

9 Social Stratification in the United States



Figure 9.1 This house, formerly owned by the famous television producer, Aaron Spelling, was for a time listed for \$150 million dollars. It is considered one of the most extravagant homes in the United States, and is a testament to the wealth generated in some industries. (Photo courtesy of Atwater Village Newbie/flickr)

Learning Objectives

9.1. What Is Social Stratification?

- Differentiate between open and closed stratification systems
- Distinguish between caste and class systems
- Understand meritocracy as an ideal system of stratification

9.2. Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States

- Understand the U.S. class structure
- Describe several types of social mobility
- Recognize characteristics that define and identify class

9.3. Global Stratification and Inequality

- Define global stratification
- Describe different sociological models for understanding global stratification
- Understand how studies of global stratification identify worldwide inequalities

9.4. Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

- Understand and apply functionalist, conflict theory, and interactionist perspectives on social stratification

Introduction to Social Stratification in the United States

Aaron grew up on a farm in rural Ohio, left home to serve in the Army, and returned a few years later to take over the family farm. He moved into the same house he had grown up in and soon married a young woman with whom he had attended high school. As they began to have children, they quickly realized that the income from the farm was no longer sufficient to meet their needs. Aaron, with little experience beyond the farm, accepted a job as a clerk at a local grocery store. It was there that his life and the lives of his wife and children were changed forever.

One of the managers at the store liked Aaron, his attitude, and his work ethic. He took Aaron under his wing and began to groom him for advancement at the store. Aaron rose through the ranks with ease. Then the manager encouraged him to take a few classes at a local college. This was the first time Aaron had seriously thought about college. Could he be successful, Aaron wondered? Could he actually be the first one in his family to earn a degree? Fortunately, his wife also believed in him and supported his decision to take his first class. Aaron asked his wife and his manager to keep his college enrollment a secret. He did not want others to know about it in case he failed.

Aaron was nervous on his first day of class. He was older than the other students, and he had never considered himself college material. Through hard work and determination, however, he did very well in the class. While he still doubted himself, he enrolled in another class. Again, he performed very well. As his doubt began to fade, he started to take more and more classes. Before he knew it, he was walking across the stage to receive a Bachelor's degree with honors. The ceremony seemed surreal to Aaron. He couldn't believe he had finished college, which once seemed like an impossible feat.

Shortly after graduation, Aaron was admitted into a graduate program at a well-respected university where he earned a Master's degree. He had not only become the first from his family to attend college but also he had earned a graduate degree. Inspired by Aaron's success, his wife enrolled at a technical college, obtained a degree in nursing, and became a registered nurse working in a local hospital's labor and delivery department. Aaron and his wife both worked their way up the career ladder in their respective fields and became leaders in their organizations. They epitomized the American Dream—they worked hard and it paid off.

This story may sound familiar. After all, nearly one in three first-year college students is a first-generation degree candidate, and it is well documented that many are not as successful as Aaron. According to the Center for Student Opportunity, a national nonprofit, 89 percent of first-generation students will not earn an undergraduate degree within six years of starting their studies. In fact, these students “drop out of college at four times the rate of peers whose parents have postsecondary degrees” (Center for Student Opportunity quoted in Huot 2014).

Why do students with parents who have completed college tend to graduate more often than those students whose parents do not hold degrees? That question and many others will be answered as we explore social stratification.

9.1 What Is Social Stratification?



Figure 9.2 In the upper echelons of the working world, people with the most power reach the top. These people make the decisions and earn the most money. The majority of Americans will never see the view from the top. (Photo courtesy of Alex Proimos/flickr)

Sociologists use the term social stratification to describe the system of social standing. **Social stratification** refers to a society's categorization of its people into rankings of socioeconomic tiers based on factors like wealth, income, race, education, and power.

You may remember the word “stratification” from geology class. The distinct vertical layers found in rock, called stratification, are a good way to visualize social structure. Society's layers are made of people, and society's resources are distributed unevenly throughout the layers. The people who have more resources represent the top layer of the social structure of stratification. Other groups of people, with progressively fewer and fewer resources, represent the lower layers of our society.



Figure 9.3 Strata in rock illustrate social stratification. People are sorted, or layered, into social categories. Many factors determine a person's social standing, such as income, education, occupation, as well as age, race, gender, and even physical abilities. (Photo courtesy of Just a Prairie Boy/flickr)

In the United States, people like to believe everyone has an equal chance at success. To a certain extent, Aaron illustrates the belief that hard work and talent—not prejudicial treatment or societal values—determine social rank. This 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, 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.



Figure 9.4 The people who live in these houses most likely share similar levels of income and education. Neighborhoods often house people of the same social standing. Wealthy families do not typically live next door to poorer families, though this varies depending on the particular city and country. (Photo courtesy of Orin Zebest/flickr)

Factors that define stratification vary in different societies. In most societies, stratification is an economic system, based on **wealth**, the net value of money and assets a person has, and **income**, a person's wages or investment dividends. While people are regularly categorized based on how rich or poor they are, other important factors influence social standing. For example, in some cultures, wisdom and charisma are valued, and people who have them are revered more than those who don't. In some cultures, the elderly are esteemed; in others, the elderly are disparaged or overlooked. Societies' cultural beliefs often reinforce the inequalities of stratification.

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 fare as well as other students.

Other determinants are found in a society's occupational structure. Teachers, for example, often have high levels of education but receive relatively low pay. Many believe that teaching is a noble profession, so teachers should do their jobs for love of their profession and the good of their students—not for money. Yet no successful executive or entrepreneur would embrace that attitude in the business world, where profits are valued as a driving force. Cultural attitudes and beliefs like these support and perpetuate social inequalities.

Recent Economic Changes and U.S. Stratification

As a result of the Great Recession that rocked our nation's economy in the last few years, 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 lower 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 we're not completely out of the woods economically, there are several signs that we're on the road to recovery. Many of those who suffered during the recession are back to work and are busy rebuilding their lives. The Affordable Health Care Act has provided health insurance to millions who lost or never had it.

