Second Edition

Understanding Social Inequality

Intersections of Class, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, and Race in Canada

Julie McMullin

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Preface

When I was five years old I decided that I wanted to visit a friend who lived quite a distance away. When I asked my mother and father if I could go to Susan's house, they said no. When I asked why, they said, 'Because we said so.' At this point I became aware of the fact that I was young and that being young didn't seem fair. I remember this incident because when my parents couldn't give me a good reason for not visiting my friend, I decided to run away from home. Luckily, as I was hitch-hiking down the street with my hand open wide (my version of the one-thumb-up pose), a friendly woman picked me up and told me she'd take me home. I couldn't remember where I lived, so the woman drove me up and down many streets until we found one that I recognized as my own. When I was 16 years old, I worked as a waitress, but I was paid less per hour than my 18-year-old friend. This too seemed unfair.

When I was eight, my younger brothers and I were playing outside on a very hot day. My mother took off my brothers' shirts for relief from the heat. When I started to take off my shirt, my mother told me that girls must keep their shirts on. 'Why?' I asked. 'Because,' she said. I couldn't understand this at all; my brothers and I looked the same. I thought to myself, being a girl isn't fair.

When I went to university I discovered I was a member of the working class. My professors told me that capitalists employed workers at relatively low wages to ensure high levels of profit for themselves. They told me about the social and cultural disadvantages of being from a working-class background. Gradually my university experience began to make some sense. I couldn't figure out why my grades were only average despite my considerable effort. Part of it was that I didn't know how to play the game—that is, how to ask my professors for help, how to use a big library, how to study effectively—and no one I knew could coach me. This seemed unfair.

It wasn't until I was in my late twenties that I discovered I was white. This awareness came as I was reading Patricia Hill Collins's book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). Of course, at some level I knew I was white, but I wasn't fully aware of the privilege associated with the colour of my skin until then. This too seemed unfair.

Structures of inequality in Canada are organized along age, class, gender, ethnic, and racial lines. The preceding stories, as trivial as they may seem, show some of the ways in which this occurs. They show that inequality involves power, the ability of individuals or groups to impose their will, with or without resistance, on others. They show that ideology is an important dimension of inequality; that societal beliefs about what is appropriate for people to do on the basis of their sex, class, race, or age creates advantage for some and disadvantage for others. The stories show that inequality is about the distribution of material, cultural, and social resources. And they show that the meaning people attribute to sex, class, race, and age is shaped by experience. These are some of the complex issues that I will consider throughout this book.

Acknowledgements

As I wrote the first edition of this book, I often reflected upon my life as an academic and thought about how privileged I am. Part of what makes my life so privileged is that I am surrounded by wonderful colleagues, family, and friends, to whom I owe much gratitude for the help and support that they graciously give me. When I didn't know how to begin to write this book, James Teevan, Michael Gardiner, Edward Grabb, Victor Marshall, and Ingrid Connidis read my proposal and provided me with valuable feedback. To Ed I am especially grateful because he suggested that I send my proposal to Megan Mueller, then acquisitions editor for Oxford University Press. Megan liked my proposal and pursued the book project with vigour. Although Megan persuaded me to write this manuscript much more like a textbook than I had originally intended, I thank her for her welcome and very positive encouragement along the way.

In writing the first edition of this book and revising it for the second edition, I have been fortunate to work with very talented research assistants. Thanks go to Katherine Pendakis and Erin Demaiter (first edition) and to Catherine Gordon, Jennifer Silcox, and Juyan Wang (second edition) who did literature and data searches, tracked down references, and combed the Internet for stories that could be used in the boxed inserts. I am particularly indebted to Tammy Duerden Comeau, who also worked as a research assistant on both editions of the book. Tammy saved my sanity by agreeing to co-author chapters 10, 11, and 12 with me for the first edition and helped me revise them for the second. Finally, Emily Jovic deserves a very special thank you for her work on the second edition of this book. Emily's industry and resourcefulness helped to make this book what it is, and I will be forever grateful for her help.

