

SOCIOLOGY

# Inequality and the Social Imagination

Class, Culture, and Power  
in Everyday Life



Dr. Saira Siddiqui

LUMINA LITERATI PUBLISHING

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### **Inequality and the Social Imagination**

Class, Culture, and Power in Everyday Life

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# The Everyday Architecture of Inequality

How Social Difference Becomes Common Sense

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- 1.1 Inequality Before the Statistic
- 1.2 Classification: The Hidden Grammar of Social Life
- 1.3 The Social Imagination and Its Limits
- 1.4 Why Meritocracy Feels True

## 1.1 Inequality Before the Statistic

### 1. The First Encounter with Inequality

Consider an illustrative job interview. A young person enters an office for a job interview wearing carefully cleaned but inexpensive clothes. Another candidate arrives in a tailored suit, speaks in a polished accent, and appears entirely comfortable in the building. Before either person has answered a formal question, judgments have already begun. The first may be regarded as nervous, insufficiently professional, or unfamiliar with workplace expectations. The second may be read as capable, intelligent, and prepared. Their qualifications might be similar, but their bodies, clothing, speech, and confidence are interpreted differently.

In a university classroom, a student mentions the name of an elite private school and is immediately assumed to be academically strong. Another names an unfamiliar rural or government school and is quietly treated as someone who will require additional explanation. At a social gathering, one person's accent is heard as educated and cosmopolitan, while another's is treated as comic, provincial, or backward. A family's residential address may create admiration, suspicion, sympathy, or embarrassment before anything is known about the family itself. The occupation of a parent, a doctor, domestic worker, teacher, shopkeeper, driver, farmer, civil servant, or daily-wage labourer can alter how a child is perceived by classmates and teachers. Even confidence is unequally interpreted. In a privileged person, confidence is often described as leadership; in a less privileged person, the same behaviour may be judged as arrogance or a failure to know one's place.

These encounters may appear minor when considered separately. No salary has been disclosed. No property record has been examined. No official category has been assigned. Yet inequality is already present. It operates through glances, tones of voice, expectations, pauses, invitations, interruptions, assumptions, and degrees of attention. It shapes who is welcomed, who is questioned, who is believed, who is given time to explain, and who must prove that they belong.

This is why inequality must be studied before it becomes a statistic. Statistical measures reveal essential differences in income, wealth,

health, education, housing, employment, and life expectancy. They allow sociologists to demonstrate the scale and distribution of disadvantages. Nevertheless, by the time inequality appears in a dataset, it has often already been lived through thousands of ordinary encounters. It has been communicated through the quality of a school, the safety of a neighbourhood, the authority attached to an accent, the confidence permitted to a child, the respect given to an occupation, and the futures that families consider realistic.

The statistic is therefore not the beginning of inequality. It is one of its later traces.

## **2. Before Measurement: Inequality as a Social Relationship**

Public discussions often represent inequality as a difference between numerical positions. One household earns more than another. One district has better examination results. One occupational group possesses more wealth. One social category experiences higher unemployment. These comparisons are indispensable, but they can encourage the mistaken belief that inequality exists only where a measurable gap can be identified.

Inequality is not simply a difference in the quantity of resources possessed by separate individuals. It is a relationship through which resources, opportunities, authority, dignity, and social worth are distributed unevenly. A difference becomes an inequality when it is connected to organized advantages and disadvantages. People do not merely have different accents, clothes, addresses, occupations, or educational histories. These differences acquire social meanings. They become associated with intelligence, reliability, morality, modernity, competence, cleanliness, ambition, or respectability. Once those meanings influence treatment and opportunity, cultural distinction becomes social hierarchy.

A statistical account might show that graduates of certain schools obtain better jobs. An analysis of everyday inequality asks what happens before the employment outcome is counted. It examines whether those graduates were taught to speak confidently with authority figures, whether their school's name produced immediate recognition, whether relatives helped them obtain internships, whether they understood the unwritten rules of interviews, and

whether employers interpreted their manners as evidence of professional competence. It also asks whether other candidates had to manage an unfamiliar accent, conceal financial difficulty, travel from a distant neighbourhood, borrow appropriate clothing, or enter an institution in which no one appeared to share their background.

The numerical employment gap is real, but it is produced through a social process. It is the accumulated result of unequal resources, unequal expectations, unequal familiarity, and unequal recognition.

To study inequality before statistics is therefore not to reject measurement. It is to investigate the social life that measurement summarizes. The mechanisms discussed here vary across societies and institutions; the examples illustrate possibilities rather than universal class traits. Numbers can tell us that outcomes are unequal. They cannot, by themselves, explain how inequality enters the body, shapes interaction, becomes emotionally believable, or comes to appear natural.

### **3. Inequality as Atmosphere**

Inequality is often lived as an atmosphere before it is understood as a structure. An atmosphere is difficult to isolate because it is distributed across a setting rather than located in one explicit rule. It is sensed in the difference between spaces where a person can relax and spaces where every gesture must be monitored. It appears in the feeling of being observed, evaluated, tolerated, or out of place.

A working-class student entering an elite university may not encounter an official statement declaring that students from affluent families are more valuable. The institution may formally celebrate diversity and equal opportunity. Yet the student may notice that classmates speak casually about international travel, expensive tutoring, unpaid internships, private accommodation, and family connections. Others may already know how to address professors, request recommendations, challenge grades, join societies, and discuss future careers. Their confidence appears personal, but much of it has been socially cultivated.

The less privileged student may possess equal or greater intellectual ability while remaining uncertain about the rules of participation. The student may hesitate before speaking, fear that a grammatical

mistake will reveal an inferior background, avoid social events because of cost, or remain silent when others discuss experiences that seem ordinary to them. Nothing openly discriminatory needs to occur for the atmosphere to communicate a hierarchy of belonging.

The same process operates in workplaces, hospitals, courts, hotels, restaurants, government offices, residential communities, and marriage negotiations. Some people enter these spaces with the assumption that they will be served, heard, and respected. Others enter expecting delay, suspicion, embarrassment, or rejection. The unequal atmosphere is created through previous experience. Those who have repeatedly been treated as legitimate develop ease. Those who have repeatedly been questioned develop caution.

Atmosphere is sociologically important because it connects social structure with embodied feeling. It is where inequality becomes perceptible without always becoming explicit. A person may not be able to identify a discriminatory policy or calculate the economic distance between social classes but may still know that a room is not organized for people like them. They may sense that their clothes are being read, their accent is being assessed, or their family background is being silently placed within a hierarchy.

Such perceptions can reflect practical knowledge formed through repeated exposure to social judgment, although any particular encounter requires interpretation.

#### **4. Inequality as Expectation**

Inequality also operates through expectations. Expectations are judgments about what particular people are likely to do, deserve to receive, or can become. They are rarely neutral predictions. They influence the conditions under which people act.

Teachers may expect children from prestigious schools or educated families to perform well and therefore give them more demanding tasks, patient explanations, or leadership opportunities. Children from poor neighbourhoods may be expected to lack discipline, parental support, fluency, or ambition. Their mistakes are more easily interpreted as evidence of limited ability. The privileged child's mistake is temporary; the disadvantaged child's mistake becomes diagnostic.

Employers may expect a candidate with a polished accent to communicate effectively, even before the candidate demonstrates occupational competence. Another candidate may be assumed to lack professionalism because of pronunciation, dress, nervousness, or unfamiliarity with interview conventions. A patient with an educated manner may be given a more detailed medical explanation, while a poorer patient is given instructions without meaningful consultation. A person from an affluent neighbourhood may be considered trustworthy, while a person from a stigmatized area may be treated as potentially troublesome.

Expectations matter because they organize attention and opportunity. People who are expected to succeed are often allowed to experiment, fail, recover, and try again. Their confidence is reinforced by the assumption that they belong. People who are expected to fail are watched more closely, corrected more harshly, and offered fewer chances to demonstrate complexity.

Over time, institutional expectations can become personal expectations. People begin to understand themselves through the judgments repeatedly directed toward them. A child who is seldom invited to speak may conclude that their voice has little value. A student whose accent is mocked may avoid public participation. A worker repeatedly described as lacking “fit” may begin to doubt abilities that were never fairly evaluated. Inequality thus enters the imagination, shaping not only what people can do but what they believe they are entitled to attempt.

The power of expectation lies partly in its ability to disguise itself as observation. A teacher, employer, or official may believe that they are merely recognizing natural differences in confidence, intelligence, or professionalism. Yet the qualities being observed have often been produced through unequal histories. Confidence may reflect years of being listened to. Fluency may reflect access to schools. Professional ease may reflect familiarity with middle-class institutions. What appears to be an individual quality may be the embodied result of collective advantage.

## 5. Inequality as Judgment

If atmosphere tells people whether they belong, and expectation tells them what others think they can become, judgment assigns them social worth. Everyday inequality depends on a continuous process of classification through which people, behaviours, bodies, neighbourhoods, and lifestyles are ranked.

Clothing may be judged as elegant, modest, cheap, loud, respectable, inappropriate, or vulgar. Speech may be described as polished, broken, rough, rural, sophisticated, or unprofessional. Neighbourhoods may be called desirable, dangerous, backward, crowded, elite, or uncivilized. Occupations are ranked not only by income but by prestige and assumptions about intelligence. Family backgrounds are interpreted through ideas about discipline, culture, morality, and upbringing.

These judgments are rarely presented as class judgments. They are more often expressed as evaluations of taste, attitude, personality, character, or suitability. A person is not rejected because they are working class; they are said to lack confidence. A neighbourhood is not avoided because its residents possess less political power; it is described as having a “bad environment.” A job applicant is not excluded because dominant groups favour familiar cultural styles; the candidate is said not to fit the organizational culture.

Class hierarchy survives partly because it is translated into apparently ordinary judgments.

Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural capital is crucial here. Cultural knowledge, language, manners, credentials, and tastes operate as resources because institutions recognize some cultural forms as legitimate. Dominant ways of speaking and behaving are often mistaken for universal standards of intelligence or refinement. Those already familiar with these standards can present their social inheritance as personal competence (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus further explains why class is recognized through apparently small details. Habitus refers to socially formed dispositions: ways of moving, speaking, choosing, expecting, and responding that develop through one’s conditions of life. Class is therefore not reflected only in a bank account. It can become visible in posture, hesitation, humour, appetite, conversational rhythm, com-

fort with authority, and assumptions about the future (Bourdieu, 1984).

These signs are not mechanically determined. People can learn new codes, resist classifications, conceal origins, or combine different cultural styles. Nevertheless, the ability to interpret and perform dominant codes is distributed unequally. Some acquire these codes as an ordinary part of childhood. Others must study them consciously and bear the emotional burden of self-monitoring.

## **1.2 Classification: The Hidden Grammar of Social Life**

Inequality is sustained not only through unequal distributions of income, property, education, and political power, but also through systems of classification. Classification refers to the social process through which people, places, behaviors, occupations, identities, and lifestyles are separated into categories and assigned different levels of value. Every society develops distinctions between what is considered respectable and disreputable, refined and vulgar, modern and backward, educated and ignorant, decent and indecent, or deserving and undeserving. These distinctions may appear to be ordinary descriptions, but they frequently operate as judgments about who should be trusted, respected, included, employed, married, protected, or heard.

Classification is therefore not simply a neutral activity of organizing social reality. It is a mechanism through which hierarchy is created, justified, and reproduced. To classify something is often to place it within an implicit ranking. A neighborhood described as “cheap,” a family described as “backward,” an accent considered “uncultured,” or an occupation treated as “low status” is not merely being identified. It is being positioned within a moral and symbolic order. Such classifications shape how institutions respond to people and how people understand themselves.

Formal class categories such as working class, middle class, and upper class provide only a partial account of this process. In everyday life, people are rarely asked to announce their class position directly. Instead, class is inferred through clothing, pronunciation,

manners, confidence, educational background, occupation, residential location, food preferences, bodily presentation, and cultural knowledge. These signs become evidence through which people are informally placed within social hierarchies. Classification thus allows inequality to operate even when the language of class is absent.

## **1. Classification and the Social Construction of Difference**

Human beings classify the social world to make it understandable. They distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar people, safe and dangerous places, acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and legitimate and illegitimate identities. However, sociological analysis shows that classification systems are neither natural nor politically innocent. Categories emerge from histories, institutions, cultural struggles, and relations of power.

Mary Douglas argues that classification is central to the production of social order. Societies create boundaries that separate what is considered normal from what appears disorderly, impure, or out of place. Categories become especially powerful when they are presented as obvious and natural. Once a distinction has become established, people may forget that it was socially created. The category then begins to appear as a property of the person or object being classified rather than as the outcome of a particular cultural system (Douglas, 1966).

A person may therefore be treated as naturally respectable, naturally irresponsible, naturally intelligent, or naturally unsuitable. Yet these judgments are made through standards that reflect existing social arrangements. Behaviors that appear confident in one group may be interpreted as arrogant in another. Silence may be understood as politeness when displayed by a socially privileged person but as ignorance when displayed by someone from a disadvantaged background. The same action acquires different meanings depending on who performs it and how that person has already been classified.

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of social distinction demonstrates that classification is closely connected to class power. Dominant groups possess greater authority to define which forms of speech, knowledge, appearance, and taste count as legitimate. Their cultural preferences are often treated not as the habits of a particular social group,

but as signs of intelligence, cultivation, discipline, and good character. By contrast, the preferences of less powerful groups may be dismissed as crude, excessive, tasteless, or unsophisticated.

These distinctions allow privilege to appear as personal refinement. A socially advantaged individual may seem successful because of natural confidence, elegance, or intellectual ability, even though these characteristics have been cultivated through family resources, schooling, social networks, and repeated exposure to dominant institutions. Classification conceals these conditions by transforming socially acquired advantages into evidence of individual worth.

## **2. The Vocabulary of Social Ranking**

Everyday language contains a large vocabulary of classification. Terms such as “respectable,” “decent,” “cheap,” “backward,” “modern,” “educated,” and “uncultured” carry meanings that extend beyond simple description. They place people within symbolic hierarchies and associate them with expectations.

To describe someone as respectable is to suggest that the person possesses discipline, responsibility, morality, appropriate manners, and social value. Respectability may be attached to dress, family reputation, occupation, gender behavior, speech, housing, religious conduct, or educational achievement. Yet the standards of respectability are rarely equally accessible. Maintaining an approved appearance, living in a reputable area, attending prestigious institutions, and participating in valued cultural activities require material resources. Respectability may therefore operate as a classed ideal while continuing to present itself as a purely moral standard.

The word “cheap” illustrates a similar process. It can refer to price, but when applied to people, clothing, entertainment, housing, or behavior, it often implies inferiority. A “cheap” lifestyle becomes associated with poor judgment, weak character, lack of sophistication, or social embarrassment. Material scarcity is reinterpreted as cultural deficiency. People who purchase affordable goods because of economic necessity may be judged as though their choices reveal an absence of taste.

The labels “modern” and “backward” also organize social difference. Modernity may be associated with urban residence, En-

glish-language competence, technological familiarity, professional employment, smaller families, particular forms of dress, or specific attitudes toward gender and marriage. Individuals and communities that do not conform to these expectations may be placed in the category of the backward. This classification can ignore the unequal distribution of education, infrastructure, employment, mobility, and political influence that makes certain ways of living easier for some groups than for others.

Similarly, “educated” and “uncultured” are not always descriptions of formal learning. They may refer to accent, conversational style, confidence, literary knowledge, table manners, or familiarity with elite cultural references. A person may possess extensive practical knowledge and occupational skill while still being classified as uneducated because that knowledge does not correspond to institutionally recognized forms of culture.

Such terms convert differences in resources and social experience into differences in apparent human quality. Economic privilege becomes respectability, linguistic advantage becomes intelligence, cultural familiarity becomes talent, and deprivation becomes irresponsibility. Classification therefore makes inequality appear deserved.

### **3. Symbolic Boundaries and Cultural Distinction**

Michèle Lamont uses the concept of symbolic boundaries to describe the distinctions through which people separate themselves from others. Symbolic boundaries may be moral, cultural, socioeconomic, racial, religious, occupational, or educational. People draw these boundaries when they describe some groups as hardworking and others as lazy, some as refined and others as vulgar, or some as responsible and others as disorderly (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Symbolic boundaries do not automatically produce material inequality, but they create the cultural conditions through which unequal treatment becomes acceptable. When a group is widely classified as unreliable, dangerous, immoral, unintelligent, or undeserving, its exclusion from employment, housing, education, political representation, or public respect can be presented as reasonable rather than discriminatory.

Cultural distinctions are particularly important because they often appear voluntary. Taste in music, clothing, food, literature, decoration, leisure, and speech may be treated as a matter of personal preference. Bourdieu, however, shows that taste is shaped by social position. People develop preferences within particular family environments, educational systems, neighborhoods, and networks. What appears to be an individual choice is frequently connected to unequal access to cultural resources.

Dominant groups are more likely to possess the power to define their tastes as legitimate. Their cultural practices become associated with seriousness, complexity, restraint, and quality. Popular or working-class practices may be characterized as loud, excessive, simple, commercial, or vulgar. These classifications enable cultural privilege to reproduce because institutions often reward people who already understand dominant codes.

A person who knows how to speak confidently in an interview, interprets the informal expectations of a university, communicates with professionals, or discusses culturally prestigious subjects may be recognized as naturally capable. Another person with comparable intelligence may be classified as unsuitable because of unfamiliarity with these codes. The institution appears to measure merit, while it may also be measuring prior exposure to privileged culture.

#### **4. Respectability and the Moralization of Class**

Beverley Skeggs demonstrates that respectability is a deeply classed form of judgment. Working-class individuals, particularly women, are often required to prove that they are responsible, clean, caring, disciplined, and morally worthy. Their actions may be subjected to levels of scrutiny that socially privileged groups do not experience. Minor choices involving clothing, parenting, sexuality, consumption, or public behavior can become evidence of moral failure (Skeggs, 1997).

Respectability is powerful because it transforms structural inequality into a question of personal conduct. Poverty may be explained through poor decision-making. Unemployment may be interpreted as laziness. Housing insecurity may be connected to irresponsibility. Limited educational achievement may be treated as evidence of weak

aspiration. These explanations overlook labor-market conditions, unequal schools, inherited wealth, discrimination, illness, unpaid care responsibilities, and geographic disadvantage.

