How is society divided?

01 / SOCIAL CLASS AND STRATIFICATION



Connect the ideas as you revise

Key concepts

Social stratification: a system that ranks social groups unequally. **Social inequality:** unequal resources, power and opportunities.

Social class: a position linked to work and economic resources. **Income:** money received, such as wages. **Wealth:** assets such as savings or property.

Status: social standing or respect. Money and status do not always match.

Ascribed status: given rather than earned. **Achieved status:** gained through actions or achievement.

Systems of inequality

Class systems: allow some movement, but opportunities are unequal. **Caste:** inherited group membership strongly limits opportunities.

Feudal estates: groups tied to land, duties and inherited position. **Slavery:** people are treated as property.

Systems vary across history and societies. Do not assume every system is a simple pyramid with fixed-sized layers.

Some Principles of Stratification

Davis and Moore (1945) | AQA

Society needs people to fill important roles and perform them well. Higher rewards should encourage people to train and compete for these jobs.

Use it: Explain the functionalist link between rewards and role allocation.

Think about: High pay does not prove a job is most important. Unequal access to training may block talented people.

Meritocracy: a debate

Meritocracy: success based on ability and effort. It is a claim to test, not a fact about every society.

Functionalists emphasise incentives and useful roles. Marxists and feminists ask whether rewards reflect power and inherited advantages.

Some Principles of Stratification: A Critical Analysis

Tumin (1953) | Extra

Tumin challenged Davis and Moore. Unequal access to education can stop society discovering and developing talent.

Use it: Question whether inequality always helps society fill important roles.

Capital

Marx (1867) | AQA ideas

Capitalists own the **means of production**, such as businesses and machinery. Workers sell their labour. Marx argued that owners profit from workers' labour and that their interests conflict.

Use it: Explain class inequality through ownership and exploitation.

Think about: Class divisions are more varied than two simple groups. Changes in work and living standards need considering.

Marxist vocabulary

Bourgeoisie: capitalist owners. **Proletariat:** workers who sell their labour. **Exploitation:** owners benefiting from workers' labour.

Ruling-class ideology: ideas that justify existing power. **False class consciousness:** workers not recognising their shared class interests.

Class consciousness: awareness of shared class interests. **Alienation:** separation from control or meaning in work.

Class, work and social mobility

02 / MARKET POSITION AND CHANGING CLASS

Work Mobility Class identity

Connect the ideas as you revise

The Theory of Social and Economic Organization

Weber (1947 English edition) | AQA

Class depends on a person's position in the market. Ownership, skills and qualifications affect earnings and life chances. Weber also distinguished status and party, or organised power.

Use it: Explain why class is more than whether someone owns a business.

Think about: Class, status and power can overlap. It can be hard to separate their effects.

Class, status and party

Class: economic position. **Status:** respect or prestige. **Party:** an organised group seeking power, not only a political party.

A respected worker may have modest pay. A wealthy person may lack respect. A campaign group can gain influence without great wealth.

Social closure: groups protect advantages by limiting others' access.

The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure

Goldthorpe and colleagues (1969) | Extra

Research with better-paid manual workers challenged the idea that affluence made them middle class. Work and attitudes remained linked to class.

Use it: Give context for Devine's later return to Luton.

Affluent Workers Revisited

Devine (1992) | AQA

Interviews with Vauxhall workers and their wives in Luton revisited earlier research. Better living standards had not removed working-class values or concern about inequality.

Use it: Challenge the claim that higher income makes workers middle class.

Think about: One local group in the late 1980s does not represent every worker today.

Vocabulary about class change

Affluence: having substantial resources. **Embourgeoisement:** the claim that better-off workers become middle class in lifestyle and values.

Privatised instrumentalism: a home-centred life where work is mainly a route to material rewards. Devine challenged this picture.

A new phone or higher wage does not by itself prove a change in class identity.

Social mobility

Upward / downward mobility: movement to a higher or lower social position.

Intragenerational: movement within one lifetime. **Intergenerational:** comparing children's class positions with their parents'.

Absolute mobility: the amount of movement. **Relative mobility:** the chances of groups moving compared with one another.

Why mobility may be limited

Education, inherited wealth, contacts, discrimination and local jobs can affect opportunities. A growing professional workforce may create movement without equal chances.

