Ah, New Orleans, that fabled city on the Mississippi Delta. Images from its rich past floated through my head—pirates, treasure, intrigue. Memories from a pleasant vacation stirred my thoughts—the exotic French Quarter with its enticing aroma of Creole food and sounds of earthy jazz drifting through the air.

The shelter for the homeless, however, forced me back to an unwelcome reality. The shelter was like those I had visited in the North, West, and East—only dirtier. The dirt, in fact, was the worst that I had encountered during my research, and this shelter was the only one to insist on payment in exchange for sleeping in one of its filthy beds.

The men looked the same—disheveled and haggard, wearing that unmistakable expression of despair—just like the homeless anywhere in the country. Except for the accent, you wouldn’t know what region you were in. Poverty wears the same tired face wherever you are, I realized. The accent may differ, but the look remains the same.

I had grown used to the sights and smells of abject poverty. Those no longer surprised me. But after my fitful sleep with the homeless, I saw something that did. Just a block or so from the shelter, I was startled by a sight so out of step with the misery and despair I had just experienced that I stopped and stared.

Indignation swelled within me. Confronting me were life-size, full-color photos mounted on the transparent Plexiglas shelter of a bus stop. Staring back at me were images of finely dressed men and women proudly strutting about as they modeled elegant suits, dresses, diamonds, and furs.

A wave of disgust swept over me. “Something is cockeyed in this society,” I thought, as my mind refused to stop juxtaposing these images of extravagance with the suffering I had just witnessed.
The disjunction that I felt in New Orleans was triggered by the ads, but it was not the first time that I had experienced this sensation. Whenever my research abruptly transported me from the world of the homeless to one of another social class, I experienced a sense of disjointed unreality. Each social class has its own way of being, and because these fundamental orientations to the world contrast so sharply, the classes do not mix well.

What Is Social Class?

If you ask most Americans about their country’s social class system, you are likely to get a blank look. If you press the matter, you are likely to get an answer like this: “There are the poor and the rich—and then there are you and I, neither poor nor rich.” This is just about as far as most Americans’ consciousness of social class goes. Let’s try to flesh out this idea.

Our task is made somewhat difficult because sociologists have no clear-cut, agreed-on definition of social class (Lareau and Conley 2008). As was noted in the last chapter, conflict sociologists (of the Marxist orientation) see only two social classes: those who own the means of production and those who do not. The problem with this view, say most sociologists, is that it lumps too many people together. Teenage “order takers” at McDonald’s who work for $15,000 a year are lumped together with that company’s executives who make $500,000 a year—because they both are workers at McDonald’s, not owners.

Most sociologists agree with Weber that there is more to social class than just a person’s relationship to the means of production. Consequently, most sociologists use the components Weber identified and define social class as a large group of people who rank closely to one another in property, power, and prestige. These three elements separate people into different lifestyles, give them different chances in life, and provide them with distinct ways of looking at the self and the world.

Let’s look at how sociologists measure these three components of social class.

Property

Property comes in many forms, such as buildings, land, animals, machinery, cars, stocks, bonds, businesses, furniture, jewelry, and bank accounts. When you add up the value of someone’s property and subtract that person’s debts, you have what sociologists call wealth. This term can be misleading, as some of us have little wealth—especially most college students. Nevertheless, if your net total comes to $10, then that is your wealth. (Obviously, wealth as a sociological term does not mean wealthy.)

Distinguishing Between Wealth and Income. Wealth and income are sometimes confused, but they are not the same. Where wealth is a person’s net worth, income is a flow of money. Income has many sources: The most common is a business or wages, but other sources are rent, interest, or royalties, even alimony, an allowance, or gambling. Some people have much wealth and little income. For example, a farmer may own much land (a form of wealth), but bad weather, combined with the high cost of fertilizers and machinery, can cause the income to dry up. Others have much income and little wealth. An executive with a $250,000 annual income may be debt-ridden. Below the surface prosperity—the exotic vacations, country club membership, private schools for the children, sports cars, and an elegant home—the credit cards may be maxed out, the sports cars in danger of being repossessed, and the mortgage payments “past due.” Typically, however, wealth and income go together.
Distribution of Property. Who owns the property in the United States? One answer, of course, is “everyone.” Although this statement has some merit, it overlooks how the nation’s property is divided among “everyone.”

Overall, Americans are worth a hefty sum, about $44 trillion (Statistical Abstract 2009:Table 701). This includes all real estate, stocks, bonds, and business assets in the entire country. Figure 10.1 shows how highly concentrated this wealth is. Most wealth, 70 percent, is owned by only 10 percent of the nation’s families. As you can also see from this figure, 1 percent of Americans own one-third of all the U.S. assets.

Distribution of Income. How is income distributed in the United States? Economist Paul Samuelson (Samuelson and Nordhaus 2005) put it this way: “If we made an income pyramid out of a child’s blocks, with each layer portraying $500 of income, the peak would be far higher than Mount Everest, but most people would be within a few feet of the ground.”

Actually, if each block were 1 1/2-inches tall, the typical American would be just 10 feet off the ground, for the average per capita income in the United States is about $39,000 per year. (This average income includes every American, even children.) The typical family climbs a little higher, for most families have more than one worker, and together they average about $58,000 a year. Compared with the few families who are on the mountain’s peak, the average U.S. family would find itself only 15 feet off the ground (Statistical Abstract 2009:Tables 659, 674). Figure 10.2 portrays these differences.

The fact that some Americans enjoy the peaks of Mount Everest while most—despite their efforts—make it only 10 to 15 feet up the slope presents a striking image of income inequality in the United States. Another picture emerges if we divide the U.S. population into five equal groups and rank them from highest to lowest income. As Figure 10.3 on the next page shows, the top 20 percent of the population receive half (50.4 percent) of all income in the United States. In contrast, the bottom 20 percent of Americans receive only 3.4 percent of the nation’s income.

Two features of Figure 10.3 are outstanding. First, notice how little change there has been in the distribution of income through the years. Second, look at how income inequality decreased from 1935 to 1970. Since 1970, the richest 20 percent of U.S. families have grown richer, while the poorest 20 percent have grown poorer. Despite numerous government
antipoverty programs, the poorest 20 percent of Americans receive less of the nation’s income today than they did decades ago. The richest 20 percent, in contrast, are receiving more, almost as much as they did in 1935.

The chief executive officers (CEOs) of the nation’s largest corporations are especially affluent. The Wall Street Journal surveyed the 200 U.S. companies with the largest revenue to find out what they paid their CEOs (“The Wall Street Journal Survey...” 2009). Their median compensation (including salaries, bonuses, and stock options) came to $7,600,000 a year. (Median means that half received more than this amount, and half less.)

The CEOs’ income—which does not include their income from interest, dividends, or rents, or the value of company-paid limousines and chauffeurs, airplanes and pilots, and private boxes at the symphony and sporting events—is 200 times higher than the average pay of U.S. workers (Statistical Abstract 2009:Table 626). To really see the disparity, consider this: The average U.S. worker would have to work 2,800 years to earn the amount received by the highest-paid executive listed in Table 10.1.

Imagine how you could live with an income like this. And that is precisely the point. Beyond these cold numbers lies a dynamic reality that profoundly affects people’s lives. The difference in wealth between those at the top and those at the bottom of the U.S. class structure means that people experience vastly different lifestyles. For example,

a colleague of mine who was teaching at an exclusive Eastern university piqued his students’ curiosity when he lectured on poverty in Latin America. That weekend, one of the students borrowed his parents’ corporate jet and pilot, and in class on Monday, he and his friends related their personal observations on poverty in Latin America.

Few of us could ever say, “Mom and Dad, I’ve got to do a report for my soc class, so I need to borrow the jet—and the pilot—to run down to South America for the weekend.” What a lifestyle! Contrast this with Americans at the low end of the income ladder who lack the funds to travel even to a neighboring town for the weekend. For parents in poverty, choices may revolve around whether to spend the little they have at the laundromat or on milk for the baby. The elderly might

TABLE 10.1 The 5 Highest-Paid CEOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Compensation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sanjay Jha</td>
<td>Motorola</td>
<td>$104 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Irani</td>
<td>Occidental Petroleum</td>
<td>$50 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Iger</td>
<td>Disney</td>
<td>$50 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vikram Pandit</td>
<td>Citigroup</td>
<td>$38 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Camilleri</td>
<td>Philip Morris</td>
<td>$36 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Compensation includes salary, bonuses, and stock options.
What Is Social Class?

How the Super-Rich Live

It’s good to see how other people live. It gives us a different perspective on life. Let’s take a glimpse at the life of John Castle (his real name). After earning a degree in physics at MIT and an MBA at Harvard, John went into banking and securities, where he made more than $100 million (Lublin 1999).

Wanting to be connected to someone famous, John bought President John F. Kennedy’s “Winter White House,” an oceanfront estate in Palm Beach, Florida. John spent $11 million to remodel the 13,000-square-foot house so that it would be more to his liking. Among those changes: adding bathrooms numbers 14 and 15. He likes to show off John F. Kennedy’s bed and also the dresser that has the drawer labeled “black underwear,” carefully hand-lettered by Rose Kennedy.

At his beachfront estate, John gives what he calls “refined feasts” to the glitterati (“On History . . .” 1999). If he gets tired of such activities—or weary of swimming in the Olympic-size pool where JFK swam the weekend before his assassination—John entertains himself by riding one of his thoroughbred horses at his nearby 10-acre ranch. If this fails to ease his boredom, he can relax aboard his custom-built 42-foot Hinckley yacht.

