**MINISTERY OF EDUCATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS**

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**REFERAT:**

«SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY»

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Understanding of social stratification and social inequality

# **The grouping of people together is as old as the society itself. Racial grouping is one way that societies have done this, the example is the American South before the US civil war. Religion is another way if parts of Northern Ireland until the 1960s are meant. One common way is through the caste system to be found in India. Here, social differentiation is stressed by the caste that each individual is born into, for instance, the Brahmin caste is the top caste and the untouchables are the bottom caste. Caste membership in this life is the result of good or bad conduct in the previous life.** In any medieval country, the feudal system of land ownership meant that the nobility of land owners, with its sense of family tradition, privilege and knightly conduct became the dominant ruling group.

***Social stratification*** is the dividing of a society into levels or strata based on wealth or power. It is regarded quite differently by the principal perspectives of sociology. Proponents of structural functionalism suggest that since social stratification exists in all societies, a hierarchy must be beneficial in helping to stabilize their existence. Conflict theorists emphasize the inaccessibility of resources and lack of social mobility in many stratified societies. Anyway, all theorists share the opinion that social stratification has to do with inequality.

***Social inequality*** refers to the distribution of material wealth in a society. For instance, the current level of inequality is as follows: the richest 1% of people (with an average income of US $24,000) earns more than the poorest 60% of households in the world combined. Another illustration of this difference is the fact that the world’s three richest people alone possess more assets than 600 million least wealthy people combined.

Although there appears to be a consensus of what constitutes social inequality, there is far less agreement over the causes of it. Many theorists accept inequality as a given, but some of them see inequality as the natural consequence of Social Darwinism, proved by gender, age, IQ or the wealth of nations. Others argue that inequality is in large part the negative consequence of destructive state policies (such as capitalism) and wars.

Some modern economic theories, such as the neoclassical school, have suggested that functioning of economy requires a certain level of unemployment; other theories, such as Keynesianism and socialism, dispute this alleged positive role of unemployment.

However, sociologists share the opinion that as soon as the society was reaching a higher economic and cultural level, social inequality between people was getting more and more obvious. Historically, inequality in a group might have been caused by division of labour: the more skilled the person was, the more and better products he could produce and exchange for more wealth. If the person was wealthy, he could impose his will on others and acquire more wealth that entailed professional, territorial, religious and other differentiations.

More important is the fact that wealth always entails power in the political sphere. In his famous work, *On the Origins of Inequality among Men*, R. Dahrendorf asserts that “the system of inequality which we call social stratification is only a secondary consequence of the social structure of power” and modern Russia is a good example to prove of.

A person is viewed to show that he belongs to a certain stratum by using both objective and subjective criteria. The objective criteria are those to describe the level of education, income, property, power or occupation, the subjective ones are those to describe the level of somebody’s honour, reputation or prestige in the eyes of other people. Theories differ in numbers of criteria but they agree in understanding that each stratum includes only those people who have approximately equal income, power, education, prestige etc. seeing them as the basic criteria of social stratification.

In other words, social stratification has to do with ranking of people as individuals or groups in the society. All societies everywhere show some degree of stratification. Some societies are egalitarian, some are highly stratified. For instance, in the primitive communal society inequality was insignificant, and social stratification did not exist, so the society was egalitarian. All complex societies are stratified societies with a high level of inequality.

Inequality gave birth to castes, then to classes. But the principal sociological perspectives interpret this concept differently. M. Weber spoke of a class as an entity comprising people who are cohered by economic interests in acquiring goods or getting income and who interact in the labour or goods market. In the society, classes as well as strata have a certain social status which is determined by a corresponding way of life. That’s why some theorists define social stratification as the hierarchical arrangement of social classes, castes, and strata within a society.

