1.5: Social Stratification and Intersectionality

Social Stratification

In general, all societies are stratified along one or more lines comprised of race/ethnicity, sex/gender, age, religion, disability, and/or social class or **socioeconomic status (SES)**, which is measured by similar levels of income, education, and occupation. **Social stratification** is the unequal ways in which the resources of society are distributed. Sociologist Craig Oettinger defines stratification as who gets what and how much they get over time. According to Abercrombie and Urry (1983), social differences become social stratification when people are ranked hierarchically along some dimension of inequality whether this be income, wealth, power, prestige, age, ethnicity or some other characteristic. Sociologists use the term social stratification to describe the system of social standing.
In the United States, people like to believe everyone has an equal chance at success. An emphasis on self-effort perpetuates the belief that people control their own social standing. However, sociologists recognize that social stratification is a society-wide system that makes inequalities apparent. While there are always inequalities between individuals, sociologists are interested in larger social patterns. Stratification is not about individual inequalities, but about systematic inequalities based on group membership, social classes, and the like. No individual, rich or poor, can be blamed for social inequalities. The structure of society affects a person's social standing. Although individuals may support or fight inequalities, social stratification is created and supported by society as a whole.

One key determinant of social standing is the social standing of our parents. Parents tend to pass their social position on to their children. People inherit not only social standing but also the cultural norms that accompany a certain lifestyle. They share these with a network of friends and family members. Social standing becomes a comfort zone, a familiar lifestyle, and an identity. This is one of the reasons first-generation college students do not, as a whole, tend to fare as well as students whose parents graduated from college.

Recent Economic Changes and U.S. Stratification

The most significant threat to the relatively high standard of living we are accustomed to in the United States is the decline of the middle class. The size, income, and wealth of the middle class have all been declining since the 1970s. This is occurring at a time when corporate profits have increased more than 141 percent, and CEO pay has risen by more than 298 percent (Popken, 2007).

As a result of the Great Recession that rocked our nation’s economy in the last decade, many families and individuals found themselves struggling like never before. The nation fell into a period of prolonged and exceptionally high unemployment. While no one was completely insulated from the recession, perhaps those in the working classes felt the impact most profoundly. Before the recession, many were living paycheck to paycheck or even had been living comfortably. As the recession hit, they were often among the first to lose their jobs. Unable to find replacement employment, they faced more than loss of income. Their homes were foreclosed, their cars were repossessed, and their ability to afford healthcare was taken away. This put many in the position of deciding whether to put food on the table or
fill a needed prescription. While some recovered from the Great Recession, others have struggled to improve their socioeconomic status.

The COVID-19 pandemic roiled across the U.S. in 2020, with working class and poor Americans most at-risk for contracting this virus and most at-risk for facing financial challenges associated with COVID-19. In a study conducted by Finch and Finch (2020) on the cases of and deaths from COVID-19 during the first ten weeks of the pandemic in the U.S., counties with higher poverty rates experienced more cases and deaths than more affluent counties. The results of this study also suggest that essential workers (e.g., public sanitation, grocery stores, and delivery services) tend to be occupied by lower-paid employees who may not have equal access to testing for the virus. These workers may also be less able to quarantine away from their families, as compared to health care workers. Additionally, low-income, under-resourced communities tend to suffer more from diabetes, heart disease, and pulmonary disease, pre-existing conditions which put these individuals at higher risk for COVID-19. Communities of color, particularly Latinx, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Pacific Islander, and African American, have experienced disproportionate cases and deaths from COVID-19. The following socioeconomic factors explain the disproportionate impact: discrimination; healthcare access and utilization; occupation; educational, income and wealth gaps; and housing (Center for Disease Control, 2020). In addition to being at greater risk for COVID-19 infection, as Figure 4 indicates, 52% of lower income individuals in the U.S. are experiencing an economic fall-out from COVID-19 while only 32% upper income individuals are experiencing this fall-out (Parker, Horowitz & Brown, 2020).
Economic fallout from COVID-19 is hitting lower-income adults harder

% saying ...

They or someone in their household has lost a job or taken a pay cut due to the coronavirus outbreak

- 32% Upper income
- 52% Lower income
- 42% Middle income

They cannot pay all of their bills in full ...