The yacht is a real source of diversion. John once boarded it for an around-the-world trip. He didn’t stay on board, though—just joined the cruise from time to time. A captain and crew kept the vessel on course, and whenever John felt like it he would fly in and stay a few days. Then he would fly back to the States to direct his business. He did this about a dozen times, flying perhaps 150,000 miles. An interesting way to go around the world.

How much does a custom-built Hinckley yacht cost? John can’t tell you. As he says, “I don’t want to know what anything costs. When you’ve got enough money, price doesn’t make a difference. That’s part of the freedom of being rich.”

Right. And for John, being rich also means paying $1,000,000 to charter a private jet to fly Spot, his Appaloosa horse, back and forth to the vet. John didn’t want Spot to have to endure a long trailer ride. Oh, and of course, there was the cost of Spot’s medical treatment, another $500,000.

Other wealthy people spend extravagantly, too. Lee Tachman threw a four-day party for three friends. They had massages, ate well, took rides in a helicopter, a fighter jet, Ferraris, and Lamborghini, and did a little paintballing—all for the bargain price of $50,000. At the 1Oak Lounge in New York City, some customers pay $35,000 for a bottle of champagne (Haughney and Konigsberg 2008). Of course, it is a large bottle.

Parties are fun, but what if you want privacy? You can buy that, too. Wayne Huizenga, the founder of Blockbuster, who sold a half ownership in the Miami Dolphins for $550 million (“Builder Stephen . . .” 2008), bought a 2,000-acre country club, complete with an 18-hole golf course, a 55,000-square-foot-clubhouse, and 68 slips for visiting vessels. The club is so exclusive that its only members are Wayne and his wife (Fabrikant 2005).

Charles Simonyi has even outdone having your own country club. He bought a $25 million ticket for a rocket ride to the International Space Station. Simonyi liked the experience so much that he bought a second ticket (Leo 2008). No frequent flyer miles included. But at the rate prices are increasing, $50 million isn’t worth what it used to be anyway.

For Your Consideration

What effects has social class had on your life? (Go beyond possessions to values, orientations, and outlooks on life.) How do you think you would see the world differently if you were John Castle, Lee Tachman, Charles Simonyi, or Mrs. Wayne Huizenga?
**Power**

Like many people, you may have said to yourself, “Sure, I can vote, but the big decisions are always made despite what I might think. Certainly I don’t make the decision to send soldiers to Afghanistan or Iraq. I don’t launch missiles into Iraq or Pakistan. I don’t decide to raise taxes, lower interest rates, or spend $700 billion to bail out Wall Street fools and felons.”

And then another part of you may say, “But I do participate in these decisions through my representatives in Congress, and by voting for president.” True enough—as far as it goes. The trouble is, it just doesn’t go far enough. Such views of being a participant in the nation’s “big” decisions are a playback of the ideology we learn at an early age—an ideology that Marx said is promoted by the elites to both legitimate and perpetuate their power. Sociologists Daniel Hellinger and Dennis Judd (1991) call this the “democratic facade” that conceals the real source of power in the United States.

Back in the 1950s, sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) was criticized for insisting that power—the ability to get your way despite resistance—was concentrated in the hands of a few, for his analysis contradicted the dominant ideology of equality. As was discussed in earlier chapters, Mills coined the term power elite to refer to those who make the big decisions in U.S. society.

Mills and others have stressed how wealth and power coalesce in a group of like-minded individuals who share ideologies, values, and world views. These individuals belong to the same private clubs, vacation at the same exclusive resorts, and even hire the same bands for their daughters’ debutante balls. Their shared backgrounds and vested interests reinforce their view of both the world and their special place in it (Domhoff 1999a, 2006). This elite wields extraordinary power in U.S. society, so much so that most U.S. presidents have come from this group—millionaire white men from families with “old money” (Baltzell and Schneiderman 1988).

Continuing in the tradition of Mills, sociologist William Domhoff (1990, 2006) argues that this group is so powerful that the U.S. government makes no major decision without its approval. He analyzed how this group works behind the scenes with elected officials to determine both foreign and domestic policy—from setting Social Security taxes to imposing trade tariffs. Although Domhoff’s conclusions are controversial—and alarming—they certainly follow logically from the principle that wealth brings power, and extreme wealth brings extreme power.

**Prestige**

**Occupations and Prestige.** What are you thinking about doing after college? Chances are, you don’t have the option of lolling under palm trees at the beach. Almost all of us have to choose an occupation and go to work. Look at Table 10.2 to see how the career you are considering stacks up in terms of prestige (respect or regard). Because we are moving toward a global society, this table also shows how the rankings given by Americans compare with those of the residents of sixty other countries.

Why do people give more prestige to some jobs than to others? If you look at Table 10.2, you will notice that the jobs at the top share four features:

1. They pay more.
2. They require more education.
3. They entail more abstract thought.
4. They offer greater autonomy (independence, or self-direction).

If you look at the bottom of the list, you can see that people give less prestige to jobs with the opposite characteristics: These jobs are low-paying, require less preparation or education, involve more physical labor, and are closely supervised. In short, the professions and the white-collar jobs are at the top of the list, the blue-collar jobs at the bottom.

One of the more interesting aspects of these rankings is how consistent they are across countries and over time. For example, people in every country rank college professors higher than nurses, nurses higher than social workers, and social workers...
higher than janitors. Similarly, the occupations that were ranked high 25 years ago still rank high today—and likely will rank high in the years to come.

**Displaying Prestige.** People want others to acknowledge their prestige. In times past, in some countries only the emperor and his family could wear purple—for it was the royal color. In France, only the nobility could wear lace. In England, no one could sit while the king was on his throne. Some kings and queens required that subjects walk backward as they left the room—so that they would not “turn their back” on the “royal presence.”

Concern with displaying prestige has not let up. Military manuals specify who must salute whom. The U.S. president enters a room only after everyone else attending the function is present (to show that the president isn’t waiting for others). Everyone must also be standing when the president enters. In the courtroom, bailiffs, sometimes armed, make certain that everyone stands when the judge enters.

Do you try to display prestige? Think about your clothing. How much more are you willing to pay for clothing that bears some hot “designer” label? Purses, shoes, jeans, and shirts—many of us pay more if they have some little symbol than if they don’t. As we wear them proudly, aren’t we actually proclaiming, “See, I had the money to buy this particular item!”? For many of us, prestige is a primary factor in deciding which college to attend. Everyone knows how the prestige of a generic sheepskin from Regional State College compares with a degree from Harvard, Princeton, Yale, or Stanford.

Status symbols vary with social class. Clearly, only the wealthy can afford certain items, such as yachts and huge estates—or the $35,000 bottle of champagne mentioned in the box on page 265. But beyond affordability lies a class-based preference in status symbols. For example, people who are striving to be upwardly mobile flaunt labels on their clothing or conspicuously carry shopping bags from prestigious stores to show that they have “arrived.” The wealthy, who regard the symbols of the “common” classes as cheap and showy, flaunt their own status symbols, such as $50,000 Rolex watches and $40,000 diamond earrings. Like the other classes, they, too, try to outdo one another. They boast about who has the longest yacht or casually mention that they have a helicopter fly them to their golf game (Fabrikant 2005)—or that they stayed at the $30,000-a-night room at the Four Seasons in New York City (Feuer 2008).

### TABLE 10.2 Occupational Prestige: How the United States Compares with 60 Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Average of 60 Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court judge</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College president</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astronaut</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College professor</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airline pilot</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biologist</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil engineer</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacist</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school teacher</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered nurse</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional athlete</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical engineer</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinarian</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociologist</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical musician</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor or actress</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiropractor</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic coach</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undertaker</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz musician</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real estate agent</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail carrier</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plumber</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barber</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store sales clerk</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truck driver</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cab driver</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garbage collector</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiter or waitress</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartender</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives on public aid</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill collector</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janitor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoe shiner</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street sweeper</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For five occupations not located in the 1994 source, the 1991 ratings were used: Supreme Court judge, astronaut, athletic coach, lives on public aid, and street sweeper.

Sources: Treiman 1977, Appendices A and D; Nakao and Treas 1991; 1994: Appendix D.
Status Inconsistency

Ordinarily, we have a similar rank on all three dimensions of social class—property, power, and prestige. The homeless men in the opening vignette are an example of these three dimensions lined up. Such people are status consistent. Some people, however, have a mixture of high and low ranks. This condition, called status inconsistency, leads to some interesting situations.

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1954, 1966) analyzed how people try to maximize their status, their position in a social group. Individuals who rank high on one dimension of social class but lower on others want people to judge them on the basis of their highest status. Others, however, who are trying to maximize their own position, may respond to status-inconsistent individuals according to their lowest ranking.

A classic study of status inconsistency was done by sociologist Ray Gold (1952). After apartment-house janitors unionized in Chicago, they made more money than some of the tenants whose garbage they carried out. Tenants became upset when they saw their janitors driving more expensive cars than they did. Some attempted to “put the janitor in his place” by making “snotty” remarks to him. For their part, the janitors took delight in knowing “dirty” secrets about the tenants, gleaned from their garbage.

Individuals with status inconsistency, then, are likely to confront one frustrating situation after another (Heames et al. 2006). They claim the higher status, but are handed the lower one. The significance of this condition, said Lenski (1954), is that such people tend to be more politically radical. An example is college professors. Their prestige is very high, as we saw in Table 10.2, but their incomes are relatively low. Hardly anyone in U.S. society is more educated, and yet college professors don’t even come close to the top of the income pyramid. In line with Lenski’s prediction, the politics of most college professors are left of center. This hypothesis may also hold true among academic departments; that is, the higher a department’s average pay, the less radical are the members’ politics. Teachers in departments of business and medicine, for example, are among the most highly paid in the university—and they also are the most politically conservative.