Parts of this book have been adapted from some of my previously published work. Chapter 5 is a revised version of my article 'Diversity and the State of Sociological Aging Theory', which appeared in volume 40 of *The Gerontologist*, and bits of chapters 9 were taken from 'Social Class and Inequality', which appeared as chapter 14 in *Sociology: A Canadian Perspective*, edited by Lorne Tepperman and Jim Curtis, and published by Oxford University Press. Other parts were read by my colleagues Tracey Adams and Lorraine Davies, who took the time away from their own work to comment on mine; for that I thank them. My thanks also go to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions; to Phyllis Wilson, managing editor of Oxford University Press for answering all of my silly questions; to Freya Godard (first edition) and Stephanie Fysh (second edition) for excellent editorial suggestions; and to Sharon Sabourin (first edition) and Jennifer Silcox (second edition) for helping me compile and format my list of references.

As I was writing this book and its second edition, Ingrid Connidis, Lorraine Davies, and I shared many moments of joy, sadness, anger, and frustration owing to both our work and our personal lives. It is impossible to imagine my life without having Ingrid and Lorraine to celebrate the good times with and to lean on when the times are tough. What an honour it is to have them as friends, collaborators, and colleagues!

I am very fortunate to have a wonderful family and two very special friends who serve as an important diversion from my work. Maureen MacPherson and her daughter Claire, are very special people in my life; no more needs to be said and I thank them for that. I am grateful to my father-in-law, Peter Arnold, and step-mother-in law, Irene Say for their babysitting services. Thanks to my

For Emma and Scott.

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PART I

The first objective of Part I is to discuss and assess theories of class, age, gender, ethnicity, and race that have been used to explain inequality. Of course, it would be impossible to discuss all of the theories; instead, the first part of this book considers theories that have made influential contributions to our understanding of class, age, gender, ethnicity, and race in relation to inequality, especially in Canada. Furthermore, theories that consider the structural nature of these factors are prioritized. However, because structures do not exist outside of the individual interaction that creates them, some symbolic-interactionist perspectives are discussed. In particular, there has been some very good work done on gender and race from a symbolic-interactionist perspective and to ignore it would be remiss.

The second objective of Part I is to examine human agency and the relationship between social structure and human agency. Although most of the work on social inequality is at the macro, structural level, sociologists recognize that to understand social life better, assessments of the intersection between individual agency and social structures are required. However, there is very little agreement regarding the specific relationship between agency and structure.

The third objective of Part I is to integrate ideas from the various perspectives on class, age, gender, ethnicity, race, and human agency into a cohesive conceptual framework. The aim of this exercise is to provide an organizational tool that will enable us to explore social inequality without giving a priori emphasis to any of class, age, gender, ethnicity, or race. In doing so, we will be able to examine how structures of inequality are produced and reproduced through human agency and interaction.

Introduction

This is a book about social inequality, and to begin it describes the life of a woman I know. Anna was born to white, English-speaking parents of British descent in 1915, just after the First World War began; she grew up on a farm in Ontario with her mother, father, and two brothers. Although it was only a small farm, Anna's father and mother worked hard and were able to provide their family with the essentials of life. Anna graduated from high school, which was unusual for a rural girl in that day, and although she had the opportunity to go on to teachers' college, as her mother had done, she decided to marry John Warner, a local man who was seven years her senior. She married well. John's family were well-to-do small business owners, and with their help, Anna and John began their marriage in the late 1930s in relative financial stability. They moved to town and had two daughters, one in 1941 and the other in 1943.

Anna was always a homemaker, and John never had a stable job. His older brother, who was married and childless, inherited their father's business and John worked for him occasionally. John also bought houses, restored them, and sold them for a profit. Money was tight in the Warner household, but no one seemed to want for anything. There was food on the table, they

had paid for the house in full when they bought it, and they had a few good clothes.

In 1970, John died suddenly in a car accident. He was 62 and Anna was 55. John's estate consisted of some savings and his house. His will stipulated that Anna could draw $200 per month from his estate until she either remarried or died, at which time the estate would be divided equally among her daughters. Suddenly, Anna was poor. Her income was well below the qualifying cut-off for social assistance, but she refused to apply for it and was too young for the old age pension. The will stipulated that she could not sell John's house. Aside from a brief stint in business college, Anna had no training, no work experience, and no marketable skill. Besides, at 55 she was unlikely to find work. Her daughter hired her to babysit her grandchildren, and for the next 10 years she made do with the clothes she already owned, shopping at yard sales and eating anything that she could buy for next to nothing in the grocery store—old bread, dinted canned food, and so on. After 10 years Anna turned 65 and began receiving old age security. Though she was still poor, she was no longer destitute. Five years later her sister-in-law, the widow of John's childless brother who had inherited the family business, died, leaving Anna one-third of her quite large estate.