Marxists emphasise ownership and class power. Functionalists stress achievement. Feminists ask whether opportunities differ by gender.

Explain an example

Qualifications may help a worker enter a professional job. Fees, caring duties or lack of support may make those qualifications harder to gain. Explain both opportunities and barriers.

What affects life chances?

03 / OPPORTUNITIES AND DISCRIMINATION



Connect the ideas as you revise

Life chances and social class

Life chances: opportunities to obtain valued outcomes, such as good health, education, housing and employment.

Money can buy secure housing, study resources and time. Poverty may affect diet, stress and access to opportunities.

Group differences are patterns, not predictions for every person.

Gender

Unequal care duties, job expectations and discrimination can affect pay and promotion.

Glass ceiling: less visible barriers to senior positions.
Gender pay gap: a difference in average pay; it is not the same measure as unequal pay for identical work.

Gender patterns vary by class, age and other circumstances.

Race and ethnicity

Racism, unequal resources and exclusion can affect work, education, housing and health. Experiences vary widely within and between groups.

Prejudice: a judgement made without adequate evidence. **Discrimination:** unfair treatment linked to group membership.

Institutional discrimination: rules or practices that disadvantage groups, even beyond one person's prejudice.

Sexuality, religion and belief

Prejudice, harassment or pressure to hide identity may limit opportunities. Supportive communities and fair treatment can widen them.

Religious beliefs can shape choices and group networks. Do not assume all members of a faith have one experience.

Formal rights do not automatically remove all everyday barriers.

Age and disability

Ageism: unfair treatment linked to age. Younger and older people may face different employment barriers.

Disability can interact with inaccessible buildings, services, attitudes and work arrangements. Barriers are not only an individual's impairment.

Access, support and inclusive design can improve opportunities.

Connect factors

Intersectionality: different forms of inequality can combine. A disabled lone parent may face linked barriers involving care, work and access.

Explain the mechanism: inaccessible transport may reduce access to jobs, which affects income and housing.

Compare perspectives

Functionalism: focuses on roles and achievement.
Marxism: emphasises class resources and power.
Feminism: examines gender and patriarchy.

Use evidence to compare explanations. Avoid blaming a group for the barriers it faces.

Why does poverty continue?







Connect the ideas as you revise

Defining poverty

Absolute poverty: lacking resources to meet basic needs. Official statistical uses of "absolute low income" may use a fixed income benchmark instead.

Relative poverty: lacking resources compared with normal living standards in a society. **Material deprivation:** being unable to afford needed goods or activities.

A UK relative low-income measure uses below **60% of median household income**, adjusted for household size. Before- and after-housing-cost measures differ.

Source: DWP, Households Below Average Income, financial year ending 2025.

Poverty in the United Kingdom

Townsend (1979) | AQA

A large survey used a deprivation index covering everyday living conditions and activities. Townsend argued poverty involves being unable to join ordinary social life.

Use it: Explain relative deprivation.

Think about: Some missing activities may reflect choice, not a lack of money. The index's items affect the result.

Losing Ground

Murray (1984) | AQA

Writing about the US, Murray argued that welfare policies encouraged dependency and an underclass with different behaviours. He later made related claims about Britain.

Use it: Explain a New Right interpretation of poverty.

Think about: Critics question his evidence and argue that unemployment, low wages and inequality limit choices. Receiving benefits does not prove unwillingness to work.

Competing explanations

Culture of poverty: the disputed claim that learned attitudes help poverty continue across generations.

Structural explanations: low pay, lack of jobs, housing costs, illness, discrimination and unequal resources.

Cycle of deprivation: disadvantages can pass between generations. Support and opportunities can break the cycle.

Poverty: A Study of Town Life

Rowntree (1901) | Extra

House-to-house research in York compared income with the cost of basic needs. Low wages and family circumstances helped explain poverty.

Use it: Compare a basic-needs approach with Townsend's wider view of participation.

Think about: A historical local study is not a current national poverty measure.

Policy and unemployment

Benefits, pensions, public services, employment support and wage protections aim to reduce poverty or its effects.

Debates concern adequacy, cost, access and work incentives. The **poverty trap** can involve extra earnings being offset by lost benefits and extra costs.