Andrew Sayer similarly emphasizes that class inequality is experienced through moral evaluation. People do not encounter class merely as a position in an economic structure. They encounter it through shame, pride, recognition, embarrassment, resentment, admiration, and feelings of inadequacy. Class judgments are frequently communicated through assessments of character. Someone is not simply poor but irresponsible; not merely wealthy but successful; not simply unfamiliar with elite culture but lacking in refinement (Sayer, 2005).

Moral language can therefore conceal class language. A landlord may claim to prefer “responsible tenants,” an employer may search for candidates who “fit the culture,” a family may seek a “decent” marriage partner, and a school may praise children from “good homes.” These terms appear morally neutral but may function as indirect references to income, occupation, family background, neighborhood, ethnicity, language, or lifestyle.

The concept of deservingness is especially important. Welfare recipients, unemployed people, informal workers, migrants, single mothers, people experiencing homelessness, and other disadvantaged groups are frequently divided into deserving and undeserving categories. Assistance becomes conditional upon demonstrations of discipline, gratitude, innocence, and moral conformity. Privileged groups, meanwhile, are less often required to justify their access to inherited wealth, social networks, private education, secure housing, or family support.

## **5. Classification in Schools**

Schools are major sites of classification. Students are formally classified through grades, examinations, attendance records, ability groups, disciplinary categories, and academic tracks. They are also informally classified as bright, weak, difficult, promising, lazy, confident, well-mannered, or unsuitable.

These informal judgments can have lasting consequences. Teachers may give more attention to students they consider capable, interpret their mistakes more generously, and encourage them toward ad-

vanced study. Students classified as weak or disruptive may receive less challenging work, greater surveillance, and fewer opportunities. Initial judgments can become self-reinforcing as students respond to the expectations placed upon them.

Classifications in education frequently reflect social background. Children who speak in institutionally valued ways, display familiarity with books, participate confidently in discussion, and understand middle-class interactional styles may appear naturally intelligent. Students from other backgrounds may possess substantial knowledge but express it through forms that teachers do not recognize as academic ability.

School reputation also classifies students before they enter an examination room or job interview. The name of an elite school may signal discipline, intelligence, confidence, and social suitability. Attendance at an under-resourced institution may create assumptions of weaker ability. Educational institutions thus classify not only individuals but also one another. Their rankings become attached to the identities and opportunities of their students.

Paul Willis's work on working-class youth shows that students do not simply accept institutional classifications. They may resist school authority and reject dominant definitions of success. Yet resistance can have contradictory consequences. Cultural opposition may preserve dignity and collective identity while simultaneously leading students toward positions that reproduce their class disadvantage. Resistance is therefore not always liberation; it can occur within structures that continue to shape available choices (Willis, 1977).

## **1.3 The Social Imagination and Its Limits**

### **1. Connecting Personal Life with Social Structure**

The social imagination is the ability to connect the apparently private circumstances of personal life with the wider organization of society. It enables people to understand that their ambitions, disappointments, fears, choices, and expectations do not emerge in isolation. They are formed within social structures that distribute resources, recognition, security, knowledge, and opportunity unequally.

A student who abandons plans for university may describe the decision as a personal choice. A worker who remains in an insecure occupation may believe that they lacked sufficient courage to pursue something better. A young woman who gives up a professional career after marriage may regard the outcome as a consequence of family duty. A young man who repeatedly applies for migration opportunities may interpret his frustration as individual bad luck. Each account contains an element of personal agency, but none can be understood adequately without considering tuition costs, school quality, labour markets, gender expectations, immigration regimes, family resources, social networks, and class position.

The broader concept of social imagination used here builds on C. Wright Mills's sociological imagination: his argument that sociology must connect biography with history and personal troubles with public issues. A personal trouble is experienced within an individual life: unemployment, educational failure, debt, an unwanted marriage, or the inability to migrate. A public issue arises when similar experiences are produced systematically by the organization of institutions and the distribution of power. The social imagination allows a person to move between these levels. It asks not only, "Why did this happen to me?" but also, "What social conditions make this experience common for people in positions like mine?" (Mills, 1959).

This movement from biography to structure is especially important in the study of inequality. Inequality is not limited to the unequal possession of income, property, or credentials. It also shapes how people imagine the future. It influences which occupations appear suitable, which educational institutions seem accessible, which marriages appear acceptable, which countries seem reachable, and which obligations are treated as unavoidable. Social structure enters personal life partly by organizing the field of imaginable futures.

The social imagination therefore has two related meanings. First, it is an analytical capacity: the ability to recognize how private experience is connected to institutions, history, culture, and power. Second, it is a future-oriented capacity: the ability to imagine that social arrangements could be different from those presently experienced. To understand inequality sociologically, both meanings are necessary. People must be able to interpret how their lives have been shaped,

but they must also be able to imagine possibilities beyond the limits that inequality has taught them to accept.

## **2. Imagination as a Social Capacity**

Imagination is often treated as a private mental activity. It is associated with creativity, fantasy, motivation, or personality. From this perspective, individuals either possess ambition or lack it. Some dream boldly, while others supposedly settle for less. Success is attributed to positive thinking, self-confidence, perseverance, and the willingness to imagine a better life.

A sociological approach challenges this individualistic account. It does not deny that people think, desire, decide, and act. It argues, however, that the content and reach of imagination are socially organized. People learn what to hope for through families, schools, neighbourhoods, religious communities, media, peer groups, workplaces, and encounters with institutions. They also learn which ambitions will be encouraged, which will be mocked, and which will be treated as unrealistic.

Arjun Appadurai's idea of the "capacity to aspire" is particularly useful here. Aspiration is not simply the possession of a dream. It is a cultural and navigational capacity through which people identify possible destinations, understand the routes leading toward them, and revise their plans in response to experience. To aspire effectively, a person needs more than desire. They need information, examples, institutional knowledge, social support, material resources, and opportunities to test possible routes (Appadurai, 2004).

This navigational capacity is distributed unequally. Privileged groups generally encounter a wider range of plausible futures. They are more likely to know people who have entered prestigious universities, established businesses, joined professions, obtained scholarships, migrated legally, or recovered from career failure. They possess maps of social worlds that others may see only from a distance.

Disadvantaged groups do not necessarily possess less hope, intelligence, or desire. Their horizons may be more fragile because they have fewer opportunities to explore alternatives and fewer resources with which to survive error. Their aspirations may depend on incomplete information, uncertain routes, and institutions that remain un-

familiar or inaccessible. What looks like a lack of ambition may therefore be a realistic response to a social environment in which the costs of failure are high and the routes toward mobility are poorly marked.

The sociology of imagination begins by rejecting the assumption that people occupy an equal marketplace of dreams. The ability to imagine a future, navigate toward it, and convert it into lived reality depends upon one's location within a structured social world.

### **3. How Inequality Colonizes Imagination**

Inequality is powerful not only because it blocks action but because it shapes imagination before action begins. It teaches people what they should expect, what they are entitled to desire, and which ambitions would expose them to ridicule or disappointment. In this sense, inequality colonizes imagination.

Colonization does not require an explicit prohibition. A child does not need to be told directly that a profession is closed to people from their background. The message may be communicated through the absence of relevant role models, the quality of the local school, the language used by teachers, the cost of training, the reactions of relatives, and the repeated observation that prestigious occupations are occupied by people from different social worlds.

A student may never formally apply to an elite university because admission appears improbable, the fees appear unmanageable, and the culture of the institution appears alien. A young person may abandon an artistic ambition because the family cannot support a period of uncertain earnings. A woman may avoid imagining a career requiring travel because she has learned that respectable femininity demands proximity to home. A young man may choose a secure but unwanted occupation because he is expected to begin supporting parents and younger siblings immediately.

In each case, the person acts. The decision may even be described as reasonable. Yet the range within which the decision is made has already been socially narrowed.

This is more subtle than direct exclusion. When a university rejects an applicant, a barrier is visible. When the applicant decides that the university is "not for people like us," exclusion has entered the imagination. When an employer discriminates against a candidate, in-

equality blocks an action. When the candidate never applies because the workplace appears socially inaccessible, inequality has acted in advance.

The colonization of imagination transforms external constraints into internal limits. People learn to censor their desires before institutions need to reject them. They reduce ambitions to avoid humiliation, financial risk, family conflict, or anticipated failure. As a result, social arrangements reproduce themselves partly through what people stop allowing themselves to imagine.

The process is rarely complete. People dream beyond their circumstances, resist expectations, and pursue improbable futures. Nevertheless, even resistance takes place within a field structured by unequal resources. The person who attempts to cross a class boundary must often invest more emotional labour, tolerate greater uncertainty, and survive more severe consequences if the attempt fails.

#### **4. Habitus and the Practical Sense of Possibility**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain how social conditions enter imagination and become part of everyday judgment. Habitus refers to durable dispositions formed through repeated experience. These dispositions influence perception, taste, confidence, bodily conduct, expectation, and practical decision-making. They shape how individuals interpret social situations and what kinds of actions feel natural, sensible, risky, respectable, or inappropriate. Through habitus, social structure is not experienced only as an external limitation. It becomes embodied as a practical sense of what is normal, possible, and "for people like us."

Habitus does not operate as a fixed rule that determines every decision. Individuals can reflect, resist expectations, and act unpredictably. It is better understood as a practical orientation shaped by one's position within society. People develop expectations by observing what usually happens to family members, neighbours, classmates, and others with similar backgrounds. They learn which ambitions receive encouragement, which mistakes can be repaired, which risks families can absorb, and which institutions respond positively to people who speak, dress, or behave like them.

These lessons are often acquired without formal instruction. A child may notice that relatives enter certain occupations but never others. A student may observe that teachers give more attention to confident classmates. A young person may hear repeated warnings that particular careers are too costly, unstable, distant, or socially unsuitable. Over time, such experiences create an intuitive map of opportunity. Some choices feel realistic and familiar, while others feel distant or socially dangerous.

When objective opportunities remain persistently unequal, subjective expectations often adjust to them. People may learn to reject what is unlikely to be available, accept what appears unavoidable, and describe this adaptation as realism. Bourdieu refers to this as the tendency to make a virtue of necessity. Individuals come to value what their circumstances make attainable and to dismiss inaccessible possibilities as undesirable, inappropriate, or impractical.

This adjustment should not be understood simply as false consciousness or lack of ambition. It can protect individuals from repeated disappointment and help families make decisions under conditions of scarcity. A household with limited income cannot organize its life around every theoretically possible future. It must consider fees, transport, housing, family obligations, employment prospects, and the consequences of failure. Encouraging a child to pursue an expensive and uncertain career without scholarships or financial protection may place the entire household at risk.

The sociological problem arises when adaptations to unequal conditions are mistaken for natural preferences. A working-class student may prefer a nearby college because travel and accommodation costs make distant institutions inaccessible. The preference is genuine, but it is shaped by financial constraint. A woman may say that she prefers not to work after marriage because paid employment would be added to domestic labour rather than replacing it. Her choice may reflect an accurate judgment about unequal household responsibilities. A young man may report that he has always wanted a government job because its security protects his family from unstable income.

These preferences are real, but they have social histories. They are formed through the relationship between desire and available possibility. People do not choose from an unlimited field of options and

then reveal their inner preferences. They often learn to prefer the options that remain practically open to them. Constraint enters desire itself.

Habitus therefore creates a horizon for action. Within this horizon, some futures appear ordinary, some ambitious but reachable, some dangerously uncertain, and others almost unthinkable. This horizon does not function as a visible wall. People may know that other possibilities exist, yet those possibilities may not feel actionable. A prestigious university may be publicly open to all, but it may still appear culturally unfamiliar, financially impossible, or socially “not for us.”

Class position affects the width of this horizon. Privileged individuals usually possess more options and greater protection from failure. An elite education, international travel, professional employment, entrepreneurship, or postgraduate study may appear as normal stages of life. Families may expect these futures, provide information about them, and support repeated attempts.

For disadvantaged groups, the same futures may appear extraordinary achievements requiring exceptional talent, sponsorship, luck, migration, or major sacrifice. Even when such possibilities are imaginable, they may be approached with greater fear because failure carries heavier consequences. The future is therefore socially unequal before it occurs. Inequality shapes not only what people eventually achieve, but also what they learn to expect, attempt, reject, and desire.

## **5. Personal Ambition and Structurally Available Possibility**

Personal ambition refers to what an individual desires, intends, or works toward. It includes career goals, educational plans, migration hopes, business ideas, family expectations, and imagined forms of social mobility. Structurally available possibilities refer to the futures that can realistically be pursued given the distribution of resources, institutional routes, legal permissions, cultural recognition, and social support. Ambition describes the direction of desire, while structural possibility describes the conditions under which that desire can be acted upon.

The two are connected but not identical. Social conditions influence what people imagine, yet individuals can desire futures that re-

main difficult or impossible to reach. A person may possess strong determination, clear goals, and considerable ability while facing institutions that offer few practical routes forward. Ambition may therefore exceed opportunity.

A talented student may aspire to become a doctor but attend a school that cannot provide adequate science teaching, laboratory access, examination preparation, or career guidance. The student's ambition may be genuine and sustained, but the institutional route is weak. Similarly, a graduate may hope to enter a profession but lack professional connections, unpaid internship experience, interview preparation, or the financial resources required to relocate. A worker may want to establish a business but lack access to credit, property, technology, legal knowledge, and protection from financial failure. In each case, the problem is not simply insufficient desire. It is the absence of resources that allow desire to become action.

Conversely, a person may express modest or uncertain ambitions while occupying a position rich in possibilities. A privileged young adult may be unsure about a career yet retain access to family wealth, professional networks, travel, further education, and several opportunities to begin again. A failed examination, abandoned degree, or unsuccessful business may cause disappointment, but it does not necessarily close the future. Family resources can provide time for reflection, additional training, relocation, or repeated attempts.

The absence of a fixed ambition therefore does not place this person in the same position as someone whose future depends on a single examination, job application, scholarship, or migration route. For the less privileged individual, one failure may exhaust available savings, delay family responsibilities, or permanently remove access to an opportunity. Structural advantage is visible not only in the number of available options but also in the ability to recover from mistakes.

This distinction exposes the weakness of explanations that treat outcomes as direct measures of aspiration. Success does not prove that one person wanted a future more intensely than another. Failure does not demonstrate insufficient motivation. Two individuals may possess similar goals and make comparable efforts while facing very different opportunities, risks, and institutional responses. The con-

version of ambition into achievement depends partly upon economic, cultural, and social capital.

Economic capital provides money, property, time, mobility, technology, and protection from risk. It allows people to pay fees, purchase materials, travel, accept low-paid training, wait for better employment, or survive unsuccessful attempts. It also creates the freedom to plan beyond immediate needs.

Cultural capital includes language, educational knowledge, credentials, styles of communication, and familiarity with institutional expectations. It helps individuals understand how applications are written, interviews are conducted, qualifications are valued, and professional behaviour is recognized. Those who possess this knowledge can navigate institutions more confidently and present themselves in forms that institutions reward.

Social capital provides relationships through which information, recommendations, introductions, and assistance can be obtained. A contact may reveal an opportunity, explain an application process, recommend a candidate, provide mentoring, or connect someone to a professional network. These resources do not guarantee success, but they strongly affect whether ambition can be translated into practical movement.

The distinction also shows why calls to “raise aspirations” can be misleading. Working-class and marginalized young people frequently hold strong ambitions. They may wish to enter prestigious professions, support their families, migrate, continue education, or achieve economic independence. The central problem may not be an absence of aspiration but a lack of reliable routes through which aspiration can be realized.

Motivational programmes can encourage confidence and hope, but hope without institutional change may deepen frustration. Individuals may be told to dream, work harder, and believe in themselves while the material conditions required to pursue those dreams remain unequally distributed. When promised mobility does not occur, structural barriers may be reinterpreted as personal failure.

A sociology of imagination must therefore ask two questions at once: What future does the person desire, and what social conditions make that future navigable? The first reveals aspiration, while the

second reveals whether institutions, resources, and relationships make that aspiration realistically achievable. Without both questions, ambition may be praised while the unequal organization of possibility remains hidden.

## 1.4 Why Meritocracy Feels True

### 1. The Promise That People Get What They Deserve

Meritocracy is the belief that social rewards should be distributed according to individual merit, usually understood as a combination of talent, effort, discipline, achievement, and responsible choice. In a meritocratic society, those who work hard, develop their abilities, and make sensible decisions are expected to rise. Those who fail to advance are assumed to have worked less, chosen badly, lacked discipline, or failed to use the opportunities available to them.

This belief is among the most powerful cultural stories of modern society. It appears in schools that tell students that achievement depends upon effort, workplaces that promise promotion to the best performers, political speeches that celebrate social mobility, and popular biographies of people who allegedly rose from nothing through determination. It is repeated through familiar instructions: study hard, improve yourself, remain focused, take responsibility, avoid excuses, and never give up.

At one level, these instructions contain practical truth. Effort matters. Skills matter. Discipline can improve performance. Decisions carry consequences. People regularly transform their lives through sustained work, courage, learning, sacrifice, and persistence. To deny this would erase human agency and reduce individuals to passive products of circumstance.

The sociological problem begins when these individual truths are expanded into a general explanation of social inequality. The fact that effort sometimes changes an individual outcome does not mean that unequal outcomes across society accurately measure unequal effort. The fact that one person crosses a class boundary does not demonstrate that class boundaries have disappeared. The fact that institutions reward certain achievements does not prove that everyone possessed equal opportunities to acquire them.

Meritocracy is therefore not simply an obvious lie. Its power comes from combining recognizable truths about personal agency with misleading assumptions about social structure. It takes the limited proposition that effort can influence outcomes and turns it into the much larger claim that outcomes generally reveal merit (Littler, 2018).

As a cultural story, meritocracy does more than describe how society supposedly works. It supplies a moral interpretation of success and failure. Success becomes evidence of deservingness. Failure becomes evidence of deficiency. Social position is transformed from a consequence of history, institutions, inheritance, opportunity, luck, and effort into an apparent judgment on personal character.

## **2. From Satire to Social Ideal**

The word “meritocracy” was popularized by Michael Young in his 1958 satirical work *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Young did not present meritocracy as an ideal society. He imagined a disturbing social order in which individuals were ranked through a formula of intelligence and effort, and those at the top used this ranking to justify their power.