But the Great Recession, like the Great Depression, has changed social attitudes. Where once it was important to demonstrate wealth by wearing expensive clothing items like Calvin Klein shirts and Louis Vuitton shoes, now there's a new, thriftier way of thinking. In many circles, it has become hip to be frugal. It's no longer about how much we spend, but about how much we don't spend. Think of shows like *Extreme Couponing* on TLC and songs like Macklemore's "Thrift Shop."

Systems of Stratification

Sociologists distinguish between two types of systems of stratification. Closed systems accommodate little change in social position. They do not allow people to shift levels and do not permit social relationships between levels. Open systems, which are based on achievement, allow movement and interaction between layers and classes. Different systems reflect, emphasize, and foster certain cultural values and shape individual beliefs. Stratification systems include class systems and caste systems, as well as meritocracy.

The Caste System



Figure 9.5 India used to have a rigid caste system. The people in the lowest caste suffered from extreme poverty and were shunned by society. Some aspects of India's defunct caste system remain socially relevant. In this photo, an Indian woman of a specific Hindu caste works in construction, and she demolishes and builds houses. (Photo courtesy of Elessar/flickr)

Caste systems are closed stratification systems in which people can do little or nothing to change their social standing. A **caste system** is one in which people are born into their social standing and will remain in it their whole lives. People are assigned occupations regardless of their talents, interests, or potential. There are virtually no opportunities to improve a person's social position.

In the Hindu caste tradition, people were expected to work in the occupation of their caste and to enter into marriage according to their caste. Accepting this social standing was considered a moral duty. Cultural values reinforced the system. Caste systems promote beliefs in fate, destiny, and the will of a higher power, rather than promoting individual freedom as a value. A person who lived in a caste society was socialized to accept his or her social standing.

Although the caste system in India has been officially dismantled, its residual presence in Indian society is deeply embedded. In rural areas, aspects of the tradition are more likely to remain, while urban centers show less evidence of this past. In India's larger cities, people now have more opportunities to choose their own career paths and marriage partners. As a global center of employment, corporations have introduced merit-based hiring and employment to the nation.

The Class System

A **class system** is based on both social factors and individual achievement. A **class** consists of a set of people who share similar status with regard to factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation. Unlike caste systems, class systems are open. 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.

In a class system, occupation is not fixed at birth. Though family and other societal models help guide a person toward a career, personal choice plays a role.

In class systems, people have the option to form **exogamous marriages**, 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 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**.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy is an ideal system based on the belief that social stratification is the result of personal effort—or merit—that determines social standing. High levels of effort will lead to a high social position, and vice versa. The concept of meritocracy is an ideal—because a society has never existed where social rank was based purely on merit. Because of the complex structure of societies, processes like socialization, and the realities of economic systems, social standing is influenced by multiple factors—not merit alone. Inheritance and pressure to conform to norms, for instance, disrupt the notion of a pure meritocracy. While a meritocracy has never existed, sociologists see aspects of meritocracies in modern societies when they study the role of academic and job performance and the systems in place for evaluating and rewarding achievement in these areas.

Status Consistency

Social stratification systems determine social position based on factors like income, education, and occupation. Sociologists use the term **status consistency** to describe the consistency, or lack thereof, of an individual's rank across these factors. Caste systems correlate with high status consistency, whereas the more flexible class system has lower status consistency.

To illustrate, let's consider Susan. Susan earned her high school degree but did not go to college. That factor is a trait of the lower-middle class. She began doing landscaping work, which, as manual labor, is also a trait of lower-middle class or even lower class. However, over time, Susan started her own company. She hired employees. She won larger contracts. She became a business owner and earned a lot of money. Those traits represent the upper-middle class. There are inconsistencies between Susan's educational level, her occupation, and her income. In a class system, a person can work hard and have little education and still be in middle or upper class, whereas in a caste system that would not be possible. In a class system, low status consistency correlates with having more choices and opportunities.

Making Connections: Social Policy & Debate



The Commoner Who Could Be Queen



Figure 9.6 Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, who is in line to be king of England, married Catherine Middleton, a so-called commoner, meaning she does not have royal ancestry. (Photo courtesy of UK_repsome/flickr)

On April 29, 2011, in London, England, Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, married Catherine Middleton, a commoner. It is rare, though not unheard of, for a member of the British royal family to marry a commoner. Kate Middleton has an upper-class background, but does not have royal ancestry. Her father was a former flight dispatcher and her mother a former flight attendant and owner of Party Pieces. According to Grace Wong's 2011 article titled, "Kate Middleton: A family business that built a princess," "[t]he business grew to the point where [her father] quit his job . . . and it's evolved from a mom-and-pop outfit run out of a shed . . . into a venture operated out of three

converted farm buildings in Berkshire." Kate and William met when they were both students at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland (Köhler 2010).

Britain's monarchy arose during the Middle Ages. Its social hierarchy placed royalty at the top and commoners on the bottom. This was generally a closed system, with people born into positions of nobility. Wealth was passed from generation to generation through **primogeniture**, a law stating that all property would be inherited by the firstborn son. If the family had no son, the land went to the next closest male relation. Women could not inherit property, and their social standing was primarily determined through marriage.

The arrival of the Industrial Revolution changed Britain's social structure. Commoners moved to cities, got jobs, and made better livings. Gradually, people found new opportunities to increase their wealth and power. Today, the government is a constitutional monarchy with the prime minister and other ministers elected to their positions, and with the royal family's role being largely ceremonial. The long-ago differences between nobility and commoners have blurred, and the modern class system in Britain is similar to that of the United States (McKee 1996).

Today, the royal family still commands wealth, power, and a great deal of attention. When Queen Elizabeth II retires or passes away, Prince Charles will be first in line to ascend the throne. If he abdicates (chooses not to become king) or dies, the position will go to Prince William. If that happens, Kate Middleton will be called Queen Catherine and hold the position of queen consort. She will be one of the few queens in history to have earned a college degree (Marquand 2011).

