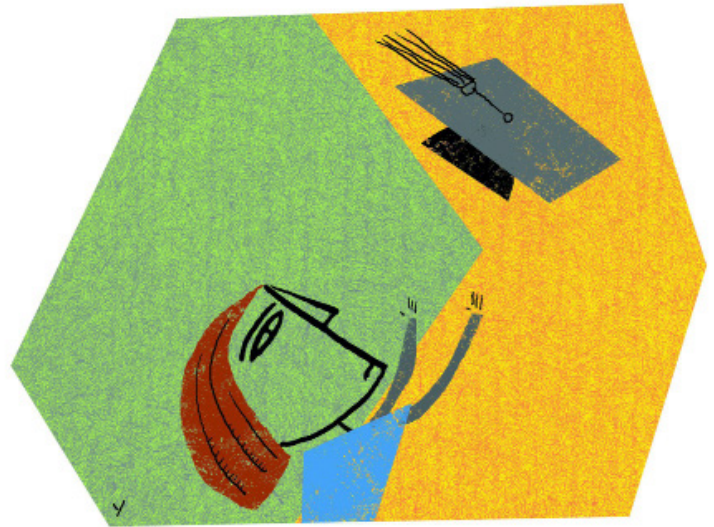




Social Stratification as a Clue for Diagnosing and Intervening in Social Systems

Jean E Neumann



These thoughts about social stratification for scholarly practice scratch the surface of a central problem in applied behavioural and social sciences. It has been my experience during forty years of change-related work that social stratification lies at the heart of anything we undertake that focuses on understanding and intervening in social differences. Further, when pressures for substantial change inside the social system are felt to be coming from its external environment, social differences tend to be mobilized in order to make something happen or to block something from happening.

Social Stratification

When we stratify we behave in ways that arrange social relations between and amongst us in layers. Like those big geological formations, we construct ourselves socially in strata: levels, grades, hierarchies and classes. We speak of ourselves and others as being located in the top, middle and bottom. We see degrees of centrality and marginality.

Such stratification is a characteristic of all social systems. We layer consciously and unconsciously. We do this for reasons that range from individual proclivities and intergroup dynamics, through to competition for desirable scarcity. We readily use stratification for differentiating and distributing material resources and other kinds of social values. We agree, negotiate, inherit, argue, celebrate and lament stratifications. Social stratification is a necessary tool for organizing ourselves, for example: control and coordination, the division of labour, matching tasks with capabilities, matching personal and professional preferences with roles, etc.

Particular social stratification schemes can be convenient and sensible to those who create and operate them. Usually, such short term arrangements can be adjusted through discussion.

For example, while preparing to leave for a holiday, father picks up the hire car while mother irons and packs up the children. Despite echoing traditional gender roles, this couple has evolved a division of labour based on preferences. They are confident with their idiosyncratic, flexible approach to gender roles within their relationship.

Other stratifications by social difference tend to be more long-term: they can still be adjusted, but not without controversy. For example, despite being overwhelmed with work, senior employees of a consultancy firm attend all early meetings with potential clients. This is so even when long-trusted associates have more time available for the entry and contracting processes, especially for projects that they will lead anyway.

Stratification - real or fantasized - weaves through relationships between people with different ranks, social positions, levels of relative importance, means of access, types of authorisation, etc. People can have multiple status positions in their total life-space, in both the present and at different times. For example, at work an Asian naturalised British citizen has been stuck, with some dissatisfaction, in a middle manager role for years. During the same period, he has been well respected in his extended family and was recently elected Chair of the governing board for a regional charity.



Emotions spark, ebb and flow both positively and negatively through processes wherein we, together, translate our social differences into stratifications. The longer a stratification scheme exists, the more infused the categories become with structure. Thus even with renegotiation, change of personnel, cultural changes and so forth, a longer term scheme rarely can be decoupled entirely from the structural elements of reward, power and privilege.

Larger social systems develop multiple, simultaneous layers in different geographical locations. Stratification reaches the point of institutionalisation. This means that a particular schema has become systematic, patterned, replicated in categories of worth over time – deeply integrated with societal stratification.