The idea of stratification had primarily a distinct ideological shade because it appeared as a counterbalance to the idea of a class society suggested by K. Marx. Social strata showing objective distinctions of various groups of the population within a certain class were differentiated with regards to social mobility that lead to the erosion of class boundaries. For instance, a worker after he has got a higher education can work as a manager, a citizen can move to the countryside to start up agro-business etc. In other words, the previous, clear-cut boundaries existing, for instance, between peasants and landlords to differentiate their class distinctions for many generations ahead, do not exist in a modern society. It means that class boundaries have lost their sense keeping only their theoretical character while the concept of a social stratum has a definite meaning. It shows that social strata or layers do fix various groups of people differentiating from each other by their income, role, status and other social qualities.

Social strata can be as large as to be close in meaning to social classes, for example, the bourgeoisie in its division to very wealthy and petty ones, or the working class including the working aristocracy and the proletariat, or the peasantry etc. Other strata may represent intra-class or inter-class layers, for example, representatives of intelligensia, service workers etc. At the same time within a certain stratum some substrata can exist, so the intelligentsia can be differentiated according to the area of activities as industrial, managerial, scientific etc. Some castes, marginal layers such as the homeless, criminals or lumpens can also be viewed as social strata.

**Scientific conceptions of stratification of the society**

One of the known conceptions of the division of the society is the ***conception of classes*** of K. Marx who emphasized the leading role of economy in development of social phenomena. The Marxist idea of a class society is centered on relations of individuals or social groups to the means of production while other class characteristics are considered derived or secondary. K. Marx marked that in any economic system there is a dominant class which owns the means of production, and a suppressed class which works for the owners; a part of the society is lumpens or people who are completely discarded by the society. It gave K. Marx and F. Engels the right to consider inequality as a consequence of unfair socio-economic relations between those who exploit and those who are exploited.

Works by K. Marx and his supporters were put into the grounds of the ***conflict approach*** to the society. Conflict theorists consider the inaccessibility of resources and lack of social mobility in many stratified societies. They conclude that stratification means that working class people are not likely to advance socio-economically, while the wealthy can continue to exploit the proletariat generation after generation.

M. Weber formulated a ***three-component theory of stratification***, with social class, status class and party class (or politics) as conceptually distinct elements.

* social class is based on economically determined relationship to the market (owner, renter, employee etc.);
* status class is based on non-economic qualities like honour, prestige and religion;
* party class refers to the factors having to do with affiliations in the political domain.

Other views to emerging inequality are expressed in the ***conception of Kingsley Davis*** and ***Wilbert Moore*** who defined stratification as the unequal rights and perquisites of different positions in a society. They are interested in the system of positions in the society and not in the individuals occupying those positions. In their *Some Principles of Stratification*, K. Davis and W. Moore consider stratification as the consequence of normal development of the society. Their approach is strictly functionalist as they argue that a society is to survive; then a functionally efficient means of fitting talented individuals to the occupations must develop. Stratification supplies this mechanism. Thus, social prestige is considered not as a quality derived from the individual’s economic position in the society but as a quality which has its own status. Their ideas seriously shook Marxist ideas that linked stratification with social inequality.

In the study of ***social stratification and social mobility*** P.A. Sorokin holds a unique place. We owe to him the creation or definition of many of the terms that have become standard in this field. His work *Social stratification and Social Mobility*, published in 1927 and stimulated further elaborations in the given area, still remains a veritable storehouse of ideas on stratification.

P.A. Sorokin defined social stratification as differentiation of the population into hierarchically overlapped classes. To him, stratification may be based on *economic* criterion, for instance, when the focus is on the wealthy and the poor. But societies or groups are also *politically stratified* when their social ranks are hierarchically structured with respect to authority and power. If, however, members of the society are differentiated into various occupational groups and some of these occupations are deemed more honourable than others, or if occupations are internally divided between those who give orders and those who receive orders, then *occupational stratification* is dealt with. Although there may be other forms of stratification, of central sociological importance are economic, political, and occupational stratification.

P.A. Sorokin held that people move in the social space. Methods appropriate to find their position in the social space are somewhat reminiscent of the system of coordinates used for locating an object in the geometrical space. So, to find one’s position in the social space means to define his relations to other individuals and to other groups, the relation of these groups to each other within the population, and the relation of this population to other populations constituting the mankind. That’s why the *social space* is defined as the population of the globe, and a *social position* – as the integrity of its relations with the other groups of the population. These relations – between groups and within a specific group – make up the system of coordinates enabling to locate a social position of any person in the social space. This approach helps to consider people holding different social positions.