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Box 1.1 Measuring Poverty

Low income cut-offs (LICOs)—more commonly known as Canada's 'unofficial' poverty lines—are established by Statistics Canada using data from the Family Expenditure Survey (now known as the Survey of Household Spending). LICOs indicate the level of income at which a family may be living in 'straitened circumstances' because it spends a greater proportion of its income—20 percentage points more—on necessities of food, shelter, and clothing than does the average family of a similar size.

Separate cut-offs are determined for seven sizes of family—from unattached individuals to families of seven or more persons—and for five sizes of communities—from rural areas to urban areas with a population of 500,000+. (See table below.)

Statistics Canada does not refer to the LICOs as poverty lines, although they concede that LICOs identify 'those who are substantially worse off than the average'. And in the absence of official poverty lines, the LICOs are used by many analysts to study the economic security of Canadian families and report on important trends over time.

Statistics Canada's After-Tax Low Income Cutoffs (1992 Base) for 2006

Family Size	Cities of 500,000+	Community Size 100,000–499,999	30,000–99,999	Less than 30,000	Rural Areas
1	$17,568	$14,857	$14,671	$13,152	$11,492
2	$21,381	$18,082	$17,857	$16,008	$13,987
3	$26,624	$22,516	$22,236	$19,932	$17,417
4	$33,216	$28,091	$27,741	$24,867	$21,728
5	$37,823	$31,987	$31,590	$28,317	$24,742
6	$41,946	$35,474	$35,034	$31,404	$27,440
7+	$46,070	$38,962	$38,477	$34,491	$30,138

Source: National Council of Welfare (2008).

Source: Canadian Council on Social Development (2007a).

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Suddenly, at 70, Anna was better off financially than she had ever been before.

A central aim of this book is to develop a conceptual framework that will help explain the ebb and flow of poverty that Anna experienced throughout her life. We often think of the conditions of inequality, such as poverty (see Box 1.1) or homelessness (see Box 1.2), as inescapable fixed states, and indeed there is ample evidence that for many this is true. However, the description of Anna's life demonstrates that for others, experiences of inequality may be more

Box 1.2 'People Who Slipped thru the Cracks'

Julia Vinograd is a street poet who lives in Berkeley, California. In her poem 'People Who Slipped thru the Cracks', Vinograd presents a conversation with a man living on the streets and trying to stay safe and sane.

People Who Slipped thru the Cracks

I talked to a man who wasn't there.
'Well, that's not exactly fair', he said,
'the cold still gets to me
and I only go invisible when the cops come
and I can't keep it up for long.
It's like holding your breath
to hold light away from your skin,
you just have to know how.
But I'm not like those imaginary people
crazies are always losing arguments with,
at least not yet.'
He sounded a little wistful.

'Would you like that?' I asked.
'Dunno', he shrugged. 'It'd be easier.
I always have to check the back of my knees
I keep leaving them behind.
Not fingerprints, they were easy.'
He held up his hand and the lines spun for me.
Like a child's whirligig in the wind.
'Imaginary people don't get cold
but they're stuck with their crazies.
I suppose I'll just go on like this
till I'm hit by a truck that didn't see me.'
He laughed, the sound low in his throat
like a beaten dog, afraid to come close enough
to a fire.
I wondered how old he'd been before
and how many other people weren't there
And no, it isn't fair.

Source: Vinograd (1997).

complex, involving multiple transitions in and out of relative states of deprivation (see Cooke 2005; L. Davies, McMullin, and Avison 2001; Leisering and Leibfried 1999). As Box 1.3 shows, 7.6 million Canadians experienced poverty for at least one year between 1997 and 2001. Yet in any given year, that number is lower. To understand inequality in this way requires a definition that considers durable patterns of advantage and disadvantage, the capacity of individuals to act toward change, and time.

