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# Beyond Intractability

## Knowledge Base & Fundamentals

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## Knowledge Base & Conflict Fundamentals

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# Social Status

By

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Originally published, September 2004. Current Implications added by Heidi Burgess in June, 2017.

## Current Implications

Social status and power conflicts are at the heart of the current political conflict roiling in the United States. Although there are many explanations for the surprising



election results in the fall of 2016, most people agree that a large part of the story was the anger felt by low-income, non-college-educated white voters. [More...](#)

## The Importance of Status

Social status can be understood as the degree of honor or prestige attached to one's position in society. Social stratification is associated with the ability of individuals to live up to some set of ideals or principles regarded as important by the society or some social group within it. [1] Although there are a few societies around the world that ascribe everyone (at least adults) equal status, most societies do have some form of social hierarchy with some people in stronger, more dominant positions, and other people in weaker, lower positions. Often this inequity is built into the social system itself through various forms of structural components and institutions. Social and economic roles are distinguished and accorded differential status according to what a particular society or culture deems valuable.



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In some cases, the inequality in resources and authority may be so great that those dominated go along with it with little self-awareness. [2] But where resistance arises, social conflict results. Domination conflicts are conflicts about who is on top (and bottom) of the social, economic, and/or political hierarchy. Such conflicts may occur between individual people (for example, between siblings, schoolmates, or co-workers), between groups (for instance between different racial or ethnic groups), or between nations.

Occupying a high status due to a characteristic that one possesses means that on the basis of that difference, an individual acquires more power and privilege. That person's opinions, ways of thinking, values, needs, and feelings are thought to have more value. There is a heightened sense of an entitlement to society's resources, including health care, education, and attractive employment. Often these benefits are derived simply from having a particular skin color, being of a particular gender, being dressed in a particular way, or having a particular profession or degree. [3]

Indeed, various characteristics can be at play in determining one's social status. These include, but are not limited to, an individual's race, ethnicity, gender, age, skin color, economic class, caste, religious sect, and regional grouping. In stratified social systems, one group is materially and/or politically dominant over another group or groups. Which characteristics are regarded as superior depends on the norms and fashions prevailing in a particular time and place. Individuals tend to evaluate others according to a particular set of values, and to rank people in terms of these evaluations. [4]

## Status Conflicts

Social Dominance Theory suggests that most forms of group conflict and oppression (e.g., racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, nationalism, classism, regionalism) can be regarded as different manifestations of the same basic human predisposition to form group-based social hierarchies. Examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts resulting at least in part from social stratification include the Holocaust, massacres of East Timorese in the late 1990s, the Khmer Rouge terror of the late 1970s, and massacres of Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda in the

late 1990s. In all of these violent situations, there were relationships of domination and subordination at work. Various groups were struggling to maintain or advance their social status. [5]

Ironically, stratification systems have been used by some societies to try to reduce overt conflict over the distribution of valued goods and services in a society. For a time, this distribution of awards may not be contested and the power of those at the top will not be challenged. But eventually, conflicts of interest may very well rise to the surface. While those on top of the social hierarchy tend to get what they want, those on the bottom tend to have less access to material awards, freedom, recognition, services from others, etc. [6]

In addition, once a group gains dominance, it will monopolize resources in an attempt to maintain and perpetuate its privileged status. Because the ability to attain one's goals is deeply connected to one's social status, those of lesser status may find it in their interest to challenge the status quo that assigns them a low position. Especially in cases where there are not enough resources to go around, parties are likely to engage in intense competition for positions of social status and privilege.

These social status struggles often are not just about who gets what. Status conflicts also tend to involve subjective assessments of an individual's or group's "goodness" or "social worth." For example, identity conflicts tend to involve issues surrounding the distribution of scarce resources as well as struggles for social status and



Deborah Kolb suggests that power

inequities often prevent women from being effective negotiators.

privilege. In many cases, groups believe they deserve higher status in virtue of their supposed moral superiority. Many theorists point out that humans have an instinct for self-preservation that motivates them to fight for a place in social relations and to ensure that their ideas and opinions are taken into account. [7] Those with lower rank in a social hierarchy may feel their social status to be a form of injustice or discrimination that they must struggle to overcome. Thus, many domination conflicts are a matter of parties fighting for more room for their respective values.

