

*Name Withheld*  
Sociology 101  
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March 6, 2008

### Social Stratification Assignment

Social stratification by definition means a hierarchical arrangement in society by which groups have different access to resources, power, and perceived social worth and it is a system of structured social inequality (Anderson & Taylor 182). Kingsley Davis (Professor of Sociology at the Hoover Institute, Stanford University) and Wilbert E. Moore (Professor of Sociology and Law at the University of Denver) both came together to create their own perspective of social stratification in which they discuss the functional theory of stratification. Davis and Moore's own definition of what stratification means is that "if the rights and perquisites of different positions in society must be unequal, then the society must be stratified" (Davis & Moore 167). They come together to argue that, "income inequalities are good for the effective functioning of societies and that certain positions in a society are more important for the well-being and survival of society than others" (Davis & Moore 165).

For this assignment, on social stratification, I interviewed three people: my Mother, my Aunt, and my best friend. During the interviews, I asked them four questions; I asked them to identify their social class and describe it, what aspects or factors that help them identify to their particular class, what feelings they have about being in that class, and what is unique about them regarding their particular social class with which they identify themselves. I first requested they provide me written answers to the questions. From these, I further questioned them on the meanings behind their initial statements so I could develop an understanding of their underlying thoughts and sentiments.

Comment [AJ1]: Great tactic!

For my particular assignment, I am going to follow the socioeconomic status as a determiner of social class. Additionally, I intend to look within the social class at the social stratification, which is the image of stratification as a laddered system, with different gradients of social standing derived from certain factors (Anderson & Taylor 189). People in today's society often define themselves by their socioeconomic status or social stratification. In other words, we define ourselves from upper, middle, or poor/lower class, many times, by mainly just what our income is, but there are also other ways to define or characterize ourselves such as by defining ourselves by our religion or our educational background. However, for this assignment I am going to follow the social status of income through the socioeconomic status of social stratification.

Let us start by looking at how the three subjects answered the first question, name the social class in which you consider yourself and describe it. All three of my subjects initially described themselves as middle class. My mother's description of middle class was "blue collar, Baptist, and hard working; not in the upper part of the class, nor in the lower or anywhere near the point of poverty; family oriented and close knit." My best friend described her version of middle class as "working class - my parents both work in order to pay the bills and I work in order to pay for school and other personal expenses. We do not live lavishly. We only buy what we need and have a few hobbies on the side." Finally, my aunt categorizes her family as "working - middle class - poor."

I asked them all to first give me a short descriptive statement about the class and then expound on that with their description. They all included the terms "working class" and "hard working" as part of either their initial statement or in the follow-up discussion. None of them defined any material or monetary limits on what they considered middle class to be. In the case

of my aunt, her descriptor as poor was derived from believing that if you could not always pay the bills on time or not get what you want when you need or want it, you are more than likely poor. These answers coupled with some answers in the other questions presents the picture of middle class as the hard-working, possibly under paid, class that is the backbone of today's society. They work to try to get ahead but never seem to make it. The richer get richer from the middle class toils. The poor reap the government benefits from the tax burden that seemingly falls mostly on middle class backs and the middle class cannot qualify for most of these benefits because they make too much. They want better for the children than they had and are in most cases willing to suffer themselves to that end.

In response to the second question, what aspects or factors help them identify what class they belong to, my best friend's comments were:

"I have always identified my class by the fact that I had a very small one-story house that was not brand new. My parents were and still are always working and rarely get a day off. Babysitters dominated my childhood and at one time, my dad worked the night shift and took care of us kids during the day just to make ends meet. There were always bills and we never got everything that we asked for because "money doesn't grow on trees." We had to work to earn anything that was given to us. We were never in trouble with debt though. We did not have creditors calling the house; we just never got too far ahead, so my parents and I continue to constantly work."

We see in my best friend's statement the focus her family placed on what made them middle class, both parents working hard in order to afford things such as a house and those amenities they considered necessary, self-reliant. My aunt's comments are summarized by her statement "It's living from pay check to pay check; most of check if not all goes to bills and then you have to rob Peter to pay Paul, so to speak, some months (just once I'd like to pay electric and gas bill in the same month!!!)" My aunt's comments reflect the distress caused by the rising costs for everything, especially medical costs, food, and fuel, without a comparable rise in spendable income. My mother also provided me with a detailed description.