In older aristocratic systems, inherited privilege could be criticized because it was visibly disconnected from personal achievement. A person might possess wealth, authority, or status simply because of birth. Meritocracy appeared to offer a fairer alternative: positions would no longer be inherited automatically but earned through ability and work.

Young’s warning was that this apparently fairer system could produce a harsher moral hierarchy. An aristocrat might know that privilege came from family position. A meritocratic elite could believe that it deserved everything it possessed. Those excluded from success would also be deprived of an explanation that protected their dignity. If the system had accurately identified and rewarded merit, then failure would appear to prove a lack of intelligence, effort, or value.

Young’s critical concept was gradually transformed into a positive political ideal. Meritocracy became associated with equal opportunity, openness, mobility, and the promise that origin need not determine destination. Political leaders, educational institutions, employ-

ers, and media narratives began to use the term approvingly. A concept designed to expose a dystopian hierarchy became a common description of fairness.

This transformation matters because it shows how cultural stories can lose their original critical meaning. Meritocracy now often combines two different propositions.

The first is normative: society should reward relevant effort, ability, and contribution rather than inherited rank, personal connections, prejudice, or arbitrary favoritism. This principle has considerable moral appeal.

The second is descriptive: existing societies already distribute rewards primarily according to merit. This proposition is far more questionable.

The distinction between these claims is frequently blurred. Because people believe that society should be meritocratic, they begin to assume that existing outcomes are already substantially deserved. The ideal becomes evidence for reality. A promise about what institutions ought to do becomes a justification for what institutions currently produce.

### **3. Meritocracy as Common Sense**

Meritocracy is powerful because it does not usually appear as an ideology. It presents itself as common sense, as a natural description of how society works rather than as a particular interpretation of social life. It seems obvious that examination success follows study, career advancement follows performance, wealth follows enterprise, and poverty follows poor decisions. These explanations are familiar, simple, and morally satisfying because they connect outcomes directly to individual conduct. They allow people to believe that rewards reflect effort and that failure can be corrected through better choices.

Structural explanations are more demanding because they require attention to several interacting conditions. To explain an educational result sociologically, one may need to examine school funding, family income, parental education, language, nutrition, housing, transport, cultural capital, teacher expectations, private tutoring, peer networks, discrimination, and institutional selection. These factors do not operate separately. They accumulate across time and shape the conditions

under which students learn, prepare, and compete. Meritocratic reasoning replaces this complex account with a short causal story: one student worked harder.

The simplicity of this account contributes greatly to its appeal. People directly observe effort more easily than they observe structure. They see a student studying late, an entrepreneur working long hours, or a professional developing skill. Visible effort appears to provide immediate evidence of deservingness. By contrast, structural advantages are often distributed gradually and privately. People do not always see the inherited resources, protected time, family support, social connections, institutional familiarity, and earlier investments that made individual effort possible or effective.

Two people may display similar determination while receiving very different returns from it. One person's effort may be supported by secure housing, reliable transport, good health, and professional guidance. Another person's effort may be interrupted by paid work, care responsibilities, financial insecurity, or weak institutions. Meritocratic explanations focus on the visible action while ignoring the unequal conditions that shape its results. They therefore make socially produced advantages appear to be purely personal achievements.

Meritocratic culture organizes social perception around visible individual conduct while pushing background conditions out of view. It encourages people to compare attitudes rather than circumstances. The disciplined are contrasted with the lazy, the ambitious with the passive, the responsible with the careless, and the confident with those said to lack motivation. These comparisons appear neutral, but they often convert unequal conditions into judgments about character.

This moral vocabulary transforms social analysis into personal evaluation. Instead of asking how opportunities are distributed, people ask whether an individual possesses the correct attitude. Instead of examining why a labour market offers insecure employment, they ask why workers failed to acquire better skills. Instead of investigating unequal schools, they ask why some parents do not value education. Instead of questioning housing costs, low wages, or weak public services, they criticize households for poor financial planning.

Such explanations are persuasive because they identify a visible person who can be held responsible. Structural causes are more diffi-

cult to locate because they are spread across institutions, policies, histories, and social relationships. No single decision creates educational inequality, labour-market insecurity, or housing exclusion. These outcomes emerge from many connected processes. Meritocratic reasoning reduces this complexity by locating responsibility within the individual.

The result is not necessarily a complete denial of inequality. People may acknowledge that society contains unfairness, discrimination, inherited privilege, and unequal opportunity while still believing that effort is the main explanation of where most individuals end up. Structural inequality is treated as an exception, complication, or temporary obstacle rather than as a basic feature of the social order.

This partial recognition makes meritocracy especially durable. Inequality can be admitted without changing the main explanation of success and failure. A person may accept that some schools are better than others while insisting that determined students can succeed anywhere. Someone may recognize workplace discrimination while continuing to believe that talent is eventually rewarded. Exceptional cases of mobility are then used to show that barriers are not decisive.

Meritocracy therefore operates through selective visibility. It highlights effort, attitude, and decision-making while backgrounding the unequal conditions that shape them. The problem is not that individual conduct is irrelevant. Study, discipline, skill, and judgment can influence outcomes. The problem arises when these factors are treated as complete explanations. Meritocratic common sense becomes ideological when it converts partial truths about effort into a general theory of social inequality.

#### 4. Why Meritocracy Remains Emotionally Powerful

Meritocracy persists not only because it is taught through schools, workplaces, political discourse, and popular culture, but also because it satisfies important emotional needs. It gives individuals a sense of control over uncertain lives. If success depends primarily on effort, discipline, talent, and responsible choices, then the future appears manageable. People can imagine that they possess the power to improve their position by working harder, acquiring qualifications, developing skills, and making better decisions. This belief turns uncertainty into a problem that can supposedly be solved through personal action.

The alternative can feel frightening. To recognize the importance of class origin, inherited wealth, discrimination, institutional access, labour-market conditions, family responsibilities, health, geography, or luck is to accept that effort does not guarantee success. A person may work hard and still remain unemployed, study seriously and still be excluded from higher education, or perform well and still be overlooked because of discrimination or weak social connections. Such recognition can produce anxiety because it reveals the limits of individual control and weakens the reassuring belief that responsible conduct will always be rewarded.

Meritocracy reduces this anxiety by presenting the social world as responsive to personal action. It suggests that persistence will eventually be recognized and that failure is temporary rather than permanent. This reassurance is especially valuable in societies marked by instability. When employment, education, healthcare, and housing are insecure, people need reasons to continue investing in the future. Students spend years gaining qualifications without certainty of employment. Workers accept temporary contracts or low-paid positions in the hope of advancement. Families sacrifice income to educate their children because they believe that effort will eventually produce mobility.

The promise that hard work will be rewarded can therefore sustain effort under difficult conditions. It gives meaning to sacrifice and allows present hardship to be interpreted as an investment. A person may endure low wages, repeated examinations, migration, or professional insecurity because future improvement remains imaginable.

The possibility of advancement may be emotionally more important than its actual probability.

Meritocracy also protects the belief that society is morally ordered. Extreme inequality becomes easier to accept when rewards are understood as deserved. Wealth can be interpreted as evidence of intelligence, discipline, contribution, or risk-taking, while poverty can be explained through insufficient effort, poor judgment, or irresponsibility. In this way, the social hierarchy is transformed into an achievement ranking. Material position begins to appear as a visible measure of personal worth.

For successful individuals, meritocracy produces pride and moral legitimacy. Success does not appear merely fortunate; it appears earned. Income, authority, credentials, and prestige can be understood as recognition of character and ability. This allows privileged individuals to enjoy their position without examining the inherited resources, educational advantages, family support, social networks, and favourable circumstances that may have contributed to it. Because they remember their own effort more clearly than the conditions that enabled it, they may treat their personal success as proof that the system is fair.

For those who have not yet succeeded, meritocracy preserves hope. A person may accept present hardship because future advancement remains possible. The story promises that origin does not have to determine destination. It encourages disadvantaged individuals to see themselves as future winners rather than permanent members of a lower social position. Exceptional stories of upward mobility become emotionally powerful because they suggest that anyone may eventually succeed.

This creates an alliance between people in very different positions. Those at the top use meritocracy to explain why they deserve success, while those below use it to believe that success remains possible. The same cultural story therefore legitimizes present inequality and sustains hope of escape from it.

The emotional power of meritocracy is double-sided. It can generate motivation, confidence, discipline, and hope, but it can also produce fear, shame, and exhaustion. If individuals are responsible for making themselves successful, they must continually improve, compete, and demonstrate value. Qualifications must be updated, pro-

ductivity maintained, and failures corrected through further effort. Every delay means that more work is required.

Rest can begin to feel like weakness, while structural criticism may be dismissed as excuse-making. Individuals who do not succeed may blame themselves for unemployment, poverty, academic failure, or professional disappointment. Structural inequality is converted into personal shame. A sociological analysis therefore does not deny the importance of effort. It shows that effort operates within unequal conditions. The central problem is not the belief that hard work matters, but the treatment of effort as a complete explanation of success and failure.

## **5. The Moral Attraction of Equal Opportunity**

Meritocracy is emotionally persuasive because it presents itself as the opposite of inherited privilege. It promises that social position should be earned rather than received by birth, and that individuals should be evaluated according to what they can do rather than where they come from. The principle that people should be judged by their accomplishments rather than their family background, caste, race, gender, religion, inherited wealth, or social connections has considerable moral appeal. It expresses a desire for recognition based on competence and effort, while rejecting systems in which opportunities are reserved for those who already possess status. For people excluded by aristocratic traditions, caste hierarchies, racial discrimination, patriarchal authority, or elite networks, meritocratic language can therefore carry an emancipatory meaning. It offers a vocabulary through which closed institutions can be criticized and demands for wider participation can be justified.

Meritocratic ideals have historically supported resistance to aristocracy, nepotism, discrimination, and closed elites because they question the legitimacy of positions obtained through lineage or personal connection. When authority is passed from one generation to another without regard to competence, merit appears to provide a fairer alternative. It challenges the assumption that certain families are naturally entitled to rule, that particular social groups are inherently more capable, or that access to prestigious institutions should depend on personal familiarity with those who control them. In this sense, meritocracy can weaken traditional hierarchies by making in-

herited status subject to public justification. It asks why a person should occupy a powerful position simply because of ancestry, and why another person should be excluded despite possessing greater knowledge or ability.

People reasonably object when an unqualified individual receives a position because of family influence. Such appointments violate widely held expectations that responsibility should be connected to competence. The objection is not merely emotional resentment. It reflects a concern that institutions cannot function properly when important roles are distributed through favoritism rather than ability. A public office, university place, professional appointment, or leadership position affects more than the person who receives it. When selection is based on personal relationships, institutional decisions may become less effective, less trustworthy, and less accountable. Meritocratic procedures can therefore serve both individual fairness and collective efficiency by creating at least some pressure to match qualifications with responsibilities.

People also object when wealth purchases access to institutions while talented individuals are excluded. The moral force of this objection comes from the belief that ability should not be wasted simply because it appears in a poor household. A society that restricts educational or professional opportunity to those who can afford it may fail to recognize valuable capacities among disadvantaged groups. Meritocratic language makes this failure visible by insisting that talent exists across social classes and should not be treated as the property of the wealthy. It creates a standard by which institutions can be criticized when fees, informal payments, social connections, or costly preparation determine access more strongly than competence.

Similarly, people object when discrimination prevents capable individuals from receiving recognition. When women, racial minorities, lower-caste groups, religious minorities, migrants, or other marginalized populations are judged through stereotypes rather than demonstrated ability, the language of merit can expose the injustice. It allows excluded individuals to demand that their work be evaluated according to publicly relevant standards rather than prejudicial assumptions about identity. In such cases, meritocracy can challenge arbitrary privilege by separating social evaluation from inherited categories. It can make exclusion more difficult to defend because insti-

tutions are required to explain why an individual's qualifications were ignored.

This critical function should not be ignored. Meritocracy is not only an ideology used to justify inequality after it has occurred. It can also be a practical principle for reducing certain forms of arbitrary advantage. Transparent examinations, publicly stated criteria, anonymous assessment, standardized procedures, and rules that limit personal favoritism can be fairer than direct inheritance, patronage, bribery, or discretionary appointment. Such mechanisms may reduce the ability of powerful individuals to distribute opportunities privately among relatives, loyalists, or members of their own social group. They can also give applicants clearer grounds on which to challenge unfair decisions.

Publicly stated criteria are particularly important because they make the basis of selection visible. When candidates know what qualifications are required, how performance will be evaluated, and how decisions will be reviewed, institutional power becomes somewhat more accountable. Selection is no longer presented simply as the unquestionable preference of an authority figure. Instead, decision-makers are expected to demonstrate that the chosen candidate satisfied relevant standards. This does not eliminate bias, but it creates procedures through which bias can be identified and contested. Transparency can therefore limit arbitrary discretion even when it cannot remove all social inequality.

In some contexts, merit-based recruitment expands access for groups previously excluded from education or government employment. Competitive examinations may allow individuals from non-elite families to enter institutions that were once dominated by hereditary privilege. Standardized recruitment may weaken the influence of local patrons, political intermediaries, or personal recommendations. Formal qualifications may enable women or members of marginalized communities to claim positions that traditional social norms would otherwise deny them. These gains are significant because they can alter both individual life chances and the social composition of institutions.

However, the replacement of openly inherited status with formal competition does not automatically produce substantive equality. A system may become more open in legal and procedural terms while

remaining deeply unequal in practice. Formal competition changes the visible mechanism of selection, but it does not necessarily change the unequal distribution of the resources needed to compete successfully. The fact that anyone is permitted to sit an examination does not mean that everyone has been equally prepared for it. The fact that a job advertisement is public does not mean that all applicants possess equal knowledge of the application process, equal access to credentials, or equal freedom to pursue unpaid preparation.



# Classed Culture

Taste, Respectability, Language, and the Politics of Belonging

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- 2.1 Taste as Social Power
- 2.2 Language, Accent, and the Sound of Class
- 2.3 Respectability and the Moral Burden of the Poor
- 2.4 Cultural Mobility and the Cost of Becoming Acceptable

## 2.1 Taste as Social Power

### 1. Taste as a Social Marker

Taste is commonly described as a private matter. People say that they simply like a particular kind of food, music, clothing, furniture, literature, film, or recreation. Preferences are presented as expressions of personality that require no further explanation. One person enjoys classical music, others listen to popular dance songs, and a third prefers silence. One household decorates its home in a restrained style, while another favours bright colours, large furniture, decorative objects, and visible signs of prosperity. These differences appear personal because they are experienced as sincere. People usually do not choose their preferences after consciously calculating what their social class requires. They experience them as natural attractions and dislikes.

Sociology does not deny the reality of personal preference. It asks how preferences are formed, why they are distributed unevenly, and why some of them receive greater respect than others. Taste is social because people develop it within families, schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, friendship groups, religious communities, media environments, and markets. These settings expose individuals to different objects, practices, vocabularies, and standards of judgment. They also teach people what is beautiful, respectable, excessive, intelligent, modern, embarrassing, ordinary, or inappropriate.

A child who grows up in a household where books are discussed, museums are visited, and artistic interpretation is encouraged develops a different relationship to culture from a child whose family has little money, time, or institutional access for such activities. This does not mean that the first child possesses deeper human sensitivity or that the second lacks curiosity. It means that they have been introduced to different cultural worlds and trained in different ways of recognizing value. What later appears as an individual preference has a social history.

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of taste remains central because it shows that preferences reflect the distribution of economic and cultural capital. Economic capital determines what people can purchase, where they can live, which schools they can attend, and how much time

they can devote to leisure. Cultural capital includes knowledge, language, credentials, manners, interpretive habits, and familiarity with legitimate forms of culture. Together, these resources shape both access to cultural goods and the ability to speak about them in socially valued ways (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986).

Taste therefore operates as a social marker. It communicates information about upbringing, education, occupation, income, social networks, and familiarity with institutions. A person may reveal class position without mentioning salary or family wealth. The restaurant they select, the food they order, the clothes they regard as appropriate, the books displayed in their home, and the destinations they choose for holidays can provide clues about their social location. Accent, humour, posture, and conversational references reinforce these signals.

These markers are not perfectly reliable. People borrow styles from other classes, acquire new preferences, conceal wealth, or reject the tastes associated with their background. Markets also circulate cultural goods widely, allowing practices once associated with elites to become popular. Nevertheless, taste remains meaningful because social groups continue to classify people through cultural signs.

Taste is particularly powerful when economic differences cannot be discussed openly. In many settings, asking directly about income or wealth is considered impolite. Cultural judgment provides an indirect language of class. People may describe someone as sophisticated, basic, provincial, polished, traditional, pretentious, loud, cultured, or lacking in taste. These descriptions appear to concern personality or aesthetics, but they frequently carry judgments about social background.

The idea of taste as a social marker also helps explain why people react emotionally when their preferences are criticized. A judgment about music or clothing may be experienced as a judgment about family, community, education, or moral worth. When someone is told that their home looks cheap, their food smells unpleasant, or their favourite entertainment is vulgar, the criticism extends beyond the object. It suggests that the person has failed to develop the correct way of perceiving and living.

Taste can also mark subtle divisions within broad class groups. Members of the middle class may distinguish themselves from those

above and below through careful choices in food, education, clothing, and leisure. Some seek signs of established refinement, while others favour creativity, ethical consumption, international culture, or deliberate simplicity. Wealth alone does not determine these distinctions. The composition of capital matters. A wealthy business owner and a university professor may have similar incomes but different cultural preferences and different standards for judging prestige.

The same principle applies within working-class communities. People distinguish themselves through ideas of respectability, cleanliness, generosity, religious commitment, family responsibility, skill, and appropriate consumption. Working-class taste is not a single undifferentiated culture. Individuals may reject both elite pretension and practices they associate with irresponsibility or disorder. Michèle Lamont's research is important here because it shows that people draw moral, cultural, and economic boundaries in different combinations. Cultural hierarchy is never produced only from above. Groups throughout society develop standards through which they identify respectable and disreputable ways of living (Lamont, 2000).