Instant wealth, the topic of the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page, provides an interesting case of status inconsistency.
If I just win the lottery, life will be good. These problems I’ve got, they’ll be gone. I can just see myself now.”

So goes the dream. And many Americans shell out megabucks every week, with the glimmering hope that “Maybe this week, I’ll hit it big.”

Most are lucky to get $20, or maybe just win another scratch-off ticket.

But there are the big hits. What happens to these winners? Are their lives all wine, roses, and chocolate afterward?

We don’t have any systematic studies of the big winners, so I can’t tell you what life is like for the average winner. But several themes are apparent from reporters’ interviews.

The most common consequence of hitting it big is that life becomes topsy-turvy (Bernstein 2007). All of us are rooted somewhere. We have connections with others that provide the basis for our orientations to life and how we feel about the world. Sudden wealth can rip these moorings apart, and the resulting status inconsistency can lead to a condition sociologists call anomie.

First comes the shock. As Mary Sanderson, a telephone operator in Dover, New Hampshire, who won $66 million, said, “I was afraid to believe it was real, and afraid to believe it wasn’t.” Mary says that she never slept worse than her first night as a multimillionaire. “I spent the whole time crying—and throwing up” (Tresniowski 1999).

Reporters and TV camera operators appear on your doorstep. “What are you going to do with all that money?” they demand. You haven’t the slightest idea, but in a daze you mumble something.

Then come the calls. Some are welcome. Your Mom and Dad call to congratulate you. But long-forgotten friends and distant relatives suddenly remember how close they really are to you—and strangely enough, they all have emergencies that your money can solve. You even get calls from strangers who have ailing mothers, terminally ill kids, sick dogs . . .

You have to unplug the phone and get an unlisted number.

You might be flooded with marriage proposals. You certainly didn’t become more attractive or sexy overnight—or did you? Maybe money makes people sexy.

You can no longer trust people. You don’t know what their real motives are. Before, no one could be after your money because you didn’t have any. You may even fear kidnappers. Before, this wasn’t a problem—unless some kidnapper wanted the ransom of a seven-year-old car.

The normal becomes abnormal. Even picking out a wedding gift is a problem. If you give the usual toaster, everyone will think you’re stingy. But should you write a check for $25,000? If you do, you’ll be invited to every wedding in town—and everyone will expect the same.

Here is what happened to some lottery winners:

When Alex Snielus of Chicago won $67 million, he lost his friends (Bernstein 2007). For some reason, they thought he should give them a large annual gift. As Alex’s daughter says about Alex’s (former) best friend, “He was like, ‘Put me on your payroll.’”

As a tip, a customer gave a lottery ticket to Tonda Dickerson, a waitress at the Waffle House in Grand Bay, Alabama. She won $10 million. (Yes, just like the Nicholas Cage movie, It Could Happen to You.) Her co-workers sued her, saying that they had always agreed to split such winnings (“House Divided” 1999).

Then there is Michael Klinebiel of Rahway, New Jersey. When he won $2 million, his mother, Phyllis, said that half of it was hers, that she and her son had pooled $20 a month for years to play the lottery. He said they had done this—but he had bought the winning ticket on his own. Phyllis sued her son (“Sticky Ticket” 1998).

When Mack Metcalf, a forklift operator in Corbin, Kentucky, hit the jackpot for $34 million, he fulfilled a dream: He built and moved into a replica of George Washington’s Mount Vernon home. Then his life fell apart—his former wife sued him, his current wife divorced him, and his new girlfriend got $500,000 while he was drunk. Within three years of his “good” fortune, Metcalf had drunk himself to death (Dao 2005).

Winners who avoid anomie seem to be people who don’t make sudden changes in their lifestyle or their behavior. They hold onto their old friends and routines—the anchors in life that give them identity and a sense of belonging. Some even keep their old jobs—not for the money, of course, but because the job anchors them to an identity with which they are familiar and comfortable.

Sudden wealth, in other words, poses a threat that has to be guarded against.

And I can just hear you say, “I’ll take the risk!”

For Your Consideration

How do you think your life would change if you won a lottery jackpot of $10 million?
Sociological Models of Social Class

The question of how many social classes there are is a matter of debate. Sociologists have proposed several models, but no single model has gained universal support. There are two main models: one that builds on Marx, the other on Weber.

Updating Marx

As Figure 10.4 illustrates, Marx argued that there are just two classes—capitalists and workers—with membership based solely on a person’s relationship to the means of production. Sociologists have criticized this view, saying that these categories are too broad. For example, because executives, managers, and supervisors don’t own the means of production, they would be classified as workers. But what do these people have in common with assembly-line workers? The category of “capitalist” is also too broad. Some people, for example, employ a thousand workers, and their decisions directly affect a thousand families.

Compare these people with a man I know in Godfrey, Illinois, who used to fix cars in his backyard. As Frank gained a following, he quit his regular job, and in a few years he put up a building with five bays and an office. Frank is now a capitalist, for he employs five or six mechanics and owns the tools and the building (the “means of production”). But what does he have in common with a factory owner who controls the lives of one thousand workers? Not only is Frank’s work different but so are his lifestyle and the way he looks at the world.

To resolve this problem, sociologist Erik Wright (1985) suggests that some people are members of more than one class at the same time. They occupy what he calls contradictory class locations. By this, Wright means that a person’s position in the class structure can generate contradictory interests. For example, the automobile mechanic-turned-business owner may want his mechanics to have higher wages because he, too, has experienced their working conditions. At the same time, his current interests—making profits and remaining competitive with other repair shops—lead him to resist pressures to raise their wages.

Because of such contradictory class locations, Wright modified Marx’s model. As summarized in Table 10.3, Wright identifies four classes: (1) capitalists, business owners who employ many workers; (2) petty bourgeoisie, small business owners; (3) managers, who sell their own labor but also exercise authority over other employees; and (4) workers, who simply sell their labor to others. As you can see, this model allows finer divisions than the one Marx proposed, yet it maintains the primary distinction between employer and employee.

Problems persist, however. For example, in which category would we place college professors? And as you know, there are huge differences in the power of managers. An executive at Toyota, for example, may manage a thousand workers, while a shift manager at McDonald’s may be responsible for only a handful. They, too, have little in common.

Updating Weber

Sociologists Joseph Kahl and Dennis Gilbert (Gilbert and Kahl 1998; Gilbert 2003) developed a six-tier model to portray the class structure of the United States and other capitalist countries. Think of this model, illustrated in Figure 10.5 on the next page, as a ladder. Our discussion starts with the highest rung and moves downward. In line with Weber, on each lower rung you find less property (wealth), less power, and less prestige. Note that in this model education is also a primary measure of class.

The Capitalist Class. Sitting on the top rung of the class ladder is a powerful elite that consists of just 1 percent of the U.S. population. As you saw in Figure 10.1 on page 263, this capitalist class is so wealthy that it owns one-third of all the nation’s assets. This tiny 1 percent is worth more than the entire bottom 90 percent of the country (Beeghley 2008).

Power and influence cling to this small elite. They have direct access to top politicians, and their decisions open or close job opportunities for millions of people. They even help
to shape the consciousness of the nation: They own our major media and entertainment outlets—newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and sports franchises. They also control the boards of directors of our most influential colleges and universities. The super-rich perpetuate themselves in privilege by passing on their assets and social networks to their children.

The capitalist class can be divided into “old” and “new” money. The longer that wealth has been in a family, the more it adds to the family’s prestige. The children of “old” money seldom mingle with “common” folk. Instead, they attend exclusive private schools where they learn views of life that support their privileged position. They don’t work for wages; instead, many study business or become lawyers so that they can manage the family fortune. These old-money capitalists (also called “blue-bloods”) wield vast power as they use their extensive political connections to protect their economic empires (Sklair 2001; Domhoff 1990, 1999b, 2006).

At the lower end of the capitalist class are the nouveau riche, those who have “new money.” Although they have made fortunes in business, the stock market, inventions, entertainment, or sports, they are outsiders to the upper class. They have not attended the “right” schools, and they don’t share the social networks that come with old money. Not blue-bloods, they aren’t trusted to have the right orientations to life. Even their “taste” in clothing and status symbols is suspect (Fabrikant 2005). Donald Trump, whose money is “new,” is not listed in the Social Register; the “White Pages” of the blue-bloods that lists the most prestigious and wealthy one-tenth of 1 percent of the U.S. population. Trump says he “doesn’t care,” but he reveals his true feelings by adding that his heirs will be in it (Kaufman 1996).
Sociologists use income, education, and occupational prestige to measure social class. For most people, this works well, but not for everyone, especially entertainers. To what social class do Depp, James, Lopez, and Oh belong? Johnny Depp makes about $72 million a year; Lebron James $38 million; Jennifer Lopez $14 million; and Sandra Oh $2 million.

He is probably right, for the children of the new-moneyed can ascend into the top part of the capitalist class—if they go to the right schools and marry old money.

Many in the capitalist class are philanthropic. They establish foundations and give huge sums to “causes.” Their motivations vary. Some feel guilty because they have so much while others have so little. Others seek prestige, acclaim, or fame. Still others feel a responsibility—even a sense of fate or purpose—to use their money for doing good. Bill Gates, who has given more money to the poor and to medical research than anyone else has, seems to fall into this latter category.