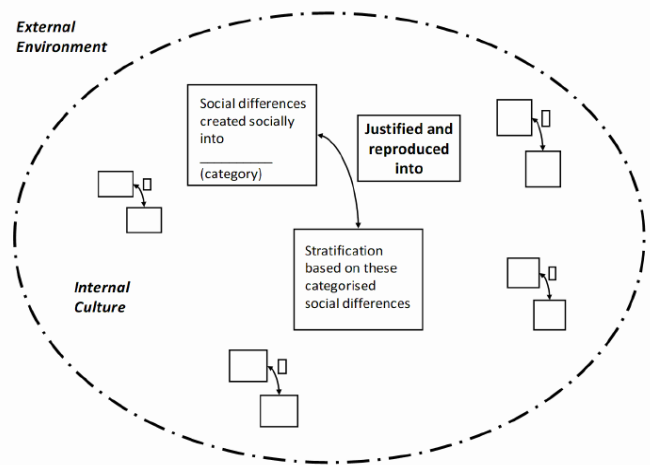
Social Stratification at the Heart of Social Difference

Wherever we are engaged in activities that require our understanding of, or intervention in, social differences, there we will find social stratification issues also. This is a social fact whether we are engaged in explicit diversity, inclusion and social justice work, or we are participating in developmental and change projects in organisations, communities or other social systems. In my professional opinion, conceptualising the unique social differences that exist, along with the relevant social stratification schemas for each particular total situation in which we are working, is necessary for competent diagnosis and intervention. At minimum, we can ask four questions:

1. What categories are being used to divide people in this situation?
2. Which categories of social difference relate in what ways to the developmental and change task at this point in time?
3. What rationalizations exist for these categories and for the resulting relational dynamics between people?
4. Which distributions of what material resources and social values underpin the replication of this social stratification?

A socially constructed rationalization evolves for how a particular social difference links to some form of distribution. Who gets more or less, for example: money, time off, special training, attention to their needs, and opportunity to shape debates? Many times, rationalizations boil down to beliefs. Our beliefs emerge through our interactions with, and between, other people: we note both obvious and less obvious social differences. Through direct conversations and backstage discussions about ourselves and each other, we contribute to a process whereby beliefs about social difference

are socially created in categories with some sort of stratification implied.



Thus, our beliefs about tangible social differences connect with our emerging social and psychological needs for how we are organised or are organizing ourselves to do something. Both shared and contested beliefs about social difference get mobilized to address the challenges and opportunities we are facing. Turning social differences into social stratification schema starts small and develops through processes of justification and reproduction. “Person A could do that, but person B would struggle”. “Group X has the authorisation for this. Even though group Y wants it they cannot deliver for a particular reason”. “Leader J is worthy given his intentions to do something, while leader K has a questionable background.” Such normal conversations form the raw material for turning social difference into stratification. Sometimes, a pattern formalises into ‘custom and practice’. The next step may be patterns crafted into rules, regulations, policies and procedures.

Working from the Stance of the Fifth Question

Social differences are everywhere in any social system, and social stratification goes hand-in-hand with such differences. Any social system has stratification schema fully operational by the time we enter. Of course, we also carry beliefs about (and embody) stratification prior to entering a social system. By virtue of interactions between and amongst ourselves we may cooperate in processes of justifying and reproducing existing social stratification schema.

Case illustration. Early in helping a training and development charity with succession planning and participative decision-making, repeated comments were made to the consultant about American employees dominating and not being appreciated within the British organisation. Many times she was invited to tell her ‘dual citizenship’ story. This preoccupation faded and the next



repeated social difference emerged. Those 'in the hierarchy' were over-worked, while those 'less able' refused to make changes to give the over-worked a break or were too incompetent to be given more responsibility. This stratification underpinned an argument that crystallized profound anxiety about the future of the charity.

I have noticed that selected social differences are stirred up at different points in a developmental or change project. This has led me to the following working hypothesis: *particular categories of social stratification are mobilized to help make something happen or to prevent something from happening*. Differences are mobilized according to some category of difference (e.g. age, occupation, nationality, ethnicity, function, education, family life, sports affinity). Individually and in small groups, there may well be opportunities for assertion of alternative norms, but these rarely shift established stratification schema without some stronger force for change being underway. On those occasions when processes for altering the social stratification schema become visible and explicit, we need to ask a fifth question: (5) Given all the social differences apparent here, why has this particular social stratification been raised to visibility now?