However, not all groups possess equal power to make their judgments socially binding. Elite preferences are more likely to be recognized by schools, universities, employers, cultural institutions, and the media. A dominant group can convert its taste into a general standard of intelligence, professionalism, or quality. Other groups can value their own practices, but they may lack the institutional authority to make those practices count in examinations, recruitment, promotion, or public recognition.

Taste is therefore more than a sign of class. It is one of the means through which class becomes visible and consequential. People read social background through cultural details and respond with varying degrees of trust, attraction, respect, discomfort, and exclusion. Taste helps transform differences in upbringing into differences in treatment. Its power lies in the fact that the process usually appears ordinary. People believe they are merely responding to what they like, when they may also be responding to socially learned classifications of people and ways of life.

## 2. Habitus, Cultural Capital, and the Formation of Preference

The relationship between taste and class cannot be understood by imagining that social groups simply receive lists of approved preferences. People are not formally instructed that members of one class must enjoy foods, music, books, or hobbies. Taste develops more gradually through what Bourdieu calls *habitus*. *Habitus* consists of durable dispositions formed through social experience. It influences how people perceive, feel, classify, and act without requiring constant conscious calculation.

*Habitus* connects objective conditions with subjective preference. People grow accustomed to environments, resources, rhythms, and expectations. These experiences produce a practical sense of what feels comfortable, attractive, possible, and appropriate. The result is that social necessity can gradually become personal taste.

Food provides a clear example. A household with limited resources may prioritize affordability, quantity, familiarity, and the ability of meals to satisfy physically demanding work. These priorities can develop into positive preferences for filling food, strong flavours, generous portions, and shared eating. A more affluent household may place greater emphasis on presentation, variety, health claims, novelty, restraint, origin, and the experience of eating. These differences are not reducible to income at the moment of purchase. They reflect longer histories of necessity, security, bodily expectation, and cultural learning.

*Habitus* also shapes how people respond to unfamiliar culture. Someone raised with regular access to art galleries may enter such a space without anxiety. They understand that one can look slowly, interpret freely, ask questions, and express preferences without possessing technical expertise. Another visitor may feel watched, uncertain, or afraid of appearing ignorant. The difference is not simply knowledge. It is an embodied sense of entitlement to occupy space.

Cultural capital expands this practical familiarity. In its embodied form, cultural capital includes language, manners, styles of reasoning, aesthetic dispositions, and confidence. In its objectified form, it includes books, artworks, musical instruments, technology, and other cultural goods. In its institutionalized form, it appears as degrees, certificates, and recognized qualifications. These forms support one

another. A home containing books may encourage reading, while educational institutions certify the resulting knowledge as academic ability.

The formation of taste begins early. Families communicate preference through ordinary routines. Children observe what adults eat, watch, wear, praise, avoid, and criticize. They learn whether reading is a duty, a pleasure, or an unfamiliar activity. They learn whether leisure should be productive, social, physically active, culturally improving, or simply restful. They hear judgments about people who display wealth, follow fashion, use particular accents, or participate in specific hobbies.

School adds another layer. Educational institutions introduce students to selected forms of literature, art, history, and language. These selections are presented as valuable knowledge rather than as the cultural preferences of particular groups. Students already familiar with these forms possess an advantage. They recognize vocabulary, references, and modes of interpretation that others encounter for the first time.

The school then evaluates students as though everyone entered with comparable preparation. Familiarity is translated into talent. Ease becomes evidence of intelligence. The student who speaks confidently about a novel may appear naturally insightful, although the language of literary interpretation was already present at home. The student who struggles to express an interpretation may appear less capable, despite engaging with the text from a different cultural position.

Bourdieu describes this process as misrecognition. Socially acquired dispositions are misrecognized as natural gifts. The privileged student does not appear culturally advantaged. They appear intelligent, articulate, and refined. The institution does not appear to reward a particular class culture. It appears to reward merit.

Taste contributes to this conversion because legitimate preference is treated as evidence of a cultivated mind. Knowledge of literature, art, cuisine, history, or music signals more than cultural interest. It can suggest discipline, intelligence, openness, and maturity. Conversely, preference for devalued culture can be interpreted as evidence of narrowness, lack of education, or poor judgment.

The concept of habitus also explains why elite taste is often performed with apparent ease. Established cultural privilege tends to conceal effort. A person familiar with legitimate culture may discuss it casually and confidently. They do not appear to be trying to prove sophistication. This ease itself becomes a valued quality.

By contrast, individuals who consciously acquire elite culture for mobility may display greater effort and seriousness. Bourdieu associates this especially with sections of the middle class whose members recognize legitimate culture but do not possess complete confidence within it. They may study correct manners, pronunciation, dress, art, and cuisine carefully. Yet visible effort can undermine the appearance of natural refinement. The person risks being judged as pretentious because they reveal the labour required to acquire what elites present as effortless.

This produces a cultural paradox. Dominant groups define the valued standard and then treat familiarity with that standard as natural. Those who attempt to learn it may be criticized for trying too hard, while those who do not learn it are dismissed as uncultured. Cultural mobility is formally possible, but the conditions of recognition remain unequal.

Habitus is durable, but it is not unchangeable. Education, migration, employment, friendship, and social mobility expose people to new fields. Individuals can develop additional preferences and learn unfamiliar codes. Someone raised with popular entertainment may later develop an interest in opera, independent cinema, or literary fiction. A person educated in elite institutions may continue enjoying the food, humour, and music of childhood.

Such change often produces a layered habitus rather than complete replacement. New dispositions are added to older ones. People learn to shift between cultural settings, adjusting language, dress, and preference according to context. This ability can become a valuable form of cultural flexibility, but it may also create uncertainty about authenticity and belonging.

Habitus therefore explains why taste is neither purely chosen nor mechanically determined. Preferences are socially conditioned, embodied, and open to change. They express class history without functioning as permanent class labels. Their sociological importance lies in how institutions and social groups interpret them. A preference

becomes a source of inequality when it is treated not merely as different but as evidence of superior or inferior people.

### **3. The Classed Worlds of Food, Clothing, Music, Books, Home Décor, Hobbies, and Leisure**

Class position becomes visible through a wide range of everyday cultural practices. Food, clothing, music, books, home décor, hobbies, and leisure do not merely express what people enjoy. They communicate relationships to money, time, education, health, family life, and public space. Each domain contains distinctions through which people identify themselves and judge others. The patterns below are context-dependent tendencies, not fixed attributes of social classes.

Food is one of the most immediate expressions of taste. Social groups differ not only in what they eat but in how they speak about food. Some emphasize quantity, familiarity, generosity, religious acceptability, and the satisfaction of hunger. Others emphasize ingredients, presentation, origin, authenticity, health, sustainability, or culinary experimentation. A meal can be judged as comforting, traditional, elegant, heavy, clean, unhealthy, sophisticated, or crude.

Elite food culture often values restraint and specialized knowledge. Small portions, unusual ingredients, technical preparation, and detailed discussion of origin can signal refinement. The ability to appreciate such food depends partly on economic security. People less constrained by hunger can turn eating into an aesthetic experience. A meal that would appear insufficient to someone seeking fullness may be praised by another person for balance, subtlety, or presentation.

Working-class food is frequently criticized as oily, heavy, simple, unhealthy, or excessive. Such judgments overlook the relationship between diet, cost, time, labour, access, and family responsibility. Cheap and filling food may be a rational response to economic conditions. Large portions may express hospitality and care. Strong flavours may carry cultural memory. Yet dominant health and lifestyle narratives can convert these practices into evidence of ignorance or indiscipline.

Clothing operates similarly. Dress reveals purchasing power, occupational environment, bodily confidence, religious or cultural affiliation, and knowledge of situational codes. Elite distinction does not al-

ways depend on visibly expensive clothing. In many settings, the highest-status style is understated. Quality is communicated through fabric, cut, fit, and brand recognition rather than obvious display. Those familiar with the code can identify value, while outsiders may see only simplicity.

Visible display is often treated differently. Bright colours, large logos, jewellery, elaborate decoration, and highly coordinated clothing may be dismissed as loud or excessive. Yet these forms can communicate celebration, achievement, gender identity, community membership, or the desire to make success visible. The judgment that understated consumption is more tasteful reflects the cultural authority of groups secure enough not to display wealth openly.

Music is another major site of class distinction. Classical music, jazz, experimental forms, and selected independent genres have often been associated with cultural capital. Popular dance music, sentimental songs, commercial entertainment, and locally rooted genres may be devalued as repetitive, emotional, unsophisticated, or vulgar. These classifications are not fixed. Genres can move between categories, and elite groups may appropriate forms that were once stigmatized.

The contemporary ideal of cultural omnivorousness has complicated the simple division between high and popular culture. Privileged people may present themselves as open to many genres. They can enjoy classical music, hip-hop, folk traditions, international pop, and electronic music while displaying knowledge about context and quality. The new distinction is not always exclusive preference for elite culture. It can be the ability to select widely, explain choices confidently, and move between cultural worlds.

This apparent openness does not necessarily eliminate hierarchy. The culturally privileged omnivore often claims the authority to decide which examples of popular culture are authentic, creative, or worthy. Broad taste becomes another form of capital. Someone who enjoys popular music without possessing the correct interpretive vocabulary may still be judged differently from someone who consumes it ironically, historically, or analytically.

Books remain strong markers of education and class. The presence of books in a home can signal intellectual identity, even when they are not read regularly. Literary fiction, political history, philosophy,

and recognized classics often carry greater status than romance, self-help, religious literature, popular thrillers, or commercial fiction. Reading itself is morally ranked. Some forms are described as serious and enriching, while others are treated as escapist or formulaic.

These distinctions ignore the different functions reading serves. A person may read religious texts for ethical guidance, romance for emotional pleasure, manuals for practical improvement, or popular fiction for relief after exhausting work. The privilege of reading demanding literature often depends on time, quiet, education, and freedom from fatigue. To judge reading preferences without considering these conditions turns unequal resources into aesthetic hierarchy.

Home décor similarly communicates class identity. Minimalism is frequently associated with refinement, control, and modernity. Empty space, neutral colours, selected objects, and restrained decoration can suggest that the household does not need to display everything it owns. Yet minimalism depends on space, storage, and the ability to replace objects when needed.

Crowded or highly decorated homes may be judged as cluttered, old-fashioned, or lacking taste. Such judgments can ignore housing size, multigenerational living, emotional attachment, and the economic importance of preserving possessions. Decorative abundance may also communicate hospitality, memory, aspiration, and family continuity.

Hobbies reveal unequal access to time, equipment, training, and space. Activities such as skiing, sailing, golf, horse riding, collecting art, foreign travel, and specialist photography require considerable resources. Other hobbies, including gardening, repair work, community sport, television, gaming, cooking, or social gatherings, may require less institutional access but carry different levels of prestige.

Even physical activity is classed. Certain forms of exercise are associated with discipline, health, and self-improvement, while others are viewed as informal recreation. A person who attends a specialized fitness studio may be read differently from someone who plays sport in a local field, even when both are physically active.

Leisure more generally expresses class relationships to time. Privileged leisure is often planned, improving, and culturally productive. Travel becomes exploration, reading becomes self-development, and

exercise becomes bodily investment. Working-class leisure is more likely to be criticized as passive, wasteful, excessive, or unhealthy. Watching television, socializing in public, or spending money on celebrations may be treated as evidence of poor priorities.

These judgments overlook the unequal need for recovery. People performing insecure, physically exhausting, or emotionally demanding work may seek immediate pleasure rather than self-improving leisure. They may also lack access to safe parks, private clubs, transport, cultural institutions, or paid holidays.

Across all these domains, taste communicates class because it reflects resources and learned dispositions. Yet no object possesses a permanent class meaning. Meanings depend on context, presentation, and interpretation. A simple meal can be celebrated as authentic when served in an elite restaurant and dismissed as poor people's food when eaten by the community that created it. Second-hand clothing can signal deprivation or ethical sophistication depending on who wears it. Popular music can be vulgar in one setting and culturally significant in another.

#### **4. Legitimate Taste and the Devaluation of Working-Class Culture**

Taste becomes a mechanism of inequality when certain preferences are socially legitimized as superior. Legitimate taste refers to cultural practices that powerful institutions and groups recognize as refined, intelligent, sophisticated, or worthy of preservation. Museums, schools, universities, publishers, critics, employers, and media organizations contribute to this process by selecting which works, styles, and forms of knowledge deserve serious attention.

The concept of legitimacy is important because it moves the analysis beyond the claim that different classes simply prefer different things. Cultural difference becomes hierarchy when one group's preferences acquire institutional recognition. The question is not only who enjoys opera or popular music. It is which form receives public funding, academic analysis, prestigious venues, and association with education.

Bourdieu argues that dominant groups use their cultural standards as though they were universal. Elite taste is detached from its class

origins and represented as good taste itself. The ability to appreciate legitimate culture then appears to demonstrate refinement rather than social advantage.

This process can be observed in language. Elite preferences are described with positive terms such as subtle, balanced, timeless, authentic, cultivated, elegant, intelligent, and restrained. Working-class or popular preferences are more likely to be described as loud, vulgar, cheap, excessive, sentimental, commercial, simple, common, or immature.

These terms do not merely describe objects. They construct social people. Someone who enjoys subtle culture is imagined as possessing subtle judgment. Someone who enjoys vulgar entertainment may be treated as personally vulgar. Aesthetic classification becomes moral classification.

The distinction between restraint and excess is especially revealing. Elite culture often presents control as evidence of superiority. The body should be controlled, clothing understated, emotion moderated, food portions restrained, and wealth displayed indirectly. Popular culture is criticized for visibility. It is too emotional, too colourful, too loud, too decorated, or too openly commercial.

The prestige of restraint reflects material security. Those whose status is already established do not need to prove it through obvious display. Their cultural codes are recognized by others with similar knowledge. Understatement can therefore become a luxury. The person without secure status may use visible consumption to communicate achievement, respectability, celebration, or membership. Dominant taste then judges this visibility as evidence of insecurity or poor judgment.

Working-class culture is also devalued through its association with necessity. Bourdieu contrasts a taste shaped by freedom from material pressure with a taste shaped by practical need. Dominant groups can separate form from function. They can appreciate food aesthetically, wear impractical clothing, treat objects as art, and devote time to activities without immediate usefulness. These practices signal distance from necessity.

Working-class preferences are more likely to value usefulness, durability, fullness, comfort, and direct pleasure. Dominant culture

can dismiss these priorities as unsophisticated because it ignores the conditions under which they developed. Practical taste appears inferior only when judged from a position protected from practical pressure.

Cultural legitimacy also depends on historical processes. Many elite forms originated in specific regions, institutions, or class fractions. Their elevation was not inevitable. Schools developed canons, critics created distinctions, and states funded certain institutions. What later appears timeless is the outcome of struggles over recognition.

Colonial histories have also shaped taste hierarchies. Languages, literature, clothing, architecture, and manners associated with colonial powers were often institutionalized as signs of education and modernity. Local and indigenous forms were treated as backward, informal, or suitable only for domestic life. These classifications can persist after formal colonialism ends, especially when employment and education continue to reward the language and cultural style of former ruling groups.

The legitimacy of elite culture is never complete. Popular groups create alternative standards and reject elite judgments. Working-class communities may value directness over pretension, generosity over restraint, practical skill over abstract knowledge, loyalty over cosmopolitanism, and emotional openness over controlled detachment. They may describe elite culture as artificial, cold, wasteful, or disconnected from ordinary life.

Lamont's work is important because it shows that cultural hierarchy interacts with moral judgment. People with limited cultural capital do not always accept elite superiority. They may respond by drawing moral boundaries around hard work, honesty, family commitment, and responsibility. A person may admit lacking knowledge of prestigious art while insisting that cultural refinement does not make someone morally decent.

This resistance limits but does not eliminate inequality. Alternative values can protect dignity, yet institutions continue to reward particular cultural forms. A working-class person can reject elite taste while still being disadvantaged in a job interview, school assessment, or marriage market that uses elite standards.

Contemporary cultural elites may avoid openly declaring their preferences superior. Direct snobbery can itself be viewed negatively. Instead, distinction may be expressed through openness, ethical consumption, authenticity, or cosmopolitanism. The privileged person presents themselves as curious about many cultures and respectful of difference.

This development is captured by the idea of the cultural omnivore. High-status individuals may consume both elite and popular forms. Yet omnivorousness requires resources. Broad taste depends on education, travel, media access, confidence, and the ability to interpret many genres. It can therefore reproduce distinction in a new form.

The hierarchy shifts from what one likes to how one likes it. Popular culture can be consumed with knowledge, irony, selectivity, and historical awareness. The working-class consumer may be criticized for enjoying the same object too directly or uncritically.

Legitimate taste is therefore flexible. Dominant groups can absorb popular practices while retaining authority over classification. Food associated with poverty can become fashionable cuisine. Street clothing can enter luxury markets. Local music can become world culture. Yet the communities that created these forms may not receive equal recognition or material benefit.

The devaluation of working-class taste is not merely an error in aesthetic judgment. It is a social process through which unequal ways of life are ranked. By treating elite culture as refinement and popular culture as deficiency, society turns differences produced by class conditions into evidence that class hierarchy is deserved.

## **5. Symbolic Boundaries and Gatekeeping in Friendship, Dating, and Marriage**

Taste becomes socially consequential when it helps determine who is included in relationships and networks. Michèle Lamont uses the concept of symbolic boundaries to describe the distinctions people draw between acceptable and unacceptable persons, practices, and ways of life. These boundaries are conceptual, but they can become social boundaries when they shape durable patterns of interaction, opportunity, and exclusion.

Friendship is often presented as a relationship of personal affection. Yet friendships tend to form among people who share educational backgrounds, neighbourhoods, occupations, lifestyles, and cultural interests. Shared taste facilitates interaction because it provides topics of conversation, common activities, and a sense of familiarity.

People who enjoy similar food, music, films, humour, sports, travel, or leisure practices often experience one another as naturally compatible. This compatibility may reflect shared class histories. They understand the same references, know how to behave in similar spaces, and possess comparable expectations about spending, hospitality, and time.

The role of taste becomes visible when someone enters a group with different preferences. They may not understand jokes, recognize musicians, know restaurant etiquette, or possess money for regular activities. Exclusion does not need to be deliberate. The group continues organizing social life around practices that are easy for its established members and difficult for the newcomer.