The Upper Middle Class. Of all the classes, the upper middle class is the one most shaped by education. Almost all members of this class have at least a bachelor’s degree, and many have postgraduate degrees in business, management, law, or medicine. These people manage the corporations owned by the capitalist class or else operate their own business or profession. As Gilbert and Kahl (1998) say,

[These positions] may not grant prestige equivalent to a title of nobility in the Germany of Max Weber, but they certainly represent the sign of having “made it” in contemporary America. . . . Their income is sufficient to purchase houses and cars and travel that become public symbols for all to see and for advertisers to portray with words and pictures that connote success, glamour, and high style.

Consequently, parents and teachers push children to prepare for upper-middle-class jobs. About 15 percent of the population belong to this class.

The Lower Middle Class. About 34 percent of the population belong to the lower middle class. Members of this class have jobs in which they follow orders given by members of the upper middle class. With their technical and lower-level management positions, they can afford a mainstream lifestyle, although they struggle to maintain it. Many anticipate being able to move up the social class ladder. Feelings of insecurity are common, however, with the threat of inflation, recession, and job insecurity bringing a nagging sense that they might fall down the class ladder (Kefalas 2007).

The distinctions between the lower middle class and the working class on the next rung below are more blurred than those between other classes. In general, however, members of the lower middle class work at jobs that have slightly more prestige, and their incomes are generally higher.

The Working Class. About 30 percent of the U.S. population belong to this class of relatively unskilled blue-collar and white-collar workers. Compared with the lower middle class, they have less education and lower incomes. Their jobs are also less secure, more routine, and more closely supervised. One of their greatest fears is that of being laid off during a recession. With only a high school diploma, the average member of the working class has little hope of climbing up the class ladder. Job changes usually bring "more of the
“same,” so most concentrate on getting ahead by achieving seniority on the job rather than by changing their type of work. They tend to think of themselves as having “real jobs” and regard the “suits” above them as paper pushers who have no practical experience (Morris and Grimes 2005).

**The Working Poor.** Members of this class, about 16 percent of the population, work at unskilled, low-paying, temporary and seasonal jobs, such as sharecropping, migrant farm work, housecleaning, and day labor. Most are high school dropouts. Many are functionally illiterate, finding it difficult to read even the want ads. They are not likely to vote (Beeghley 2008), for they believe that no matter what party is elected to office, their situation won’t change.

Although they work full time, millions of the working poor depend on food stamps and donations from local food pantries to survive on their meager incomes (O’Hare 1996b). It is easy to see how you can work full time and still be poor. Suppose that you are married and have a baby 3 months old and another child 3 years old. Your spouse stays home to care for them, so earning the income is up to you. But as a high-school dropout, all you can get is a minimum wage job. At $7.25 an hour, you earn $290 for 40 hours. In a year, this comes to $15,080—before deductions. Your nagging fear—and recurring nightmare—is of ending up “on the streets.”

**The Underclass.** On the lowest rung, and with next to no chance of climbing anywhere, is the underclass. Concentrated in the inner city, this group has little or no connection with the job market. Those who are employed—and some are—do menial, low-paying, temporary work. Welfare, if it is available, along with food stamps and food pantries, is their main support. Most members of other classes consider these people the “ne’er-do-wells” of society. Life is the toughest in this class, and it is filled with despair. About 4 percent of the population fall into this class.

The homeless men described in the opening vignette of this chapter, and the women and children like them, are part of the underclass. These are the people whom most Americans wish would just go away. Their presence on our city streets bothers passersby from the more privileged social classes—which includes just about everyone. “What are those obnoxious, dirty, foul-smelling people doing here, cluttering up my city?” appears to be a common response. Some people react with sympathy and a desire to do something. But what? Almost all of us just shrug our shoulders and look the other way, despairing of a solution and somewhat intimidated by their presence.

The homeless are the “fallout” of our postindustrial economy. In another era, they would have had plenty of work. They would have tended horses, worked on farms, dug ditches, shoveled coal, and run the factory looms. Some would have explored and settled the West. The prospect of gold would have lured others to California, Alaska, and Australia. Today, however, with no frontiers to settle, factory jobs scarce, and farms that are becoming technological marvels, we have little need for unskilled labor.

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**Consequences of Social Class**

The man was a C student throughout school. As a businessman, he ran an oil company (Arbusto) into the ground. A self-confessed alcoholic until age forty, he was arrested for drunk driving. With this background, how did he become president of the United States?

Accompanying these personal factors was the power of social class. George W. Bush was born the grandson of a wealthy senator and the son of a businessman who himself became president of the United States after serving as a member of the House of Representatives, director of the CIA, and head of the Republican party. For high school, he went to an elite...
He was given $1 million to start his own business. When that business (Arbusto) failed, Bush fell softly, landing on the boards of several corporations. Taken care of even further, he was made the managing director of the Texas Rangers baseball team and allowed to buy a share of the team for $600,000, which he sold for $15 million.

When it was time for him to get into politics, Bush’s connections financed his run for governor of Texas and then for the presidency.

Does social class matter? And how! Think of each social class as a broad subculture with distinct approaches to life, so significant that it affects almost every aspect of our lives—our health, family life, education, religion, politics, and even our experiences with crime and the criminal justice system. Let’s look at how social class affects our lives.

**Physical Health**

If you want to get a sense of how social class affects health, take a ride on Washington’s Metro system. Start in the blighted Southeast section of downtown D.C. For every mile you travel to where the wealthy live in Montgomery County in Maryland, life expectancy rises about a year and a half. By the time you get off, you will find a twenty-year gap between the poor blacks where you started your trip and the rich whites where you ended it (Cohen 2004).

The principle is simple: As you go up the social-class ladder, health increases. As you go down the ladder, health decreases (Hout 2008). Age makes no difference. Infants born to the poor are more likely to die before their first birthday, and a larger percentage of poor people in their old age—whether 75 or 95—die each year than do the elderly who are wealthy.

How can social class have such dramatic effects? While there are many reasons, here are three basic ones. First, social class opens and closes doors to medical care. Consider this example:

Terry Takewell (his real name), a 21-year-old diabetic, lived in a trailer park in Somerville, Tennessee. When Zettie Mae Hill, Takewell’s neighbor, found the unemployed carpenter drenched with sweat from a fever, she called an ambulance. Takewell was rushed to Methodist Hospital, where he had an outstanding bill of $9,400.

When the hospital administrator learned of the admission, he went to Takewell’s room, got him out of bed, and escorted him to the parking lot. There, neighbors found him under a tree and took him home.

Takewell died about twelve hours later.

Zettie Mae Hill said, “I didn’t think a hospital would just let a person die like that for lack of money.” (Based on Ansberry 1988)

Why was Terry Takewell denied medical treatment and his life cut short? The fundamental reason is that health care in the United States is not a citizens’ right but a commodity for sale. Unlike the middle and upper classes, few poor people have a personal physician, and they often spend hours waiting in crowded public health clinics. When the poor are hospitalized, they are likely to find themselves in understaffed and underfunded public hospitals, treated by rotating interns who do not know them and cannot follow up on their progress.

A second reason is lifestyles, which are shaped by social class. People in the lower classes are more likely to smoke, eat a lot of fats, be overweight, abuse drugs and alcohol, get little exercise, and practice unsafe sex (Chin et al. 2000; Navarro 2002; Liu 2007). This, to understake the matter, does not improve people’s health.

There is a third reason, too. Life is hard on the poor. The persistent stresses they face cause their bodies to wear out faster (Spector 2007). The rich find life better. They have fewer problems and more resources to deal with the ones they have. This gives them a sense of control over their lives, a source of both physical and mental health.
Mental Health

Sociological studies from as far back as the 1930s have found that the mental health of the lower classes is worse than that of the higher classes (Faris and Dunham 1939; Srole et al. 1978; Pratt et al. 2007). Greater mental problems are part of the higher stress that accompanies poverty. Compared with middle- and upper-class Americans, the poor have less job security and lower wages. They are more likely to divorce, to be the victims of crime, and to have more physical illnesses. Couple these conditions with bill collectors and the threat of eviction, and you can see how they can deal severe blows to people’s emotional well-being.

People higher up the social class ladder experience stress in daily life, of course, but their stress is generally less, and their coping resources are greater. Not only can they afford vacations, psychiatrists, and counselors, but their class position also gives them greater control over their lives, a key to good mental health.

Family Life

Social class also plays makes a significant difference in family life, in our choice of spouse, our chances of getting divorced, and how we rear our children.

Choice of Husband or Wife. Members of the capitalist class place strong emphasis on family tradition. They stress the family’s history, even a sense of purpose or destiny in life (Baltzell 1979; Aldrich 1989). Children of this class learn that their choice of husband or wife affects not just them, but the entire family, that it will have an impact on the “family line.” These background expectations shrink the field of “eligible” marriage partners, making it narrower than it is for the children of any other social class. As a result, parents in this class play a strong role in their children’s mate selection.

Divorce. The more difficult life of the lower social classes, especially the many tensions that come from insecure jobs and inadequate incomes, leads to higher marital friction and a greater likelihood of divorce. Consequently, children of the poor are more likely to grow up in broken homes.
Child Rearing. As discussed on page 81, lower-class parents focus more on getting their children to follow rules and obey authority, while middle-class parents focus more on developing their children’s creative and leadership skills (Lareau and Weininger 2008). Sociologists have traced this difference to the parents’ occupation (Kohn 1977). Lower-class parents are closely supervised at work, and they anticipate that their children will have similar jobs. Consequently, they try to teach their children to defer to authority. Middle-class parents, in contrast, enjoy greater independence at work. Anticipating similar jobs for their children, they encourage them to be more creative. Out of these contrasting orientations arise different ways of disciplining children; lower-class parents are more likely to use physical punishment, while the middle classes rely more on verbal persuasion.