- Upper income: In a typical month (7%), This month (11%)
- Middle income: In a typical month (19%), This month (26%)
- Lower income: In a typical month (44%), This month (53%)

They have rainy day funds that would cover their expenses for three months in case of emergency

- Upper income: 75%
- Middle income: 48%
- Lower income: 23%

Note: Family income tiers are based on adjusted 2018 earnings.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 7-12, 2020.
“About Half of Lower-Income Americans Report Household Job or Wage Loss Due to COVID-19”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4: Economic fallout from COVID-19. (Used with permission; About half of lower-income Americans report household job or wage loss due to covid-19, Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2020))

Social Class Stratification

A **class system** is based on both social factors and individual achievement; it affords the opportunity for mobility or movement. A **social class** consists of a set of people who share similar status with regard to factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation. Yet, a social class stratification system or ranking creates inequality in society and determines one’s social position in terms of these factors. A **caste system** is based on an ascribed status such as race,
ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or disability, and is characterized by a lack of mobility. Unlike caste systems, class systems are open. In a class system, occupation is not fixed at birth.

A person’s class status or SES influences their personal and social identity. Marx and Engels (1967) suggested there is a social class division between the capitalists who control the means of production and the workers. Weber previously ranked individuals on their wealth, power, and prestige (Weber [1968] 1978). The calculation of wealth comprises one's assets minus their debts; for sociologists, wealth is often equated with (ownership of) property. For sociologists such as Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, authors of Black Wealth, White Wealth, wealth matters more than income because great wealth is likely to be inherited or ascribed whereas income is earned in a day, week, month or year. Power is the ability to influence others directly or indirectly while prestige is the esteem or respect associated with social status (Carl, 2013). In 1985, Erik Wright interjected that people can occupy contradictory class positions throughout their lifetime. Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl (1992) developed a six-tier model portraying the U.S. class structure including underclass, working-poor, working, lower middle, upper middle, and capitalists. The social class model depicts the distribution of property, prestige, and power among society based on income, education, and occupation.

Though family and other societal models help guide a person toward a career, personal choice also plays a role. In theory, people are free to gain a different level of education or employment than their parents. They can also socialize with and marry members of other classes, which allows people to move from one class to another. These exogamous marriages represent unions of spouses from different social categories. Marriage in these circumstances is based on values such as love and compatibility rather than on social standing or economics. Though social conformities still exist that encourage people to choose partners within their own social class, people are not as pressured to choose marriage partners based solely on those elements. Marriage to a partner from the same social background is an endogamous union.

While the U.S. is often viewed as a class system, it also has remnants of a racial caste system associated with history and legacy of slavery, forced removal of Native Americans, and polices and practices associated with colonialism and Manifest Destiny. Many systemic efforts to deny African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans the right to vote, equal education, and ownership of land characterize our history of racial caste. Contemporary racial inequalities characterized by voter suppression, unequal educational outcomes, wealth, and income echo this history.

Each class lifestyle requires a certain level of wealth in order to acquire the material necessities and comforts of life (Henslin, 2011). The correlation between the standard of living and quality of life or life chances (e.g., opportunities and barriers) influence one’s ability to afford food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, other basic needs, and luxury items. A person’s standards of living including income, employment, class, and housing affects their identity.
Social class serves as a marker or indication of resources. These markers are noticeable in the behaviors, customs, and norms of each stratified group (Carl, 2013). People living in impoverished communities have different cultural norms and practices compared to those with middle incomes or families of wealth. For example, the urban poor often sleep on cardboard boxes on the ground or on sidewalks and feed themselves by begging, scavenging, and raiding garbage (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012). Middle income and wealthy families tend to sleep in housing structures and nourish themselves with food from supermarkets or restaurants.

Language and fashion also vary among these classes because of educational attainment, employment, and income. People will use language like “white trash” or “welfare mom” or “thug” to marginalize people in working classes and use distinguished labels to identify the upper class such as “noble” and “elite.” Sometimes people engage in conspicuous consumption or purchase and use certain products (e.g., buy a luxury car or jewelry) to make a social statement about their status (Henslin, 2011). Nonetheless, the experience of poor people is very different in comparison to others in the upper and middle classes, and the lives of people within each social class may vary based on their position within other social categories including age, disability, sexuality, gender, race-ethnicity, region, and religion.