Because nobody wants to be on the bottom of the social hierarchy and few are willing to share the top, such conflicts tend to be very difficult to resolve. Invariably, the people on the bottom want to reverse the relationship, while the people on the top want to maintain it. This leads people to want to dominate others and to compete with others for position. The result is that parties feel threatened and sense a need to retaliate in order to defend themselves. As the struggle continues, the conflict tends to escalate, and may even become violent, as the examples of genocide cited earlier demonstrate. Unless the top people are willing to share their top position with everyone else (thus eliminating many of the benefits of being on the

Sena literally means 'army'. In the context of Bihar—one of the most underdeveloped states of India—it refers to the private militias of the upper caste. Bihar has seen conflict between the upper castes (the landowning feudal classes and business contractors) and the lower castes (usually powerless sharecroppers and agricultural laborers) ever since independence. The gradual empowerment of these lower classes has provoked a bloody reaction from the gangs (sena) surrounding upper-caste criminals. The ever-present repression and retaliation escalated in the second half of the 1990s, when the entire populations of a number of hamlets were massacred in outbursts of Naxalite and sena violence. From Suba Chandran and Alok Kumar Gupta, India: Caste Violence and Class in Bihar: The Ranvir Sena. European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation, 2002-01-01.

- Available at:

<http://www.conflictprevention.net/dev>  
(<http://www.conflictprevention.net/dev>)

top), the conflict will most likely continue. Moreover, even if those on the bottom are able to reverse the situation and become the leadership group, a new conflict is likely to arise as those now on the bottom begin their attempt to climb to the top. Thus, the social system itself is not altered as people struggle for social status. It is only people's roles that are reversed.

A closely-related topic is oppression. BI has a series of seven articles on **oppression** contributed by an expert on the topic, Morton Deutsch.

## Current Implications

Social status and power conflicts are at the heart of the current political conflict roiling in the United States. Although there are many explanations for the surprising election results in the fall of 2016, most people agree that a large part of the story was the anger felt by low-income, non-college-educated white voters. This group chafed at the disdain and lack of attention they had suffered at the hands of the political left, which was embodied by Hillary Clinton's referring to them as "the deplorables." Consequently, they voted heavily for Donald Trump, and remain largely in support of him in May of 2017, even after his policies are clearly hurting their interests.



Unfortunately, even after November, 2016, when the Democratic Party lost not only the presidency, but both houses of Congress, many Party leaders still regard lower-class whites as inferior people, undeserving of respect or support. The opposite is also true: Trump supporters and conservatives in general consider liberals as naïve, idealistic and selfish people with little regard for American values, as they see them. Consequently, they, too, treat liberals with deep disrespect. As a result, the divide between the parties is continuing to increase, rather than diminish and status conflicts remain at the center of much of this discontent.

Heidi Burgess, June 5, 2017

[Back to Essay Top](#)

## References:

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[1] Harold Kerbo, *Social Stratification and Inequality: Class Conflict in the United States*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1983), 113.

[2] Louis Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 15.

[3] Pat Patfoort, *Uprooting Violence, Building Nonviolence: From Nonviolent Upbringing to a Nonviolent Society*, (Freeport, Maine: Cobblesmith, 1995), 20.

[4] Kerbo, 113.

[5] For more on Social Dominance Theory, see Jim Sidaneus and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[6] Kerbo, 150.

[7] Patfoort, 24.

Social media image information: Social Status pie chart obtained

at: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Social\\_Status\\_in\\_Great\\_Henny%2C\\_1831.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Social_Status_in_Great_Henny%2C_1831.png).

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**Use the following to cite this article:**

Maiese, Michelle. "Social Status." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: September 2004

<<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/social-status>>.

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## **Additional Resources**

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