There is a great deal of social pressure on her not only to behave as a royal but also to bear children. In fact, Kate and Prince William welcomed their first son, Prince George, on July 22, 2013 and are expecting their second child. The royal family recently changed its succession laws to allow daughters, not just sons, to ascend the throne. Kate's experience—from commoner to potential queen—demonstrates the fluidity of social position in modern society.

9.2 Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States

Most sociologists define social class as a grouping based on similar social factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation. These factors affect how much power and prestige a person has. Social stratification reflects an unequal distribution of resources. In most cases, having more money means having more power or more opportunities. Stratification can also result from physical and intellectual traits. Categories that affect social standing include family ancestry, race, ethnicity, age, and gender. In the United States, standing can also be defined by characteristics such as IQ, athletic abilities, appearance, personal skills, and achievements.

Standard of Living

In the last century, the United States has seen a steady rise in its **standard of living**, the level of wealth available to a certain socioeconomic class in order to acquire the material necessities and comforts to maintain its lifestyle. The standard of living is based on factors such as income, employment, class, poverty rates, and housing affordability. Because standard of living is closely related to quality of life, it can represent factors such as the ability to afford a home, own a car, and take vacations.

In the United States, a small portion of the population has the means to the highest standard of living. A Federal Reserve Bank study shows that a mere one percent of the population holds one-third of our nation's wealth (Kennickell 2009). Wealthy people receive the most schooling, have better health, and consume the most goods and services. Wealthy people also wield decision-making power. Many people think of the United States as a "middle-class society." They think a few people are rich, a few are poor, and most are fairly well off, existing in the middle of the social strata. But as the study mentioned above indicates, there is not an even distribution of wealth. Millions of women and men struggle to pay rent, buy food, find work, and afford basic medical care. Women who are single heads of household tend to have a lower income and lower standard of living than their married or male counterparts. This is a worldwide phenomenon known as the "feminization of poverty"—which acknowledges that women disproportionately make up the majority of individuals in poverty across the globe.

In the United States, as in most high-income nations, social stratifications and standards of living are in part based on occupation (Lin and Xie 1988). Aside from the obvious impact that income has on someone's standard of living, occupations also influence social standing through the relative levels of prestige they afford. Employment in medicine, law, or engineering confers high status. Teachers and police officers are generally respected, though not considered

particularly prestigious. At the other end of the scale, some of the lowest rankings apply to positions like waitress, janitor, and bus driver.

The most significant threat to the relatively high standard of living we're 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).

G. William Domhoff, of the University of California at Santa Cruz, reports that "In 2010, the top 1% of households (the upper class) owned 35.4% of all privately held wealth, and the next 19% (the managerial, professional, and small business stratum) had 53.5%, which means that just 20% of the people owned a remarkable 89%, leaving only 11% of the wealth for the bottom 80% (wage and salary workers)" (Domhoff 2013).

While several economic factors can be improved in the United States (inequitable distribution of income and wealth, feminization of poverty, stagnant wages for most workers while executive pay and profits soar, declining middle class), we are fortunate that the poverty experienced here is most often relative poverty and not absolute poverty. Whereas absolute poverty is deprivation so severe that it puts survival in jeopardy, relative poverty is not having the means to live the lifestyle of the average person in your country.

As a wealthy developed country, the United States has the resources to provide the basic necessities to those in need through a series of federal and state social welfare programs. The best-known of these programs is likely the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is administered by the United States Department of Agriculture. (This used to be known as the food stamp program.)

The program began in the Great Depression, when unmarketable or surplus food was distributed to the hungry. It was not until 1961 that President John F. Kennedy initiated a food stamp pilot program. His successor Lyndon B. Johnson was instrumental in the passage of the Food Stamp Act in 1964. In 1965, more than 500,000 individuals received food assistance. In March 2008, on the precipice of the Great Recession, participation hovered around 28 million people. During the recession, that number escalated to more than 40 million (USDA).

Social Classes in the United States



Figure 9.7 Does taste or fashion sense indicate class? Is there any way to tell if this young man comes from an upper-, middle-, or lower-class background? (Photo courtesy of Kelly Bailey/flickr)

Does a person's appearance indicate class? Can you tell a man's education level based on his clothing? Do you know a woman's income by the car she drives?

For sociologists, categorizing class is a fluid science. Sociologists generally identify three levels of class in the United States: upper, middle, and lower class. Within each class, there are many subcategories. Wealth is the most significant way of distinguishing classes, because wealth can be transferred to one's children and perpetuate the class structure. One economist, J.D. Foster, defines the 20 percent of U.S. citizens' highest earners as "upper income," and the lower 20 percent as "lower income." The remaining 60 percent of the population make up the middle class. But by that distinction, annual household incomes for the middle class range between \$25,000 and \$100,000 (Mason and Sullivan 2010).

One sociological perspective distinguishes the classes, in part, according to their relative power and control over their lives. The upper class not only have power and control over their own lives but also their social status gives them power and control over others' lives. The middle class doesn't generally control other strata of society, but its members do exert

control over their own lives. In contrast, the lower class has little control over their work or lives. Below, we will explore the major divisions of U.S. social class and their key subcategories.

Upper Class



Figure 9.8 Members of the upper class can afford to live, work, and play in exclusive places designed for luxury and comfort. (Photo courtesy of PrimelImageMedia.com/flickr)

The upper class is considered the top, and only the powerful elite get to see the view from there. In the United States, people with extreme wealth make up 1 percent of the population, and they own one-third of the country's wealth (Beeghley 2008).

Money provides not just access to material goods, but also access to a lot of power. As corporate leaders, members of the upper class make decisions that affect the job status of millions of people. As media owners, they influence the collective identity of the nation. They run the major network television stations, radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, and sports franchises. As board members of the most influential colleges and universities, they influence cultural attitudes and values. As philanthropists, they establish foundations to support social causes they believe in. As campaign contributors, they sway politicians and fund campaigns, sometimes to protect their own economic interests.