Thinking Sociologically

Could you survive in poverty, middle class, or wealth? In her book A Framework for Understanding Poverty (2005), Dr. Ruby K Payne presents lists of survival skills needed by different societal classes. Test your skills by answering the following questions:

Could you survive in . . . (mark all that apply)

1. ____ find the best rummage sales.
2. ____ locate grocery stores’ garbage bins that have thrown away food.
3. ____ bail someone out of jail. ____ get a gun, even if I have a police record.
4. ____ keep my clothes from being stolen at the laundromat.
5. ____ sniff out problems in a used car.
6. ____ live without a checking account.
7. ____ manage without electricity and a phone.
8. ____ entertain friends with just my personality and stories.
9. ____ get by when I don’t have money to pay the bills.
10. ____ move in half a day.
11. ____ get and use food stamps.
12. ____ find free medical clinics.
13. ____ get around without a car.
14. ____ use a knife as scissors.

Middle Class know how to....

1. ____ get my children into Little League, piano lessons, and soccer.
2. ____ set a table properly.
3. ____ find stores that sell the clothing brands my family wears.
4. ____ use a credit card, checking and/or savings account.
5. ____ evaluate insurance: life, disability, 20/80 medical, homeowners, and personal-property.
6. ____ talk to my children about going to college.
7. ____ get the best interest rate on my car loan.
8. ____ help my children with homework and don’t hesitate to make a call if I need more information.

Wealth, check if you....

1. ____ can read a menu in French, English and another language.
2. ____ have favorite restaurants in different countries around the world.
3. ____ know how to hire a professional decorator to help decorate your home during the holidays.
4. ____ can name your preferred financial advisor, lawyer, designer, hairdresser, or domestic-employment service.
5. ____ have at least two homes that are staffed and maintained.
6. ____ know how to ensure confidentiality and loyalty with domestic staff.
7. ____ use two or three “screens” that keep people whom you don’t wish to see away from you
8. ____ fly in your own plane, the company plane, or the Concorde.
9. ____ know how to enroll your children in the preferred private schools.
10. ____ are on the boards of at least two charities.
11. ____ know the hidden rules of the Junior League.
12. ____ know how to read a corporate balance sheet and analyze your own financial statements.
13. ____ support or buy the work of a particular artist.

Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, a Georgetown University sociology professor, explains the "race vs. class" conversation, in which the racial divide of the middle and working-class works against people’s self-interests and benefits the wealthy and powerful. In 2012, he stated,

What we have to tell our white brothers who are working class, blue-collar cats, is that "you are in the same boat as most African Americans and most Latino people. You suffer from the economy equally. If you allow elite politicians to
manipulate you into believing that your real enemy is a Black guy who works along side you in a factory where you are both inhaling toxic chemicals that will lead both of you to die early. As opposed to this elite figure in the American political echelon or corporate structure that is living off of your anxiety about this Black guy, you are going down in defeat."

Dyson challenges working class whites to recognize their common social class experiences with most people of color, hypothesizing that when white people begin to understand how they have been manipulated by white elites to focus on race rather than class, a multi-racial working class solidarity may unfold.