Cultural participation can therefore influence access to social capital. Networks formed around high-status education, professional culture, art, travel, or specialized leisure can provide information, recommendations, and career opportunities. A person excluded from these networks loses more than companionship. They lose access to resources that circulate through relationships.

Taste also operates strongly in dating. Individuals often describe attraction as personal chemistry, but attraction is socially patterned. Clothing, accent, bodily style, food preferences, cultural knowledge, and leisure habits influence whether someone appears desirable, respectable, compatible, or embarrassing.

Dating platforms intensify this process by encouraging people to list music, books, travel, exercise, food, and hobbies. These preferences function as compact class signals. Descriptions such as adventurous, cultured, family-oriented, ambitious, simple, traditional, artistic, or well-travelled communicate expected lifestyle and background.

People may avoid explicit class language while selecting partners through classed criteria. Someone may say that they want a partner who is educated, polished, open-minded, sophisticated, or able to fit

into different settings. These qualities often require cultural capital acquired through particular families and institutions.

Conversely, a potential partner may be rejected as loud, basic, narrow-minded, too traditional, materialistic, or lacking ambition. Such descriptions can translate class discomfort into personality judgment. The rejection appears to concern compatibility rather than hierarchy.

Marriage makes these dynamics more visible because families, resources, and long-term expectations become involved. Family background, education, occupation, language, residential location, manners, and cultural style can all influence marital suitability. Taste helps determine whether two families are regarded as belonging to the same social world.

A family may evaluate how a prospective spouse dresses, eats, speaks, hosts guests, decorates the home, and participates in ceremonies. These details are interpreted as signs of upbringing and future conduct. Taste appears to reveal whether the person will preserve family status, adapt to expected roles, and avoid social embarrassment.

Class mobility can complicate these judgments. A highly educated person from a working-class family may possess credentials and occupational status while retaining cultural ties to their origins. A prospective partner's family may accept their achievements but remain uncomfortable with accent, relatives, neighbourhood, or ceremonial style.

The mobile individual may then face pressure to demonstrate cultural transformation. They may modify dress, speech, food preferences, and social behaviour to prove compatibility. Acceptance becomes conditional upon distance from the culture of origin.

Taste can also regulate marriage within class fractions. Families with similar income may differ in education, religious orientation, occupational history, or cultural capital. One may value intellectual conversation and restrained consumption, while another values visible prosperity and business success. These differences can produce judgments about refinement, morality, or suitability.

The power of taste as gatekeeping lies in its deniability. People rarely admit that they are excluding someone because of class. They say that the person would not fit, lacks shared interests, behaves

awkwardly, or comes from a different environment. These statements may be sincerely experienced, but they convert class closure into personal preference.

Taste also shapes the geography of relationships. Cafés, clubs, restaurants, universities, cultural events, gyms, religious institutions, and leisure venues bring together people with particular resources. The cost, location, dress code, and expected behaviour of these places influence who enters. Social networks emerge from spaces that are already stratified.

The ideal of cultural omnivorousness can make some elite groups more flexible in their interactions. People with high cultural capital may move comfortably across different musical, culinary, or social environments. Yet this flexibility is not evenly distributed. The privileged person can enter popular spaces temporarily without losing status. The working-class person entering elite spaces may face greater scrutiny and greater consequences for mistakes.

A highly educated individual can enjoy local street food, popular music, or ordinary entertainment and appear open-minded. A person from a working-class background cannot automatically convert knowledge of elite culture into equal acceptance. The same cultural crossing carries different meanings depending on the traveller's social position.

Symbolic boundaries are therefore relational. They depend not only on what is consumed but on who consumes it, how it is presented, and whether the person possesses recognized legitimacy. The ability to move between cultural worlds is itself a form of power.

Friendship, dating, and marriage demonstrate how apparently private choices reproduce class inequality. People select those who feel familiar, and familiarity reflects shared social formation. Through repeated choices, networks remain homogeneous, resources circulate within similar groups, and cultural differences become barriers to intimacy.

No individual needs to intend class exclusion for the pattern to persist. Taste performs the gatekeeping quietly. It turns social distance into a feeling of incompatibility and allows inequality to reproduce through the language of personal connection.

## 2.2 Language, Accent, and the Sound of Class

### 1. Speech as a Social Biography

Speech does more than communicate information. It also communicates social history. Before listeners fully consider what a person is saying, they may form impressions from pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, volume, rhythm, fluency, hesitation, and tone. These features can suggest where a speaker grew up, which schools they attended, the languages spoken in their household, the occupations of family members, and the social settings in which they have learned to communicate.

Accent is therefore a form of social biography. It carries traces of region, migration, education, ethnicity, class background, gender, age, and professional experience. No accent provides a perfectly reliable account of identity. People move, learn new languages, alter their speech, and develop hybrid linguistic repertoires. Nevertheless, listeners routinely use speech as evidence when placing others within social categories.

A regional accent may identify a person with a rural district, industrial city, affluent suburb, ethnic community, or postcolonial educational tradition. Vocabulary can indicate whether someone has spent time in universities, professional organizations, religious institutions, manual workplaces, or multilingual homes. Patterns of silence and confidence can reveal familiarity with formal authority. Even the decision to speak at length or briefly can be interpreted through classed expectations.

These judgments occur rapidly. A listener may describe a speaker as educated, rough, polished, intelligent, provincial, trustworthy, arrogant, warm, backward, comic, or professional after hearing only a short sample. The words spoken may matter less than how they are delivered. Two people can express the same idea and receive different evaluations because one uses a socially prestigious accent while the other uses a stigmatized variety.

This process demonstrates that language is never evaluated only as language. Speech is attached to imagined speakers. An accent associated with wealth and elite education can acquire prestige even when it contains features that are no clearer or more logical than those of a

working-class variety. A stigmatized accent may be treated as defective because listeners associate it with groups that already possess less social power.

Sociolinguistics has consistently shown that all naturally developed language varieties possess grammatical order. Nonstandard dialects are not failed or incomplete versions of standard language. They contain systematic rules governing pronunciation, tense, word order, emphasis, and meaning. Speakers of these varieties do not lack grammar. They use a grammar that institutions have chosen not to recognize as legitimate (Labov, 1972).

The distinction between linguistic difference and linguistic deficiency is central. When a person says something in a regional, working-class, multilingual, or minority variety, the form may differ from the institutional standard without being less expressive. The language may communicate intimacy, humour, solidarity, local knowledge, and complex social meaning with great precision.

Yet dominant institutions often evaluate language according to a single hierarchy. One variety is described as correct, clear, formal, educated, or neutral. Other varieties are marked as deviations. Their speakers are told that they have an accent, while speakers of the dominant form imagine themselves as speaking without one.

Everyone has an accent. The appearance of accentlessness is a political achievement of the dominant variety. It has become so closely associated with institutions that it no longer appears socially located. It presents itself as language in its proper form.

Speech also reveals gendered expectations. Women and men may be judged differently for speaking loudly, using direct language, displaying confidence, or adopting prestigious pronunciation. A confident male speaker may be interpreted as authoritative, while a woman using the same tone may be described as aggressive. Conversely, women may face greater pressure to soften speech, display politeness, or avoid regional features associated with roughness.

Race, ethnicity, caste, religion, and nationality also affect linguistic judgment. Listeners may respond not only to the sound of an accent but to the identity they believe the accent represents. Language becomes a coded means of evaluating social groups without referring to them directly. A person may claim to dislike an accent while insisting

that the judgment has nothing to do with the community associated with it.

Class remains central because linguistic varieties are distributed through unequal social institutions. Families possess different access to prestigious schools, books, professional networks, language training, media, and international mobility. Children learn the speech of their environment long before they understand its place in a hierarchy.

When they enter school, some discover that the language of home resembles the language of authority. Their ordinary speech already carries institutional value. Others discover that words, pronunciations, and styles associated with family intimacy are treated as problems to be corrected.

Language therefore carries class into the classroom and workplace without anyone needing to mention income or occupation. The voice becomes an audible social marker. It can communicate belonging before qualifications are reviewed and trigger exclusion before competence is tested.

The sociology of language begins with this connection between voice and social biography. It asks why some linguistic histories are heard as evidence of intelligence and others as evidence of deficiency. It also asks how apparently minor judgments about pronunciation become mechanisms through which class difference is converted into unequal treatment.

## **2. The Social Ranking of Accents**

Accents are not merely recognized as different. They are placed within symbolic hierarchies. Some are described as polished, educated, neutral, cosmopolitan, refined, or professional. Others are called rural, urban, backward, rough, comic, loud, broken, or untrustworthy. These classifications are social judgments rather than objective descriptions of linguistic quality.

An accent becomes prestigious because of its association with powerful groups and institutions. The speech of political leaders, senior professionals, broadcasters, elite schools, and influential urban centres is more likely to be treated as authoritative. The social position of speakers gives value to the linguistic form.

The reverse also occurs. Accents associated with poor regions, racialized communities, migrants, manual workers, or marginalized ethnic groups can acquire stigma. Listeners hear not only pronunciation, but the social category attached to it. Linguistic evaluation becomes a way of expressing wider judgments about class, region, morality, education, and modernity.

The classification of an accent as rural is rarely a simple geographical observation. It may suggest lack of education, technological unfamiliarity, traditionalism, narrow experience, or social backwardness. An urban working-class accent may be associated with aggression, criminality, poor discipline, or limited intelligence. An elite urban accent may be heard as evidence of confidence, competence, and global awareness.

These associations are culturally specific. The same accent can carry different meanings in different places. A regional variety may be stigmatized nationally while conveying solidarity and authenticity locally. A colonial or foreign accent may signal prestige in one post-colonial society and outsider status in another.

The social value of an accent can also change over time. Economic growth, migration, media representation, and political movements can alter how linguistic varieties are perceived. A speech form associated with a rising commercial centre may gain prestige. A minority language can become a symbol of cultural pride. Popular music and entertainment can make an urban vernacular desirable among young people.

However, cultural visibility does not necessarily produce institutional equality. An accent may be celebrated in music, comedy, or advertising while remaining disadvantaged in education and professional employment. Society can enjoy the cultural products of a group while continuing to treat its ordinary speakers as less competent.

The comic classification of accent deserves particular attention. Regional and working-class accents are often used for humour because listeners have learned to associate them with simplicity, directness, ignorance, or exaggerated emotion. The laughter may be presented as harmless, but it reinforces a hierarchy in which some voices naturally command attention while others naturally invite amusement.

People who speak stigmatized varieties may participate in such humour themselves. They may imitate their own accent, laugh at regional expressions, or describe standard speech as more intelligent. This does not prove that the hierarchy is accurate. It demonstrates how deeply dominant classifications can be internalized.

Research on language attitudes shows that speakers may rate their own group's accent positively on warmth, friendliness, or loyalty while rating prestigious accents more highly on intelligence, education, and competence. This division reproduces a familiar class hierarchy. Working-class speech is granted solidarity but denied authority. Elite speech is granted authority even when it is experienced as distant or cold.

The distinction between status and solidarity helps explain why people may admire one accent and trust another. A nonstandard speaker may be preferred as a friend but rejected as a manager, teacher, lawyer, journalist, or public representative. The accent is accepted in intimate life but excluded from institutional authority.

Prestige accents are often treated as clearer, although clarity depends partly on listener familiarity. People process familiar speech more easily. When an accent is unfamiliar, comprehension requires additional attention. Listeners may then mistake difficulty of processing for a defect in the speaker.

The speaker can be judged less credible because the listener has to work harder. This effect is especially important because the listener may experience the judgment as objective. They sincerely believe that the speaker was unclear, uncertain, or less convincing. The social origin of the difficulty remains unrecognized.

The idea of a neutral accent conceals these relations. A prestigious accent appears neutral because institutions repeatedly use it. It dominates broadcasting, education, government, and professional communication. Listeners become familiar with it and treat familiarity as linguistic superiority.

Regional and minority accents, by contrast, remain audible as deviations. Their speakers carry the burden of difference. They are expected to modify speech so that dominant listeners do not have to modify listening practices.

The ranking of accents is also connected to national projects. States standardize language through education, administration, law, media, and examinations. A particular variety becomes the official language of citizenship and authority. Other varieties may be tolerated in private life but excluded from formal domains.

Standardization can support communication across regions, but it becomes unequal when the selected standard is treated as naturally superior. Speakers closest to it receive an unacknowledged advantage. Those furthest from it must perform additional linguistic labour.

Accent hierarchy is therefore not created by sound alone. It is produced through relationships among language, institutions, history, and power. A voice sounds polished because society has already associated its speakers with polish. Another sounds backward because the group associated with it has been placed lower in the social order.

### **3. Schools and the Production of Legitimate Language**

Schools are among the most important institutions through which linguistic hierarchies are created and reproduced. They do not merely teach reading and writing. They define which forms of speaking, writing, explanation, and argument will be recognized as legitimate knowledge.

Students enter school with linguistic repertoires acquired through family and community life. Some speak a variety close to languages used by teachers, textbooks, examinations, and administrators. Others speak regional dialects, working-class vernaculars, minority languages, or multilingual combinations that differ from institutional expectations.

For students already familiar with the dominant form, the transition between home and school is relatively smooth. The language used to ask questions, explain ideas, and interact with adults resembles the language expected in the classroom. These students can focus on subject matter without constantly translating their thoughts into another register.

For other students, schooling involves both learning content and learning how the institution requires that content to be expressed. They may understand an idea but struggle to present it in the pre-

ferred vocabulary. Teachers can interpret this difference as a lack of understanding.

Pierre Bourdieu describes the dominant language as linguistic capital. It is valuable because institutions recognize it and reward those who possess it. Like other forms of cultural capital, linguistic capital is inherited unequally but presented as individual ability (Bourdieu, 1991).

Schools help turn this inherited advantage into educational achievement. Students who speak in institutionally valued ways appear articulate, confident, and intelligent. Their answers are more readily understood. Their questions sound appropriate. Their interaction with teachers resembles the communication style of the institution.

Students using nonstandard forms may be interrupted, corrected, or asked to speak properly. The content of their contribution becomes secondary to its form. Repeated correction communicates that their ordinary voice is inadequate.

This process can affect participation. A student who expects correction may remain silent even when they know the answer. Another may avoid complex ideas because expressing them in the standard form feels difficult. Silence or brevity is then interpreted as limited understanding or low confidence.

The educational hierarchy of language is often justified through the need for standards. Students require access to formal writing and dominant language if these forms govern higher education, public administration, and employment. Teaching the standard can therefore expand opportunity.

The problem is not the teaching of additional linguistic forms. It is the presentation of the standard as the only logical, correct, or intelligent form. Additive education expands a student's repertoire. Deficit education treats the home variety as something that must be replaced.

When schools frame nonstandard language as deficiency, they can produce alienation. Students may hear criticism of their speech as criticism of their families. The teacher may intend to improve communication, but the student experiences an attempt to transform identity.

The concept of appropriateness is often used to manage this tension. Students are told that home speech is acceptable in informal settings but that standard speech is required in school. This approach appears inclusive because it avoids declaring one form universally superior.

Yet judgments of appropriateness remain connected to power. Dominant speakers rarely need to leave their ordinary language at the school entrance. Their variety is appropriate across more settings. Nonstandard speakers must learn where their natural voice will be penalized.

Assessment deepens inequality. Oral presentations, essays, interviews, and examinations reward command of formal language. A student's linguistic style influences how teachers perceive the quality of reasoning. Fluency can be confused with knowledge, while hesitation can be confused with uncertainty.

The educational institution then converts linguistic familiarity into grades and credentials. These credentials later shape employment. A classed difference in home language becomes an official difference in educational merit.

Teachers themselves are located within linguistic hierarchies. They may sincerely believe that correcting nonstandard language is necessary for students' futures. Because employers and universities reward the dominant form, refusing to teach it could reproduce disadvantage.

This creates an ethical difficulty. Schools must prepare students for unequal institutions without legitimizing the inequality. They must teach access to dominant language while affirming the complexity and value of other varieties.

The solution cannot be to pretend that all forms currently possess equal market value. They do not. It must instead distinguish linguistic equality from social valuation. Languages and dialects can be structurally complete while carrying unequal institutional power.

A critical language education would make this distinction explicit. Students would learn how standards were historically constructed, why different settings reward different forms, and how language judgments intersect with class and power.

Such an approach would also treat multilingualism and dialect knowledge as resources. Students capable of moving between varieties possess linguistic flexibility, social awareness, and interpretive skills. These capacities should not be recognized only after they are translated into the dominant code.

Schools reproduce inequality when they treat one group's linguistic inheritance as intelligence and another's as a barrier. They can challenge inequality when they expand repertoire without producing shame.

#### **4. Bernstein, Labov, and the Myth of Linguistic Deficit**

Debates about class and language in education have often centred on whether working-class children possess forms of speech that limit educational success. Basil Bernstein's distinction between restricted and elaborated codes became highly influential in this discussion. Bernstein proposed that different social conditions produce different patterns of communication and that schools favour the linguistic code more common in middle-class families (Bernstein, 1971).

The elaborated code was associated with meanings made explicit for listeners who do not share the immediate context. The restricted code relied more heavily on shared knowledge and social relationships. These codes are orientations to meaning, not separate dialects or measures of intelligence; restricted codes can occur across classes. Bernstein examined how class relations shape access to the forms of communication schools reward.

However, the theory was frequently simplified. Educational professionals interpreted working-class speech as linguistically inadequate. Children's difficulties were attributed to limited vocabulary, insufficient parental conversation, or failure to develop abstract thought.

These interpretations formed part of what became known as verbal deficit theory. Working-class families were portrayed as environments in which children were not properly taught to speak, reason, or explain. Educational inequality was located inside the household rather than in the relationship between home language and institutional expectations.

William Labov's sociolinguistic research challenged this account. Labov demonstrated that nonstandard vernaculars possess systematic grammatical structures. He also showed that speakers judged inarticulate in formal settings could display complex reasoning and narrative skill in environments where they felt comfortable (Labov, 1972).

A child's silence during an unfamiliar interview did not prove limited language. It could reflect distrust, anxiety, unequal power, or the artificial nature of interaction. When researchers changed the setting and relationship, the same child could speak fluently and analytically.

Labov's critique exposed the difference between linguistic competence and performance under unequal conditions. A person may possess sophisticated language while failing to display it in a setting where their speech is devalued.

