Sociology 699i
Stratification: Social Class, Family, and Community

This is a review of the literature seminar designed to cover some of the major topics in the stratification literature. It is organized topically, much like the literature itself. The field is so vast that it has been been segmented into mostly self-contained issues with surprisingly little cross-fertilization between issues.

We will acknowledge this segmentation while still trying to draw some overarching lessons about how to think about stratification issues. Each week we will take up a different topic, looking at a handful of important contributions -- mostly journal articles. The topics selected are not meant to be comprehensive but are chosen in large part to fill in the holes of the graduate strat curriculum. For instance, none of the topics deal centrally with race and gender since the department offers several excellent courses focusing on those dimensions of stratification (although we cannot, of course, ignore how each of these issues below intersect with race and gender!).

Also, we do not focus much on income inequality and how that varies over time and across space -- although that is one of the central stratification issues of our time. Partly as a result, many of the topics we do cover have a more micro than macro focus. They tend to ask how individuals are allocated to positions with the class structure rather than how that structure itself changes. This micro focus reflects the orientation of much of the stratification literature, but, as we will see, this has been one of its principal weaknesses.

Our answer to this micro-focus of the literature will be to emphasize the contextual factors that often determine how individual stratification processes operate. Individuals are nested within families, communities, and different poles in the global economy, and those contexts alter how the individual relationships play out. For example, William J. Wilson’s great contribution to poverty analyses has been that growing up in a poor family has very different consequences if that family lives in a poor neighborhood than in a mixed or middle-class neighborhood. And Dalton Conley has argued that family effects on sibling outcomes are very different in middle-class and working-class families. What we will be especially interested in is not merely how family and community contexts have direct effects on individual outcomes, but how they condition other factors that affect those outcomes.
Class discussion

For each topic, we will spend a good part of the class period discussing the assigned reading. I will also introduce some additional material, but you should be concerned primarily with being ready to discuss each reading when you enter. Through a random process, students will be called on to summarize the main points of each reading. Learning how to extract the important sociological essentials of journal articles and other scholarly publications will be an important part of the skills you should be developing this semester. The presentation of your summary should take about sixty seconds. Obviously, that doesn’t give you time to go into details, elaborate on the theory, or evaluate the evidence. What we’re aiming for is just the facts. We’ll evaluate each piece together, but first we have to agree what the article is saying.

As a general guide, a summary should identify the following:

1. What is the most important causal relationship being tested?
2. What data are used?
3. What is the level of empirical support?

Papers

As part of developing your skills in reviewing journal literature, each student will write a review of the literature paper. The paper will focus on a specific causal relationship (e.g., the effect of marriage on earnings -- or better: gender differences in the effect of marriage on earnings). Only one student per topic, so you will need to "claim" topics beginning at our second meeting.
Your task will be to review everything we know about that relationship. The paper should not just be an annotated bibliography. A paper that sequentially reviews each article will be automatically suspect. Instead, your paper should have a thesis: what is the main conclusion you draw about the existence of that causal relationship? Usually you will want to cover at least three other issues:

1. Are there intervening variables that help explain how that relationship occurs?
2. Are there prior causal variables that might make the relationship spurious?
3. Are there any conditions (i.e., interaction effects) that determine whether the relationship exists or how strong it is?

Organize your review around these issues, not around who did the research.

Final exam

There will be a final exam given during the official exam week. The exam will be five short essays chosen randomly from a longer list of questions distributed prior to exam week.

Grades

Review papers: 40%
Final exam: 40%
Class discussion: 20%

Books to purchase

This is primarily an article-oriented review of the literature (or sometimes, chapters from books). But there are at least two books you will need whose arguments can’t be easily summarized by excerpts or articles.

Malcom Gladwell’s popular best seller, Outliers is a convenient way to ease into the issues we will be discussing this semester. We will use it as a focus for our first session next week. Gladwell is a journalist not an academic; but he is a brilliant journalist, and he often thinks like a sociologist. Our main task will be to translate his ideas back into more general sociological propositions and to ask what kinds of studies might test those propositions. We will treat each chapter as if it were an article: be prepared to summarize its main causal proposition and the "evidence" for it in your sixty-second presentation.