"It's hard working class; believes in God and Country. We take care of our elderly and handicap in the home due to the lack of resources and funds we are offered by our states. Like most

families, we go payday to payday and just try to keep our heads above water. We list our projects as major and minor. Examples of this are major meaning anything medical and health care, insurances, and college tuitions, where as groceries and car payments might have to be considered minor at times. We tend to be independent when it comes to voting, we swing to either side of the fence when we vote for offices, and it is the person not the party. However, when it comes to issues we research and vote solid.”

In my mother’s comments, she hits on most of the points affecting the instability of the middle class medical costs, especially those things not covered by insurance that seems to be constantly on the increase elder care, having to care for older generation family members either in their home or one’s own home; and college tuition, another constantly rising cost and more to spend as more kids enter college.

In these answers we can better see the where the individuals view themselves within the social structure of the social class, which rung of the ladder they are standing on. One important point in these answers, as well as in the answers in the last two questions, has to do with social differentiation based on age. In the answers from my mother and aunt, there was more of a focus on paying the bills. The worries of the middle class adult in providing for and sustaining the finances of the family; a worry that is compounded by the instability of the job market and the skyrocketing costs of medical care and college education. My best friend mentioned paying the bills also but the total answer focused on the family as a whole. How the work, family time, and, of course, money affected the views and values with which they grew up. In addition, here we see the first mention by the respondents of what they deem as governmental affect on class distinction and stratification.

Comment [AJ2]: Excellent analysis here!

Moving on to the third topic, what is their feeling about their class, my aunt responded with “I am so used to it I do not much notice anymore. We just keep plugging along and bringing in that measly pay check that does not stretch as it should thanks to the idiots in Washington that are taxing the hell out of it. Despite all of this, we take care of our own.” Her response shows frustration with wanting more but having to do with less since money only goes

so far which fits her description of being at the lower end of the middle class. My mother's response was "Sometimes going payday to payday is difficult when you have bills bigger than what you are bringing in. If something major comes up like an illness or tuitions, well it leaves little for the extras like a movie or even groceries. Good thing is so far we are holding our own and are not put in between a rock and a hard place as far as giving up our home or other things." These are the tough choices the middle class families must face every day, or better put, every payday, especially in a single income household such as ours. My best friend provided a lengthy answer. I feel it is important to present it in its entirety to provide the best description of the views presented.

"When I was in school especially, I was jealous of the other kids. I hated the fact that my parents were not home all the time and that I did not get all the latest technology handed to me, such as an iPod or a brand new Mustang convertible like some of my friends. I was jealous of the upper class kids who got everything and spent long vacations with their parents in faraway locales. However, I was modest. Being middle class showed me the value of hard work and how it feels to earn something rather than to have it handed to you. As I grew older, I saw how the attitudes of the "upper class" kids went from childhood innocence to snooty and exclusive. I was glad that I could be warm and welcoming to others and appreciate the things that I had, especially those for which I worked hard. It also caused me to fight my own battles, where many kids stepped aside and let their parents step in. I learned to take control of my life and the outcome of situations; not just stand by and let things happen. That has turned out to be an invaluable skill. I am overall glad that I am from a middle working class family."

My best friend's answer here shows how she views the middle class. The feeling of earning something, not having it handed to you or handed out to you. Although the view is of being in control of your life, you can still realize that it takes work to stay there. You cannot rest on your laurels for around the next corner in your life may rest an unforeseen bill or, worse yet, a pink slip.

Again, here we see the social differentiation play out. Both of the adults focus on the money aspect and its more direct effects, bills, providing necessities, and affording some luxuries. My best friend mentions the money aspect but not in the aspect of paying the bills or making ends meet. The main focus was the negative affects of money on the attitudes and

**Comment [AJ3]:** I agree, based on your argument above.

abilities of those in higher social classes to interact in society in general and the positive affects of being middle class by giving the ability to be more self supportive and independent. Part of the response did target the dissatisfaction of not being able to have all she may have wanted but the first real problem mentioned was the time her parents were not available to spend with the family. Here we see the social stratification through the eyes of my generation of the middle class. We tend to stand up for ourselves and not stand idly by. We see working for a living as normal and do not expect handouts to be able to survive. We see not just the money; we see how it affects our relationship with our family and friends.

The final question posed, “what is unique about them regarding social class,” got the following responses. From my mother,

“Being in the, as I will call it, middle class of things, you have a good outlook when you go buy things for the home and family. You tend to buy more sensible and buy wisely. You have a sense of family and pride when taking care of your children and elderly in the home. You tend to appreciate things more that do come your way. Now only if we can do something about these college loans that are astronomical for us and others in our place too.”