This distinction remains important because institutions often measure confidence in dominant interactional styles rather than underlying thought. A student who speaks quickly, uses formal vocabulary, and maintains eye contact may appear more intelligent. Another student may reason carefully but express ideas through a different rhythm, narrative form, or linguistic code.

Deficit theory persists because it offers institutions a convenient explanation. If students fail because their families did not provide sufficient language, the school's role in producing inequality becomes less visible. The solution becomes intervention in the child's speech rather than transformation of teaching and assessment.

The language of deprivation can also appear compassionate. Teachers may believe that they are identifying a disadvantage so that they can provide support. Yet support based on a false diagnosis can cause harm. It encourages educators to overlook existing linguistic resources and communicate low expectations.

The debate should not be resolved by denying all differences in exposure. Children grow up with unequal access to books, formal vocabulary, dominant languages, and interaction with professionals. These differences can affect educational performance.

The sociological question is how such differences are interpreted. Lack of familiarity with institutional language is not lack of intelli-

gence. A child can be unfamiliar with the vocabulary of schooling while possessing extensive practical, narrative, multilingual, or community knowledge.

The distinction between difference and deficit also requires attention to power. The dominant code is not simply one communication style among many. It has greater value because institutions use it. Students need access to it, but access should not require accepting that their original language is inferior.

Labov's work shifted attention from supposed defects in speakers to the social organization of language judgment. A nonstandard form may be stigmatized even when it communicates meaning effectively. The problem lies not in the variety itself but in the listener's classification.

This insight challenges the frequent claim that standard language is rewarded because it is inherently clearer. Clarity depends on shared conventions and familiarity. A legal or academic text written in standard language can be incomprehensible to most readers. A local vernacular can communicate with great precision among its speakers.

What counts as elaborated also depends on context. A worker explaining a complex mechanical problem, a farmer describing environmental change, or a community elder narrating family history may use highly developed language that does not resemble school discourse.

Educational institutions often fail to recognize such competence because they define intellectual expression narrowly. They reward decontextualized argument, particular vocabulary, and formal presentations. These forms are valuable but should not be mistaken for the totality of thought.

The legacy of Bernstein and Labov therefore requires careful interpretation. Bernstein helps identify how class shapes communication and how schools reward particular codes. Labov shows why this difference cannot be reduced to linguistic deprivation.

Together, they direct attention to the relationship between language and institution. Educational difficulty does not follow automatically from a child's speech. It can be intensified when schools treat one linguistic repertoire as the universal measure of intelligence.

## 5. Linguistic Capital, Confidence, and Class Mobility

Language becomes capital when command of a valued linguistic form can be converted into educational, occupational, and social advantage. Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital explains why some ways of speaking increase authority while others reduce it.

The value of language depends on the linguistic market in which it is used. A regional dialect may carry strong value within a local community because it signals trust, authenticity, and shared identity. The same dialect may lose value in a corporate interview. A prestigious international language may carry little importance in intimate family life but become highly valuable in education and migration.

Speakers learn these market differences through experience. They observe which voices belong to teachers, officials, managers, journalists, and professionals. They discover which pronunciations are corrected and which are imitated. Over time, they develop a practical sense of the value attached to their speech.

Linguistic capital is embodied. It includes pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, tone, timing, confidence, and knowledge of when to speak. It cannot always be acquired quickly because it is connected to long histories of socialization.

A child from a professional family may learn how to ask adults questions, express disagreement politely, provide explanations, and present personal achievements. These practices later appear as confidence. A child from a social environment where authority is approached cautiously may communicate differently.

Schools and workplaces often reward the first style without recognizing its class history. Confidence is treated as a personal quality rather than the result of repeated experiences in which speech received positive attention.

This relationship between language and confidence is circular. Speakers whose language is respected become more willing to speak. Their participation gives them practice, visibility, and feedback. Speakers whose language is corrected or mocked become more cautious. Their reduced participation is then interpreted as a lack of confidence.

Linguistic inequality therefore produces the behaviour used to justify it. Dominant speakers sound confident because the environment

confirms their right to speak. Stigmatized speakers may sound uncertain because they know that both content and accent are being evaluated.

The conversion of linguistic capital into class mobility is visible in education. Students who master academic language can present knowledge in recognized forms, build relationships with teachers, and navigate application processes. Their speech helps them appear prepared for advancement.

In employment, linguistic capital affects interviews, client interaction, leadership assessment, and promotion. A candidate who speaks the most professional language can create an immediate sense of competence. Another candidate may possess equivalent technical ability but need more time to establish credibility.

Migration intensifies the importance of linguistic capital. Command of an international or official language can provide access to universities, visas, professional occupations, and transnational networks. Families invest heavily in language education because they recognize its potential economic return.

This investment is unequally available. Elite schools often provide stronger language instruction, smaller classes, international exposure, and opportunities to practice with confident speakers. Wealthier families can purchase tutoring, travel, media access, and prestigious credentials.

The resulting linguistic skill appears to belong entirely to the individual. Employers and universities reward fluency as merit while overlooking the resources that produced it.

Linguistic mobility can also involve adopting a more prestigious accent within the same language. Speakers may reduce regional features, change rhythm, or expand vocabulary. These changes can increase institutional acceptance.

However, the rewards are uncertain. A speaker may develop standard language without being fully accepted as a legitimate speaker. Race, ethnicity, nationality, and class can continue to shape interpretation. The same accent feature may be overlooked in a privileged body and marked as evidence of incompetence in a marginalized one.

Mobility also creates the danger of linguistic insecurity. The person who has consciously learned a prestigious variety may monitor every word. Unlike native speakers of the dominant form, they cannot assume automatic legitimacy.

This monitoring can reduce fluency in high-stakes situations. Fear of making an error produces hesitation, and hesitation is then read as lack of knowledge. The individual's effort to avoid stigma may create the performance used to confirm it.

Linguistic capital is therefore not simply knowledge of correct grammar. It includes the confidence to use language without excessive self-surveillance. That confidence is socially distributed.

A critical sociology of mobility recognizes the practical value of dominant language while refusing to treat it as proof of intelligence. People should have access to linguistic forms that expand opportunities. Yet institutions must also examine why only certain forms are convertible into authority.

## **2.3 Respectability and the Moral Burden of the Poor**

### **1. Respectability as a Demand to Prove Moral Worth**

Respectability refers to the demand that socially marginalized people demonstrate their moral worth through disciplined behaviour, appropriate dress, orderly family life, controlled speech, cleanliness, obedience, hard work, and emotional restraint. It is not simply a personal commitment to dignity or ethical conduct. It becomes a form of politics when disadvantaged groups are required to perform these qualities in order to receive recognition, protection, employment, education, or basic social acceptance.

In unequal societies, privileged groups are more often treated as complex individuals. Their mistakes can be explained through personality, circumstance, stress, youth, or bad luck. Marginalized people are more likely to be judged as representatives of an entire category. The conduct of one poor person can be used to confirm stereotypes about poverty. The actions of one migrant can be made to stand for migrant communities. A woman's dress or sexual behaviour can

be treated as evidence of the morality of her family. A working-class child's resistance at school can be interpreted as proof of defective upbringing.

Respectability politics develops within this unequal field of judgment. It tells marginalized people that they must appear especially disciplined because they are already suspected of indiscipline. They must appear especially peaceful because they are imagined as threatening. They must appear especially clean because poverty is associated with dirt. They must appear especially grateful because any access they receive is treated as a favour. They must appear especially responsible because disadvantages are commonly explained through irresponsibility.

This demand places the burden of disproving stigma upon the stigmatized. Instead of requiring institutions to abandon prejudicial assumptions, it asks individuals to present themselves in ways that dominant groups find reassuring. The marginalized person must demonstrate that they are not like the negative image attached to their category.

The historical scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham provides an important foundation for understanding this process. Du Bois (1903) examined how racial domination forced Black Americans to view themselves through the judgments of a society that denied their full humanity. His concept of double consciousness captures the strain of experiencing oneself both from within and through the hostile gaze of the dominant world. Respectability can be understood as one response to this divided condition. People learn to manage how they are seen because social survival depends partly upon controlling dominant interpretation.

Higginbotham's (1993) analysis of the politics of respectability shows how women's organizations in the Black Baptist church promoted discipline, education, cleanliness, proper conduct, religious morality, and orderly family life as strategies against racist dehumanization. These practices were not merely imitations of dominant culture. They could serve as collective resources for survival, institution-building, dignity, and political struggle. Yet they also established standards against which other members of the community could be judged.

Respectability is therefore deeply ambivalent. It can express self-respect and collective defence, but it can also accept the premise that marginalized groups must prove their humanity through exceptional conduct. It may challenge the accusation that a group lacks morality while leaving intact the power of dominant society to define what morality looks like.

The distinction between respect and respectability is important. Respect refers to recognition of a person's inherent dignity. Respectability is conditional. It requires conformity to approved behaviour before dignity is granted. Under a respectability regime, people are treated as worthy only when they appear hardworking, modest, disciplined, clean, heterosexual, family-oriented, emotionally controlled, and non-threatening.

These qualities are not inherently undesirable. Cleanliness, responsibility, care, education, and discipline can support individual and collective well-being. The sociological problem lies in their unequal enforcement. Privileged groups can violate these norms without losing their basic social legitimacy. Marginalized groups may comply fully and still remain exposed to discrimination.

Respectability thus converts rights into rewards for conduct. Access to fair treatment is made dependent on being the correct kind of poor person, woman, migrant, minority citizen, worker, or family. Those who cannot or refuse to perform the expected identity are treated as less deserving of protection.

The power of respectability lies in its moral appearance. It presents itself as advice rather than domination. Parents tell children to behave properly because they fear how institutions will respond. Community leaders promote discipline because they want members to succeed. Teachers insist on obedience because they believe it will prepare students for the world.

Such advice may be realistic. Marginalized people often do face harsher consequences for perceived misconduct. Yet practical realism can reproduce the very standards that create danger. The child learns not only that institutions are biased but that survival depends on appearing harmless to those institutions.

Respectability politics must therefore be understood as a response to inequality that can become one of inequality's instruments. It is

born from vulnerability but often shifts responsibility away from powerful institutions and toward the conduct of those already disadvantaged.

## **2. The Respectable Poor and the Moral Classification of Class**

Class inequality is sustained not only through economic differences but through moral distinctions between the deserving and undeserving. Poor and working-class people are rarely represented simply as people with fewer resources. They are classified according to behaviour, discipline, family life, consumption, appearance, and willingness to work.

The respectable poor are imagined as hardworking, modest, clean, responsible, patient, family-oriented, and grateful for assistance. They do not complain loudly, demand too much, display anger, or appear threatening. They manage limited resources carefully and demonstrate that hardship has not damaged their morality.

The disreputable poor are represented as lazy, disorderly, dependent, sexually irresponsible, badly dressed, noisy, aggressive, unclean, or wasteful. Their poverty is interpreted as the visible consequence of defective character. The social conditions producing hardship disappear behind judgments about conduct.

This distinction allows societies to acknowledge suffering without questioning inequality itself. Assistance can be directed toward those who prove deservingness, while others are blamed for their position. Poverty becomes a test of moral character rather than a relationship produced through labour markets, property, education, housing, health, and political power.

Beverley Skeggs's (1997) work is especially important in explaining the classed meaning of respectability. She argues that respectability is one of the most powerful signs through which class is recognized. It is usually most important to those whose respectability is doubted. Privileged groups possess a greater presumption of legitimacy, while working-class people must actively establish that they are decent.

For working-class women, respectability can require careful management of dress, sexuality, motherhood, domestic order, speech, and public behaviour. They may seek to distance themselves from

stereotypes of the careless mother, sexually irresponsible woman, aggressive neighbour, or dependent welfare recipient. These stereotypes are not merely cultural insults. They influence how institutions respond to people.

Respectability produces a hierarchy within the working class. Some people claim moral value by distinguishing themselves from others considered irresponsible or disorderly. A family may emphasize that it is poor but honest. A worker may insist that they are not like people who depend on benefits. A neighbourhood may separate respectable residents from those blamed for crime or public disorder.

These distinctions provide dignity under conditions in which economic status offers little recognition. Michèle Lamont's (2000) research with working-class men in France and the United States demonstrates how they draw moral boundaries. They may reject elite cultural superiority and instead emphasize honesty, hard work, loyalty, generosity, and care.

Such moral distinctions can be protective. They allow people to value themselves through qualities not monopolized by wealth or education. A low-paid worker may lack institutional prestige but possess a strong identity as a responsible parent, reliable neighbour, or honest employee.

However, moral boundaries can also reproduce dominant narratives. When disadvantaged people define their own respectability by condemning others as lazy, dirty, dependent, or immoral, structural inequality is fragmented into individual judgments. The working class becomes divided between those considered deserving and those considered responsible for their own hardship.

This internal division is encouraged by institutions. Welfare systems often require applicants to document need, responsible conduct, job-seeking effort, family status, disability, or moral innocence. Assistance is not presented as a social right but as something that must be earned through compliance.

Poor people must repeatedly disclose private information and submit to inspection. They may be required to demonstrate that they have searched for work, spent money appropriately, maintained acceptable family relationships, and avoided behaviour associated with irresponsibility.

Affluent people also receive public support through property law, tax arrangements, inheritance rules, subsidies, education, infrastructure, and financial protection. Yet these benefits are less often moralized. Wealthy recipients are not required to appear humble or grateful. Their access is treated as entitlement rather than dependency.

The unequal language of dependency reveals the class structure of respectability. A poor household receiving assistance is described as dependent upon society. A profitable business benefiting from public infrastructure or state support is described as economically productive. The distinction is ideological rather than purely financial.

Respectability also shapes public reactions to consumption. Poor people are expected to display deprivation correctly. Purchasing expensive clothing, technology, celebrations, or leisure can be treated as proof that they do not deserve assistance. Their consumption is placed under moral surveillance.

This expectation ignores the social importance of dignity, participation, celebration, and belonging. A family may spend money on a wedding, religious festival, mobile phone, or child's clothing because these objects carry emotional and social value. Yet dominant judgment reduces spending to evidence of poor discipline.

Affluent consumption is rarely judged through the same moral lens. Luxury can be interpreted as success, while modest pleasure among the poor is treated as irresponsibility. Respectability therefore regulates who is allowed visible enjoyment.

The respectable poor are expected to suffer quietly and manage scarcity efficiently. They must show enough deprivation to qualify for sympathy but not so much disorder that they appear blameworthy. They must ask for help without appearing demanding and accept assistance without challenging the conditions attached to it.

This narrow position demonstrates how respectability controls class through moral classification. It does not separate rich from poor. It ranks poor people according to how successfully they perform the values defined by those with greater power.

### **3. Humility, Gratitude, Cleanliness, Discipline, and Non-Threatening Conduct**

Respectability politics is communicated through a recognizable set of behavioural demands. Marginalized people are expected to appear humble, grateful, clean, disciplined, obedient, and non-threatening. Each expectation may appear reasonable when considered separately, but together they form a system of unequal social control.

Humility requires disadvantaged people to avoid appearing entitled. They must acknowledge their lower position without naming it too directly. A worker seeking improved conditions should remain polite. A student receiving financial support should avoid criticism of the institution. A migrant granted temporary protection should demonstrate appreciation. A poor family receiving assistance should not appear demanding.

This demand can transform legitimate claims into signs of arrogance. When marginalized people speak confidently about rights, they may be accused of ingratitude. Their anger is treated as evidence that they do not deserve support.

Privileged people are granted greater freedom to display entitlement. They can question officials, negotiate services, challenge teachers, demand professional attention, and insist on favourable treatment. The same behaviour that appears assertive in a high-status person can appear aggressive in someone with less power.

Gratitude operates similarly. Marginalized people are expected to express thanks for opportunities that others receive as normal entitlements. The scholarship student should be grateful to attend university. The low-paid worker should be grateful to have employment. The migrant should be grateful for permission to remain. The minority employee should be grateful for inclusion.

Gratitude can be a sincere ethical response. The problem emerges when it is demanded as a condition of belonging. Required gratitude discourages criticism. People fear that naming discrimination will make them appear unappreciative.

Cleanliness is another central sign of respectability. Poverty has long been associated with dirt, disease, disorder, and bodily failure. Poor people are therefore required to demonstrate that material de-

privation has not made them unclean. Homes, clothing, children, and bodies become evidence in moral evaluation.

Cleanliness is not merely a matter of personal discipline. It depends upon housing, water, sanitation, time, health, storage, transport, and access to safe environments. Treating it only as an individual quality conceals the material conditions required to maintain it.

The demand for cleanliness also carries classed aesthetic standards. A home can be clean but judged disorderly because it is crowded or highly decorated. Clothing can be washed but considered inappropriate because it does not match middle-class taste. Respectability therefore involves more than hygiene. It requires culturally approved presentation.

Discipline refers to punctuality, work, financial control, educational effort, sexual regulation, and emotional restraint. Poor and working-class people are repeatedly instructed that discipline is the route out of hardship. They should save, work harder, study, avoid risky relationships, delay pleasure, and make responsible choices.

Discipline can improve individual circumstances, but it cannot eliminate structural inequality. A disciplined worker may remain low-paid. A careful family may still face medical debt, insecure housing, or unemployment. Respectability converts these structural limits into tests of character.

Obedience is especially important in institutional settings. Schools, welfare offices, hospitals, police encounters, workplaces, and immigration systems often reward those who comply calmly. Resistance can result in punishment, delayed service, loss of opportunity, or increased surveillance.

The expectation of obedience is rarely applied equally. Privileged people can challenge institutions because they possess resources, confidence, and social protection. Marginalized people are told that survival depends on avoiding confrontation.

Non-threatening conduct combines all these demands. The respectable disadvantaged person should appear safe to dominant society. They must control anger, volume, bodily movement, clothing, and group presence. They should reassure others that they do not challenge established order.

Racialized men may face particularly intense pressure to appear non-threatening because their bodies are associated with danger. Women may be expected to appear modest and compliant. Migrants may avoid political expression to prevent accusations of disloyalty. Working-class youth may be disciplined for clothing, speech, or gathering in public. This demand is emotionally costly because it requires people to manage not only conduct but the fears and prejudices of others. They must anticipate how their presence will be read and adjust themselves in advance.

