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Social Inequality

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Social Inequality, Class, and Food

The impact of industrial agriculture and illegal immigrant working practices lead to dangerous conditions and unfair practices towards laborers. As a result, a cycle of poverty is created from which illegal immigrant laborers struggle to escape. In addition, these practices perpetuate stereotypes of races and create a divide between classes in the United States society. The laborers possess no ability to complain about unfair treatment and being underpaid. The industrial agricultural industry profits off of illegal labor while failing to compensate workers for their work and maintaining a minimum level of care towards their workers. Low compensation leads to an inability to travel to produce stores and purchase healthier foods, such as fruits and vegetables. As a result, individuals working long hours with low compensation and unhealthy eating habits may remain at higher risk for physical illnesses or injuries. In addition, the nature of their jobs disallows the possibility of taking time off to recover from these illnesses or injuries. The cycle of poverty perpetually continues as a result of the systemic inequalities of the food produce and agricultural industries in the United States.

Structural functionalism posits that society places individuals into roles that activates their necessary contribution to society (1945:242). However, the stratification of these societal positions varies. As a result, various levels of inequality in the United States society occurs. Society remains unequal because of the imbalance in rewards for certain roles. For example,

medical doctors earn salaries much higher than agricultural laborers because of the associated costs and effort that one sacrifices to obtain a medical degree. This persistent societal role and status distribution ensures that qualified individuals are placed in higher positions. People in higher statuses have many more opportunities to pay for and eat healthier foods than that of people in lower statuses. As a result, many of these lower-class individuals face a harder time obtaining and maintaining healthy food options than that of higher-class individuals.

However, this stratification reflects an imbalance in the United States' societal appraisal of the importance of agriculture and food. Individuals who handle our food in the fields are paid very low, many times unfair, wages and can often not afford to purchase the same level of food they produce. As a result, many individuals in these lower-class working positions, such as field laborers, face injuries and fatigue. In addition, they lack the option of quitting or changing jobs due to a language barrier or lack of other job skills that limits their opportunities. At the same time, Blau and Duncan show that an individual's familial background greatly impacts one's education and first job (1945:242). Field laborers often cannot sustain a family without relying on help from older children to take care of their younger siblings and other home responsibilities. As a result, these children lack the ability to participate in after school activities and further their education. The responsibilities are given to these children as a direct result of hard labor for long hours without adequate compensation for workers. These responsibilities lead many individuals in lower classes remain in lower classes instead of gaining upward social mobility.

Although a popularized notion, attainment of upward social mobility in the United States remains rare in actuality. Parental status and class directly impacts individuals' personal level of social mobility, or lack thereof. As indicated in *The American Way of Eating*, many farm

laborers require older children to stay home from school to take care of siblings or other familial duties. As a result of this duty, children of laborers lack an adequate education to obtain higher-wage jobs, and they remain in the same level of poverty as their parents. Large agricultural producers perpetuate this cycle. In addition, the lack of money amassed by agricultural labor influences the opportunities, or lack thereof, in which children can engage. Children often help their parents in the fields, helping the family earn money to sustain themselves. Children often help their parents with child care, cooking, and other home responsibilities as well. These families cannot afford to send their children to expensive summer camps or enrichment programs. Lack of money lends to incredibly lower chance for agricultural laborers to earn upward social mobility . At the same time, laborers, especially those who lack the means to quit or move jobs, do not possess the ability to file complaints about inaccurate paystubs or unfair treatment. Individuals face hard conditions, low and often unfair payment, and even discrimination in their daily jobs. However, because of their lack of status, they remain unable to file complaints about their mistreatment or injuries. Due to their low status, individuals remain stuck in these jobs, relying on family to assist in taking care of the familial duties. Unfortunately, these conditions lead to a lessened chance for their children to gain skills and knowledge to advance their social status in the future.

Individuals who attain high status and class typically have higher paying jobs, and as a result, they generally possess healthier diets. Many people who hold high status live in affluent areas with multiple accessible grocery stores and fresh produce markets. High-income families also have adequate means to purchase healthier, organic foods that are generally priced higher than processed and unhealthy foods than compared to lower-income families. In addition, people

in high-income areas generally have a means and ability to travel to these food stores in a relatively easy manner. At the same time, however, individuals in lower classes often live in areas of food deserts, lacking adequate amounts of fresh produce. Instead, many people in lower classes must shop at small corner stores that mainly sell packaged foods and do not provide healthy alternatives. In addition, individuals in lower classes often lack the means to travel to larger food stores with more fresh produce. Healthy options remain generally more expensive than packaged goods, making the selection of produce less likely for lower class individuals. Lastly, people in higher classes are more likely to eat at restaurants due to their higher income. Unfortunately, this luxury is often not afforded to those in lower classes. However, people in these lower classes often work together more as a community to help each other have access to enough food than higher-income families. As McMillan notes in *The American Way of Eating*, many lower-income families share produce and meals (2012:48-50). The shared system of food in these communities allows for healthier subsistence for more people at a lower cost. The systematic differences in class impact the whole nature of eating and the relationships among communities in terms of where, when, and how people buy and eat food.