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**Racial Stratification**

Probably the best way to begin to understand racial and ethnic inequality in the United States is to read first-hand accounts by such great writers of color as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Piri Thomas, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X, all of whom wrote moving, autobiographical accounts of the bigotry and discrimination they faced while growing up. Sociologists and urban ethnographers have written their own accounts of the daily lives of people of color, and these, too, are well worth reading. One of the classics is Elliot Liebow’s (1967)Tally’s Corner, a study of Black men and their families in Washington, DC.
Statistics also give a picture of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States. We can begin to get a picture of this inequality by examining racial and ethnic differences in such life chances as income, education, poverty, unemployment and home ownership, as provided in the Table 1.5.8. The data for Native Americans is not provided in here, but their numbers resembles Black and Latinx populations. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, in 2012, 17% of Native Americans earned a college degree while the poverty rate for Native Americans was 26%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Indicators</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>AAPI</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Latinx</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Degree (% of 25 year+ adults)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Completion (% of 25 years adults)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Ownership (% of Householders Owning a Home)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income</td>
<td>$43,000</td>
<td>$77,900</td>
<td>$71,300</td>
<td>$43,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty (% in poverty)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate (%)</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, a persistent racial wealth gap has characterized U.S. history. The median net worth for white households has far exceeded that of Black households through recessions and booms over the last three decades. Following the Great Recession, the median net worth for Black families declined more than for white families. In fact, the ratio of white family wealth to Black family wealth is higher today than at the start of the century, with white family wealth netting ten times more than Black family wealth (McIntosh, Moss, Nunn & Shambaugh, 2020). Figure 1.5.9 below provides a glimpse at the 2016 racial wealth gap.
Figure 9: Median Household Wealth in U.S. Dollars (2016). While all households averaged just under $100,000 in wealth, white non-Latinx household held more than $160,000 in wealth with Latinx and Black households averaging well under $20,000. Other or multiple races households averaged approximately $60,000 in wealth. (Chart created by Jonas Oware with data from Statista)

The data is clear: U.S. racial and ethnic groups differ dramatically in their life chances. Compared to whites, for example, Blacks, Latinx, and Native Americans have much lower family incomes and much higher rates of poverty; they are also much less likely to have college degrees. In addition, Blacks and Native Americans have much higher infant mortality rates than whites: Black infants, for example, are more than twice as likely as white infants to die. Still, these comparisons obscure some differences within some of the groups just mentioned. Among Latinos, for example, Cuban Americans have fared better than Latinos overall, and Puerto Ricans worse. Similarly, among Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI), people with Chinese and Japanese backgrounds have fared better than those from Cambodia, Korea, and Vietnam.

**Gender Stratification**

Each of us is born with physical characteristics that represent and socially assign our sex and gender. **Sex** refers to our biological differences, and **gender** the cultural traits assigned to females and males (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012). While our physical make-up distinguishes our sex, society and our social interaction implicates the **gender socialization** process we will experience throughout our life. **Gender identity** is an individual’s self-concept and their association with femininity, masculinity and perhaps questioning of these social categories. Children learn gender roles and acts of sexism in society through socialization (Griffiths, Keirns, Strayer, Cody-Rydzewsk, Scaramuzzo, Sadler, Vyain, Byer & Jones, 2015). Children become aware of gender roles between the ages of two and three and by four to five years old; they are fulfilling gender roles based on their sex (Griffiths et al., 2015). Nonetheless, gender-based characteristics do not always match one’s self or cultural identity as people grow and develop.

1. Why do people need and use gender labels?
2. Why do people create gender roles or expectations?
3. Do gender labels and roles influence limitations on individuals or the social world? Explain.

**Gender stratification** focuses on the unequal access females have to socially valued resources, power, prestige, and personal freedom as compared to men based on differing positions within the socio-cultural hierarchy (Light, Keller, & Calhoun, 1997). Traditionally, society treats women as second-class citizens in society. The design of dominant gender ideologies and inequality maintains the prevailing social structure, presenting male privilege as part of the natural order.
Theorists suggest society is a male dominated patriarchy where men think of themselves as inherently superior to women resulting in unequal distribution of rewards between men and women (Henslin, 2011). Video \( \PageIndex{10} \): Race - The Power of an Illusion: How the Racial Wealth Gap Was Created. (Close-captioning and other settings appear at the bottom of the screen.) (Fair Use; California Newsreel via Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/133506632)

Media portrays women and men in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender (Wood, 1994). Media affects the perception of social norms including gender. People think and act according to stereotypes associated with one’s gender broadcast by media (Goodall, 2016). Media stereotypes reinforce gender inequality of girls and women. According to Wood (1994), the underrepresentation of women in media implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or invisible. Stereotypes of men in media display them as independent, driven, skillful, and heroic lending them to higher-level positions and power in society.