U.S. society has historically distinguished between “old money” (inherited wealth passed from one generation to the next) and “new money” (wealth you have earned and built yourself). While both types may have equal net worth, they have traditionally held different social standings. People of old money, firmly situated in the upper class for generations, have held high prestige. Their families have socialized them to know the customs, norms, and expectations that come with wealth. Often, the very wealthy don't work for wages. Some study business or become lawyers in order to manage the family fortune. Others, such as Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian, capitalize on being a rich socialite and transform that into celebrity status, flaunting a wealthy lifestyle.

However, new-money members of the upper class are not oriented to the customs and mores of the elite. They haven't gone to the most exclusive schools. They have not established old-money social ties. People with new money might flaunt their wealth, buying sports cars and mansions, but they might still exhibit behaviors attributed to the middle and lower classes.

The Middle Class



Figure 9.9 These members of a club likely consider themselves middle class. (Photo courtesy of United Way Canada-Centraide Canada/flickr)

Many people consider themselves middle class, but there are differing ideas about what that means. People with annual incomes of \$150,000 call themselves middle class, as do people who annually earn \$30,000. That helps explain why, in the United States, the middle class is broken into upper and lower subcategories.

Upper-middle-class people tend to hold bachelor's and postgraduate degrees. They've studied subjects such as business, management, law, or medicine. Lower-middle-class members hold bachelor's degrees from four-year colleges or associate's degrees from two-year community or technical colleges.

Comfort is a key concept to the middle class. Middle-class people work hard and live fairly comfortable lives. Upper-middle-class people tend to pursue careers that earn comfortable incomes. They provide their families with large homes and nice cars. They may go skiing or boating on vacation. Their children receive high-quality education and healthcare (Gilbert 2010).

In the lower middle class, people hold jobs supervised by members of the upper middle class. They fill technical, lower-level management or administrative support positions. Compared to lower-class work, lower-middle-class jobs carry more prestige and come with slightly higher paychecks. With these incomes, people can afford a decent, mainstream lifestyle, but they struggle to maintain it. They generally don't have enough income to build significant savings. In addition, their grip on class status is more precarious than in the upper tiers of the class system. When budgets are tight, lower-middle-class people are often the ones to lose their jobs.

The Lower Class



Figure 9.10 This man is a custodian at a restaurant. His job, which is crucial to the business, is considered lower class. (Photo courtesy of Frederick Md Publicity/flickr)

The lower class is also referred to as the working class. Just like the middle and upper classes, the lower class can be divided into subsets: the working class, the working poor, and the underclass. Compared to the lower middle class, lower-class people have less of an educational background and earn smaller incomes. They work jobs that require little prior skill or experience and often do routine tasks under close supervision.

Working-class people, the highest subcategory of the lower class, often land decent jobs in fields like custodial or food service. The work is hands-on and often physically demanding, such as landscaping, cooking, cleaning, or building.

Beneath the working class is the working poor. Like the working class, they have unskilled, low-paying employment. However, their jobs rarely offer benefits such as healthcare or retirement planning, and their positions are often seasonal or temporary. They work as sharecroppers, migrant farm workers, housecleaners, and day laborers. Some are high school dropouts. Some are illiterate, unable to read job ads.

How can people work full-time and still be poor? Even working full-time, millions of the working poor earn incomes too meager to support a family. Minimum wage varies from state to state, but in many states it is approaching \$8.00 per hour (Department of Labor 2014). At that rate, working 40 hours a week earns \$320. That comes to \$16,640 a year, before tax and deductions. Even for a single person, the pay is low. A married couple with children will have a hard time covering expenses.

The underclass is the United States' lowest tier. Members of the underclass live mainly in inner cities. Many are unemployed or underemployed. Those who do hold jobs typically perform menial tasks for little pay. Some of the underclass are homeless. For many, welfare systems provide a much-needed support through food assistance, medical care, housing, and the like.

Social Mobility

Social mobility refers to the ability to change positions within a social stratification system. When people improve or diminish their economic status in a way that affects social class, they experience social mobility.

Individuals can experience upward or downward social mobility for a variety of reasons. **Upward mobility** refers to an increase—or upward shift—in social class. In the United States, people applaud the rags-to-riches achievements of celebrities like Jennifer Lopez or Michael Jordan. Bestselling author Stephen King worked as a janitor prior to being published. Oprah Winfrey grew up in poverty in rural Mississippi before becoming a powerful media personality. There are many stories of people rising from modest beginnings to fame and fortune. But the truth is that relative to the overall population, the number of people who rise from poverty to wealth is very small. Still, upward mobility is not only about becoming rich and famous. In the United States, people who earn a college degree, get a job promotion, or marry someone with a good income may move up socially. In contrast, **downward mobility** indicates a lowering of one's social class. Some people move downward because of business setbacks, unemployment, or illness. Dropping out of school, losing a job, or getting a divorce may result in a loss of income or status and, therefore, downward social mobility.

It is not uncommon for different generations of a family to belong to varying social classes. This is known as **intergenerational mobility**. For example, an upper-class executive may have parents who belonged to the middle class. In turn, those parents may have been raised in the lower class. Patterns of intergenerational mobility can reflect long-term societal changes.

Similarly, **intragenerational mobility** describes a difference in social class that between different members of the same generation. For example, the wealth and prestige experienced by one person may be quite different from that of his or her siblings.

Structural mobility happens when societal changes enable a whole group of people to move up or down the social class ladder. Structural mobility is attributable to changes in society as a whole, not individual changes. In the first half of the twentieth century, industrialization expanded the U.S. economy, raising the standard of living and leading to upward structural mobility. In today's work economy, the recent recession and the outsourcing of jobs overseas have contributed to high unemployment rates. Many people have experienced economic setbacks, creating a wave of downward structural mobility.

When analyzing the trends and movements in social mobility, sociologists consider all modes of mobility. Scholars recognize that mobility is not as common or easy to achieve as many people think. In fact, some consider social mobility a myth.

Class Traits

Class traits, also called class markers, are the typical behaviors, customs, and norms that define each class. Class traits indicate the level of exposure a person has to a wide range of cultures. Class traits also indicate the amount of resources a person has to spend on items like hobbies, vacations, and leisure activities.