Her views focus on the family aspect of the class, being willing to spend on trying to make life better for the next generation by getting them through college while at times forfeiting some of the less important necessities. My best friend’s views were,

“I think the fact that we value hard work is unique. Also, we seem to be much more close-knit and open to new people. Upper class people seem much more exclusive and do not seem to really know one another. They are more like acquaintances than true friends. At the same time, we are not struggling to pay the bills. Yes, we have to work and we have credit cards to help with extraneous purchases but we never have to worry about our heat being turned off because of a bill not being paid. I think we are also more conservative. We try to buy energy-efficient appliances and recycle so that we can save money do our part.”

My best friend pointed out something here that had yet to be mentioned but is a hallmark of middle class, credit card debt. There was not a problem in this family but it is one of the primary problems facing the middle class. Easy to get credit with reasonable interest rates that spike at the first late payment or over-limit fee to such a point that it takes years and thousands of dollars

to pay off the debt. Finally my Aunt's comments, "There are more of us instead of them (Washington idiots.) But we still keep putting them in office instead of an average Joe!" Anger on her part at the perceived or actual failure of our elected officials to act in ways to reduce the burden on middle class families.

Here in the final question, the divergence does not fall along the age social differentiation, but rather, it falls along the view of where they stand in the hierarchy. Both my mother and my best friend point to the bonds of family and friends being the norm in middle class social circumstances. My best friend, both here and in the previous question, pointed to the upper class as being aloof and not having real friendships, just those that are based on their social status. Lose the money, lose the status, and lose the friend. My aunt's answer was to place blame for their socioeconomic position on the government. True or not, many people in the middle-middle class and the lower-middle class tend to point to taxes and action or inaction of government as the root cause for their plight in life. In the discussions around this final question, all of the respondents did mention money as one of the unique factors for their class. My mother and my aunt voiced "living paycheck to paycheck" and "making ends meet" as being unique about the class. All three stated that hard work was a unique factor also.

An individual's or group's position within a hierarchical social structure of this ladder system depends on a combination of variables, including but not limited to, occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence. Money is a strong factor in social stratification of the middle class, but it is not the only factor in determining where one stands on the social ladder. These other forces are at work in maintaining the inequality between classes can be overcome. Unlike the nearly impossible task of moving up in a caste system, it is possible for individuals to move up the social ladder by obtaining wealth or power. We can see

in the answers obtained in this project that there is a strong desire, especial in the case of my Mother and best friend, to move their children or themselves up that ladder by changing the circumstances of the position, improving their education so they can get into a better occupation that will lead to a more income and finally greater overall wealth. The object in the end is to obtain a better socioeconomic to move up through the layers social stratification to a position above that from which they started.

I would like to close with a couple of quotes from the Harvard Magazine article, *Forum: The Middle Class on the Precipice, Rising Financial Risks for American Families* by Elizabeth Warren (Jan – Feb 2006) that a friend shared with me when I told him about this paper. These and the article state a perfect picture of today’s middle class dilemma.

“During the past generation, the American middle-class family that once could count on hard work and fair play to keep itself financially secure has been transformed by economic risk and new realities. Now a pink slip, a bad diagnosis, or a disappearing spouse can reduce a family from solidly middle class to newly poor in a few months.”

“Middle-class families have been threatened on every front. Rocked by rising prices for essentials as men’s wages remained flat, both Dad *and* Mom have entered the workforce—a strategy that has left them working harder just to try to break even. Even with two paychecks, family finances are stretched so tightly that a very small misstep can leave them in crisis. As tough as life has become for married couples, single-parent families face even more financial obstacles in trying to carve out middle-class lives on a single paycheck. And at the same time that families are facing higher costs and increased risks, the old financial rules of credit have been rewritten by powerful corporate interests that see middle-class families as the spoils of political influence.”

These state almost exactly what all of my respondents said or alluded to in their comments and corroborate my thoughts and conclusions when trying to determine how best to complete this assignment.

Comment [AJ4]: Yes, this is a great article!

Student –

I have very little constructive comments for this paper. You outline your argument well and you illustrate a higher level of analysis. In short, this is an excellent paper!!

**Grade on Exam 1 ----- 79**

**Grade on Extra Credit Essay ----- 150**