

5 STRATIFICATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

Example answers

- 1 Outline and explain **two** ways in which women continue to be disadvantaged in the contemporary UK.

[10 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

Evidence shows that females are still more likely to be disadvantaged in society compared to men. This is often linked to the ideas of patriarchy and that we continue to live in a world that is male dominated and male run, particularly in terms of wealth and power.

One example of this is in terms of earnings. Overall, females still earn around 19% less than men in countries such as the UK. This percentage gap is even wider in other parts of the world. It is often said that even when females do work in certain occupations such as business that they hit a 'glass ceiling', meaning that they tend to stop in middle management positions rather than moving on to the highest positions of authority. However, many disagree with these statistics as they do not take into account that more females than males choose to work fewer hours or take part-time work.

A second example can be seen in terms of politics. The majority of world leaders are still male and males are far more likely to be MPs or local councillors. The reason that this is a disadvantage is because the laws and policies that shape society are much more likely to be influenced and decided by men thus reinforcing patriarchy. However, there is evidence of a large increase in female leadership in politics over recent years such, as Teresa May in the UK.

Therefore, females continue to face disadvantages in society but there have been large steps in recent times to redress the issues of gender inequality. The disadvantages that females face in contemporary society are not as vast as in previous periods of time.

TEACHER COMMENTS

This answer has two very clear points to show examples of female disadvantage in society, as well as attempting some analysis and evaluative points. However, there is a distinct lack of theory here in both major paragraphs.

Can you identify a sociologist to use in each of the two large paragraphs to back up the points being made and apply some sociological theory at points in the answer?

2 Read **Item A** below and answer the question that follows.

ITEM A

Recent analyses of changes in the UK class structure have drawn attention to the emergence of a new class – the precariat – composed of people in insecure and generally poorly paid employment.

Applying material from **Item A**, analyse **two** reasons for the emergence of the precariat in recent decades.

[10 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

According to the sociologist Standing, the precariat refers to a group of people that live precarious lives with a distinct lack of job security and are often said to be directionless or in constant risk of being made unemployed.

One reason for this is due to the changing pace of industry. Many companies will act on a fad or fashion for a particular time, a workforce will be employed for a short period to meet the demands of the fad and then disposed of once the company moves on to a new line of work. Neo-Marxists in particular note that this is a major concern to the proletariat who are far more likely to be desperate for work and therefore will take these types of jobs as a short-term fix in order to earn money. Of course others argue that this can be seen as a good thing as at least there is an opportunity for some work rather than no work at all.

Likewise, the precariat comes about because of regular redundancies. Companies are now far more likely to make people redundant than in the past and the idea of a job for life is quite rare compared to before. Therefore, according to Neo-Marxists, people become dispensable once they are no longer needed by a company and become unemployed at several points in their life. In conclusion, many would predict that the precariat is likely to continue to rise in the near future in line with industry and capitalism.

TEACHER COMMENTS

There are some good points in this answer and the student has attempted to apply some theory to back up the points that are being made. The issue here is a common error made by students, which is that the two points being made are very similar. They are not different enough to be considered two separate reasons for the emergence of the precariat class.

Can you identify how to re-write this answer but with two distinct paragraphs, each focusing on different reasons for the emergence of the precariat rather than a repetition of the same point?

3 Read **Item B** below and answer the question that follows.

ITEM B

Sociologists disagree about how meritocratic British society is. Some argue that those who are bright and work hard will be successful whatever their starting point, while others argue that the dice are loaded in favour of those born into more affluent backgrounds.

Applying material from **Item B**, and your knowledge, evaluate the debate around meritocracy in the UK.

[20 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

Meritocracy refers to the idea that the most able people will rise to the top or, in other words, that a person can gain success in society through hard work and effort. As stated in Item B, functionalists believe that a person can achieve success 'whatever their starting point', whilst Marxists disagree, going so far as to say that meritocracy is a myth.

The functionalist, Parsons, believed that the people at the top of the stratification system are there based on merit. In other words, they have gained their status as a reward for conforming to the values of a society. Parsons believed that stratification in society reinforces order and the collective goals of a society, by this he meant that people are aware that it takes hard work to get to the top and they can gain this through the system of meritocracy.

Marxists such as Althusser, however, disagree with this viewpoint as he believes that the structure of society works in the favour of those with wealth. He refers to this as the ideological state apparatus. For example, he notes that it would be far easier for the bourgeoisie to get the top jobs because they already have access to family wealth and private education. They are also likely to have good contacts which is often referred to as 'the old boys' network'.

Functionalist writers Davis and Moore, however, agree with Parsons that society is geared towards making sure that the most able and talented do the most important jobs. They call this role allocation. The theory is that different jobs are paid differing amounts and therefore this acts as a mechanism to motivate individuals to work hard. This means that individuals will work hard in school to get good grades as they are aware that they will be rewarded with higher-status, better-paid jobs in the future.

Bowles and Gintis disagree with this theory of meritocratic role allocation, however, as they believe that society benefits the bourgeoisie from the start. For example, they note that children with money can go to top private schools with better resources, smaller classes and pay for private tutoring. This usually means richer children will gain better results than poor, not just based on merit but because of the standard of education to which they have access. Bowles and Gintis suggest there is a link between private/state education and the unfair capitalist world. They call this the correspondence principle.

The Neo-functionalism, Avis, continues the argument by saying that in the world of employment there is an organisation of human capital, and that those who are the most able and hard-working will be filtered in to the jobs matching their talent. Likewise, those who do not try will fall towards the bottom of the hierarchy. For Avis, it is important to have a stratification of jobs because it acts as a motivator for individuals to work hard, seek meritocratic success and ultimately gain social mobility.

Weber, however, says that meritocracy cannot work because of the unequal access to material resources in the first place. If everyone started with equal resources then the system of meritocracy may be valid, but the unfair distribution of wealth means that a person's ascribed status is as important, if not more important, than their achieved status. The class you are born into will largely dictate your future.

In conclusion, there is a degree of meritocracy in any society as hard work will improve your chances of success. However, as mentioned in Item B, those with an affluent background will always have a head start in life and access to the better resources, making their likelihood of success far higher.

TEACHER COMMENTS

At first glance, this looks like a strong essay as there is a good understanding of meritocracy, sociologists, theories, analysis and evaluation. The student clearly understands the arguments about meritocracy and has a good knowledge of the key writers from both the functionalist and Marxist viewpoints.

However, the student has failed to read the question clearly. The question asks specifically about meritocracy in the UK. This response is a general discussion about meritocracy rather than a clear focus on what is being asked. Can you identify how to adapt this essay in order to answer the question in relation to the issues of meritocracy in the UK?