People may associate the upper class with enjoyment of costly, refined, or highly cultivated tastes—expensive clothing, luxury cars, high-end fund-raisers, and opulent vacations. People may also believe that the middle and lower classes are more likely to enjoy camping, fishing, or hunting, shopping at large retailers, and participating in community activities. While these descriptions may identify class traits, they may also simply be stereotypes. Moreover, just as class distinctions have blurred in recent decades, so too have class traits. A very wealthy person may enjoy bowling as much as opera. A factory worker could be a skilled French cook. A billionaire might dress in ripped jeans, and a low-income student might own designer shoes.

Making Connections:

Sociological Research



Turn-of-the-Century “Social Problem Novels”: Sociological Gold Mines

Class distinctions were sharper in the nineteenth century and earlier, in part because people easily accepted them. The ideology of social order made class structure seem natural, right, and just.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, U.S. and British novelists played a role in changing public perception. They published novels in which characters struggled to survive against a merciless class system. These dissenting authors used gender and morality to question the class system and expose its inequalities. They protested the suffering of urbanization and industrialization, drawing attention to these issues.

These “social problem novels,” sometimes called Victorian realism, forced middle-class readers into an uncomfortable position: they had to question and challenge the natural order of social class.

For speaking out so strongly about the social issues of class, authors were both praised and criticized. Most authors did not want to dissolve the class system. They wanted to bring about an awareness that would improve conditions for the lower classes, while maintaining their own higher class positions (DeVine 2005).

Soon, middle-class readers were not their only audience. In 1870, Forster’s Elementary Education Act required all children ages five through twelve in England and Wales to attend school. The act increased literacy levels among the urban poor, causing a rise in sales of cheap newspapers and magazines. The increasing number of people who rode public transit systems created a demand for “railway literature,” as it was called (Williams 1984). These reading materials are credited with the move toward democratization in England. By 1900 the British middle class had established a rigid definition for itself, and England’s working class also began to self-identify and demand a better way of life.

Many of the novels of that era are seen as sociological goldmines. They are studied as existing sources because they detail the customs and mores of the upper, middle, and lower classes of that period in history.

Examples of “social problem” novels include Charles Dickens’s *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (1838), which shocked readers with its brutal portrayal of the realities of poverty, vice, and crime. Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) was considered revolutionary by critics for its depiction of working-class women (DeVine 2005), and U.S. novelist Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) portrayed an accurate and detailed description of early Chicago.

9.3 Global Stratification and Inequality

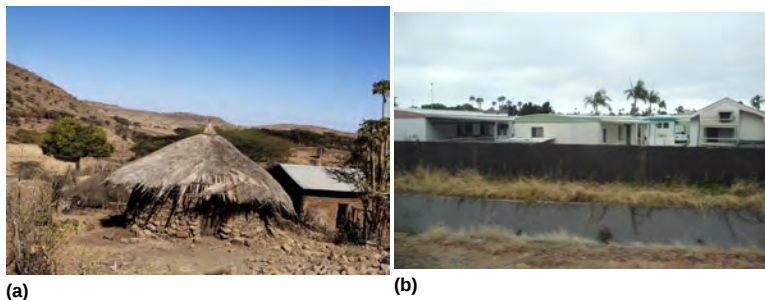


Figure 9.11 A family lives in this grass hut in Ethiopia. Another family lives in a single-wide trailer in the trailer park in the United States. Both families are considered poor, or lower class. With such differences in global stratification, what constitutes poverty? (Photo (a) courtesy of Canned Muffins/flickr; Photo (b) courtesy of Herb Neufeld/flickr)

Global stratification compares the wealth, economic stability, status, and power of countries across the world. Global stratification highlights worldwide patterns of social inequality.

In the early years of civilization, hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies lived off the earth and rarely interacted with other societies. When explorers began traveling, societies began trading goods, as well as ideas and customs.

In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution created unprecedented wealth in Western Europe and North America. Due to mechanical inventions and new means of production, people began working in factories—not only men, but women and children as well. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industrial technology had gradually raised the standard of living for many people in the United States and Europe.

The Industrial Revolution also saw the rise of vast inequalities between countries that were industrialized and those that were not. As some nations embraced technology and saw increased wealth and goods, others maintained their ways; as the gap widened, the nonindustrialized nations fell further behind. Some social researchers, such as Walt Rostow, suggest that the disparity also resulted from power differences. Applying a conflict theory perspective, he asserts that industrializing nations took advantage of the resources of traditional nations. As industrialized nations became rich, other nations became poor (Rostow 1960).

Sociologists studying global stratification analyze economic comparisons between nations. Income, purchasing power, and wealth are used to calculate global stratification. Global stratification also compares the quality of life that a country's population can have.

Poverty levels have been shown to vary greatly. The poor in wealthy countries like the United States or Europe are much better off than the poor in less-industrialized countries such as Mali or India. In 2002, the UN implemented the Millennium Project, an attempt to cut poverty worldwide by the year 2015. To reach the project's goal, planners in 2006 estimated that industrialized nations must set aside 0.7 percent of their gross national income—the total value of the nation's good and service, plus or minus income received from and sent to other nations—to aid in developing countries (Landler and Sanger, 2009; Millennium Project 2006).

Models of Global Stratification



Figure 9.12 Luxury vacation resorts can contribute to a poorer country's economy. This one, in Jamaica, attracts middle and upper-middle class people from wealthier nations. The resort is a source of income and provides jobs for local people. Just outside its borders, however, are poverty-stricken neighborhoods. (Photo courtesy of gailf548/flickr)

Various models of global stratification all have one thing in common: they rank countries according to their relative economic status, or gross national product (GNP). Traditional models, now considered outdated, used labels to describe the stratification of the different areas of the world. Simply put, they were named “first world,” “second world,” and “third world.” First and second world described industrialized nations, while third world referred to “undeveloped” countries (Henslin 2004). When researching existing historical sources, you may still encounter these terms, and even today people still refer to some nations as the “third world.”

