

The Sociology of Social Inequality

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Social inequality results from a society organized by hierarchies of class, race, and gender that broker access to resources and rights in ways that make their distribution unequal. It can manifest in a variety of ways, like income and wealth inequality, [unequal access to education](#) and [cultural resources](#), and differential treatment by the police and judicial system, among others. Social inequality goes hand in hand with [social stratification](#).

Overview

Social inequality is characterized by the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within a group or society. It contains structured and recurrent patterns of unequal distributions of goods, wealth, opportunities, rewards, and punishments. [Racism, for example](#), is understood to be a phenomenon whereby access to rights and resources is unfairly distributed across racial lines. In the context of the U.S., people of color typically experience racism, which benefits white people by [conferring on them white privilege](#), which allows them greater access to rights and resources than other Americans.

There are two main ways to measure social inequality: inequality of conditions, and inequality of opportunities. Inequality of conditions refers to the unequal distribution of income, wealth, and material goods. Housing, for example, is an inequality of conditions with the homeless and those living in housing projects sitting at the bottom of the hierarchy while those living in multi-million dollar mansions sit at the top. Another example is at the level of whole communities, where some are poor, unstable, and plagued by violence, while others are invested in by business and government so that they thrive and provide safe, secure, and happy conditions for their inhabitants.

Inequality of opportunities refers to the unequal distribution of life chances across individuals. This is reflected in measures such as level of education, health status, and treatment by the criminal justice system. For example, studies have shown that college and university professors are more likely to ignore emails from women and people of color than they are to ignore those from white men, which privileges the educational outcomes of white men by channeling a biased amount of mentoring and educational resources to them.

Discrimination at individual, community, and institutional levels is a major part of the process of reproducing social inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For example, women are systematically paid less than men for doing the same work, and sociologists have conclusively demonstrated that racism is built into the very foundation of our society, and is present in all of our social institutions.

Two Main Theories of Social Inequality

There are two main views of social inequality within sociology. One view aligns with the functionalist theory and the other aligns with conflict theory.

Functionalist theorists believe that inequality is inevitable and desirable and plays an important function in society. Important positions in society require more training and thus should receive more rewards. Social inequality and social stratification, according to this view, lead to a meritocracy based on ability.

Conflict theorists, on the other hand, view inequality as resulting from groups with power dominating less powerful groups. They believe that social inequality prevents and hinders societal progress as those in power repress the powerless people in order to maintain the status quo. In today's world, this work of domination is achieved primarily through the power of ideology--our thoughts, values, beliefs, worldviews, norms, and expectations--through a process known as cultural hegemony.

How Sociologists Study Social Inequality

Sociologically, we can study social inequality as a social problem that encompasses three dimensions: structural conditions, ideological supports, and social reforms.

Structural conditions include things that can be objectively measured and that contribute to social inequality. Sociologists study how things like educational attainment, wealth, poverty, occupations, and power lead to the social inequality between individuals and groups of people.

Ideological supports include ideas and assumptions that support the social inequality present in a society. Sociologists examine how things such as formal laws, public policies, and dominant values both lead to social inequality, and help sustain it. For example, consider this discussion of the role that words and the ideas attached to them play in this process.

Social reforms are things such as organized resistance, protest groups, and social movements. Sociologists study how these social reforms help shape or change social inequality that exists in a society, as well as their origins, impact, and long-term effects. Today, social media plays a large role in social reform campaigns and was [harnessed in 2014 by British actor Emma Watson](#), on behalf of the UN, to launch a campaign for gender equality called #HeForShe.