

---

*Generating Social Stratification: Toward a New Research Agenda*, edited by **Alan C. Kerckhoff**. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996. 358 pp. \$39.85 cloth. ISBN: 0-8133-8967-4.

YU XIE  
The Population Studies Center  
University of Michigan

---

As sociologists, we are often asked what constitutes the core of our discipline. To some, the core lies in the vague notion of "social structure," somehow defined and operationalized. To others, including myself, the core of sociology is the study of differences in social attributes across individuals, groups, organizations, and social contexts. This latter definition contrasts sociology sharply with psychology and economics, which focus more on typical lawlike relationships than on deviations from such relationships. Sociology's emphasis on differences rather than on typical patterns is manifested in almost all major fields of sociological inquiry, from the traditional areas of human ecology and organizational behavior to the more fashionable areas of gender and race.

Given sociology's central concern with differences in social attributes, social stratification research takes the center stage. Indeed, it is hard to think of an important area of sociology that is unrelated in some way to social stratification. Our knowledge about the processes that generate social stratification should have direct relevance to sociologists working in other areas; conversely, new knowledge in other areas of sociology can also help advance research in social stratification.

It is the realization of the interconnectedness of social stratification with other areas of sociology that underlies *Generating Social Stratification*, a collection of articles aimed at shedding new light on the entire social stratification process. Not all of the contributors to this volume are identified as stratification researchers, but those who are not are experts in related fields, and have useful insights into the stratification process. This volume is a welcome addition to Westview's "Social Inequality" series, edited by Marta Tienda and David Grusky.

The first of the four sections provides a useful review of the theoretical background and proposes new approaches to conceptualizing

careers within social stratification processes, with chapters by Angela O'Rand on the life course, Jeylan Mortimer on social psychology, and Alan Kerckhoff on relations between schooling and labor force. The second part covers the roles of education: a review of tracking effects by Adam Gamoran, a commentary on school reforms by Maureen Hallinan, and three empirical studies—Karl Alexander and Doris Entwisle on tracking; Charles E. Bidwell, Stephen Plank, and Chandra Muller on network influence; and J. Douglas Willms on school choice in Scotland. Part three on education and labor-force linkages includes four empirical chapters: an interindustrial study of credentialism by W. P. Bridges; a comparative study of education and earnings between Germany and the United States, by Thomas DiPrete and Patricia McManus; a detailed examination of a two-tier system in allied health occupations by Robert Althausser and Toby Appel; and a survey study of business school students in Poland by Barbara Heyns. The final part, on "social system contexts," or societal-level conditions for social stratification, comprises Michael Hout's commentary on the role of social policy, with an emphasis on higher education; Seymour Spilerman and Hiroshi Ishida's empirical study on promotion patterns in a Japanese firm; and Arne Kalleberg's critical review of the literature on labor-market structures.

These solid chapters should be read by graduate students and active researchers who are interested in social stratification. I found the theoretically oriented chapters more valuable than their empirical counterparts, for the former suggest new and different paths for future research. For example, O'Rand's stimulating and challenging contribution persuasively argues first for the importance of the life course—individual-level transitions of sociological significance over time—and then for the complications introduced by heterogeneity—differing orders and times of these transitions for different individuals. To relate individuals to each other in a meaningful way and account for multiple sources of influence, O'Rand recommends a multilevel conceptualization. Her distinction between the "traditional institutional approaches" and the "relationship approaches" is also a useful, albeit still limited, step toward a unified framework. With richer

data and better methodological tools now available, we should be able to generate more affirmative knowledge than we currently have regarding how events early in life affect or condition later events.

For the last three decades, social stratification has exhibited a level of methodological rigor unparalleled in most other fields in sociology. Indeed, it was in social stratification research that many modern methodological arsenals were invented or refined (such as path analysis and loglinear analysis). Uncharacteristic of this tradition in social stratification, however, *Generating Social Stratification* does not push hard on methodological fronts. In fact, in some of the empirical chapters a few methodological problems are glossed over rather than rigorously dealt with.

My second problem with the volume is that it is still not broad enough. Many of the chapters were written mainly for students of social stratification. Why not address the entire sociology audience? Why not extend the discussion to cover pressing issues concerning gender, race, poverty, family structure, and experience? Why not relate the research to the current literature in economics that deals with similar questions? For sure, we cannot expect one volume to meet all of our needs. Perhaps my questions should be directed to future editors and authors considering a similar project.