Working-class and middle-class parents also have different ideas about how children develop (Lareau 2002; Bodovsky and Farkas 2008). Working-class parents think that children develop naturally—they sort of unfold from within. If parents provide comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support, the child’s development will take care of itself. Middle-class parents, in contrast, think that children need a lot of guidance to develop correctly. Among the consequences of these contrasting orientations is that middle-class parents read to their children more, make more efforts to prepare them for school, and encourage play and extracurricular activities that they think will help develop their children’s mental and social skills.

Education
As we saw in Figure 10.5 on page 271, education increases as one goes up the social class ladder. It is not just the amount of education that changes, but also the type of education. Children of the capitalist class bypass public schools. They attend exclusive private schools where they are trained to take a commanding role in society. Prep schools such as Andover, Groton, and Phillips Exeter Academy teach upper-class values and prepare their students for prestigious universities (Cookson and Persell 2005; Beeghley 2008).

Keenly aware that private schools can be a key to upward social mobility, some upper-middle-class parents do their best to get their children into the prestigious preschools that feed into these exclusive prep schools. Although some preschools cost $23,000 a year, they have a waiting list (Rohwedder 2007). Parents even solicit letters of recommendation for their 2- and 3-year-olds. Such parental involvement and resources are major reasons why children from the more privileged classes are more likely to go to college—and to graduate.

Religion
One area of social life that we might think would not be affected by social class is religion. (“People are just religious, or they are not. What does social class have to do with it?”) As we shall see in Chapter 18, however, the classes tend to cluster in different denominations. Episcopalians, for example, are more likely to attract the middle and upper classes, while Baptists draw heavily from the lower classes. Patterns of worship also follow class lines: The lower classes are attracted to more expressive worship services and louder music, while the middle and upper classes prefer more “subdued” worship.

Politics
As I have stressed throughout this text, people perceive events from their own corner in life. Political views are no exception to this symbolic interactionist principle, and the rich and the poor walk different political paths. The higher that people are on the social class ladder, the more likely they are to vote for Republicans (Hout 2008). In contrast, most members of the working class believe that the government should intervene in the economy to provide jobs and to make citizens financially secure. They are more likely to vote for Democrats. Although the working class is more liberal on economic issues (policies that increase government spending), it is more conservative on social issues (such as opposing abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment) (Houtman 1995; Hout 2008). People toward the bottom of the class structure are also less likely to be politically active—to campaign for candidates or even to vote (Gilbert 2003; Beeghley 2008).
Crime and Criminal Justice

If justice is supposed to be blind, it certainly is not when it comes to one’s chances of being arrested (Henslin 2008). In Chapter 8 (pages 210–212), we discussed how the social classes commit different types of crime. The white-collar crimes of the more privileged classes are more likely to be dealt with outside the criminal justice system, while the police and courts deal with the street crimes of the lower classes. One consequence of this class standard is that members of the lower classes are more likely to be in prison, on probation, or on parole. In addition, since those who commit street crimes tend to do so in or near their own neighborhoods, the lower classes are more likely to be robbed, burglarized, or murdered.

The Changing Economy

“They are so quiet,” I thought, as I watched the homeless men at breakfast, most sitting in silence, slowly eating their food or staring into a cup of coffee. “What do they have to talk about, anyway”? I realized. Where they are going to panhandle? How many cans they expect to collect? The soup kitchen they are going to visit at noon?

Two major forces in today’s world are the globalization of capitalism and rapidly changing technology. If the United States does not remain competitive by producing low-cost, high-quality, state-of-the-art goods and services, its economic position will decline. We will face dwindling opportunities—fewer jobs, shrinking paychecks, and vast downward social mobility. The men in the homeless shelter, high school dropouts, are technological know-nothings. Of what value are they to a rapidly changing technological society trying to compete on a global level? They have no productive place in it. Zero. This self-esteem and the feelings of belonging that come from work and paychecks have been pulled out from under them.

The upheaval in the economy does not affect all social classes in the same way. For the capitalist class, globalization is a dream come true: By minimizing the obstacles of national borders, capitalists are able to move production to countries that provide cheaper labor. They can produce components in one country, assemble them in another, and market the product throughout the world. Members of the upper middle class are well prepared for this change. Their higher education enables them to take a leading role in managing this global system for the capitalist class or for using the new technology to advance in their professions.

Below these two most privileged classes, changes in capitalism and technology add to the insecurities of life. As job markets shift, the skills of many in the lower middle class become outdated. Those who work at specialized crafts are especially at risk, for changing markets and technology can reduce or even eliminate the need for their skills. People in lower management are more secure, for they can transfer their skills from one job to another.

From this middle point on the ladder down, these changes in capitalism and technology hit people the hardest. The threat of plant closings haunts the working class, for they have few alternatives. The working poor are even more vulnerable, for they have even less to offer in the new job market. As unskilled jobs dry up, workers are tossed into the industrial garbage bin. Lacking technical skills, they fear the fate of the homeless.

Social Mobility

No aspect of life, then—from work and family life to politics—goes untouched by social class. Because life is so much more satisfying in the more privileged classes, people strive to climb the social class ladder. What affects their chances?

Three Types of Social Mobility

There are three basic types of social mobility: intergenerational, structural, and exchange. Intergenerational mobility refers to a change that occurs between generations—when grown-up children end up on a different rung of the social class ladder from the one
occupied by their parents. If the child of someone who sells used cars graduates from college and buys a Toyota dealership, that person experiences **upward social mobility**. Conversely, if a child of the dealership’s owner parties too much, drops out of college, and ends up selling cars, he or she experiences **downward social mobility**.

We like to think that individual efforts are the reason people move up the class ladder—and their faults the reason they move down. In these examples, we can identify hard work, sacrifice, and ambition on the one hand, versus indolence and substance abuse on the other. Although individual factors such as these do underlie social mobility, sociologists consider **structural mobility** to be the crucial factor. This second basic type of mobility refers to changes in society that cause large numbers of people to move up or down the class ladder.

To understand structural mobility, think about how changes in society (its structure) drive some people down the social class ladder and lift others up. When computers were invented, for example, new types of jobs appeared overnight. Huge numbers of people attended workshops and took crash courses, switching from blue-collar to white-collar work. In contrast, others were thrown out of work as technology bypassed their jobs. Individual effort was certainly involved—for some seized the opportunity while others did not—but the underlying cause was a huge social change that transformed the structure of work. This happens during depressions, too, when opportunities disappear, forcing millions of people downward on the class ladder.

In this instance, too, their changed status is due less to individual behavior than to structural changes in society.

The third type of social mobility, **exchange mobility**, occurs when large numbers of people move up and down the social class ladder, but, on balance, the proportions of the social classes remain about the same. Suppose that a million or so working-class people are trained in some new technology, and they move up the class ladder. Suppose also that because of a surge in imports, about a million skilled workers have to take lower-status jobs. Although millions of people change their social class, there is, in effect, an exchange among them. The net result more or less balances out, and the class system remains basically untouched.

**Women in Studies of Social Mobility**

In classic studies to determine how much social mobility there is, sociologists concluded that about half of sons passed their fathers on the social class ladder, about one-third stayed at the same level, and about one-sixth moved down (Blau and Duncan 1967; Featherman 1979). Feminists objected. They said that it wasn’t good science to ignore daughters and that assigning women the class of their husband assumed that wives had no social class position of their own (Davis and Robinson 1988). The male sociologists of the time brushed off these objections, replying that too few women were in the labor force to make a difference.

These sociologists simply hadn’t caught up with the times. The gradual but steady increase of women working for pay had caught them unprepared. Although sociologists now include women in their research on social mobility, determining how the social class of married women is related to that of their husbands is still in its infancy (McCall 2008). Sociologists Elizabeth Higginbotham and Lynn Weber (1992) studied 200 women from...
working-class backgrounds who had become administrators, managers, and professionals in Memphis. Almost without exception, their parents had implanted ideas of success in them while they were still little girls, encouraging them to postpone marriage and get an education. This research confirms how important the family is in the socialization process. It also supports the observation that the primary entry to the upper middle class is a college education. At the same time, if there had not been a structural change in society, the millions of new positions that women occupy would not exist.

**Interpreting Statistics on Social Mobility**

The United States is famous worldwide for its intergenerational mobility. That children can pass their parents on their way up the social class ladder is one of the attractions of this country. How much mobility is there? It turns out that most apples don't fall far from the tree. Of children who are born to the poorest 10 percent of Americans, about a third are still there when they are grown up. Similarly, of children who are born to the richest 10 percent of families, about a third stay there, too (Krueger 2002).

But is the glass half empty or half full? The answer depends on what part of these findings you emphasize. We can also put it this way: Two-thirds of the very poorest kids move up, and two-thirds of the very richest kids drop down. That is a lot of social mobility. What is the truth then? It depends on what you want to make of these findings. Remember that statistics don't lie, but liars use statistics. In this case, you can stress either part of these findings, depending on what you want to prove. Within all this, we don't want to lose sight of the broader principle: As with George W. Bush, the benefits that high-income parents enjoy tend to keep their children afloat. In contrast, the obstacles that low-income parents confront tend to weigh their children down.