People moving or transition from one social position to another in the social space, P.A. Sorokin defines as social mobility. There are two types of social mobility, *horizontal* and *vertical*. The first concerns movements from one social position to another situated on the same level, as in a movement from work as a foreman with Volvo to similar work with Ford. The second refers to transitions of people from one social stratum to one higher or lower in the social scale, as in ascendant movements from the rags to the riches.

Both ascending and descending movements occur in two principal forms. The first form deals with individuals and includes the penetration of individuals of a lower stratum into a higher one, called the *ascent*, and the *descent* of individuals from a higher social position to one lower on the scale. The second form deals with groups and includes the collective ascent or descent of whole groups relative to other groups in the social pyramid. But P.A. Sorokin considered that individual ascent and descent needs no explanation. What must be considered more carefully was the second form of social ascending and descending, or the rise and fall of groups. This main focus upon collective, not on individual phenomena distinguished P.A. Sorokin’s approach from others on stratification and mobility.

The theory of social stratification developed by ***R. Dahrendorf*** takes into account the concept of political authority which most exactly characterizes the relations of power and struggle for power between social groups. He believes that distribution of property in production determines distribution of political power in the society. As classes are political groups cohered by common interests, the struggle between two classes is a political struggle. Within this approach, the society’s structure is represented by those who manage and those who are managed. The first ones are further divided into owners and non-owners or bureaucrats-managers; the second ones – into a higher group of working aristocrats and a lower group of low qualified workers. Between them there is a new middle class.

Another example of a stratum class model was developed by the American sociologist ***William Lloyd Warner*** in his book, *Social Class in America* (1949). In the 1930-40s he studied the stratification structure of American cities. Based on social anthropology, W. Warner divided Americans into three classes (upper, middle, and lower), then further subdivided each of these into an upper and lower segment, with the following postulates:

* upper-upper class called “old money” is represented by people who have been born into and raised with wealth, for instance, Rockerfeller;
* lower-upper class or “new money” is represented by individuals who have become rich within their own lifetimes; known examples are Bill Gates in the USA, Richard Branson in the United Kingdom;
* upper-middle class comprises high-salaried professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, corporate executives;
* lower-middle class comprises lower-paid professionals, but not manual labourers, for instance, police officers, non-management office workers, small business owners;
* upper-lower class, also known as the “working class” comprises blue-collar workers and manual labourers;
* lower-lower class is represented by the homeless and permanently unemployed, as well as the “working poor.”

To W. Warner, American social class was based more on shared attitudes than on the actual amount of money an individual has made. Such attitudes are income, prestige of job, education and ethnicity. For example, the richest people in the United States belong to the lower-upper class like Bill Gates, but members of the upper-upper class tend to be more respected, as a simple survey of US presidents may demonstrate (for instance, the Roosevelts; John Kennedy; the Bushes).

Another observation concerns members of the upper-lower class who might make more than members of the lower-middle class, for instance, a well-salaried mechanic versus a secretarial worker, but the class difference is based on the type of work they perform.

There are also stratification theories developed by modern Russian sociologists. For instance, ***G.V. Osipov, V.V. Radaev, O.I. Shkaratan*** distinguished between essential and additional criteria of a social stratum. The essential criteria are people’s economic position (private property, size of income, level of material wealth), division of labour (area of activities, character of labour, level of education and qualification), size of authority (types and forms of governance) and social prestige (impact, roles); the additional criteria are gender, age, ethnic qualities, religion, character of family relations, kinship relations and place of living.

At the same time a modern French theorist ***A. Touraine*** considers those criteria out-dated. His stratum model is based on the access to information: those who have an access to more information occupy dominant positions in the society.

