Social Differentiation and Social Class

***Social differentiation*** refers to how people differ across certain variables. It’s about how we define and distinguish between categories, such as age, gender and race, which are pretty objective. However, it gets more subjective when we try to assign individuals to categories such as socioeconomic class and political affiliation

What about ***social class***? I think it’s difficult trying to assign someone to a social class. I just know that about three to five percent of the people living in the United States are in the upper class. About 40 to 50 percent are in the middle class, 30 to 40 percent in the working class and 15 to 20 percent in the lower socioeconomic class. I’m in the upper class because of the car I drive. How do you determine what social class you belong to? Sociologists believe that social stratification arose after observing that human beings can be ranked according to many levels. Sadly enough, in contemporary society human beings are unequal due to genetic and environmental factors influencing our development. Some of us end up receiving unequal treatment when it comes to enjoying social privileges.

I believe some human beings have an insatiable desire for things, and I think, regardless of how much human beings possess, some always want more. My explanation for this behavior is that these valued objects have enduring status value. Individuals who obtain status symbols like to keep them, and desire to continue inheriting big, fancy expensive items that display their social status. Thus, our system of ***stratification*** evaluates people on factors such as wealth, power and prestige. You know, social class is synonymous with socioeconomic status. I’ve included a brief description of each of these factors.

***Wealth***

In our Western society, we generally rank people with money and material possessions higher on the scale. These possessions include their impressive homes, the community they live in, number and kinds of cars, their expensive clothes, watches and jewelry. Value is placed on wealth and expensive possessions and the people owning these expensive materials need you to know it so you can admire them and their possessions. The term status symbol was created to describe these items. The thing is, you may not ever meet these individuals, so they will simply display their social class to you by what they drive or where they live.

***Power***

Individuals can also be ranked according to how much power they possess. Power is the ability of one individual or group to impact or change the behavior of another individual or group. Not surprisingly, power is often associated with wealth, which means that wealthy people have power. The important thing to know, however, is that power is not distributed equally in society. Only a few people in our society have power.

***Prestige***

What do you think prestige refers to? What is and isn’t prestige is subjectively determined and refers to an individual who enjoys a special distinction or reputation in society. It may mean prestige in occupation-- such as certain occupations having high prestige compared to occupations with low prestige. Occupations with high prestige include being a Supreme Court justice, physician, college professor, and well, lawyers. Occupations with low prestige are shoe shiners, garbage collectors, janitors, and security workers.

The unfortunate, unavoidable reality is that social differentiation leads to ***social inequality***. Remember the categories that were created based on personal, biological and physical differences? Well, individuals in society created a ranking system to classify these differences. The problem, however, with this ranking system is in the social meaning individuals assign to the ranked characteristics. What worries me is what we do with the social meaning associated with being African-American, Asian, and Hispanic, affluent or living in poverty, young or old. I know about these social meanings and the effects they have on individuals being ranked. Imagine people’s race determining where they are ranked in the system. It sounds unfair to me. The assumption one makes when ranking others based on race is that an individual’s behavior is determined by their physical characteristics.

Do me a favor right now and ask yourself this question: “What accounts for social differentiation in our society?” Think about whether our innate makeup accounts for the observed differences in abilities between human beings. In other words, we begin with exploring whether an individual’s innate abilities, such as being intelligent or a really good problem solver, enable him or her to lead a more satisfying life. The competing theory suggests that social differentiation and social inequality isn’t a result of an individuals innate makeup, but rather a function of how he/she is affected by institutions in society. For example, according to structural theory, social differentiation and social inequality results from how our society is structured or how some institutions function. ***Structural explanations*** for why social inequality occurs may be related to how capitalism operates as an economic system resulting in unequal education, blocked access to resources or other problems related to social and economic conditions. So, political and economic factors may account for the pervasive patterns that sustain social inequality and institutional forms of discrimination against minorities. The problem now is how some institutions may be serving individuals differentially.

Cultures exist because people are interested in getting their social, psychological, spiritual, and physical needs met. It’s about a group of people making sincere commitments to cooperate with each other in a social setting. I’ve pretty much concluded that for a culture to survive, its members must establish the institution of marriage and religion. The rules and norms guiding acceptable and unacceptable behavior need to be enforced through some institution, such as law enforcement, the judicial system and the penal system. See, there needs to be institutions in society to guide conformity and obedience.