

University of North Carolina  
Chapel Hill

# Soci850-001 Social Stratification

Fall 2011

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## Module 2 – Functions and Disfunctions of Stratification Discussion Questions

Last modified September 2, 2011

### Synthetic Question

Davis's and Moore's functionalist theory of social stratification has greatly influenced (or resonated with) sociological thinking on the issues. To trace the fate of the functionalist approach to stratification in sociology, citing the relevant literature as needed, do the following:

- (a) Outline the functionalist theory of stratification proposed by Davis & Moore
- (b) Discuss the role of *teleological* versus *causal* statements in the functionalist theory.
- (c) Describe the principal lines of criticism of the theory. How do the theory and criticisms of it relate to political/ideological values?
- (d) Discuss the possibility (or impossibility) of reformulating the functionalist theory to fix some of these critiques.
- (e) When all is said and done, how much (if anything) does a functional perspective contribute to understanding trends in income inequality in the U.S. over the past century?

### Detailed questions

*Davis & Moore (1945)*

1. What are Davis & Moore trying to explain and how do they explain it? (In other words, what is their main argument in a nutshell?)
2. What elements of Davis & Moore's theory of stratification can be viewed as *teleological*<sup>1</sup>? What elements are *causal* (or "naturalistic", using Richard Simpson's term)?
3. What assumptions do Davis & Moore make about human nature?

*Lenski's (1994) "New Light on Old Issues..."*

1. In what way(s) is Lenski's discussion relevant to an understanding of functionalism?

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<sup>1</sup>*Random House Dictionary: teleology*: 5. "the doctrine that phenomena are guided not only by mechanical forces but that they also move toward certain goals of self-realization."

*Simpson (1956)*

1. What weaknesses of the Davis & Moore theory does Simpson identify in his article?
2. What theoretical elements, already present at least implicitly in Davis & Moore, are emphasized in Simpson's reformulation of the theory?
3. How does Simpson use the concept of "product differentiation" to solve a paradox of the Davis & Moore theory?
4. How successful is Simpson's modification of Davis & Moore? (In other words, in what ways does Simpson's reformulation represent theoretical progress in understanding stratification?)
5. Where is the slightly *risqué* joke in Simpson's article?

*Stinchcombe (1963)*

1. In "Some Empirical Consequences...", how does Stinchcombe view the relationship between the theory of Davis & Moore (and other functional theories) and ordinary scientific theories?
2. How does Stinchcombe view the relationship between functional explanations of social structures, and a conservative outlook? According to him, does functionalism necessarily imply conservatism?

*Tumin*

1. What are the principal charges that Tumin brings to bear against the functionalist theory?

*Fischer et al. (1996) "Inequality by Design"*

1. How do Fischer et al. view the relationship between the functional approach and the conservatism versus progressivism debate?

*Krueger; Morris & Western; Piketty & Saez* (We will come back to discuss trends and comparative patterns of income inequality in greater detail later in the course.)

1. What historical trends and comparative patterns of inequality do these readings describe?
2. What are the economic and social mechanisms implicated by the authors in these historical trends and comparative patterns? Is it fair to say that the trend of increasing inequality in the U.S. after 1970 represents a resurgence of the capitalist class or "property elite"? If not, why not? What might be a better way to understand what happened?
3. In what ways (if any) do the economic and social mechanisms invoked by these authors relate to the functional perspective on social stratification?

## Questions on Optional Readings

*Stinchcombe (1968)*

1. How would one represent the Davis & Moore theory of stratification using the formal model of a functional explanation, as presented by Stinchcombe in *Constructing Social Theories* (Figure 3.7 p. 89)? To what elements of Davis & Moore do the components *H*, *S*, and *T* of a complete functional explanation correspond? To what mechanisms invoked by Davis & Moore (or missing from their discussion) do the causal arrows in Stinchcombe's formal model correspond?

2. What is the crucial category of causal links (or mechanisms) that Stinchcombe is able to specify, to interpret the teleological (and apparently non-causal) element of functional theories in causal terms, and therefore present functional explanations as a variety of causal models?
3. How does Stinchcombe construct his argument that Marxism is a special kind of functional explanation?