Thus, elaborators of stratification conceptions do not postulate social equality. Moreover, they consider social inequality as a natural state of the society. Despite people’s everlasting strive for equality that lead to revolutions and wars (for example, the October revolution and Civil war in Russia), a desired equality is impossible to achieve. Inequality did, does and will exist. The point is how to make inequality less painful to the members of the society. Here of importance are various social programmes aimed at supporting the population with low income. Such programmes are gaining more significance in a transitive society because stabilizing the standards of living and struggle against poverty are indispensable factors of success of political and socio-economic reforms in the society.

**An aggregated socio-economic status**

As various stratification models show, numbers of criteria to grouping people in each may vary. But their authors share the opinion that such parameters as income, power, education and prestige must be enlisted as the basic ones.

***Income*** as an economic status is an amount of money a person or family makes for a definite period of time (month or year). Income is spent to satisfy needs but if it is high, it is accumulated and turns to wealth.

*Wealth* is accumulated income in the form of cash or materialized money. The later can be movable property (car, yacht, securities) and real estate (house, masterpieces of art). Wealth can be inherited. It differs from income in the way that wealth can be inherited by those who work and who don’t, and income is earned only by those who work. Pensioners and unemployed have income but rags – don’t. The rich either can or cannot work as they are owners of wealth. Accumulated property is the parameter used to differentiate the high class from middle and low classes who live on income.

Wealth and income are distributed unequally and means economic inequality. Sociologists interpret economic inequality to show unequal chances of different groups of the population. Those who have more money have better food, live in more comfortable houses, prefer going by private car to public transport, can afford an expensive holiday etc. Besides having economic advantages, the rich possess a number of hidden privileges: they live longer than the poor even if the latter use the same medical achievements, children from poor families are less educated even if they go to the same public schools as children from wealthy families etc.

***Power*** is a possibility to impose one’s will or decision on others regardless of their desire. It is measured by a number of people who have to follow one’s will or decision. Decisions made by the President or Prime-Minister of the country should be accepted by the whole population of the given country, and decisions by a sole proprietor – by his employees only.

In a highly stratified society power is guarded by law and tradition, it means privileges, a wider access to social wealth, and possibility to make decisions which are most essential to the society, laws for the benefit of the higher class being among them. People possessing power (political, economic or religious) constitute the elite of the society.

***Education*** is measured by a number of years studied in state or private school, university etc. For instance, a professor has studied for more than 20 years (11 years at school, 5 – university, 3 – post-graduate courses, 3 – doctorate courses), a low qualified worker – not more than 11. A weak point of the criterion is that quality of education is not taken into account. Establishments of learning located in the capital of the country are likely to provide better quality than those located on the periphery. Another distinction is character of knowledge – theoretic, fundamental or branch, applied – that a person can get.

Income, power and education are objective parameters, and they have units of measure, correspondingly local currency, people, years; unlike them prestige is of subjective character.

***Prestige*** is respect that public opinion gives to a certain job, profession or occupation. No doubt, the profession of a banker is more prestigious than that of a cleaner or plumber. All professions, occupations and jobs existing in the society can be ranked from top to bottom according to their prestige. Although professional prestige is very often defined by intuition, approximately, in some countries, for instance in the USA sociologists measure it with special methods.

Income, power, education and prestige combined together define an ***aggregated socio-economic status***, or position and place of a person in the society. In its sense the status is a generalized parameter of stratification. An ascribed status characterizes a strictly fixed system of stratification or closed society where transition from one stratum to another is practically forbidden. Examples of a closed society are caste and slave-owning systems. An achieved status characterizes a mobile system of stratification, or open society with people’s free ascending and descending on the social ladder. An example is a capitalist society with its class differentiation. A feudal society is an intermediate type as it belongs to a relatively closed system: transitions are formally forbidden but in practice they are not excluded. Such are the historic types of stratification.

**Stratification profile**

Four parameters of stratification are made use of to create analytical models and instruments which can be applied to define not only the status of separate individuals but groups as well, i.e. dynamics and structure of the society in general.

Sociologists distinguish the stratification profile which enables to apply a deeper consideration of the problem of status incompatibility. ***Status incompatibility*** is a contradiction between statuses in the person’s set or between status characteristics in his status set. If some parameters of a definite status set go beyond the boundaries of a class, status incompatibility turns to ***stratification incompatibility***.

