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THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL STRATICATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY.

The act of categorizing people based on different criteria in our present day society seems to be so natural that some do it unconsciously. In our daily lives, whenever we come across an individual we try to fit the person into a category. It could be a gender based category or a racial category or even an age category. It is not just common with individuals; it can be seen in our societies. And sociologists refer to this process of categorizing people or things into different groups as stratification.

Social stratification is the differentiation of a given population into hierarchically superposed classes. Simply put it is the way people of a society are categorized based on factors like wealth, social status, gender, age, race, income or influence. Social inequality on the other hand, refers to a situation where different social castes within a society are given unequal opportunities and rewards. It is also the economic differences between social classes. In the case of social stratification and social inequality, it is not possible for one to exist without the other. It is also present in all societies, Nigeria as a country not excluded. The link between these two is not deniable. Before you can say people are socially unequal you must first acknowledge that people are differentiated and categorized in groups (social stratification). And if you choose to say that people differ in terms of class then you admit to the fact that those different classes are not treated alike (social inequality).

When you acknowledge that social stratification exists, you may be tempted to ask the question; why does it exist? The answer to this question is analyzed through three major theories: structural functionalism theory (Davis-Moore thesis, formed by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore), social conflict theory (suggested by Karl Marx and further researched on by Max Weber) and symbolic interaction (created by George Herbert Mead). These theories are based on very different perspectives.

Functionalism theory sees social stratification as a necessity to the society in order to promote excellence, efficiency and productivity. It was suggested by Davis and Moore in 1945 hence gaining the name The Davis-Moore thesis. They said that the inequality in things such as salaries, served as an incentive to make people want to take jobs that requires a certain level of skill and that in turn creates a type of stability in the economy. An instance of a firefighter and a grocery store attendant is used here and the theory is justified thus; assuming a person was presented with two jobs with the same amount of salary and bonuses but one required him to risk his life, he would most likely pick the other. This created the need to make one seem more appealing than the other financially, thus inequality in pay of the two jobs.

Social conflict theory on the other hand opposes the first theory and antagonizes the notion that inequality is needed to keep the economy stable. It says that the social stratification exists because certain people gain from the struggles of others. And this is because members of a society interact on the basis of conflicts rather than consensus. A conflict theorist will say the relationship between the tenant and a landlord is an ongoing struggle, in which they both extract resources from each other. The landlord extracts money and the tenant gets a place to dwell. It implies that the demarcation exists in other help the perpetrators retain their power over the powerless. And since the powerless have no power that needs to be retained, they are only interested in gaining access to the resources and capitals of the powerful. Education provides basis for this theory. The lower and powerless class will struggle to go to school and gain knowledge that they believe is the key to becoming a part of the higher and powerful class. Weber however, believed that law and politics are simply tools in the hands of the powerful to help them maintain a firm grip on the less powerful.

Symbolic interaction theory focuses more on the interaction between individuals in the society. George Herbert Mead is considered a founder of this theory although his work was never published. Symbolic interactionism believes that communication is the way people make sense of their social worlds. It supports that individuals are responsible for shaping the society with little or no external influence. While examining a group of people gathered for a press conference, a conflict theorist will look at the different classes involved, but a symbolic interactionist will focus on each individual as an entity and try to take note of the questions being asked as well as the body language and the answers. Symbolic interactionism also supports that reality is what individuals construct it to be. And this is evident in the way people view different concepts like dressing. In some societies women are not allowed to wear revealing clothes, whereas in other societies the clothes a woman appears in is strictly up to her. These varying views are created by the individuals in the society. Therefore, individuals are responsible for the different categories that exist.

Now that the question ‘why does social stratification exist?’ has been answered, it is important to note the forms of social stratification and they are four major forms; slavery, estates, caste and class. While the first three were common in the agrarian societies, class is what is seen in the modern society. Slavery is an extreme form of inequality and slaves labored for their masters and were given no political rights as well as lower living conditions. Estates were present in Europe in the middle ages and were formed by man-made laws, politically. In estates men were assigned based on their birth, military strengths and land holdings. Caste was based on ascription and focused more on an inherited inequality as the guiding principles for interaction. Today’s class is not different from the others but it is better than the due to the increased flexibility in human interaction.

Like all concepts, social stratification is not without its pros and cons. Its advantages include social organization and ease of governance above all. It also helps individuals understand the society better and it also gives members of a group clear expectation of appropriate behaviors. Its cons however includes negatively impacting social solidarity and unity, creating inequalities in economic, social, ideological and political areas, creating emotional and financial stress to members of the lower class and disparity which in turn causes chaos in the society and the downfall of the society.

In truth social stratification exists and is in no haste to disappear. But whether we are defined by the inequality around us or not is strictly up to us. Social inequality is a big problem, but it can be your biggest strength as a person.