Defining Social Inequality

Sociologists argue that inequality is *not* caused by innate personality flaws. People are not poor because they are lazy or because they lack motivation or ambition. They are poor because opportunities are distributed differentially in society on the basis of things such as class, age, gender, ethnicity, and race. Sociologists are interested in why social inequality exists, what factors contribute to social inequality, how and through which processes it is maintained, and what changes need to be made to create a more equal society. A unifying assumption in much of the contemporary sociological work on social inequality is that it is a social problem. Few sociologists would argue that we need higher rates of poverty; more hungry, malnourished people in the world; or more disparity in wealth between the rich and the poor. Indeed, many

Box 1.3 Persistence of Poverty

Many people and families move in and out of poverty. Some only stay in poverty for a short period of time while others experience deep and persistent poverty. For children, chronic poverty has a significant effect on both their short-term and long-term developmental outcomes.

Duration of poverty

Some 7.6 million people or 30.7 per cent of the population experienced poverty for at least one year form 1996 through 2001.

Just over 2 million people lived in poverty for only one year.

Nearly 1.5 million people lived in poverty for all six years.

Persistent poverty

Almost 400,000 children lived in poverty for all six years between 1996 and 2001.

About 13 per cent of people with less than a high school education lived in poverty for all six years. Less than two per cent of people with university degrees lived in poverty for all these six years.

Transitions in and out of poverty

The one age group that stands apart is youth aged 18 through 24. This group has a high poverty rate in any given year, but often tends to be poor for only one or two years at a time. They have the highest rate of moving into or out of poverty, almost double that of people aged 25 to 54.

Number of years in poverty[a]

Years	Number of persons
No years	17,093,000
1 year	2,081,000
2 years	1,415,000
3 years	1,035,000
4 years	789,000
5 years	777,000
6 years	1,463,000

Number of persons
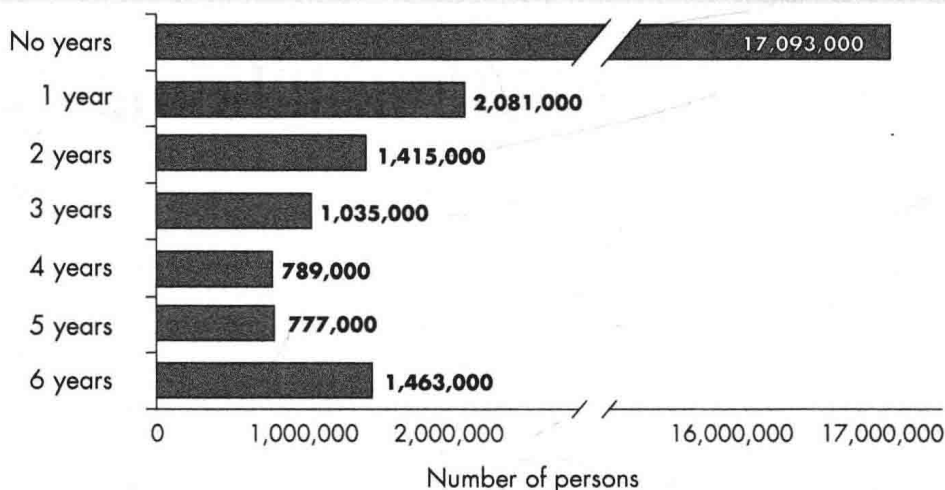
a Excludes persons whose status was not known in each of the six years

Source: National Council of Welfare 2006a..

sociologists search for ways in which problems of inequality can be alleviated and, in doing so, they specify policies and programs that would help to eradicate it. This line of inquiry is as old as the discipline itself, for Karl Marx and Max Weber both considered these issues (see Grabb 2007 for a detailed account).

At a very basic level, inequality is a condition or situation that is not equal. This suggests that *inequality* does not simply refer to differences among individuals but rather reflects differences that matter, differences that result in unfairness and disadvantage for some and privilege for others. In Canada, class, age, gender, race, and ethnicity are differences that matter; hair colour or texture do not. **Social inequality**, as it is usually defined, refers to relatively long-lasting differences among individuals or groups of people that have implications for individual lives, especially 'for the rights or opportunities they exercise and the rewards or privileges they enjoy' (Grabb 2007: 1; see also Pampel 1998). So, for example, compared to people from the middle and upper classes, people who are a part of the working class do not have the same educational opportunities and tend to have worse health. Women and members of racial and ethnic minority groups tend to work in bad jobs while good jobs are reserved for men and members of privileged racial and ethnic groups. And, compared to middle-aged adults, older and younger people suffer longer bouts of unemployment and earn less money. In these examples, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age are social structures of inequality that result in outcomes that matter. These **structures of inequality** are patterns of advantage and disadvantage that are durable (Tilly 1998) but penetrable.