In order to work from the stance of the fifth question, we need to label the social differences captured in a particular category, and then examine how the related social stratification functions. From the list of categories being used for dividing people within the particular situation (question 1), we need to discern which of those categories are relevant for the particular mobilization we are observing (question 2).

Case illustration. Anxieties about the future of the training and development charity were often expressed in terms of the social differences labelled 'age' and 'capability'. Three groups of employees were stratified. Firstly, there were the ageing elders who were charismatic, well-published and often invited to lead prestigious training and development events. Secondly, there were employees who were apparently at the bottom - who could not present well externally and managed small roles due to infirmities of some kind, usually physical or mental. Thirdly, there was a large middle group of energetic middle aged or young employees who had proven themselves to be good assistants and instruction followers but did not have the 'right stuff' to take the charity into the future.

Rationalizations for the particular stratification (question 3) and the underpinning advantages and disadvantages (question 4) may well add up to clues for how particular differences have been rigidified as a defence against important work in the social system. Given all the social differences apparent

here (question 5), why has this particular social stratification been mobilised now?

Case illustration. Strategically, the executives within the training and development charity feared for the potential lost reputation as the final 'big name' elder faced retirement. Two others had left recently through being head-hunted elsewhere in one instance and death in the other. The executives were preoccupied with the need to match the internal status of 'big names' with prestigious external client organisations. Both the large middle group and those at the bottom were mostly preoccupied with the task of performing the considerable workload of running the charity and its buildings. The anticipated retirement of the last 'big name' created the challenge of how the middles and bottoms could reconfigure. This diagnostic understanding led to an overall intervention plan: by reconsidering workloads and making sure that everyone had something to do with different aspects of the charity, a type of shared leadership might achieve survival during succession transition.

A stratification schema performs some functional purpose. It is common place for people to experience dissatisfaction about the categories within their own or another's position – taken or assigned - within stratification schema. Even so, schema *will* serve a role in holding the *status quo* in equilibrium. The resulting internal organisational culture, thus, resonates somehow with the external organisational environment.

Working from the stance of the fifth question can allow us to interpret how and why a particular stratification schema is becoming more visible and why pressures to change it have increased. It can be practical (i.e. useful) to consider that a long standing stratification has become dysfunctional in some way. In other words, a particular social stratification within the organisation, community or other social system, may no longer be contributing effectively to the strategic concerns in relation to the external environment.

Implications for Diagnosis and Intervention

Social stratification is a normal, pervasive issue – a characteristic of all societies, indeed, given that multiple social differences are apparent in any one social system, usually with multiple social stratifications tied to those differences. So why has one been selected officially for change at this point in time? Why is the *status quo* being challenged now? What is happening on the boundary between the inside and outside that makes this internal shift necessary to loosen a hold on the previous status system?

An authorised change and developmental



process, wherein a particular social difference and stratification schema have been selected for legitimate change, needs to be recognised as the result of a shift in the taken-for-granted nature of that stratification. For example, during a time when lower and middle strata employees needed to take on more 'professionalised' tasks fuelled by rapid information technology, stratified cafeterias in large corporations were minimized, and then practically eliminated. During other sorts of change and developments not explicitly about diversity or inclusion, a scholar practitioner needs to be curious about how and why other sorts of social differences and stratification schema seem to be emerging as somehow related. For example, a paper company became preoccupied with improvements to human resources policies at a time when the industry was being globalized: financial restructuring with employee stock ownership helped protect the firm from being bought by competitors, but this required that other outstanding inequalities be addressed.

We need to broaden the sorts of social differences we can attend to as scholarly practitioners. This means that we need to be able to expand the list of those social differences with which we are familiar: gender, race, sexual preference, disabilities, etc. As a minimum, this requires us to be able to notice how those social differences, readily observed through our senses and widely acknowledged, are being stratified at the specific time that we are involved.