Here is an example. As practice shows, in transitive societies like those on the post-soviet area a professor belongs to the lower class according to his income, and to the upper one – according to his prestige. It means a large dispersion of parameters extending the boundaries of the middle class to which a professor belongs in developed societies and testifies about stratification incompatibility. There are two ways to liquidate it and make status characteristics more or less equal: either to raise a professor’s salary to the level of the middle class or to decrease the level of education. Both things can hardly be done in a transitive society: the first one – due to economic reasons, the second one – due professional reasons.

Stratification incompatibility may entail a feeling of social discomfort which may turn to frustration, the latter – to dissatisfaction with one’s place in the society. That’s why the fewer are the cases of status and stratification incompatibility in the society the more stable and sustainable is the society. Russia of 1995-2000 is a typical example of a transitive society characterized by both status and stratification incompatibility.

As far as the society is concerned, its stratification profile, or a profile of social inequality, should be distinguished. A ***stratification profile*** is defined as structural distribution of wealth and income. As a rule, it shows a ratio of the upper, middle and lower classes in the country’s population, or the level of social inequality in the given society. If the ratio is in interest, the table is made up.

 The stratification profile is also easily viewed graphically. It can have three forms – that of a rhombus or diamond, and a pyramid with either broad or narrow footing. For instance, in modern highly developed countries the profile is a rhombus.

**Types of stratification profile**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Upper class |  |  |  |  |
| Middle class |  |  |  |  |
| Lower class |  |  |  |  |

 a) b) c)

*Picture 1.* a) rhombus; b) pyramid with broad footing; c) pyramid with narrow footing.

The stratification profile may speak a lot of stability in the society. Its extreme stretching or increase of social distance between the poles of differentiation of the society (as in case *c*) leads to strengthening social tension in the society. On the other hand, extreme compression (as in case *b*) can also have negative consequences as egalitarian principles in income, property, power, status positions deprive people of both important stimuli to activities and source of social development, which is social inequality. In other words, it leads to stagnation of the society.

Sociologists are unanimous in their opinion that middle class plays an important role in ensuring stability in the society. Sociological surveys prove that in modern Western countries middle class accounts for about 60% of the population. Occupying an intermediate position in a social hierarchy it serves as a kind of shock-absorber that partially puts out contradictions arising between the poles of social differentiation of the society and reduces the poles’ opposition. The larger is the share of the middle class in the population the larger is the impact it has on the socio-economic policy of the state, on formation of the public opinion etc.

**Social stratification of modern Belarusian society**

Under transferring from one socio-economic system to another in post-soviet societies in general and in Belarusian society in particular some deconstruction of criteria for social stratification has taken place. The following three parameters are of primary importance nowadays:

* owning the capital brining in profit;
* participation in redistribution of public wealth resulted from privatization of state property;
* level of personal income and consumption.

These parameters in a generalized form may represent material well-being measured per capita monthly in US dollars. Such methods are used by Russian sociologists, for instance, by N.M. Rimashevskaya and others who consider as rich those people whose monthly current income exceeds $ 3,000 per capita and as poor – those people whose monthly income is less than $ 50.

Having applied these methods of calculations a Belarusian sociologist E.M. Babosov suggested a seven-step socio-structural matrix which shows social stratification of the Belarusian society by 2002:

1) rich people (1,5-2% of the population);

2) prosperous people who can afford expensive goods, trips, holidays etc. (3-4%);

3) well-doing people with the income of $1,000-500 who feel a bit restrained while buying expensive cars, visiting restaurants, going abroad etc. (8-9%);

4) moderately-doing people with the income of $300-100 who have to make a choice how to spend spare money with focusing on the family primary needs: to buy either good clothes or good food or high-tech equipment but never all these things at a time (38%);

5) little-doing people who feel seriously restrained as they can’t buy household or other expensive equipment, good clothes etc. (14-15%);

6) poor people who only sometimes afford to buy meat, fruit, clothes, who can’t pay for their children’s education (31%);

7) rags who can’t buy meat, fruit, clothes for themselves and their children; being beggars they often live on handout (7%).