**The Pain of Social Mobility**

If you were to be knocked down the social class ladder, you know it would be painful. But are you aware that it also hurts to climb this ladder? Sociologist Steph Lawler (1999) found that British women who had moved from the working class to the middle class were caught between two worlds—their working-class background and their current middle-class life. The women's mothers found their daughters' middle-class ways “uppity,” and they criticized their daughters’ tastes in furniture and food, their speech, even the way they reared their children. As you can expect, this put a lot of strain on the relationship between daughters and mothers. Studying working-class parents in Boston, sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972/1988) found something similar. The parents had made deep sacrifices—working two jobs, postponing medical care—just so their children could go to college. They, of course, expected their children to appreciate their sacrifice. But again, the result was two worlds of experience. The children's educated world was so unlike that of their parents that children and parents had difficulty talking to one another. Not surprisingly, the parents felt betrayed and bitter.

Some of those who make the jump from the working to the middle class always feel a tearing away of their roots and never become comfortable with their new social class (Morris and Grimes 2005). The Cultural Diversity box on the next page discusses other costs that come with the climb up the social class ladder.
Cultural Diversity in the United States

Social Class and the Upward Social Mobility of African Americans

The overview of social class presented in this chapter doesn’t apply equally to all the groups that make up U.S. society. Consider geography: What constitutes the upper class of a town of 5,000 people will differ from that of a city of a million. With fewer extremes of wealth and occupation, in small towns family background and local reputation are more significant.

So it is with racial–ethnic groups. All racial–ethnic groups are marked by social class, but what constitutes a particular social class can differ from one group to another—as well as from one historical period to another. Consider social class among African Americans (Cole and Omari 2003).

The earliest class divisions can be traced to slavery—to slaves who worked in the fields and those who worked in the “big house.” Those who worked in the plantation home were exposed more to the customs, manners, and forms of speech of wealthy whites. Their more privileged position—which brought with it better food and clothing, as well as lighter work—was often based on skin color. Mulattos, lighter-skinned slaves, were often chosen for this more desirable work. One result was the development of a “mulatto elite,” a segment of the slave population that, proud of its distinctiveness, distanced itself from the other slaves. At this time, there also were free blacks. Not only were they able to own property but some even owned black slaves.

After the War Between the States (as the Civil War is known in the South), these two groups, the mulatto elite and the free blacks, formed an upper class. Proud of their earlier status, they distanced themselves from other blacks. From these groups came most of the black professionals.

After World War II, the black middle class expanded as African Americans entered a wider range of occupations. Today, more than half of all African American adults work at white-collar jobs, about 22 percent at the professional or managerial level (Beeghley 2008). An unwelcome cost greets many African Americans who move up the social class ladder: an uncomfortable distancing from their roots, a separation from significant others—parents, siblings, and childhood friends (hooks 2000). The upwardly mobile enter a world unknown to those left behind, one that demands not only different appearance and speech, but also different values, aspirations, and ways of viewing the world. These are severe challenges to the self and often rupture relationships with those left behind.

An additional cost is a subtle racism that lurks beneath the surface of some work settings, poisoning what could be easy, mutually respectful interaction. To be aware that white co-workers perceive you as different—as a stranger, an intruder, or “the other”—engenders frustration, dissatisfaction, and cynicism. To cope, many nourish their racial identity and stress the “high value of black culture and being black” (Lacy and Harris 2008). Some move to neighborhoods of upper-middle-class African Americans, where they can live among like-minded people who have similar experiences (Lacy 2007).

For Your Consideration
In the box on upward social mobility on page 84, we discussed how Latinos face a similar situation. Why do you think this is? What connections do you see among upward mobility, frustration, and racial–ethnic identity? How do you think that the upward mobility of whites is different? Why?
Poverty

Many Americans find that the “limitless possibilities” of the American dream are quite elusive. As illustrated in Figure 10.5 on page 271, the working poor and underclass together form about one-fifth of the U.S. population. This translates into a huge number, about 60 million people. Who are these people?

Drawing the Poverty Line

To determine who is poor, the U.S. government draws a poverty line. This measure was set in the 1960s, when poor people were thought to spend about one-third of their incomes on food. On the basis of this assumption, each year the government computes a low-cost food budget and multiplies it by 3. Families whose incomes are less than this amount are classified as poor; those whose incomes are higher—even by a dollar—are determined to be “not poor.”

This official measure of poverty is grossly inadequate. Poor people actually spend only about 20 percent of their incomes on food, so to determine a poverty line, we ought to multiply their food budget by 5 instead of 3 (Uchitelle 2001). Another problem is that mothers who work outside the home and have to pay for child care are treated the same as mothers who don’t have this expense. The poverty line is also the same for everyone across the nation, even though the cost of living is much higher in New York than in Alabama. In addition, much of the income of the poor goes uncounted: food stamps, rent assistance, subsidized child care, and the earned income tax credit (Kaufman 2007).

That a change in the poverty line would instantly make millions of people poor—or take away their poverty—would be laughable, if it weren’t so serious. (The absurdity has not been lost on Parker and Hart, as you can see from their cartoon below). Although this line is arbitrary, because it is the official measure of poverty, we’ll use it to see who in the United States is poor. Before we do this, though, compare your ideas of the poor with the stereotypes explored in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

Who Are the Poor?

Geography. As you can see from the Social Map on page 283, the poor are not distributed evenly among the states. Notice the clustering of poverty in the South, a pattern that has prevailed for more than 150 years.

A second aspect of geography is also significant. The rate of rural poverty (16 percent) is higher than the national average of 12 percent. What is different about rural poverty? The rural poor are less likely to be single parents and more likely to be married and to have jobs. Compared with urban Americans, the rural poor are less educated, and the jobs available to them pay less than similar jobs in urban areas (Lichter and Crowley 2002; Arsnault 2006).

Geography, however, is not the main factor in poverty. The greatest predictors of poverty are race–ethnicity, education, and the sex of the person who heads the family. Let’s look at these factors.

WIZARD OF ID

The King will now outline his plan to eliminate poverty. In the future, there will be no monetary amount used to define poverty. Gee, I feel richer already!

This cartoon pinpoints the arbitrary nature of the poverty line. This almost makes me think that the creators of the Wizard of Id have been studying sociology.
Taking Another Fun Quiz: Exploring Stereotypes About the Poor

Do you hold any of these stereotypes? Can you tell which are true and which are not?

**Most poor people are lazy. They are poor because they do not want to work.** False. Half of the poor are either too old or too young to work. About 40 percent are under age 18, and another 10 percent are age 65 or older. About 30 percent of the working-age poor work at least half the year.

**Most of the poor are trapped in a cycle of poverty that few escape.** False. Long-term poverty is the exception. Most poverty lasts less than a year (Lichter and Crowley 2002). Only 12 percent remain in poverty for five or more consecutive years (O’Hare 1996a). Most children who are born in poverty are not poor as adults (Ruggles 1989; Corcoran 2001).

**There is more poverty in rural than in urban areas.** True. We’ll review this in the following section.

**Most African Americans are poor.** False. This one was easy. We just reviewed some statistics in the box on upward mobility on page 280—plus you have the bar chart below.

**Most of the poor are African Americans.** False. Look at the second part of Figure 10.6. There are more poor whites than any other group. The combined total of poor African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, however, is larger than the total of poor whites.

**Most of the poor are single mothers and their children.** False. About 38 percent of the poor match this stereotype, but 34 percent of the poor live in married-couple families, 22 percent live alone or with nonrelatives, and 6 percent live in other settings.

**Most of the poor live in the inner city.** False. About 42 percent of the poor do live in the inner city, but 36 percent live in the suburbs, and 22 percent live in small towns and rural areas.

**Most of the poor live on welfare.** False. Only about 25 percent of the income of poor adults comes from welfare. About half comes from wages and pensions, and about 22 percent from Social Security.

**On a percentage basis, more children than adults are poor.** True. (Okay, no one holds this stereotype. I just want to make this important point. We’ll come back to it shortly.)

For Your Consideration

What stereotypes of the poor do you (or people you know) hold? How would you test these stereotypes?

Sources: O’Hare 1996a, 1996b, with other sources as indicated.

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**FIGURE 10.6 Race–Ethnicity and U.S. Poverty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1 Of these groups, what percentage is poor?</th>
<th>Part 2 Of all the U.S. poor, what percentages are from these groups?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>12 10 10 21 24 27 1 23 17 14 27 33 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The elderly age 65 and over</td>
<td>9 8 12 19 12 12 3 22 21 1 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under age 18</td>
<td>27 1 6 33 33 33 33 33 33 33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1The source does not break this total down by age. 2Others consists of people who identify themselves as being of ancestry other than the groups listed here plus those who claim membership in two or more racial–ethnic groups.

Note: Only these groups are listed in the source. The poverty line on which this figure is based is $20,614 for a family of four.

Race–Ethnicity. One of the strongest factors in poverty is race–ethnicity. As Figure 10.6 shows, only 10 percent of Asian Americans and whites are poor. In contrast, 21 percent of Latinos live in poverty, while the total jumps even higher, to 24 percent for African Americans and 27 percent for Native Americans. Because whites are, by far, the largest group in the United States, their much lower rate of poverty still translates into larger numbers. As a result, there are more poor whites than poor people of any other racial–ethnic group.

Education. You are aware that education is a vital factor in poverty, but you may not know just how powerful it is. Figure 10.8 on the next page shows that 3 of 100 people who finish college end up in poverty, but 1 of every 4 people who drop out of high school is poor. As you can see, the chances that someone will be poor become less with each higher level of education. Although this principle applies regardless of race–ethnicity, this figure shows that at every level of education, race–ethnicity makes an impact.

The Feminization of Poverty. One of the best indicators of whether or not a family is poor is family structure. Families headed by both a mother and father are the least likely to be poor, and families headed by only a mother are the most likely to be poor (Statistical Abstract 2009:Table 676). The reason for this can be summed up in this one statistic: Women average only 70 percent of what men earn. (If you want to jump ahead, go to Figure 11.8 on page 318.)