Most people within a particular situation will be able to identify unequal distributions of power, privilege and material resources. Yet these stratifications come wrapped in their particular social differences, only some of which are institutionalised at a system-wide level. How might we scholarly practitioners enhance our understanding of working with, and intervening in, stratification systems?

In addition to improving our diagnosis, we need to be clearer about what we think we are doing when we intervene in particular situations in which social differences have developed into stratification schema to a greater or lesser degree of rigidity. Do we really aim to eliminate totally social stratification from all relationships in which social difference has become intertwined in systemic difficulties? How aware are we of how we have aligned ourselves – or are perceived to be aligned – with particular stratification by virtue of social differences we share with members of the system?

Case illustration. Consultancy with the training and development charity began with data feedback and planning, from which seniors and top-middle managers led on identifying priorities. Three aspects of the emerging intervention strategy directly enabled employees to reconfigure themselves in terms of how their social differences had previously been stratified.

Firstly, work was redesigned from individual, fixed roles into group clusters in which each employee had a place, engaging in cross-training and rotating roles. Secondly, the overall workload was conceptualized into four big areas (external clients, buildings, daily operations, self-development) and everyone had a 'portfolio job' made up of all four areas, but with differing proportions. Finally, regular (already existing) charity-wide mechanisms were improved and the voices of all heard in shaping the future.

When we are intervening – or being asked to intervene – what strategies are we using or being asked to use? In the training and development charity case, succession planning and participative decision-making were explicit in the presenting problem. Social differences and stratification issues were implied as 'part of the territory' that could not be changed.

Are we talking about structural inequalities and differences like socio-economic class and its related enactments through racism and educational attainment? In this case illustration, the stratified social differences of 'age' and 'capability' (a code word for aspects of socio-economic class) could not totally disappear. However, the necessity of reconfiguring how people worked and what was expected of them took on a greater priority with a positive, indirect impact on stratification that is no longer useful.

Are we hearing ideologies about inequalities and differences like inter-group biases and occupational superiorities? Professional intervention within the charity required turning attention away from the high status training and development work, and thinking about the lower status charity management and building work. This allowed unacknowledged *equalities* to be revealed; the enabling functions of the lower status work became apparent.

Are we seeing individual and collective strategies for dealing with inequalities and differences like quotas or payment differentials? Within the charity, those competent middles and young recruits certainly wanted to step into the spaces created by the retirement of the 'big names'. Organisational process meetings provided a vehicle for developing consensus about shared leadership and what that meant for the charity's future. Senior leaders were sensitized to being influenced by middles and younger ones.

Interventions can be explicitly about diversity, inclusion and social justice. They can also be implicit, enacted in multiple iterations, embedded or woven within developmental designs. I tend to work indirectly with social differences while simultaneously allowing my awareness of social



stratifications to play into explicit business and task issues. When and if the time comes for explicit work to become the focus for a sufficient period of time, I will use it to explore how social difference is being used to help or hinder the work of the change effort. For scholarly practitioners, being able to work flexibly yet confidently with social stratification sometimes brings a sophisticated 'value added' to a confusing situation.

BIOGRAPHY

Jean E Neumann (BA, MA, PhD) works as both practitioner and academic in those fields that blend organizational development and change, consultancy and related change management careers. As Senior Fellow in Scholarly Practice at The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR, London), she recently has been crafting a series of web-articles on the contemporary application of Kurt Lewin's principles. This blend of classic concepts with current challenges underpins Jean's action research into the complexity and contradictions of 'good' organisational change. Having achieved over 25 refereed publications in this vein, Jean's particular concern is to encourage writing and publication by practitioners. A few years after serving as an Assistant Editor for TIHR's journal, Human Relations, she accepted a role as Associate Editor for NTL Institute's journal JABS (Journal of Applied Behavioural Science). As owner and principal of her own private practice, Jean provides professional advice and development for organisational consultants and change managers. Since 1976, she has completed over 450 projects. Recently, her professional interest in integrating theory and practice for more realistic and workable approaches to real life change has involved research on middle managers as internal change agents – the focus of her role as Visiting Fellow, Cranfield School of Management (UK, since 2010).

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