Actually, this structural matrix of social stratification shows the distribution of wealth and income in Belarus but the population of the country can also be stratified according to people’s social statuses. E.M. Babosov suggested his own hierarchy with seven strata which is superposed with his socio-structural matrix. Obviously, his matrix differs from that of W. Warner with three basic strata further subdivided into upper and lower ones, because in modern Belarus, due to its historic development, there is no “old money” class, middle class is subdivided in three layers etc. So, due to statuses, in 2002 the Belarusian society was viewed by E.M. Babosov as follows:

* upper class – new elite is at the top of the pyramid: rich entrepreneurs, top officials like ministers and higher who are in fact a new bourgeoisie and higher state bureaucracy;
* upper middle class – middle and petty entrepreneurs, directors of enterprises, popular artists, actors, famous scientists, owners of medical centers etc.;
* middle class – professors, lawyers and doctors possessing a private practice, middle management of efficient enterprises, senior offices etc.;
* lower middle class – teachers, line managers and engineers, employees of cultural establishments, qualified workers etc.;
* lower class – low qualified workers, peasants, etc.;
* parasite layers – mafia groups, racketeers, gangsters, witches, magicians etc. They may belong to various classes due to their level of wealth, even to the upper class but their status in the society is not high that’s why they have to put on a mask of other statuses;
* marginal layers – the homeless adults and teenagers, beggars who descended from other social classes, refugees etc.

Sociological surveys carried out in 1990-2002 show that a stratification profile of Belarusian transitive society had the form of a pyramid with broad footing (poor or lower classes of the society) and small peak (economic and political elite). The footing was a zone of poverty which extended from 3% of the population in 1990 to 76,8% in 2001. The other area of the pyramid was for the elite and middle class, they being not numerous in number. Of four basic parameters of social stratification (income, power, education and prestige) only power and income worked here as clearly defined. As for the political elite, these parameters were power and, to some extent, income which enabled to define the political elite as the middle class, as for the economic elite – mainly income.

 As for prestige, the rich couldn’t be defined by this parameter as most of them got money by robbing the society and sometimes by crimes. As for education, the political elite are university graduates, but only few of the economic elite (the so called “new Belarusians”) can have boasted having university diplomas. It means that in the Republic of Belarus characteristics of the middle class were less defined as compared to highly developed countries.

But over the last three years a tendency of increasing monthly wages and salaries has been observed in the country. The income of the population is gradually increasing that together with the results of various socio-economic reforms undertaken in the Republic of Belarus may soon lead to changing the structural matrix of social stratification of its society.

**BASIC CONCEPTS**

***Aggregated socio-economic status*** – a person’s position and place in the society; a generalized parameter of stratification.

***Economic stratification*** – a form of stratification when the focus is on the wealthy and the poor.

***Horizontal social mobility*** – movements from one social position to another situated on the same level.

***Income*** – amount of money a person or family makes for a definite period of time (month or year).

***Lumpens*** – people who are completely discarded by the society.

***Occupational stratification*** – a form of stratification if members of the society are differentiated into various occupational groups and some of these occupations are deemed more honorable than others, or if occupations are internally divided between those who give orders and those who receive orders.

***Political stratification*** – a form of stratification when social ranks in a society are hierarchically structured with respect to authority and power.

***Prestige*** – respect that public opinion gives to a certain job, profession or occupation.

***Social inequality*** – unequal distribution of material wealth in a society.

***Social mobility*** – people’s moving or transition from one social position to another in the social space.

***Social stratification*** – differentiation of the population into hierarchically overlapped classes or strata (by P.A. Sorokin).

***Status incompatibility*** – a contradiction between statuses or between status characteristics in the person’s status set.

***Stratification profile*** – structural distribution of wealth and income that shows a ratio of the upper, middle and lower classes in the country’s population, or the level of social inequality in the given society.

***Vertical social mobility*** – transitions of people from one social stratum to one higher or lower in the social scale.

***Wealth*** – accumulated income in the form of cash or materialized money; it can be movable property and real estate.

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