At an individual level, the experience of inequality refers to the meaning that is attached to unequal life conditions as well as to the things that people do to manage or penetrate the structures of inequality. These issues reflect human agency or the capacity of individuals to interpret

their situation and act to change it. However, the experience of inequality is at odds with the experience of privilege by which those in positions of power act to maintain their advantage and reproduce the structures of inequality (see Box 1.4). Furthermore, the experience of inequality must be examined within the context of social time. For our purposes, *social time* refers to issues of generation and the life course. The experience of inequality in this context is understood as a dynamic process that evolves throughout one's life and is influenced by the generation in which one is born.

In short, the perspective developed in this book suggests that to understand social inequality we need a framework that integrates social structure, human agency, and social time. Hence it is important to define each of these terms carefully and to discuss the assumptions made about them in this book.

Defining Social Structure

If we acknowledge the assumptions that sociologists make about social structures in their work, we can understand better why certain research questions are asked in the first place and we can interpret research in context. **Social structure** generally refers to relatively long-lasting, patterned relationships among the elements of society (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 2000). Although this broad definition holds true regardless of one's sociological perspective, there is little agreement in sociology about what social structures precisely are and even less agreement about their relationship to individuals. In general, however, there are two dominant views of social structure; one has its intellectual roots in structural functionalism, the other in critical theory.

Following the work of Talcott Parsons, structural functionalists conceive of society as an all-encompassing social structure that may be decomposed into several specialized substructures. Examples of these substructures are the

economic, the political, and the educational systems of society. From this point of view, the elements of social structures include social institutions (e.g., work organizations and political institutions) and patterns of social roles (Parsons 1951). Roles are the building blocks of institutions, which are, in turn, the building blocks of society (Parsons 1951; Riley 1971). Structural functionalists tend to overemphasize the degree to which individuals conform to the values and

Box 1.4 Toronto's Tent City Sealed Off, Squatters Ejected

By Wallace Immen and James Rusk

A shantytown that had become a civic embarrassment for Toronto was cleared yesterday in an operation Mayor Mel Lastman praised and poverty activists condemned.

About 100 people looked dishevelled, dazed and angry as security officials hired by the landowners, Home Depot Canada, rousted them from the camp in a rubble-strewn field near the harbour.

Some wept and others yelled in contempt as a police cordon kept them from retrieving their belongings from the makeshift shanties that had been home to some for as long as two years.

'Shame on you. You don't have the right to destroy people's houses,' one yelled.

Mr Lastman defended the action, telling reporters that the eviction was at Home Depot's, not the city's, initiative.

'Home Depot has the same right as you or I to move trespassers from their land,' he said.

No one has claimed the collection of cobbled shelters that became known as Tent City would ever be a permanent solution to Toronto's lack of housing for the poor. There was no running water and no electricity, and the soil of the former industrial site on the shore of Lake Ontario is tainted with toxic wastes.

The camp had attracted a growing population of homeless men and women who refused to use the city's shelters, many of whom have drug and alcohol addictions or mental illness.

Home Depot Canada had warned the squatters repeatedly that they must leave the crime-plagued, litter-strewn site or be moved out.

First, security officials in flak jackets marched through openings in a chainlink fence that surrounded the site in an industrial zone on the city's eastern harbour. A large number of Toronto police stood by.

When the people and their pets had been moved out, trucks moved in carrying front-end loaders while teams went into action to install more secure chainlink fencing.

Meanwhile squads of workers wearing white coveralls and face masks used chain saws and weed whackers to clear-cut a patrol zone around the entire perimeter of the site.

Police arrested two people, including a woman who was handcuffed and held in a van during the eviction.

The eviction shocked Sam Rosen, who said he was sitting in a latrine when he heard an announcement that everyone had 10 minutes to leave the site.

'They told me if I left peacefully they would arrange food and shelter. But now there's nobody doing anything for us,' said Mr Rosen, who moved into a wooden shack in Tent City this summer after eight years of using shelters. He said he had to leave behind his clothes, pots and pans and books and was allowed to return only to get medication for his diabetes.

Those evicted were handed pink notices that resembled traffic tickets. A box checked on each said they were charged with trespassing and faced a fine of up to $2,000.

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