Americans was carried out in less overt terms, prejudice still operated to relegate them to the bottom rungs of the social caste. Through various means of positive and negative reinforcement, such as intimidation against those who tried to rise above their “rightful place”, and praising those who conformed to it, whites were able to remain firmly in place at the top.

Segregation was an extremely effective means of preserving the status quo. The notion of “separate but equal” was little more than a farce. African Americans were relegated to housing in the poorest sections of the cities and confined to inferior school systems with inadequate resources (76). In contemporary society, knowledge is power, and advanced education is the gateway to the higher paid, skilled positions that are so coveted in the labor market. During the heyday of the industrial revolution, high school graduates, and even dropouts, were still able to comfortably provide for their families on one salary. It is no longer the case. Today, even college graduates have trouble finding work with sufficient pay to provide for a family on a single salary. More and more families must have two wage earners in order to make ends meet. Unfortunately, in the low wage markets, many times even this is not enough.

Though overt discrimination is no longer legal, the systems long ago put in place have allowed the privileged upper class to maintain their discriminatory practices on a less obvious basis. (74-93). Because African Americans, and other lower class social groups have been concentrated into poorer neighborhoods in the inner cities, employers can use this information to discriminate in hiring practices without resorting to overt racism. Employers will simply fail to call back those from undesirable areas. Also, many African Americans have an identifiable accent, and studies have shown that applicants for jobs or housing who “sound black” are much less likely to get a call back than those who sound white.

These are just some of the mechanisms that the author describes as barriers to social mobility for the lowest classes of Americans, including African Americans and immigrants. As the author explained, the privileged – whether consciously or subconsciously -- need only follow a simple blueprint of how to build a static underclass: “To begin, choose a minority group whose members are somehow identifiably different from the majority.” Once the group has been selected, confine its members to a small number of continuous residential areas and then impose stringent barriers to residential mobility...Once a group’s segregation in society has been ensured, then drive up its rate of poverty...The interaction of poverty and segregation acts to concentrate a variety of deleterious social and economic characteristics...Through prolonged exposure to life in a racially isolated and intensely poor neighborhood, poverty will quite likely be passed to children in the next generation. When this point is reached, a well-functioning and efficient structure for the construction and maintenance of an urban underclass will have been created. (156).

Recommendations and Implications

Massey does a very complete job of explaining how post-industrialist society has been stratified into a system that is inherently unequal and why it is very difficult for anyone in the disfavored groups to break into the middle and upper classes.

Much of what is creating these static economic categories in society is our own prejudices. Massey’s analysis of subconscious racism against African Americans is particularly powerful. While it is no longer socially acceptable, at least in most civilized circles, to express ones bigotry publically, white middle and upper class Americans still stereotype African Americans in a very negative fashion, and thus, subconscious discrimination still occurs. For instance, while most Americans profess to agree with school and neighborhood integration, most white people remain very uncomfortable living in neighborhoods that are inhabited by more than 15% minority. If races were distributed equally in a typical city,

African Americans would make up roughly 30% in a given neighborhood, a figure that is well out of the comfort zone of most whites. The typical response is for whites to retreat to the suburbs, which drives down the property values of urban neighborhoods and perpetuates the poverty of the minorities that remain, cementing them ever more firmly in the lower class.

Analysis and Critique

Douglas Massey has done a fantastic job of explaining a pervasive social problem that has no easy solutions. Reading through the sections on subconscious racism against African Americans and Latinos and sexism against women, I worried that I might even think that way subconsciously. Certainly, exposing this problem so clearly should work wonders in getting people to address it and perhaps take some positive steps towards social reform. However, I worry that in a capitalist society, where big government holds little favor, there is no overarching mechanism to spread wealth around. I think that it is deplorable that so much of our nation's wealth is concentrated in the top 5% of the population, but if the backlash and fear mongering against Obama's health care plan is any indication, our nation will not willingly turn to policies that would be able to drag the lower classes out of poverty.

I consider myself well educated, and informed, and I found some of the politics employed to keep the current class system in place to be shocking. A good example is Massey's analysis of the voter fraud in Florida that resulted in the wrongful disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of African Americans wrongly labeled "felons". Until we are able to regulate racism and bigotry on an almost mental level, I fear that there is no quick solution in sight for the problems explored in *Categorically Unequal*.