Environmental risk factors, such as poverty, influence available food choices. At the same time, these food choices influence the outcome of associated problems such as obesity and heart issues. Morland et al. note that poor and minority groups generally face less healthy options than that of wealthy populations (2001:24-26). Many children and adults who do not possess access to supermarkets or other forms of access to fresh produce stop at corner stores to purchase less expensive food options. A great number of choices in corner stores in urban areas all around the United States remain unhealthy, processed, processed foods that can contribute significantly

to various forms of obesity and even diabetes. A survey of 605 students in the Philadelphia area indicated that of low-income fourth to eighth graders, 50% stop at corner stores in the mornings, 48% stop after school, and 38% stop before and after school (2003:383). The types of foods sold in corner stores reflect high-calorie and low-nutritious foods, such as chips, candy, and sodas. Healthy eating is not an option for these young children and their families.

Healthy food options can prevent and even mediate health issues. Jane VanHuevelen notes that individuals who possess access to healthier food suffer lower negative health outcomes overall (2017:28). This access to food is greatly dependent on socioeconomic status. More wealthy people maintain active lifestyles because they make enough money to purchase healthier, more expensive food and pay for child care to go on trips to the market. In addition, they possess the ability to spend time exercising and enjoy more organized activities, contributing to a healthier lifestyle. In addition to physical health, mental health is impacted by class and food. As a result, not only do individuals in lower classes experience sickness as a result of unhealthy foods, obtaining food can lead to chronic strains (2015: 4). Individuals experience chronic strain when they experience frequent small strains over time such as discrimination, loss of a family member, or even lack of sleep. As a result, chronic strain can lead to long-term stress, depression, anxiety, and anger (2015:5). In terms of food, people in lower-income areas and in food deserts may experience chronic strain when attempting to provide nutritious food for their families. Individuals who must wrestle with coupons, take various forms of public transit, and must take children on long trips with them for food are more likely to experience chronic strains over time. As a result, the inequality of the distribution of

food may inadvertently contribute not only to physical health issues, but also to mental health issues.

Class directly impacts individuals' relationships with food. People in lower classes have less opportunity to eat healthy food. These inadequacies result from food deserts and a lack of money for people to spend on traveling and purchasing healthy foods. Food deserts are areas of the country where individuals face difficulty finding and purchasing adequate amounts of healthy food. Many food deserts in the United States are in urban areas, where there is a large prevalence of unhealthy foods. While the presence of food deserts negatively impacts people in lower classes, many upper-class individuals possess the ability to travel easily to nearby food stores and purchase healthier food, such as organic produce. Interestingly, immigrant laborers may handle many types of food that they cannot afford to purchase for themselves. As a result of unhealthy diets, many lower-class individuals suffer from more sicknesses and are placed in a cycle of debt from medicine. In addition, individuals who possess lower-paying jobs must often work longer hours. As a result, these individuals do not have time to exercise or engage in organized sports. There is often no healthy stress relieving activity for these individuals, contributing to continued chronic strain. The inequality of class and access to food directly impacts health outcomes and even influences the possibility of, or lack thereof, upward social mobility.

Class intersects with race, especially in the United States. Individuals, specifically immigrants, who possess a language barrier and may not possess the same access to resources, face a harder time gaining upward social mobility. Many of these workers in lower-class jobs who immigrate may feel as though they cannot complain to a boss about issues or ask for raises,

contributing to continued low wages and maltreatment. In the United States, many individuals in lower classes are people of color. This imbalance of races in the distribution of United States classes is a result of unfair systematic processes. People of color often face discrimination when applying for jobs, directly impacting their ability, to purchase and eat healthy foods. On the other hand, many people of color maintain strong community bonds. This connection allows for the sharing of foodstuff and for family and friends to have greater access to healthier foods. There is an imbalance of people of color residing in lower classes, lending to the notion that people of color, specifically those in lower classes, possess a more challenging time obtaining healthy food options.

Food production in the United States of America shows a great blending of institutions, classes, functions, and individuals in society. The detailed experience of Tracie McMillan showcases the complicated process that food endures from farms to grocery stores and restaurants. Her experience allowed her to escape these hardships; however, the reality of her experience remains inescapable for many people residing in America. Access to healthy food is influenced by location, supply and demand, and class. Individuals with higher-paying jobs possess access to healthier foods and can take trips to stores and restaurants more easily than individuals with lower-paying jobs. In addition, individuals who work with healthy foods often struggle to be able to purchase or partake in the kinds of food they produce because of the expensive nature of the food. As a result, the United States faces food loss and a less healthy lower class. The relationship between class and food may be mediated by supply and demand. Unfortunately, the imbalance of access to healthy food will remain a prevalent issue in the United States unless change in production practices and wages for workers are readjusted. In

addition, the systematic processes that contribute to food deserts and inequality in food access need to be reevaluated and revamped in order to provide adequate healthy food to a larger majority of the United States population.

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