Figure \( \PageIndex{11} \): Gender equality, woman using laptop and man in background on laptop. (CC BY-NC-SA; Flickr)

According to Pew Research Trends (2020) on average, women make 85% of men's earnings, though this gap has narrowed over recent decades and varies widely based on the job/occupation, education level, race, and ethnicity. Women outnumber men amongst college graduates, yet male college graduates out-earn female college graduates. Inequality in career pathways, job placement, and promotion or advancement result in an income gap between genders
affecting the buying power and economic vitality of women in comparison to men. Today’s society is encouraging gender flexibility resulting from cultural shifts among women seeking college degrees, prioritizing career, and delaying marriage and childbirth.

Still, women continue to face challenges associated with inter-partner violence, including rape. Depictions in the media emphasize male dominant roles and normalize violence against women (Wood, 1994). Culture plays an integral role in establishing and maintaining male dominance in society ascribing men the power and privilege that reinforces subordination and oppression of women.

Your task is to find the ten words on the sex-role inventory trait list below that are most often culturally associated with each of the following labels and categories: femininity, masculinity, wealth, poverty, President, teacher, mother, father, minister, or athlete. Write down the label or category and ten terms to compare your lists with other students.

1. self-reliant
2. yielding
3. helpful
4. defends own beliefs
5. cheerful
6. moody
7. independent
8. shy
9. conscientious
10. athletic
11. affectionate
12. theatrical
13. assertive
14. flatterable
15. happy
16. strong personality
17. loyal
18. unpredictable
19. forceful
20. feminine
21. reliable
22. analytical
23. sympathetic
24. jealous
25. leadership ability
26. sensitive to other's needs
27. truthful
28. willing to take risks
29. understanding
30. secretive
31. makes decisions easily
32. compassionate
33. sincere
34. self-sufficient
35. eager to soothe hurt feelings
36. conceived
37. dominant
38. soft-spoken
39. likable
40. masculine
41. warm
42. solemn
43. willing to take a stand
44. tender
45. friendly
46. aggressive
47. gullible
48. inefficient
49. act as leader
50. childlike
51. adaptable
52. individualistic
53. does not use harsh language
54. unsystematic
55. competitive
56. loves children
57. tactful
58. ambitious
59. gentle
60. conventional

Compare your results with other students in the class and answer the following questions:

1. What are the trait similarities and commonalities between femininity, masculinity, wealth, poverty, President, teacher, mother, father, minister, and athlete?
2. How are masculinity and femininity used as measures of conditions and vocations?

Stratification and Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is a physical, emotional and perhaps spiritual expression of sexual desire or attraction. Culture sets the parameters for sexual norms and habits. Enculturation dictates and controls social acceptance of sexual expression and activity. Eroticism like all human activities and preferences, is learned and malleable (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012). Sexual orientation labels categorize personal views and representations of sexual desire and activities. Many people ascribe and conform to the sexual labels constructed and assigned by society. Because sexual desire or attraction is

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Ethnic_Studies/Race_and_Ethnic_Relations_in_the_U.S.%3A_An_Intersectional_...
inborn, people within the socio-sexual dominant group (e.g., heterosexual) often believe their sexual preference is "normal." However, heterosexual fit or type is not normal. History has documented diversity in sexual preference and behavior since the dawn of human existence (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012).

Individuals develop sexual understanding around middle childhood and adolescence (APA, 2008). There is no genetic, biological, developmental, social, or cultural evidence linked to homosexual behavior. The difference is in society's discriminatory response to homosexuality likely derived from heteronormativity or the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred or normal mode of sexual orientation. Alfred Kinsley was the first to identify sexuality is a continuum rather than a dichotomy of gay or straight (Griffiths et al., 2015). His research showed people do not necessarily fall into the sexual categories, behaviors, and orientations constructed by society (e.g., heterosexual and homosexual). Eve Kosofky Sedgwick (1990) expanded on Kinsley's research to find women are more likely to express homosocial relationships such as hugging, handholding, and physical closeness. Whereas, men often face negative sanctions for displaying homosocial behavior in the U.S. society, such social interaction is extremely normal in many parts of the world including sub-Saharan Africa.