People can be in poverty while working. Household income alone may hide unequal access to money within a family.

Globalisation

Globalisation: growing connections across countries through trade, work, money and communication.

It can create jobs and cheaper goods, but moving production can remove local jobs. Benefits and costs are uneven; it does not always increase poverty.

Read poverty figures carefully

Check the definition, period, household adjustment and housing costs. A change in measurement can change the total.

Townsend's historical findings are not current poverty rates. Compare sources and explain their limits.

Who has power and authority?

05 / LEGITIMACY, THE STATE AND INFLUENCE



Connect the ideas as you revise

Key concepts

Power: the ability to influence actions or decisions, including against resistance. **Authority:** power seen as legitimate or rightful.

Formal power: linked to an official role. **Informal power:** linked to respect, contacts or influence.

Coercion: using force or threats. Authority involves acceptance, though coercion may also exist.

Weber's three types of authority

Traditional: accepted because of long-established customs. **Charismatic:** accepted because a leader is seen as exceptional.

Rational-legal: accepted because of rules and an official position, such as a court role.

Real leaders and organisations may combine types. Charisma means followers' belief in a leader, not simply popularity.

The Theory of Social and Economic Organization: authority

Weber (1947 English edition) | AQA

Weber distinguished different reasons why people accept authority. Wealth is not the only source of power: status and organised groups can matter too.

Use this to compare a traditional leader, an inspiring campaigner and an official with powers set by rules.

The state and participation

State: institutions that govern a territory, including government, courts and public administration.

Democracy: citizens can influence government through political participation and elections. **Dictatorship:** power is concentrated with limited public accountability.

People can use parties, pressure groups, petitions, protests and media to seek change.

Compare views of power

Pluralism: power is spread among competing groups. Different groups can influence different issues.

Marxism: economic ownership gives capitalists major influence over politics and ideas.

Feminism: asks how male-dominated institutions restrict women's voices.

Ask who controls resources, who sets the agenda and who can take part.

Barriers to influence

Class, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion and beliefs can affect who is heard.

Time, money, access, safety and public trust matter. Legal rights may exist while practical participation remains unequal.

Explain, then evaluate

A pressure group gaining change supports a pluralist argument. Unequal access to decision-makers may support a conflict argument. Compare evidence rather than assuming all power is held by one group.

How does patriarchy shape power?

06 / WALBY, GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE


Paid work


Home


Power

Connect the ideas as you revise

Theorizing Patriarchy

Walby (1990) | AQA

Walby described six linked structures that help maintain male dominance. Patriarchy works through institutions as well as personal relationships.

Use it: Explain why inequality can remain even when women gain more rights.

Think about: Women's experiences vary. Class, ethnicity and other factors combine with gender.

Private and public patriarchy

Private: control mainly through the household, such as restricting a partner's choices.

Public: disadvantage through workplaces and public institutions. Entering paid work does not automatically give equal pay or power.

Walby argued that the balance changed over time. Private and public forms can coexist.

Six structures

Paid work: unequal job opportunities and rewards.

Household production: men benefiting from women's unpaid domestic work.

Culture: messages and expectations that support male power.

Sexuality: unequal expectations and double standards.

Male violence: violence or its threat restricting women's freedom.

The state: policies and institutions that may maintain unequal power.

An example

A woman may gain a job but still face most care duties, barriers to promotion and pressure about acceptable behaviour. Several structures may work together.

Avoid saying every man benefits equally or every woman has the same experience.

Change and continuing inequality

Education, employment, legal protection, political action and changing expectations can widen opportunities.

Average improvements may hide differences between groups. Equal rights on paper do not guarantee equal treatment.

Functionalists may stress achievement. Marxists ask about class and ownership. Feminists examine continuing gender power.

Link the topic together

Class resources affect life chances. Life chances affect access to work and political influence. Power can shape the rules that distribute resources.

Compare Davis and Moore's rewards, Marx's ownership, Weber's class/status/power and Walby's patriarchy.

Use studies in answers

Name the text and sociologist, explain the key idea, apply it to the question and give a relevant limit.

AQA marks prescribed thinkers or ideas. Each entry is a study or theoretical text; not every theory comes from a survey.