9.1E: Status Inconsistency

Status inconsistency occurs when an individual’s social positions are varied and these variations influence his or her overall social status.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss the concept of status inconsistency and how this phenomena can lead to frustration for people

Key Points

• Introduced by the sociologist Gerhard Lenski in the 1950s, status inconsistency theories predict that people whose status is inconsistent will be more frustrated and dissatisfied than people with consistent statuses.
• Sociologists investigate issues of status inconsistency in order to better understand status systems and stratification.
• Max Weber articulated three major dimensions of stratification in his discussion of class, power, and status.

Key Terms

• sociologist: A social scientist focused on the study of society, human social interaction, and the rules and processes that bind and separate people not only as individuals, but as members of associations, groups and institutions.
• status inconsistency: A situation in which an individual’s varied social positions can have both positive and negative influences on his or her social status.
• Max Weber: (1864–1920) A German sociologist, philosopher, and political economist who profoundly influenced
social theory, social research, and the discipline of sociology itself.

Status inconsistency is a situation where an individual’s social positions have both positive and negative influences on his or her social status. Introduced by the sociologist Gerhard Lenski in the 1950s, status inconsistency theories predict that people whose statuses are inconsistent will be more frustrated and dissatisfied than people with consistent statuses. For example, a teacher may have a positive societal image (respect, prestige, etc.), which increases her status but she may earn little money, which simultaneously decreases her status.

All societies have some basis for social stratification, and industrial societies are characterized by multiple dimensions to which some vertical hierarchy may be imputed. The notion of status inconsistency is simple: It is defined as occupying different vertical positions in two or more hierarchies. Sociologists investigate issues of status inconsistency in order to better understand status systems and stratification, and because some sociologists believe that positions of status inconsistency might have strong effects on people’s behavior.

Max Weber articulated three major dimensions of stratification in his discussion of class, power, and status. This multifaceted framework provides the background concepts for discussing status inconsistency. Status inconsistency theories predict that people whose status is inconsistent, or higher on one dimension than one another, will be more frustrated and dissatisfied than people with consistent statuses.

Gerhard Lenski originally predicted that people suffering from status inconsistency would favor political actions and parties directed against higher status groups. According to Lenski, the concept can be used to further explain why status groups made up of wealthy minorities who would be presumed conservative tend to be liberal instead. Since Lenski coined the term, status inconsistency has remained controversial with limited empirical verification.

School Teacher: Teachers are often held in high esteem and exert power over students and in local policy, but they tend to have low incomes and little accumulated wealth.

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