Another model separates countries into two groups: more developed and less developed. More-developed nations have higher wealth, such as Canada, Japan, and Australia. Less-developed nations have less wealth to distribute among higher populations, including many countries in central Africa, South America, and some island nations.

Yet another system of global classification defines countries based on the per capita gross domestic product (GDP), a country's average national wealth per person. The GDP is calculated (usually annually) one of two ways: by totaling either the income of all citizens or the value of all goods and services produced in the country during the year. It also includes government spending. Because the GDP indicates a country's productivity and performance, comparing GDP rates helps establish a country's economic health in relation to other countries.

The figures also establish a country's standard of living. According to this analysis, a GDP standard of a middle-income nation represents a global average. In low-income countries, most people are poor relative to people in other countries. Citizens have little access to amenities such as electricity, plumbing, and clean water. People in low-income countries are not guaranteed education, and many are illiterate. The life expectancy of citizens is lower than in high-income countries.

Making Connections:



the Big Picture

The Big Picture: Calculating Global Stratification

A few organizations take on the job of comparing the wealth of nations. The Population Reference Bureau (PRB) is one of them. Besides a focus on population data, the PRB publishes an annual report that measures the relative economic well-being of all the world's countries. It's called the Gross National Income (GNI) and Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).

The GNI measures the current value of goods and services produced by a country. The PPP measures the relative power a country has to purchase those same goods and services. So, GNI refers to productive output and PPP refers to buying power. The total figure is divided by the number of residents living in a country to establish the average income of a resident of that country.

Because costs of goods and services vary from one country to the next, the GNI PPP converts figures into a relative international unit. Calculating GNI PPP figures helps researchers accurately compare countries' standard of living. They allow the United Nations and Population Reference Bureau to compare and rank the wealth of all countries and consider international stratification issues (nationsonline.org).

9.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

Basketball is one of the highest-paying professional sports. There is stratification even among teams. For example, the Minnesota Timberwolves hand out the lowest annual payroll, while the Los Angeles Lakers reportedly pay the highest. Kobe Bryant, a Lakers shooting guard, is one of the highest paid athletes in the NBA, earning around \$30.5 million a year (Forbes 2014). Even within specific fields, layers are stratified and members are ranked.

In sociology, even an issue such as NBA salaries can be seen from various points of view. Functionalists will examine the purpose of such high salaries, while conflict theorists will study the exorbitant salaries as an unfair distribution of money. Social stratification takes on new meanings when it is examined from different sociological perspectives—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalism

In sociology, the functionalist perspective examines how society's parts operate. According to functionalism, different aspects of society exist because they serve a needed purpose. What is the function of social stratification?

In 1945, sociologists Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore published the **Davis-Moore thesis**, which argued that the greater the functional importance of a social role, the greater must be the reward. The theory posits that social stratification represents the inherently unequal value of different work. Certain tasks in society are more valuable than others. Qualified people who fill those positions must be rewarded more than others.

According to Davis and Moore, a firefighter's job is more important than, for instance, a grocery store cashier's. The cashier position does not require the same skill and training level as firefighting. Without the incentive of higher pay and better benefits, why would someone be willing to rush into burning buildings? If pay levels were the same, the firefighter might as well work as a grocery store cashier. Davis and Moore believed that rewarding more important work with higher levels of income, prestige, and power encourages people to work harder and longer.

Davis and Moore stated that, in most cases, the degree of skill required for a job determines that job's importance. They also stated that the more skill required for a job, the fewer qualified people there would be to do that job. Certain jobs, such as cleaning hallways or answering phones, do not require much skill. The employees don't need a college degree. Other work, like designing a highway system or delivering a baby, requires immense skill.

In 1953, Melvin Tumin countered the Davis-Moore thesis in "Some Principles of Stratification: A Critical Analysis." Tumin questioned what determined a job's degree of importance. The Davis-Moore thesis does not explain, he argued, why a media personality with little education, skill, or talent becomes famous and rich on a reality show or a campaign trail. The thesis also does not explain inequalities in the education system or inequalities due to race or gender. Tumin believed social stratification prevented qualified people from attempting to fill roles (Tumin 1953). For example, an underprivileged youth has less chance of becoming a scientist, no matter how smart she is, because of the relative lack of

opportunity available to her. The Davis-Moore thesis also does not explain why a basketball player earns millions of dollars a year when a doctor who saves lives, a soldier who fights for others' rights, and a teacher who helps form the minds of tomorrow will likely not make millions over the course of their careers.

The Davis-Moore thesis, though open for debate, was an early attempt to explain why stratification exists. The thesis states that social stratification is necessary to promote excellence, productivity, and efficiency, thus giving people something to strive for. Davis and Moore believed that the system serves society as a whole because it allows everyone to benefit to a certain extent.

Conflict Theory



Figure 9.13 These people are protesting a decision made by Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, Tennessee, to lay off custodians and outsource the jobs to a private firm to avoid paying employee benefits. Private job agencies often pay lower hourly wages. Is the decision fair? (Photo courtesy of Brian Stansberry/Wikimedia Commons)

Conflict theorists are deeply critical of social stratification, asserting that it benefits only some people, not all of society. For instance, to a conflict theorist, it seems wrong that a basketball player is paid millions for an annual contract while a public school teacher earns \$35,000 a year. Stratification, conflict theorists believe, perpetuates inequality. Conflict theorists try to bring awareness to inequalities, such as how a rich society can have so many poor members.

Many conflict theorists draw on the work of Karl Marx. During the nineteenth-century era of industrialization, Marx believed social stratification resulted from people's relationship to production. People were divided by a single line: they either owned factories or worked in them. In Marx's time, bourgeois capitalists owned high-producing businesses, factories, and land, as they still do today. Proletariats were the workers who performed the manual labor to produce goods. Upper-class capitalists raked in profits and got rich, while working-class proletariats earned skimpy wages and struggled to survive. With such opposing interests, the two groups were divided by differences of wealth and power. Marx saw workers experience deep alienation, isolation and misery resulting from powerless status levels (Marx 1848). Marx argued that proletariats were oppressed by the money-hungry bourgeois.