You also should purchase Murray Milner’s Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids most of which we will read later in the semester (because Milner never put his basic argument into article form the way that Kathy Edin, Annette Lareau, and Dalton Conley did).
We will read articles or chapters from several other authors who have written excellent books that have changed the way we think about stratification. If you plan to continue work in this field (e.g., comps!), I would recommend you purchase these as well:


I. GLADWELL: OUTLIERS


II. HOMELESSNESS


III. POVERTY


Stratification: Social Class, Family, and Community

III. Poverty


IV. WELFARE


V. CLASS AND POLITICS


VI. HAPPINESS & HEALTH


VII. STATUS ORDERS

VIII. ELITES AND CULTURAL CAPITAL


IX. MOBILITY: THE CLASSICS


X. ATTAINMENT: FAMILY STRUCTURE


XI. ATTAINMENT: FAMILY STRUCTURE


XII. SCHOOL EFFECTS


XIII. SOCIAL CAPITAL


Sociology 699s final exam questions (2009)

Four questions from the list A and two questions from list B will be chosen by random numbers on the day of the final. Your job is to answer each as completely as possible based on the readings and the material we have discussed in class.

I. LIST A

1. Select two possible causes of homelessness that might plausibly be causes at both the macro and micro levels. What evidence is there for causal impact at each level?

2. What is the macro level evidence for the relationship between homelessness and the supply of housing or shelters?

3. What is the difference between studying individual spells of poverty/homelessness/welfare and studying the characteristics of those who are currently poor/homeless/on welfare? Explain how it is true that most people who have been poor/homeless/on welfare do so for short spells but that most people who are currently poor/homeless/on welfare have been long term.

4. Discuss the various ways in which poverty has been measured. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the measures and discuss the problems that have arisen in using these measures to follow trends over time.

5. What explains the changes in poverty rates? Explain and evaluate two economic and two demographic reasons.

6. What is the empirical evidence about how welfare levels and programs affect poverty?

7. What is the evidence about two macro-level causes of welfare levels and programs?

8. Describe the evidence for and against a decline in the relationship between class position and voting.

9. Compare the micro-level and macro-level (across space and time) evidence of the relationship between income and voting.
10. What is the (alas, contradictory) evidence about the relationship between macro-level incomes and individual happiness?

11. Describe what is meant by cultural capital and at least two different ways it has been used in the stratification literature.

12. Summarize the four principles that Milner uses to describe status hierarchies and provide a concrete example of each.

13. Compare and contrast path models and mobility tables as methods for studying intergenerational mobility? Citing specific examples where possible, discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of each method.

14. How do social psychological variables (i.e., support/encouragement/aspirations) help account for the transmission of the status of families of origin to their children?

15. What is the evidence that large families have negative impacts on children’s outcomes? What are the paths through which these factors have an impact?

16. What is the evidence that single-parent families have negative impacts on children’s outcomes? What are the paths through which these factors have an impact?

17. What characteristics of schools have shown to be clear determinants of how much children learn? What characteristics seem to be important but don’t have as much impact as most people think?

18. What are two important differences between working class and middle class families in the effects of family origins on children’s outcomes? That is, how does the status attainment process differ for working-class and middle-class families?

II. LIST B

19. For several topics (e.g., homelessness, poverty/welfare, educational attainment) we have had examples of both qualitative and quantitative studies of similar issues. Obviously, these are complementary approaches, but are there
consistent ways in which they complement each other? Choosing two of these issues, make an argument about the relative strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and how they have been able to shed light on different aspects of the issue.

20. Sorting out causality has become a dominant concern of empirical stratification research. We have had several examples of how researchers have tried to get better and "cleaner" solutions to the problem that "correlation is not causation". Using specific examples of empirical stratification studies, illustrate at least three such methods that attempt to address the causality question with more carefully designed studies. Describe how these methods improve on simple correlational studies and what kinds of alternative causal interpretations are eliminated (or at least less plausible) with these designs. What are the weaknesses of each design?

21. Micro/macro questions have been a consistent theme throughout the semester. Choose three studies that represent different contrasts between micro and macro stratification relationships: one in which micro and macro relationships are similar, one in which they are opposite, and one in which there is a micro relationship but no significant macro relationship. For each, describe both the theoretical connection between the micro and macro relationships and the empirical evidence for the theory. What might account for when micro relationships translate into macro relationships and when they don’t?

22. A theme that has appeared often among our topics is the change over time in the stratification system and in its relationships with other outcomes. Choose three such changes that you feel are especially important for understanding contemporary inequality and review the evidence and disputes about a) what the changes actually are and b) what has caused the changes.