Respectability is therefore a form of embodied labour. People monitor posture, facial expression, volume, eye contact, clothing, and movement. They learn when confidence will be rewarded and when it will be punished. The effort may provide temporary safety, but it cannot guarantee protection. A person can appear calm, clean, educated, and obedient and still encounter discrimination. Prejudice may simply shift form. This limitation reveals the deeper problem. Respectability treats stigma as a problem of presentation. If the marginalized person can present correctly, they may avoid negative judgment. Yet stigma is produced by unequal social relations, not only by misunderstanding.

The demand for non-threatening behaviour also limits political action. Protest, anger, disruption, and refusal are easily classified as disrespectful. Movements are considered legitimate only when participants are polite, orderly, well-dressed, and willing to operate within approved boundaries.

Respectability thus separates acceptable claims from unacceptable methods. Dominant institutions reserve the right to decide whether marginalized people have protested correctly. The injustice that produced the protest receives less attention than the behaviour of protesters.

#### **4. Women and the Intensified Burden of Respectable Femininity**

Women experience respectability through highly gendered expectations. Their moral worth is often judged through clothing, sexuality, family relationships, motherhood, speech, emotional conduct, and bodily presentation. Women from poor, working-class, migrant, racialized, or minority backgrounds face particularly intense scrutiny because class and gender stereotypes reinforce one another.

Respectable femininity usually requires modesty, self-control, cleanliness, care for others, sexual restraint, and conformity to approved family roles. A respectable woman should appear nurturing but not weak, confident but not aggressive, attractive but not sexually excessive, ambitious but not neglectful of family, and independent without appearing disobedient.

These contradictory demands make respectability difficult to achieve. Women can be judged negatively for being too visible or insufficiently polished, too traditional or too modern, too quiet or too outspoken. The standard shifts according to setting and social identity.

Working-class women are frequently required to distance themselves from stereotypes of vulgarity, uncontrolled sexuality, poor motherhood, dependency, and disorder. Their bodies and homes become evidence in judgments about class character.

Skeggs shows how working-class women invest in respectability because their social value is not automatically recognized. They may emphasize cleanliness, care, proper appearance, and responsible motherhood. These practices provide dignity, but they also reveal how strongly class is moralized through femininity.

Middle-class femininity is more likely to be recognized as the general standard of appropriate womanhood. Its dress, speech, family organization, emotional style, and career expectations appear normal rather than class-specific. Working-class women must approach this standard while avoiding the accusation that they are pretending to be something they are not.

Women also carry the respectability of families and communities. Their behaviour is treated as reflection upon parents, husbands, ethnic groups, religious communities, and nations. A man's individual

misconduct may be treated as personal, while a woman's conduct can be used to judge the morality of an entire group.

This burden is visible in clothing regulation. Women are required to dress in ways that communicate professionalism, modesty, cultural belonging, and gender conformity. The same clothing can be judged differently depending on the body wearing it.

A poor or racialized woman may be sexualized in clothing that appears fashionable or confident on a privileged woman. Traditional clothing may be respected in community settings but treated as backward or unprofessional at work. Religious clothing may be interpreted as modesty, oppression, resistance, or threat depending on institutional context.

Respectability also regulates speech. Women are often expected to communicate calmly and politely even when describing discrimination, violence, or mistreatment. Anger can discredit the complaint. The woman must prove injury without becoming emotionally excessive.

This expectation can be particularly damaging in workplaces. Women from marginalized backgrounds may engage in emotional restraint and strategic self-presentation to maintain professional legitimacy. They monitor tone, avoid appearing confrontational, and withhold knowledge or criticism that could threaten dominant colleagues.

Such restraint is often praised as professionalism. Yet it represents unpaid emotional and epistemic labour. The woman must manage both her work and the institution's reaction to her identity.

Motherhood intensifies respectability demands. Poor mothers are judged through childcare, household organization, children's clothing, school attendance, nutrition, family size, and use of public assistance. Structural problems such as inadequate childcare, insecure work, or poor housing are transformed into evidence of maternal failure.

Affluent mothers can purchase services that support the appearance of ideal parenting. Poor mothers are judged against standards that require resources they do not possess. The standard remains individualized even though the ability to meet it is classed.

Respectability can also regulate sexuality and gender diversity. Women who reject heterosexual family norms, display sexual autonomy, or express gender nonconformity may be treated as threats to collective respectability. Communities facing external stigma may police these members especially harshly because they fear that visible difference will confirm dominant stereotypes.

The pressure is often justified through protection. Families may restrict daughters because they fear violence, gossip, discrimination, or damage to marriage prospects. Community leaders may promote modest behaviour because they understand how dominant institutions judge the group.

These fears can be realistic. Yet protective regulation transfers the cost of prejudice onto women. Instead of challenging those who discriminate, it restricts those who might become targets.

Respectability politics is therefore not only imposed by men or dominant institutions. Women can participate in enforcing it upon other women. Mothers, teachers, employers, community leaders, and peers may judge dress, motherhood, sexuality, and ambition.

This internal enforcement can create class divisions among women. Professionally successful women may distinguish themselves from those viewed as loud, dependent, sexualized, or improperly dressed. Their own respectability is strengthened by comparison with a less respectable figure.

The promise is that correct femininity will produce safety and mobility. Yet respectable women remain vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, violence, and exclusion. Compliance may change how an individual is treated in some settings, but it does not remove the structures that make gendered respectability necessary.

## **5. Minorities, Migrants, and the Burden of Representing the Group**

Minorities and migrants often experience respectability as a demand to represent their communities positively. Because dominant society treats them as members of a category before recognizing them as individuals, their conduct can be interpreted as evidence about the group.

A migrant employee may feel that mistakes will reinforce assumptions about migrants' competence. A minority student may believe that poor performance will confirm stereotypes about intelligence or discipline. A religious minority may carefully manage public conduct to avoid accusations of extremism, backwardness, or cultural incompatibility.

This representative burden produces heightened self-surveillance. Individuals do not merely ask whether behaviour is personally appropriate. They ask how it will affect perceptions of people like them.

Respectability may require minorities to demonstrate loyalty to the nation, fluency in the dominant language, economic productivity, family stability, and willingness to integrate. They must show that they are useful, peaceful, law-abiding, and grateful.

Migrants are often divided into deserving and undeserving categories. The respectable migrant works, pays taxes, learns the language, avoids political conflict, raises disciplined children, and expresses appreciation for the host society. The disreputable migrant is represented as dependent, criminal, culturally separate, overly fertile, politically demanding, or unwilling to integrate.

These classifications conceal the structures governing migration. Legal status, labour markets, housing discrimination, language access, and recognition of qualifications shape migrants' lives. Yet respectability makes outcomes appear to depend mainly on attitude.

A qualified migrant working in a low-status occupation may be told to improve language or integrate more fully. The non-recognition of credentials and discriminatory labour practices receive less attention. Structural exclusion is translated into a personal failure of cultural adaptation.

Minority communities may adopt respectability strategies because they recognize the dangers of stigma. Parents teach children to avoid certain clothing, places, friends, or forms of speech. Community leaders emphasize education, professional success, family stability, and disciplined public behaviour.

These strategies can create genuine resources. Educational achievement, professional networks, and collective institutions may strengthen community power. Respectability should not be dis-

missed as simple submission. It can be a rational response to hostile conditions.

However, the strategy can also reproduce dominant standards. Community members closest to middle-class norms are presented as evidence that the group deserves inclusion. Those unable or unwilling to conform become liabilities.

The respectable minority figure is often used politically against other members of the group. Successful professionals are presented as proof that discrimination can be overcome through effort and proper conduct. People facing poverty, criminalization, unstable housing, or exclusion are blamed for failing to follow the same path.

This use of exceptional success resembles meritocratic ideology. Individual mobility is used to deny structural inequality. The respectable migrant or minority professional becomes evidence that the system is fair.

The burden of representation can also suppress criticism. Minorities may fear that speaking publicly about racism, religious discrimination, or state violence will make them appear disloyal or ungrateful. Their acceptance depends upon demonstrating emotional restraint.

Dominant society often prefers minority representatives who explain difference without challenging power. They are celebrated as moderate, reasonable, and integrated. More critical voices are described as angry, divisive, radical, or unwilling to participate constructively.

Respectability therefore controls which forms of minority politics are heard. Claims must be presented through dominant language, professional appearance, and polite institutional channels. The content of criticism is shaped by the demand to remain acceptable.

Migrants with insecure legal status face even greater pressure. Their behaviour may affect employment, housing, asylum claims, residency, or citizenship. They must avoid any conduct that can be interpreted as danger or dependency.

For queer, transgender, religious, ethnic, or racial minorities, respectability can involve selecting which aspect of identity to make visible. A person may emphasize education, occupation, citizenship,

or family respectability to reduce the stigma attached to another identity.

This can be understood as respectable passing. The individual uses recognized markers of class and morality to become legible as deserving. Such passing may provide safety, but it requires concealment and emotional labour.

The wider limitation remains. Respectability asks minorities to demonstrate that they can fit within dominant society without disturbing it. It offers inclusion through conformity rather than transforming the standards of inclusion.

## 2.4 Cultural Mobility and the Cost of Becoming Acceptable

### 1. Cultural Mobility and the Acquisition of Dominant Codes

Cultural mobility refers to the process through which people learn the language, conduct, knowledge, tastes, and institutional habits associated with socially dominant groups. It usually accompanies upward movement through education, professional employment, rural-to-urban migration, marriage, or entry into elite social environments. Cultural mobility is therefore related to economic and occupational mobility but cannot be reduced either. A person may acquire a degree, salary, or professional title and remain uncertain about how to speak, dress, socialize, and present themselves in the institutions to which those achievements provide access. Advancement requires not only possession of resources but an understanding of the codes through which resources are recognized.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital provides a useful framework for explaining this process. Economic capital includes income, wealth, property, and material security. Social capital consists of relationships through which people obtain information, recommendations, protection, and opportunity. Cultural capital includes credentials, language styles, knowledge, manners, tastes, bodily dispositions, and familiarity with institutions. Cultural mobility often begins with the acquisition of institutionalized cultural capital in the form of a degree, examination result, scholarship, or professional qualifica-

tion. Yet successful participation in higher-status spaces also requires embodied cultural capital, including confidence, conversational ease, appropriate self-presentation, and an intuitive understanding of unwritten rules.

Dominant codes are rarely explained completely. Universities publish academic regulations, but they may not teach students how to develop relationships with professors, request recommendations, challenge an assessment, find internships, or present uncertainty as intellectual curiosity. Workplaces provide job descriptions but do not always explain how to speak during meetings, build alliances, display ambition, or approach senior colleagues. Elite social settings may have no formal rules at all, yet participants are evaluated through accent, dress, posture, food knowledge, humour, emotional control, and familiarity with cultural references. People raised within privileged families often absorb these codes gradually and experience them as ordinary behaviour. Those entering from less privileged backgrounds must identify and learn them consciously.

Annette Lareau's (2011) research with Black and white families in the United States distinguishes between concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth. These patterns help explain how institutional familiarity develops before adulthood, without defining every family within a class. Middle-class children are often encouraged to negotiate with adults, participate in organized activities, ask questions, and treat institutions as systems that can be managed. These experiences can produce confidence, vocabulary, and a sense of entitlement that schools and professional institutions recognize positively. Working-class children may develop independence, practical ability, close kinship ties, and respect for adult authority, but these capacities are not rewarded in the same way. The result is not an absolute difference in intelligence or ability. It is a difference between the culture learned at home and the culture recognized by powerful institutions.

Cultural mobility therefore requires some people to acquire in adulthood what others learned from childhood. They must study the appropriate way to communicate with authority, describe achievements, organize leisure, dress for formal settings, and participate in unfamiliar conversations. These skills may provide real opportunities and can become genuine parts of a person's identity. However, the

requirement to acquire them also communicates that the culture of origin is institutionally insufficient. Mobility becomes a process of translation in which individuals make themselves recognizable to groups that already possess the authority to define intelligence, professionalism, respectability, and social fit.

## **2. First-Generation and Scholarship Students in Elite Education**

First-generation students are commonly defined as students whose parents have not completed a university degree, although institutional definitions vary. Their admission may be the result of individual effort, parental sacrifice, collective expectation, and years of careful planning. Yet formal entry into a university does not guarantee cultural belonging. Universities are not merely places where knowledge is taught. They are social fields with assumptions about how students should speak, seek assistance, participate in discussion, manage time, choose courses, develop professional networks, and imagine their futures. Students from families familiar with higher education often recognize these expectations before arriving. First-generation students must learn them while already being evaluated according to them.

Research by Diane Reay, Gill Crozier, and John Clayton (2009) shows how working-class students at an elite English university negotiate an unfamiliar institutional culture, experiencing gains as well as tensions. Middle-class students may regard higher education as a natural continuation of family life. They often know that professors can be approached, grades can be questioned, opportunities can be requested, and academic difficulty does not automatically mean that they do not belong. Working-class students may enter with equivalent academic achievement but interpret uncertainty differently. A difficult seminar, unfamiliar theoretical text, or unsuccessful assignment can be experienced as evidence that they are intellectually inferior rather than culturally unfamiliar with the institution.

This misinterpretation is intensified by the confidence of privileged peers. Students raised in professional families may speak before fully forming an argument, disagree with teachers, and present themselves as future academics, lawyers, executives, or policymakers. Their ease can be mistaken for greater intelligence. First-genera-

tion students may prepare more carefully, remain silent until certain, and avoid requesting help because they fear exposing weakness. The institution then interprets their caution as passivity or limited engagement. Cultural inequality thus produces the behaviour used to justify further inequality.

Scholarship students face an additional contradiction. Financial assistance may provide access to elite institutions while making class difference unusually visible. Their classmates may discuss international travel, expensive hobbies, family business, private schooling, and unpaid internships as ordinary experiences. The scholarship student may be able to pay tuition but remain unable to participate in social events, trips, professional clothing purchases, and informal activities through which relationships are formed. Declining invitations can be interpreted as a lack of sociability, while working for income can be interpreted as inadequate commitment to university life.

Scholarship status can also impose a moral expectation of gratitude. Students may feel that criticizing the institution would make them appear ungrateful for the opportunity they have received. They are expected to demonstrate that support was correctly invested by maintaining high performance, disciplined behaviour, and visible ambition. Wealthier students can change degrees, fail courses, take time away, or experiment with careers because their families can absorb uncertainty. Scholarship students often experience access as conditional upon continuous success. A single mistake appears capable of threatening the entire mobility project.

Anthony Abraham Jack's (2019) distinction between the privileged poor and the doubly disadvantaged demonstrates that low-income students do not all enter elite education with the same cultural preparation. Those who attended selective secondary schools may already understand many elite educational codes, even if they lack economic resources. Students arriving from under-resourced schools may encounter elite institutional culture for the first time at university. Their adjustment therefore involves academic learning, social translation, and financial survival simultaneously. These categories concern income and school background, not first-generation status alone. Access policies that ignore these differences can place responsibility for adaptation entirely on students rather than changing the cultural organization of the university.

### 3. Rural-to-Urban Migration and the Cultural Codes of the City

Rural-to-urban migration is frequently described as a movement toward employment, education, infrastructure, and modern opportunity. It is also a form of cultural mobility. Migrants must learn how to navigate urban transport, bureaucracy, housing, labour markets, educational institutions, and social networks. They encounter new expectations regarding speech, dress, time, privacy, gender, consumption, and personal ambition. The transition is not merely geographical. It involves movement between cultural worlds that assign different meanings to behaviour and identity.

Rural accents, clothing, manners, and forms of knowledge can become sources of stigma in cities. An accent that communicates belonging and trust in a village may be heard as evidence of backwardness in a university or workplace. Practical knowledge of agriculture, family organization, environmental change, or community relations may receive little recognition in institutions that reward formal credentials and urban communication styles. Migrants learn that some aspects of their background must be translated before urban listeners will recognize their competence.

Urban institutions can introduce unfamiliar schedules and expectations of punctuality, speed, privacy, and impersonal exchange. The contrast varies by occupation and locality: rural work can also require strict timing, and urban life also depends on family and community obligations. Migrants who arrive late because of distant housing or unreliable transport may be judged as undisciplined rather than structurally disadvantaged. Those who prioritize family responsibilities can be treated as insufficiently committed to professional life.

Migrants often alter speech, clothing, food, and bodily presentation to reduce stigma. These changes can be practical and sincerely desired. Urban education and employment may expand confidence, knowledge, income, and independence. A migrant may take pride in mastering new systems, supporting relatives, and gaining opportunities that were unavailable at home. Yet the same transformation can generate embarrassment when family members visit the city or when urban colleagues ask questions about origins. The migrant can be

come ashamed of feeling ashamed of the people and practices that formed them.

Return visits make the cultural tension visible. Relatives may celebrate the migrant's progress while noticing changes in pronunciation, diet, clothing, politics, marriage expectations, or attitudes toward health and education. These changes can be interpreted as evidence that migrants now consider rural life inferior. The migrant may respond by restoring local speech and concealing urban habits while at home, then resuming professional self-presentation in the city. This movement between codes allows continued participation in both settings but can also produce the feeling that no single version of the self is sufficient everywhere.

#### **4. Lower-Middle-Class Professionals and the Anxiety of Maintaining Mobility**

Lower-middle-class professionals frequently occupy an unstable position between working-class insecurity and established middle-class privilege. They may possess university degrees, professional titles, secure-looking employment, and higher incomes than their parents while lacking inherited property, influential networks, and protection from economic crisis. Their mobility is genuine, but it can remain fragile. A period of unemployment, illness, family emergency, or debt may threaten achievements that appear permanent from the outside.

Professional mobility requires more than technical competence. Workers must understand how to dress, communicate with senior colleagues, participate in meetings, discuss leisure, and present ambition. They learn which emotions can be displayed, how directly disagreement should be expressed, and how achievements can be mentioned without appearing arrogant. Those raised around professionals may experience these practices as ordinary. Lower-middle-class entrants often acquire them through observation, correction, and occasional embarrassment.

The appearance of professional status can require significant economic investment. Appropriate clothing, transport, housing in a respectable location, technology, children's education, social events, and family ceremonies become part of maintaining recognition.