Beyond the awareness of most Americans are the rural poor, such as this family in Maine. With low education and few good jobs available, life is hardscrabble. What do you think the future holds for these children?
With our high rate of divorce combined with our high number of births to single women, mother-headed families have become more common. Sociologists call this association of poverty with women the feminization of poverty.

Old Age. As Figure 10.6 on page 282 shows, the elderly are less likely than the general population to be poor. This is quite a change. It used to be that growing old increased people’s chances of being poor, but government policies to redistribute income—Social Security and subsidized housing, food stamps, and medical care—slashed the rate of poverty among the elderly. Figure 10.6 also shows how the prevailing racial–ethnic patterns carry over into old age. You can see how much more likely an elderly African American, Latino, or Native American is to be poor than an elderly white or Asian American.

Children of Poverty

Children are more likely to live in poverty than are adults or the elderly. This holds true regardless of race–ethnicity, but from Figure 10.6 on page 282, you can see how much greater poverty is among Latino, African American, and Native American children. That millions of U.S. children are reared in poverty is shocking when one considers the wealth of this country and the supposed concern for the well-being of children. This tragic aspect of poverty is the topic of the following Thinking Critically section.

Thinking CRITICALLY

The Nation’s Shame: Children in Poverty

One of the most startling statistics in sociology is shown in Figure 10.6 on page 282. Look at the rate of childhood poverty: For Asian Americans, 1 of 8 children is poor; for whites, 1 of 7; for Latinos, 1 of 4; and for African Americans, an astounding 1 of 3. These percentages translate into incredible numbers—approximately 13 million children.
Why do so many U.S. children live in poverty? A major reason is the large number of births to women who are not married, about 1.5 million a year. This number has increased sharply. In 1960, 1 of 20 U.S. children was born to a single woman. Today that total is about eight times higher, and single women now account for 2 of 5 (39 percent) of all U.S. births (Statistical Abstract 2009:Table 87).

By itself, though, births to single women don't cause poverty. Consider the obvious: Children born to wealthy single women aren't reared in poverty. Then consider this: Although the U.S. birth rate to single women is not the highest in the industrialized world, our rate of child poverty is the highest in the industrialized world (Rainwater and Smeeding 2003). In countries where the birth rate to single women is higher than ours but where child poverty is lower, the government provides extensive support for rearing these children—from day care to health checkups and medicine. As the cause of their poverty, then, why can't we point to government support for children—or the lack of it?

Apart from the matter of government policy, births to single women follow patterns that have a negative impact on their children's welfare. The less education a single woman has, the more likely she is to bear children. As you can see from Figure 10.9, births to single women drop with each gain in education. As you know, people with lower education earn less, so this means that the single women who can least afford children are those most likely to give birth. Their children are likely to face the obstacles to building a satisfying life that poverty entails. They are more likely to die in infancy, to go hungry, to be malnourished, to develop more slowly, and to have more health problems. They also are more likely to drop out of school, to become involved in criminal activities, and to have children while still in their teens—thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

**For Your Consideration**

With education so important to obtain jobs that pay well, in light of Figure 10.9, what programs would you suggest for helping women attain more education? What programs would you suggest for reducing child poverty? Be specific and practical.

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**The Dynamics of Poverty**

Some have suggested that the poor get trapped in a culture of poverty (Lewis 1966a; Gorsky 2008). They assume that the values and behaviors of the poor “make them fundamentally different from other Americans, and that these factors are largely responsible for their continued long-term poverty” (Ruggles 1989:7).
Lurking behind this concept is the idea that the poor are lazy people who bring poverty on themselves. Certainly, some individuals and families match this stereotype—many of us have known them. But is a self-perpetuating culture—one that poor people transmit across generations and that locks them in poverty—the basic reason for U.S. poverty?

Researchers who began following 5,000 poor U.S. families in 1968 uncovered some surprising findings. Contrary to stereotypes, most poverty is short-lived, lasting only a year or less. Most poverty comes about because of a dramatic life change such as divorce, the loss of a job, or even the birth of a child (O’Hare 1996a). As Figure 10.10 shows, only 12 percent of poverty lasts five years or longer. Contrary to the stereotype of lazy people content to live off the government, few poor people enjoy poverty—and they do what they can to avoid being poor.

Yet from one year to the next, the number of poor people remains about the same. This means that the people who move out of poverty are replaced by people who move into poverty. Most of these newly poor will also move out of poverty within a year. Some people even bounce back and forth, never quite making it securely out of poverty. Poverty, then, is dynamic, touching a lot more people than the official totals indicate. Although 13 percent of Americans may be poor at any one time, twice that number—about one-fourth of the U.S. population—is or has been poor for at least a year.

**Why Are People Poor?**

Two explanations for poverty compete for our attention. The first, which sociologists prefer, focuses on social structure. Sociologists stress that features of society deny some people access to education or the learning of job skills. They emphasize racial–ethnic, age, and gender discrimination, as well as changes in the job market—the closing of plants, the elimination of unskilled jobs, and the increase in marginal jobs that pay poverty wages. In short, some people find their escape route from poverty to a better life blocked.

A competing explanation focuses on the characteristics of individuals that are assumed to contribute to poverty. Sociologists reject individualistic explanations such as laziness and lack of intelligence, viewing these as worthless stereotypes. Individualistic explanations that sociologists reluctantly acknowledge include dropping out of school, bearing children in the teen years, and averaging more children than women in the other social classes. Most sociologists are reluctant to speak of such factors in this context, for they appear to blame the victim, something that sociologists bend over backward not to do.

The tension between these competing explanations is of more than just theoretical interest. Each explanation affects our perception and has practical consequences, as is illustrated in the following Thinking Critically section.

**Thinking CRITICALLY**

**The Welfare Debate: The Deserving and the Undeserving Poor**

Throughout U.S. history, Americans have divided the poor into two types: the deserving and the undeserving. The deserving poor are people who, in the public mind, are poor through no fault of their own. Most of the working poor, such as the Lewises, are considered deserving:

Nancy and Ted Lewis are in their early 30s and have two children. Ted works three part-time jobs, earning $13,000 a year; Nancy takes care of the children and house and is not employed. To make ends meet, the Lewises rely on food stamps, Medicaid, and housing subsidies.

The undeserving poor, in contrast, are viewed as people who brought on their own poverty. They are freeloaders who waste their lives in laziness, alcohol and drug abuse, and
promiscuous sex. They don’t deserve help, and, if given anything, will waste it on their dissolute lifestyles. Some would see Joan as an example:

Joan, her mother, and her two brothers and two sisters lived on welfare. Joan started having sex at 13, bore her first child at 15, and, now, at 23, is expecting her fourth child. Her first two children have the same father, the third a different father, and Joan isn’t sure who fathered her coming child. Joan parties most nights, using both alcohol and whatever drugs are available. Her house is filthy, the refrigerator usually empty, and social workers have threatened to take away her children.

This division of the poor into deserving and undeserving underlies the heated debate about welfare. “Why should we use our hard-earned money to help them? They are just going to waste it. Of course, there are others who want to get back on their feet, and helping them is okay.”

For Your Consideration

Why do people make a distinction between deserving and undeserving poor? Should we let some people starve because they “brought poverty upon themselves”? Should we let children go hungry because their parents are drug abusers? Does “unworthy” mean that we should not offer assistance to people who “squander” the help they are given?

In contrast to thinking of poor people as deserving or undeserving, use the sociological perspective to explain poverty without blaming the victim. What social conditions (conditions of society) create poverty? Are there social conditions that produce the lifestyles that the middle class so despises?

Welfare Reform

After decades of criticism, the U.S. welfare system was restructured in 1996. A federal law—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—requires states to place a lifetime cap on welfare assistance and compels welfare recipients to look for work and to take available jobs. The maximum length of time that someone can collect welfare is five years. In some states, it is less. Unmarried teen parents must attend school and live at home or in some other adult-supervised setting.

This law set off a storm of criticism. Some called it an attack on the poor. Defenders replied that the new rules would rescue people from poverty. They would transform welfare recipients into self-supporting and hard-working citizens—and reduce welfare costs. National welfare rolls plummeted, dropping by about 60 percent (Urban Institute 2006). Two out of five who left welfare also moved out of poverty (Hofferth 2002).

This is only the rosy part of the picture, however. Three of five are still in poverty or are back on welfare. A third of those who were forced off welfare have no jobs (Hage 2004; Urban Institute 2006). Some can’t work because they have health problems. Others lack transportation. Some are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Still others are trapped in economically depressed communities where there are no jobs. Then there are those who have jobs, but earn so little that they remain in poverty. Consider one of the “success stories”:

JoAnne Sims, 37, lives in Erie, New York, with her 7-year-old daughter Jamine. JoAnne left welfare, and now earns $7.25 an hour as a cook for Head Start. Her 37-hour week brings $268 before deductions. With the help of medical benefits and a mother who provides child care, JoAnne “gets by.” She says, “From what I hear, a lot of us who went off welfare are still poor . . . let me tell you, it’s not easy.” (Peterson 2000; earnings updated)

Conflict theorists have an interesting interpretation of welfare. They say that the purpose of welfare is not to help people, but, rather, to maintain a reserve labor force. It is designed to keep the unemployed alive during economic downturns until their labor is needed during the next economic boom. The 1996 law that reduced the welfare rolls fits this
model, as it was passed during the longest economic boom in U.S. history. Recessions are inevitable, however, and just as inevitable is surging unemployment. In line with conflict theory, we can predict that during the coming recession, welfare rules will be softened—in order to keep the reserve labor force ready for the next time they are needed.