Figure \(\PageIndex{12}\): Emotional expression of sexual identity. Two men smiling, head to head, nose to nose. (CC BY-NC-SA; Pexels)

Society ascribes meaning to sexual activities (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012). Variance reflects the cultural norms and sociopolitical conditions of a time and place. Since the 1970s, organized efforts by LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual or Allied) activists have helped establish gay culture and civil rights (Herdt, 1992). For example, in 2020, the Supreme Court decision in Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, protects gay, lesbian, and transgender from employment discrimination. Gay culture provides social acceptance for persons rejected, marginalized, and punished by others because of sexual orientation and expression. Queer theorists are reclaiming the derogatory label of "queer" to help in broadening the understanding of sexuality as flexible and fluid (Griffiths et al., 2015).

Stratification by Age and Disability

Our numeric ranking of age is associated with particular cultural traits. Even the social categories we assign to age express cultural characteristics of that age group or cohort. Age signifies one’s cultural identity and social status (Kottak & Kozaitis, 2012). Many of the most common labels we use in society signify age categories and attributes. For example, the terms "newborns and infants" generally refer to children from birth to age four, whereas "school-age
children” signifies youngsters old enough to attend primary school.

Generations have collective identity or shared experiences based on the time-period the group lived. Consider the popular culture of the 1980s to today. In the 1980s, people used a landline or fixed line phone rather than a cellular phone to communicate and went to a movie theater to see a film rather than downloaded a video to a mobile device. Therefore, someone who spent their youth and most of their adulthood without or with limited technology may not deem it necessary to have or operate it in daily life. Whereas, someone born in the 1990s or later will only know life with technology and find it a necessary part of human existence. Those born in 2020 or after will only know life as experienced during COVID-19 or post-COVID-19 and will thus likely be more dependent on video games and social media for everyday social interaction.

Because there are diverse cultural expectations based on age, there can be conflict between age cohorts and generations. Age stratification theorists suggest that members of society are classified and have social status associated to their age (Riley, Johnson & Foner, 1972). Conflict often develops from age associated cultural differences influencing social and economic power of age groups. For example, the economic power of working adults conflicts with the political and voting power of the retired or elderly.

Age and generational conflicts are also highly influenced by government or state-sponsored milestones. In the United States, there are several age-related markers including the legal age of driving (16 years old), use of tobacco products (21 years old), consumption of alcohol (21 years old), and age of retirement (65-70 years old). Regardless of knowledge, skill, or condition, people must abide by formal rules with the expectations assigned to the each age group within the law. Because age serves as a basis of social control and reinforced by the state, different age groups have varying access to political and economic power and resources (Griffiths et al., 2015). For example, the United States is the only industrialized nation that does not respect the abilities of the elderly by assigning a marker of 65-70 years old as the indicator for someone to become a dependent of the state and an economically unproductive member of society.
In addition to age, disability is another status that may confer stratification. The term disability does not mean inability and it is not a sickness (US National Library of Medicine, 2007.) There are many different types of disabilities and disabled persons in the United States as well as throughout the world. While no one definition can adequately describe all disabilities, the universally-accepted definition describes a disability as “any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity” (U.S. Department of Justice, ADA, 2007.) The term disability includes cognitive, developmental, intellectual, physical, and learning impairments. Some disabilities are congenital (present at birth), or the result of an accident or illness, or age-related.

"The social constructionist view perceives the problem of disability situated within the minds of non-disabled people individually as prejudice, and collectively as the manifestation of hostile social attitudes and practices based upon negative assumptions of impairment" (Barnes & Oliver, 1993, p. 14). This view perceives the inequalities associated with disability as the outcome of the institutionalized practices of contemporary society.

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in the areas of employment, transportation, public accommodations, communications and access to state and local government programs and services. The ADA is a significant civil rights law designed to eliminate the obstacles of employment and guarantee education for disabled individuals. The ADA offers protection to persons with a physical or mental impairment which limits one or more of their life activities, and requires employers to extend “reasonable accommodations” to these
persons. Though the status of disability is no longer viewed simply as a medical problem, sociology has yet to fully consider disability in mainstream sociological discourse and analysis to parallel the stratification of social class, gender, race-ethnicity and sexuality (Barnes & Olive, 1993).

**Intersectionality**

While it is useful to consider how the study into each of the above (race, social class, gender, sexuality, disability, age) can provide a distinct understanding of our society and social stratification, there may be a better way to understand these categories and the structures they inhabit: use of an intersectional lens.