Today, while working conditions have improved, conflict theorists believe that the strained working relationship between employers and employees still exists. Capitalists own the means of production, and a system is in place to make business owners rich and keep workers poor. According to conflict theorists, the resulting stratification creates class conflict. If he were alive in today's economy, as it recovers from a prolonged recession, Marx would likely have argued that the recession resulted from the greed of capitalists, satisfied at the expense of working people.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a theory that uses everyday interactions of individuals to explain society as a whole. Symbolic interactionism examines stratification from a micro-level perspective. This analysis strives to explain how people's social standing affects their everyday interactions.

In most communities, people interact primarily with others who share the same social standing. It is precisely because of social stratification that people tend to live, work, and associate with others like themselves, people who share their same income level, educational background, or racial background, and even tastes in food, music, and clothing. The built-in system of social stratification groups people together. This is one of the reasons why it was rare for a royal prince like England's Prince William to marry a commoner.

Symbolic interactionists also note that people's appearance reflects their perceived social standing. Housing, clothing, and transportation indicate social status, as do hairstyles, taste in accessories, and personal style.



Figure 9.14 (a) A group of construction workers on the job site, and (b) a group of businessmen. What categories of stratification do these construction workers share? How do construction workers differ from executives or custodians? Who is more skilled? Who has greater prestige in society? (Photo (a) courtesy of Wikimedia Commons; Photo (b) courtesy of Chun Kit/flickr)

To symbolically communicate social standing, people often engage in **conspicuous consumption**, which is the purchase and use of certain products to make a social statement about status. Carrying pricey but eco-friendly water bottles could indicate a person's social standing. Some people buy expensive trendy sneakers even though they will never wear them to jog or play sports. A \$17,000 car provides transportation as easily as a \$100,000 vehicle, but the luxury car makes a social statement that the less expensive car can't live up to. All these symbols of stratification are worthy of examination by an interactionist.

Chapter Review

Key Terms

caste system: a system in which people are born into a social standing that they will retain their entire lives

class: a group who shares a common social status based on factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation

class system: social standing based on social factors and individual accomplishments

class traits: the typical behaviors, customs, and norms that define each class (also called class markers)

conspicuous consumption: the act of buying and using products to make a statement about social standing

Davis-Moore thesis: a thesis that argues some social stratification is a social necessity

downward mobility: a lowering of one's social class

endogamous marriages: unions of people within the same social category

exogamous unions: unions of spouses from different social categories

global stratification: a comparison of the wealth, economic stability, status, and power of countries as a whole

income: the money a person earns from work or investments

intergenerational mobility: a difference in social class between different generations of a family

intragenerational mobility: a difference in social class between different members of the same generation

meritocracy: an ideal system in which personal effort—or merit—determines social standing

primogeniture: a law stating that all property passes to the firstborn son

social mobility: the ability to change positions within a social stratification system

social stratification: a socioeconomic system that divides society's members into categories ranking from high to low, based on things like wealth, power, and prestige

standard of living: the level of wealth available to acquire material goods and comforts to maintain a particular socioeconomic lifestyle

status consistency: the consistency, or lack thereof, of an individual's rank across social categories like income, education, and occupation

structural mobility: a societal change that enables a whole group of people to move up or down the class ladder

upward mobility: an increase—or upward shift—in social class

wealth: the value of money and assets a person has from, for example, inheritance

Section Summary

9.1 What Is Social Stratification?

Stratification systems are either closed, meaning they allow little change in social position, or open, meaning they allow movement and interaction between the layers. A caste system is one in which social standing is based on ascribed status or birth. Class systems are open, with achievement playing a role in social position. People fall into classes based on factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation. A meritocracy is a system of social stratification that confers standing based on personal worth, rewarding effort.

9.2 Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States

There are three main classes in the United States: upper, middle, and lower class. Social mobility describes a shift from one social class to another. Class traits, also called class markers, are the typical behaviors, customs, and norms that define each class.

9.3 Global Stratification and Inequality

Global stratification compares the wealth, economic stability, status, and power of countries as a whole. By comparing income and productivity between nations, researchers can better identify global inequalities.

9.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

Social stratification can be examined from different sociological perspectives—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. The functionalist perspective states that systems exist in society for good reasons. Conflict theorists observe that stratification promotes inequality, such as between rich business owners and poor workers. Symbolic interactionists examine stratification from a micro-level perspective. They observe how social standing affects people's everyday interactions and how the concept of “social class” is constructed and maintained through everyday interactions.

Section Quiz

9.1 What Is Social Stratification?

1. What factor makes caste systems closed?
 - a. They are run by secretive governments.
 - b. People cannot change their social standings.
 - c. Most have been outlawed.
 - d. They exist only in rural areas.
2. What factor makes class systems open?
 - a. They allow for movement between the classes.

- b. People are more open-minded.
 - c. People are encouraged to socialize within their class.
 - d. They do not have clearly defined layers.
3. Which of these systems allows for the most social mobility?
- a. Caste
 - b. Monarchy
 - c. Endogamy
 - d. Class
4. Which person best illustrates opportunities for upward social mobility in the United States?
- a. First-shift factory worker
 - b. First-generation college student
 - c. Firstborn son who inherits the family business
 - d. First-time interviewee who is hired for a job
5. Which statement illustrates low status consistency?
- a. A suburban family lives in a modest ranch home and enjoys a nice vacation each summer.
 - b. A single mother receives food stamps and struggles to find adequate employment.
 - c. A college dropout launches an online company that earns millions in its first year.
 - d. A celebrity actress owns homes in three countries.
6. Based on meritocracy, a physician's assistant would:
- a. receive the same pay as all the other physician's assistants
 - b. be encouraged to earn a higher degree to seek a better position
 - c. most likely marry a professional at the same level
 - d. earn a pay raise for doing excellent work