Deferred Gratification

One consequence of a life of deprivation punctuated by emergencies—and of viewing the future as promising more of the same—is a lack of deferred gratification, giving up things in the present for the sake of greater gains in the future. It is difficult to practice this middle-class virtue if one does not have a middle-class surplus—or middle-class hope.

In a classic 1967 study of black streetcorner men, sociologist Elliot Liebow noted that the men did not defer gratification. Their jobs were low-paying and insecure, their lives pitted with emergencies. With the future looking exactly like the present, and any savings they did manage gobbled up by emergencies, it seemed pointless to save for the future. The only thing that made sense from their perspective was to enjoy what they could at that moment. Immediate gratification, then, was not the cause of their poverty, but, rather, its consequence. Cause and consequence loop together, however, for their immediate gratification helped perpetuate their poverty. For another look at this “looping,” see the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page, in which I share my personal experiences with poverty.

If both causes are at work, why do sociologists emphasize the structural explanation? Reverse the situation for a moment. Suppose that members of the middle class drove old cars that broke down, faced threats from the utility company to shut off the electricity and heat, and had to make a choice between paying the rent or buying medicine and food and diapers. How long would they practice deferred gratification? Their orientations to life would likely make a sharp U-turn.

Sociologists, then, do not view the behaviors of the poor as the cause of their poverty, but, rather, as the result of their poverty. Poor people would welcome the middle-class opportunities that would allow them the chance to practice the middle-class virtue of deferred gratification. Without those opportunities, though, they just can't afford it.

Where Is Horatio Alger? The Social Functions of a Myth

In the late 1800s, Horatio Alger was one of the country's most popular authors. The rags-to-riches exploits of his fictional boy heroes and their amazing successes in overcoming severe odds motivated thousands of boys of that period. Although Alger's characters have disappeared from U.S. literature, they remain alive and well in the psyche of Americans. From real-life examples of people of humble origin who climbed the social class ladder, Americans know that anyone who really tries can get ahead. In fact, they believe that most Americans, including minorities and the working poor, have an average or better-than-average chance of getting ahead—obviously a statistical impossibility (Kluegel and Smith 1986).

The accuracy of the Horatio Alger myth is less important than the belief that limitless possibilities exist for everyone. Functionalists would stress that this belief is functional for society. On the one hand, it encourages people to compete for higher positions, or, as the song says, “to reach for the highest star.” On the other hand, it places blame for failure squarely on the individual. If you don't make it—in the face of ample opportunities to get ahead—the fault must be your own. The Horatio Alger myth helps to stabilize society: Since the fault is viewed as the individual’s, not society's, current social arrangements can be regarded as satisfactory. This reduces pressures to change the system.

As Marx and Weber pointed out, social class penetrates our consciousness, shaping our ideas of life and our “proper” place in society. When the rich look at the world around them, they sense superiority and anticipate control over their own destiny. When the poor look around them, they are more likely to sense defeat and to anticipate that unpredictable forces will batter their lives. Both rich and poor know the dominant ideology, that their particular niche in life is due to their own efforts, that the reasons for success—or failure—lie solely with the self. Like fish that don't notice the water, people tend not to perceive the effects of social class on their own lives.

*Horatio Alger myth* the belief that due to limitless possibilities anyone can get ahead if he or she tries hard enough.
Poverty: A Personal Journey

I was born in poverty. My parents, who could not afford to rent a house or apartment, rented the tiny office in their minister’s house. That is where I was born.

My father began to slowly climb the social class ladder. His fitful odyssey took him from laborer to truck driver to the owner of a series of small businesses (tire repair shop, bar, hotel), then to vacuum cleaner salesman, and back to bar owner. He converted a garage into a house. Although it had no indoor plumbing or insulation (in northern Minnesota!), it was a start. Later, he bought a house, and then he built a new home. After that we moved into a trailer, and then back to a house. My father’s seventh-grade education was always an obstacle. Although he never became wealthy, poverty eventually became a distant memory for him.

My social class took a leap—from working class to upper middle class—when, after attending college and graduate school, I became a university professor. I entered a world that was unknown to my parents, one that was much more pampered and privileged. I had opportunities to do research, to publish, and to travel to exotic places. My reading centered on sociological research, and I read books in Spanish as well as in English. My father, in contrast, never read a book in his life, and my mother read only detective stories and romance paperbacks. One set of experiences isn’t “better” than the other; just significantly different in determining what windows of perception it opens onto the world.

My interest in poverty, which was rooted in my own childhood experiences, stayed with me. I traveled to a dozen or so skid rows across the United States and Canada, talking to homeless people and staying in their shelters. In my own town, I spent considerable time with people on welfare, observing how they lived. I constantly marveled at the connections between structural causes of poverty (low education and skills, undependable transportation, the lack of unskilled jobs) and personal causes (the culture of poverty—alcohol and drug abuse, multiple out-of-wedlock births, frivolous spending, all-night partying, and a seeming incapacity to keep appointments—except to pick up the welfare check).

Sociologists haven’t unraveled this connection, and as much as we might like for only structural causes to apply, clearly both are at work (Duneier 1999:122). The situation can be illustrated by looking at the perennial health problems I observed among the poor—the constant colds, runny noses, backaches, and injuries. The health problems stem from the social structure (less access to medical care, less capable physicians, drafty houses, little knowledge about nutrition, and more dangerous jobs). At the same time, personal characteristics—hygiene, eating habits, and overdrinking—cause health problems. Which is the cause and which the effect? Both, of course, for one loops into the other. The medical problems (which are based on both personal and structural causes) feed into the poverty these people experience, making them less able to perform their jobs successfully—or even to show up at work regularly. What an intricate puzzle for sociologists!

By the Numbers: Then and Now

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The richest 20% of Americans receive this percentage of the nation’s income</th>
<th>The poorest 20% of Americans receive this percentage of the nation’s income</th>
<th>Frequency of births outside of marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOW: 51%</td>
<td>NOW: 3%</td>
<td>NOW: 8 in 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUMMARY and REVIEW

What Is Social Class?

What is meant by the term social class?

Most sociologists have adopted Weber’s definition of social class: a large group of people who rank closely to one another in terms of property (wealth), power, and prestige. Wealth—consisting of the value of property and income—is concentrated in the upper classes. From the 1930s to the 1970s, the trend in the distribution of wealth in the United States was toward greater equality. Since that time, it has been toward greater inequality. Pp. 262–265.

Power is the ability to get one’s way even though others resist. C. Wright Mills coined the term power elite to refer to the small group that holds the reins of power in business, government, and the military. Prestige is linked to occupational status. People’s rankings of occupational prestige have changed little over the decades and are similar from country to country. Globally, the occupations that bring greater prestige are those that pay more, require more education and abstract thought, and offer greater independence. Pp. 266–267.

What is meant by the term status inconsistency?

Status is social position. Most people are status consistent; that is, they rank high or low on all three dimensions of social class. People who rank higher on some dimensions than on others are status inconsistent. The frustrations of status inconsistency tend to produce political radicalism. Pp. 268–269.

Sociological Models of Social Class

What models are used to portray the social classes?

Erik Wright developed a four-class model based on Marx: (1) capitalists (owners of large businesses), (2) petty bourgeoisie (small business owners), (3) managers, and (4) workers. Kahl and Gilbert developed a six-class model based on Weber. At the top is the capitalist class. In descending order are the upper middle class, the lower middle class, the working class, the working poor, and the underclass. Pp. 270–273.

Consequences of Social Class

How does social class affect people’s lives?

Social class leaves no aspect of life untouched. It affects our chances of benefiting from the new technology, dying early, becoming ill, receiving good health care, and getting divorced. Social class membership also affects child rearing, educational attainment, religious affiliation, political participation, the crimes people commit, and contact with the criminal justice system. Pp. 273–277.

Social Mobility

What are three types of social mobility?

The term intergenerational mobility refers to changes in social class from one generation to the next. Structural mobility refers to changes in society that lead large numbers of people to change their social class. Exchange mobility is the movement of large numbers of people from one class to another, with the net result that the relative proportions of the population in the classes remain about the same. Pp. 277–280.

Poverty

Who are the poor?

Poverty is unequally distributed in the United States. Racial–ethnic minorities (except Asian Americans), children, households headed by women, and rural Americans are more likely than others to be poor. The poverty rate of the elderly is less than that of the general population. Pp. 281–286.

Why are people poor?

Some social analysts believe that characteristics of individuals cause poverty. Sociologists, in contrast, examine structural features of society, such as employment opportunities, to find the causes of poverty. Sociologists generally conclude that life orientations are a consequence, not the cause, of people’s position in the social class structure. Pp. 286–289.

How is the Horatio Alger myth functional for society?

The Horatio Alger myth—the belief that anyone can get ahead if only he or she tries hard enough—encourages people to strive to get ahead. It also deflects blame for failure from society to the individual. P. 288.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT Chapter 10

1. The belief that the United States is the land of opportunity draws millions of legal and illegal immigrants to the United States each year. How do the materials in this chapter support or undermine this belief?

2. How does social class impact your life?

3. What social mobility has your own family experienced? In what ways has this affected your life?
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

What can you find in MySocLab? www.mysoclab.com

• Complete Ebook
• Practice Tests and Video and Audio activities
• Mapping and Data Analysis exercises

• Sociology in the News
• Classic Readings in Sociology
• Research and Writing advice

Where Can I Read More on This Topic?

Suggested readings for this chapter are listed at the back of this book.