![Ven diagram of Intersectionality](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Ethnic_Studies/Race_and_Ethnic_Relations_in_the_U.S.%3A_An_Intersectional_...)

Figure \(\PageIndex{14}\): Ven diagram of Intersectionality. (Diagram created by Jakobi Oware)

Originally introduced by legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality was born of an analysis of the intersection of race and gender. Her analysis of legal cases involving discrimination experienced by African American women involved not only racism but also sexism, yet legal statutes and precedents provided no clear analysis of their intersection, but instead treat them as separate social categories. To understand the intersection of these social categories resulting in their ill treatment, both forms of oppression would need to considered jointly. Crenshaw advocates for social scientists to integrate race and gender into their "frames" to better capture the complexity of life experiences, particularly the experiences impacting African American women. Crenshaw used the example of police brutality and the countless African American male victims, with few recognizing the names of African American women brutalized by the police. The #SayHerName campaign was born of an intersectional frame revealing the importance of naming African American female victims of police brutality such as Breonna Taylor, Sandra Byrd, and Rekia Boyd.
Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) further developed intersection theory, which suggests we cannot separate the effects of race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and other attributes. “The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor . . . . Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves” (Collins, 1992, p.2). We are all shaped by the forces of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism, though we are likely impacted very differently by these forces.

When we examine race and how it can bring us both advantages and disadvantages, it is important to acknowledge that the way we experience race is shaped, for example, by our gender, social class, sexual orientation, age, disability and other statuses which are structured into our social systems. Multiple layers of disadvantage intersect to create the way we experience race, evidenced in concepts such as double jeopardy or triple jeopardy when an individual has two or three potentially oppressive statuses, respectively. For example, if we want to understand prejudice, we must understand that the prejudice focused on a Euro American woman because of her gender is very different from the layered prejudice focused on a poor Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) woman, who is affected by stereotypes related to being poor, being a woman, and her race-ethnic status. In contrast, writer Alice Walker suggested these individuals instead may have double or triple insights into the human condition. Rosenblum and Travis (2011) have argued that what one notices in the world depends in large part on the statuses one occupies . . . thus we are likely to be fairly unaware of the statuses we occupy that privilege us . . . [and] provide advantage and are acutely aware of those . . . that yield negative judgments and unfair treatment.

Collins (1990) writes that not all African American women experience life, and hence life chances, the same. A middle class heterosexual, Christian African American woman has more privileges than a poor, lesbian African American transgender woman. In fact, Collins explains that there are no pure oppressors or pure victims. In the previous example, this more privileged African American woman may be oppressed based on her gender and race-ethnicity, but she may be oppressive based on her religion, social class, and sexuality.
A variety of public issues may be considered using an intersectional lens; thus, the chapters in this book provide a discussion of intersectionality as the authors of this textbook recognize the utility, complexity and path towards social change that intersectionality offers. For example, in Chapter 2.2, intersectionality is presented as a sociological theory, and intersectionality is covered in most chapters of this textbook. Figure 1.5.16 above illustrates the intersection of race-ethnicity, social class and gender with regards to the income gap. Just as Latinas on average have the lowest income in the above chart, during COVID-19, Latinas also faced disproportionate job loss and unemployment. What we don't see in this chart though is the impact of ethnic background, education, sexuality or other social categories that impact our social structures. Looking at the U.S. Congress, an intersectional analysis informs us that most of our Senators and representatives in the House are Euro American men. While the blue wave in 2018 ushered in more women, particularly more women of color such as Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (pictured below in Figure 1.5.17) and Sharice Davids, the first Native American lesbian Congresswoman, time will tell if Congress will alter significantly to reflect the changing U.S. demographics.

Thinking Sociologically

How does intersectionality enhance our understanding of race and ethnicity? What types of social problems may be better understood by using an intersectional lens?
Key Takeaways

- The study of social stratification, or the unequal distribution of resources provides another lens in how to better understand race and ethnic relations.
- Society is stratified by race, social class, gender, sexuality, disability and age.
- An intersectional lens informs us that we cannot separate the effects of race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability, as these can rather be understood in their complexity and thus their intersection.

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