9.2 Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States

7. In the United States, most people define themselves as:
- a. middle class
 - b. upper class
 - c. lower class
 - d. no specific class
8. Structural mobility occurs when:
- a. an individual moves up the class ladder
 - b. an individual moves down the class ladder
 - c. a large group moves up or down the class ladder due to societal changes
 - d. a member of a family belongs to a different class than his or her siblings
9. The behaviors, customs, and norms associated with a class are known as:
- a. class traits
 - b. power
 - c. prestige
 - d. underclass
10. Which of the following scenarios is an example of intergenerational mobility?
- a. A janitor belongs to the same social class as his grandmother did.
 - b. An executive belongs to a different class than her parents.
 - c. An editor shares the same social class as his cousin.
 - d. A lawyer belongs to a different class than her sister.
11. Occupational prestige means that jobs are:
- a. all equal in status
 - b. not equally valued
 - c. assigned to a person for life
 - d. not part of a person's self-identity

9.3 Global Stratification and Inequality

12. Social stratification is a system that:
- a. ranks society members into categories
 - b. destroys competition between society members

- c. allows society members to choose their social standing
 - d. reflects personal choices of society members
- 13.** Which graphic concept best illustrates the concept of social stratification?
- a. Pie chart
 - b. Flag poles
 - c. Planetary movement
 - d. Pyramid
- 14.** The GNI PPP figure represents:
- a. a country's total accumulated wealth
 - b. annual government spending
 - c. the average annual income of a country's citizens
 - d. a country's debt

9.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

- 15.** The basic premise of the Davis-Moore thesis is that the unequal distribution of rewards in social stratification:
- a. is an outdated mode of societal organization
 - b. is an artificial reflection of society
 - c. serves a purpose in society
 - d. cannot be justified
- 16.** Unlike Davis and Moore, Melvin Tumin believed that, because of social stratification, some qualified people were _____ higher-level job positions.
- a. denied the opportunity to obtain
 - b. encouraged to train for
 - c. often fired from
 - d. forced into
- 17.** Which statement represents stratification from the perspective of symbolic interactionism?
- a. Men often earn more than women, even working the same job.
 - b. After work, Pat, a janitor, feels more comfortable eating in a truck stop than a French restaurant.
 - c. Doctors earn more money because their job is more highly valued.
 - d. Teachers continue to struggle to keep benefits such as health insurance.
- 18.** When Karl Marx said workers experience alienation, he meant that workers:
- a. must labor alone, without companionship
 - b. do not feel connected to their work
 - c. move from one geographical location to another
 - d. have to put forth self-effort to get ahead
- 19.** Conflict theorists view capitalists as those who:
- a. are ambitious
 - b. fund social services
 - c. spend money wisely
 - d. get rich while workers stay poor

Short Answer

9.1 What Is Social Stratification?

- 1.** Track the social stratification of your family tree. Did the social standing of your parents differ from the social standing of your grandparents and great-grandparents? What social traits were handed down by your forebears? Are there any exogamous marriages in your history? Does your family exhibit status consistencies or inconsistencies?
- 2.** What defines communities that have low status consistency? What are the ramifications, both positive and negative, of cultures with low status consistency? Try to think of specific examples to support your ideas.
- 3.** Review the concept of stratification. Now choose a group of people you have observed and been a part of—for example, cousins, high school friends, classmates, sport teammates, or coworkers. How does the structure of the social group you chose adhere to the concept of stratification?

9.2 Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States

4. Which social class do you and your family belong to? Are you in a different social class than your grandparents and great-grandparents? Does your class differ from your social standing, and, if so, how? What aspects of your societal situation establish you in a social class?
5. What class traits define your peer group? For example, what speech patterns or clothing trends do you and your friends share? What cultural elements, such as taste in music or hobbies, define your peer group? How do you see this set of class traits as different from other classes either above or below yours?
6. Write a list of ten to twenty class traits that describe the environment of your upbringing. Which of these seem like true class traits, and which seem like stereotypes? What items might fall into both categories? How do you imagine a sociologist might address the conflation of class traits and stereotypes?

9.3 Global Stratification and Inequality

7. Why is it important to understand and be aware of global stratification? Make a list of specific issues that are related to global stratification. For inspiration, turn on a news channel or read the newspaper. Next, choose a topic from your list, and look at it more closely. Who is affected by this issue? How is the issue specifically related to global stratification?
8. Compare a family that lives in a grass hut in Ethiopia to an American family living in a trailer home in the United States. Assuming both exist at or below the poverty levels established by their country, how are the families' lifestyles and economic situations similar and how are they different?

9.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Social Stratification

9. Analyze the Davis-Moore thesis. Do you agree with Davis and Moore? Does social stratification play an important function in society? What examples can you think of that support the thesis? What examples can you think of that refute the thesis?
10. Consider social stratification from the symbolic interactionist perspective. How does social stratification influence the daily interactions of individuals? How do systems of class, based on factors such as prestige, power, income, and wealth, influence your own daily routines, as well as your beliefs and attitudes? Illustrate your ideas with specific examples and anecdotes from your own life and the lives of people in your community.

Further Research

9.1 What Is Social Stratification?

The *New York Times* investigated social stratification in their series of articles called "Class Matters." The online accompaniment to the series includes an interactive graphic called "How Class Works," which tallies four factors—occupation, education, income, and wealth—and places an individual within a certain class and percentile. What class describes you? Test your class rank on the interactive site: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/NY_Times_how_class_works (http://openstaxcollege.org/l/NY_Times_how_class_works)

9.2 Social Stratification and Mobility in the United States

PBS made a documentary about social class called "People Like Us: Social Class in America." The filmmakers interviewed people who lived in Park Avenue penthouses and Appalachian trailer parks. The accompanying web site is full of information, interactive games, and life stories from those who participated. Read about it at http://openstaxcollege.org/l/social_class_in_America (http://openstaxcollege.org/l/social_class_in_America)

9.3 Global Stratification and Inequality

Nations Online refers to itself as "among other things, a more or less objective guide to the world, a statement for the peaceful, nonviolent coexistence of nations." The website provides a variety of cultural, financial, historical, and ethnic information on countries and peoples throughout the world: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Nations_Online (http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Nations_Online).

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