These expenses are not simply consumer desires. They are investments in cultural credibility. A professional who appears unable to meet expected standards may be judged as unsuccessful, disorganized, or not fully suited to the occupational class they have entered.

Lower-middle-class professionals also occupy contrasting positions in different social settings. Among relatives, they may be viewed as financially successful and expected to support parents, siblings, cousins, and community members. Among colleagues, their salary may appear modest compared with peers who possess inherited wealth, family property, and international education. The same individual can therefore experience privilege at home and disadvantage at work. Formal income does not fully describe class position because family obligations and inherited resources differ considerably.

This intermediate location can produce an intense fear of downward mobility. The individual has moved far enough to understand the value of elite cultural capital but not far enough to feel secure without it. They may closely monitor their own conduct and invest heavily in children's education so that the family's mobility becomes permanent across generations. Their discipline can be misread as uncomplicated ambition when it is also shaped by anxiety. Cultural performance serves not only to enter professional space but to prevent exclusion from it.

## **5. Marriage, Family Expectations, and the Social Consolidation of Mobility**

Cultural mobility affects marriage because intimate partnerships bring together families, habits, resources, and class histories. Education and occupational advancement can change whom a person regards as a suitable partner. Shared credentials, language styles, professional ambitions, consumption patterns, and comfort in elite settings become signs of compatibility. These preferences may be sincerely personal while also functioning as mechanisms through which class position is consolidated.

Families often evaluate potential partners through more than occupation or income. They observe accent, clothing, table manners, food practices, home environment, religious conduct, family reputation, and the style of ceremonies. These details are interpreted as evidence

of upbringing. An upwardly mobile professional from a rural or working-class family may possess an elite qualification but remain culturally marked through parents, relatives, neighbourhood, or family customs.

This situation requires active management. The mobile individual may prepare relatives for formal meetings, modify wedding practices, change speech, or minimize cultural differences that might be judged as excessive, backward, or unsophisticated. Marriage therefore extends self-editing from the individual to the family. Acceptance by a higher-status family can depend on demonstrating that mobility has transformed not only occupational position but personal and domestic culture.

Cross-class partnerships can also produce disagreements about money, privacy, care, and obligation. One partner may understand financial support for relatives as a moral duty, while the other regards it as poor financial planning or inadequate personal boundaries. One may prefer large ceremonies because they express family honour and collective belonging, while the other prefers restraint as a sign of refinement. These conflicts appear personally but often reflect different class histories.

Families may experience mixed emotions when one member marries into a more privileged group. The relationship can bring pride, security, and expanded opportunity while also creating fear of cultural loss. Relatives may worry that the mobile person will become distant or ashamed of them. The individual may feel pressure to prove loyalty to the family of origin while adapting to the expectations of the new household. Marriage thus becomes another location in which upward mobility produces both recognition and divided belonging.

# Institutions of Everyday Power

Schools, Workplaces, Families, and the State

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- 3.1 Schools and the Manufacture of Unequal Confidence
- 3.2 Workplaces and the Performance of Professionalism
- 3.3 Family as Safety Net and Social Trap
- 3.4 The State, Bureaucracy, and Unequal Treatment

## 3.1 Schools and the Manufacture of Unequal Confidence

### 1. The Promise and Paradox of Equal Opportunity

Modern schools are commonly presented as institutions of equal opportunity. They promise that children can overcome the circumstances of birth through learning, effort, discipline, and academic achievement. In this account, education weakens the influence of inherited class position by judging students according to ability rather than family wealth, occupation, neighbourhood, or social connection. A child from a poor household is theoretically able to enter the same examination system, acquire the same qualifications, and compete for the same occupations as a child from an affluent family. The legitimacy of modern inequality depends heavily upon this promise. Differences in adult income and status appear fairer when social positions are believed to have been allocated through education rather than inherited directly.

Schools do provide knowledge, opportunity, social contact, and routes of mobility. Literacy, numeracy, scientific understanding, historical knowledge, and professional training can transform individual lives. Public education has allowed many people to enter occupations and social worlds that were unavailable to earlier generations. A sociological critique of schooling should not deny these achievements. The central issue is that schools perform two functions simultaneously. They can expand opportunities while also reproducing the inequalities students bring with them. The same institution can teach knowledge, reward effort, and create mobility for some while converting inherited advantage into apparently deserved academic success.

Students do not enter school as socially identical individuals. They arrive with unequal access to secure housing, nutrition, healthcare, technology, books, quiet study space, private tutoring, transport, and educated adults who understand institutional procedures. Some parents know how to select schools, communicate with teachers, challenge decisions, arrange extracurricular activities, and prepare children for examinations. Other families may value education deeply but lack the time, money, confidence, or institutional knowledge

needed to convert that value into recognized educational advantage. When schools assess students without accounting for these differences, they can transform unequal preparation into unequal achievement.

The promise of equal opportunity is therefore complicated by unequal starting points, unequal journeys, and unequal protection from failure. A child from a wealthy family can recover from a weak examination result through tutoring, a different school, another qualification, or family connections. A working-class student may depend on one examination or scholarship. Failure carries different consequences because families possess unequal resources with which to absorb it. The same educational rule can thus operate differently across class positions.

Schooling reproduces inequality most effectively when it appears not to do so. Formal procedures are presented as neutral, and differences in outcomes are attributed to effort, intelligence, discipline, or attitude. The social history behind academic performance disappears. Schools do not simply reflect class inequality from outside. Through curriculum, language, teacher expectations, discipline, tracking, credentials, and institutional reputation, they actively translate social advantage into educational distinction. The resulting hierarchy appears meritocratic because it has been certified by examinations and qualifications.

## **2. Cultural Capital, Habitus, and the Hidden Curriculum**

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus explain how schools reward the culture of advantaged groups while appearing neutral. Cultural capital includes knowledge, language, manners, confidence, tastes, credentials, and familiarity with socially valued institutions. Children acquire these resources through family life long before schools formally assess them. A child raised around books, professional conversation, organized activities, museums, educational technology, and adults familiar with universities develops dispositions that resemble the expectations of schooling. These dispositions are not necessarily taught as deliberate examination strategies. They are absorbed as ordinary ways of speaking, asking questions, interpreting texts, and interacting with authority.

Habitus refers to the durable dispositions formed through a person's social conditions. It shapes what feels natural, possible, and appropriate. In school, students whose habitus resembles the institutional culture are more likely to experience confidence and belonging. They understand how to respond to teachers, how much explanation is expected, and what kinds of knowledge count as intelligent. Students whose home experiences differ from school expectations may possess valuable knowledge and ability while feeling uncertain about the institution's rules. The mismatch can appear as lack of talent when it is partly a lack of familiarity.

The curriculum contributes to this inequality by selecting particular forms of language, literature, history, science, art, and cultural knowledge as worthy of study. Curriculum decisions are necessary, but they are not culturally neutral. They reflect judgments about which knowledge is universal, serious, advanced, or civilizing. Students familiar with these traditions receive an advantage because new material connects with knowledge already present at home. Others encounter both unfamiliar content and unfamiliar methods of interpretation. The first group appears naturally able, while the second must perform additional cultural translation.

Schools also communicate a hidden curriculum. Alongside formal subjects, students learn punctuality, obedience, competition, emotional restraint, self-presentation, and acceptance of evaluation. Bowles and Gintis (2011) argue that school organization often resembles the hierarchical relations of employment. Students follow schedules, respond to authority, complete assigned tasks, and compete for rewards. However, the hidden curriculum is not identical for all students. Those placed in advanced programmes may be encouraged to discuss, lead, solve problems, and exercise judgment. Students in lower tracks may receive greater emphasis on compliance, routine, and basic task completion.

Cultural capital becomes especially powerful because schools misrecognize it as individual merit. The student who speaks confidently is described as intelligent. The child who questions a teacher is seen as intellectually curious when the behaviour fits middle-class expectations. A student who remains silent may be judged unmotivated, although silence could reflect respect for authority, linguistic insecurity, or fear of correction. Schools thus individualize differences that

were socially produced. The educational system rewards cultural familiarity while describing the reward as recognition of ability.

### **3. Language, Communication, and Educational Recognition**

Language is one of the main mechanisms through which class advantage enters schooling. Students arrive with different accents, dialects, vocabularies, narrative styles, and forms of interaction. Schools usually privilege a standardized language associated with formal education, professional employment, and dominant social groups. Students who already speak in ways close to this standard can express knowledge without translating themselves. Other students must learn subject content and the linguistic form through which the institution recognizes that content.

Basil Bernstein's (1971) distinction between restricted and elaborated codes attempted to explain how class conditions shape communication. Elaborated codes rely more heavily on explicit explanation, abstraction, and language that does not assume a shared context. Restricted codes can communicate through condensed meanings and common experience. These are orientations to meaning in social contexts, not a ranking of dialects or intelligence. Schools tend to reward elaborated forms because academic assessment requires students to make reasoning visible. However, simplified interpretations of Bernstein often treated working-class speech as deficient rather than differently organized. This allowed educational inequality to be blamed on families that supposedly failed to teach children proper language.

William Labov (1972) challenged linguistic deficit theories by demonstrating that nonstandard varieties are grammatically systematic and capable of expressing complex thought. Students who appear inarticulate in formal interviews may display rich reasoning, humour, and narrative ability in familiar settings. Their performance changes because interaction is shaped by confidence, power, and the listener's expectations. A child's hesitation before a teacher cannot automatically be treated as evidence of limited intelligence. It may reflect awareness that both the content and form of speech are being judged.

Language inequality affects written assessment as well as classroom participation. Academic writing requires control of vocabulary,

argument, structure, and formal tone. These are learnable skills, but students receive unequal preparation. Families familiar with education may discuss essays, correct grammar, purchase books, and explain institutional expectations. Students without this support must infer the rules from teacher feedback, often after being penalized for not knowing them. Formal language then appears to reveal intellectual ability when it also reflects unequal access to linguistic capital.

Schools face a genuine challenge because students need access to dominant language forms that govern universities and employment. Refusing to teach standardized speech and academic writing would not eliminate their social value. The more equitable approach is additive rather than corrective. Schools can expand students' linguistic repertoires without describing home languages as broken or unintelligent. They can distinguish between learning a powerful institutional code and accepting the belief that speakers closest to that code are naturally more capable.

#### **4. Teacher Expectations and the Formation of Academic Identity**

Teachers do not encounter students as neutral collections of ability. They form expectations based on previous performance, behaviour, language, appearance, family reputation, school records, gender, ethnicity, and class-coded forms of confidence. These expectations influence how teachers interpret participation, error, effort, and potential. A student regarded as capable may receive patience, challenging work, detailed feedback, and opportunities to recover from mistakes. A student expected to struggle may receive simplified tasks, closer discipline, and fewer invitations to demonstrate complex ability.

Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) Pygmalion study tested whether experimentally induced teacher expectations could influence pupils' development. Teachers were told that randomly selected pupils were likely to show unusual intellectual growth. The researchers reported greater gains on an intelligence test for some of these pupils, particularly in the younger grades. The findings helped establish teacher expectations as a research question, but measurement and methodological criticisms limit what can be concluded from this experiment alone. Specific mechanisms, such as differences in attention and feedback, require evidence beyond the original result.

Later research has added important qualifications. Jussim and Harber's (2005) review found that self-fulfilling expectation effects occur but are generally small; expectations also predict outcomes because they reflect prior achievement. Stronger effects may occur among some stigmatized groups, but effects do not necessarily accumulate over time and can dissipate. Teacher expectations therefore deserve scrutiny without being treated as a universal or sufficient explanation of educational inequality.

Teacher expectations affect self-concept because children use adult responses to understand their own abilities. Students repeatedly invited to lead, answer, and attempt difficult work develop an identity as capable learners. Those corrected mainly for behaviour may come to see school as a place where they are managed rather than intellectually valued. Confidence is therefore not merely an internal personality trait. It is built or weakened through repeated interactions in which students learn whether their voices are expected to matter.

The relationship between expectation and achievement can become circular. Students who are treated as promising gain confidence and experience, which improves performance and appears to justify the original expectation. Students treated as weak become cautious, disengaged, or oppositional, and their response is interpreted as proof that the teacher was correct. Schools can interrupt this cycle through reflective teaching, varied assessment, high expectations combined with support, and careful separation of unfamiliarity from inability. Without such practices, teacher judgment becomes one of the mechanisms through which social stereotypes enter academic trajectories.

## **5. Discipline, Tracking, and Unequal Training of Conduct**

School discipline is commonly justified as necessary for safety, order, and learning. Students must respect others, attend regularly, and allow teaching to occur. Yet discipline is not applied outside class relations. Schools differ in what they expect from students and in how they interpret confidence, resistance, emotion, and bodily conduct. Working-class and minority students are more likely to be judged through subjective categories such as defiance, disrespect, aggression, poor attitude, or lack of discipline.

Bowles and Gintis (2011) argue that schools prepare students for different locations in the labour hierarchy. Students directed toward professional and managerial futures are more likely to receive training in independence, decision-making, creativity, and leadership. Those expected to enter routine or subordinate work are more likely to receive training in punctuality, compliance, and acceptance of external control. The contrast can be summarized as confidence training for some and obedience training for others.

Middle-class children often enter school with experience negotiating with adults. Their parents may encourage them to ask questions, explain preferences, and seek accommodation from institutions. Teachers can interpret this conduct as confidence and intellectual independence. Working-class children may be taught greater respect for adult authority or may communicate more directly. The same behaviour can receive different meanings depending on class. Negotiation appears mature in one student and challenging in another.

Tracking reinforces these differences by placing students into different curricula and expectations. Advanced groups receive complex material, discussion, independent research, and preparation for higher education. Lower tracks may emphasize basic skills, discipline, and practical training. Placement is presented as a response to ability, but it can reflect teacher expectations, previous school quality, language, family advocacy, and access to enrichment. Once students are tracked, the educational experience itself produces wider differences.

Discipline can also generate resistance. Students who feel that school offers little recognition may reject its authority and create oppositional cultures. Paul Willis's (1977) study of a group of working-class boys in England showed how resistance to school could express a partial understanding of unequal rewards. The boys rejected academic obedience and valued manual masculinity, humour, and peer solidarity. Yet their resistance helped direct them toward the same working-class jobs the school expected them to enter. Resistance exposed domination while also reproducing it.

## 3.2 Workplaces and the Performance of Professionalism

### 1. Professionalism as a Cultural and Classed Performance

Professionalism is commonly understood as the competent, ethical, and responsible performance of work. It includes reliability, relevant knowledge, respect for colleagues, and commitment to organizational standards. These qualities are important in almost every occupation. Sociologically, however, professionalism cannot be reduced to technical competence or ethical conduct. It is also a cultural performance shaped by class, gender, race, language, institutional history, and dominant ideas about how a legitimate worker should look, speak, move, and behave. Workplaces evaluate not only whether people can complete tasks but whether they resemble the socially recognized image of a professional.

This image is rarely neutral. It often reflects the embodied culture of upper-middle-class groups that have historically occupied positions of organizational authority. The ideal professional speaks calmly, dresses with restraint, maintains controlled body language, expresses ambition confidently, participates comfortably in formal and informal conversation, and appears familiar with the expectations of institutional life. Some of these characteristics can support effective work, but their use as general measures of competence can also reward familiarity with dominant cultural conventions. Workers who possess them are described as polished, articulate, mature, leadership-oriented, or client-ready. Those who do not may be described as rough, awkward, overly emotional, informal, or lacking professional presence.

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital explain why such differences appear natural. Habitus consists of durable dispositions acquired through family life, education, neighbourhood, and repeated social experience. Cultural capital includes language, manners, knowledge, tastes, credentials, confidence, and familiarity with institutions. Workers from privileged families often enter professional settings already possessing the codes that organizations reward. They understand how to speak with authority, approach senior people, describe achievements, and participate in elite social en-

vironments. Because these behaviours were learned gradually, they appear effortless. Their class origins disappear, and they are interpreted as personal qualities.

Working-class employees may possess strong technical knowledge, reliability, practical judgment, and commitment but lack the cultural style preferred by the organization. Their accent may be marked, their clothing may appear slightly incorrect, or their communication may be more direct. They may avoid self-promotion because it feels boastful or approach authority cautiously because earlier institutions rewarded obedience. These differences do not demonstrate lower capacity. They reflect a mismatch between the worker's social formation and the workplace's dominant culture.

Professionalism therefore operates as a classification system. It separates workers whose conduct appears naturally appropriate from those who must consciously learn how to perform legitimacy. The first group is evaluated primarily through what it contributes. The second may be evaluated simultaneously through work, background, speech, appearance, and emotional style. When professional culture is treated as universal, class advantage is misrecognized as merit. Workplaces reward workers who already know how to look and sound like the people who control advancement, then present the resulting hierarchy as evidence of ability.

## **2. Dress, Appearance, and the Professional Body**

Dress is one of the most immediate ways through which professionalism is judged because appearance is visible before a worker demonstrates technical knowledge, reliability, or competence. Clothing communicates occupation, gender, class position, cultural identity, and familiarity with organizational expectations. Formal dress codes may appear straightforward, but professional appearance usually depends on subtle distinctions involving fit, fabric, colour, grooming, footwear, accessories, and the degree of visible effort. These distinctions are often easier to recognize for people raised around professional employment because they have observed how authority, competence, and status are presented in workplaces.

Professional dress is therefore not simply a matter of wearing formal clothing. It requires knowledge of what kind of formality is ap-

propriate in a particular institution. A suit that appears suitable in one workplace may seem excessive in another. A worker may follow the written dress code and still be judged negatively because the clothing does not match the organization's unwritten expectations. Such judgments reveal that professionalism is partly cultural. Employees must know not only what to wear but also how to make their appearance seem natural and unforced.

Elite professional style is often based on restraint. Clothing should appear expensive enough to signal competence and stability but not so visibly expensive that it suggests vanity. It should be fashionable without appearing experimental and conservative without seeming outdated. The ideal appearance often communicates that the wearer understands quality without needing to display status openly. Achieving this balance requires both economic resources and cultural knowledge.

A worker may purchase formal clothes and still be judged as poorly dressed because the cut, combination, fabric, or level of formality does not match the unwritten code. This illustrates the difference between possessing clothing and possessing the cultural knowledge required to use it effectively. Those unfamiliar with elite professional environments may rely on visible signs of formality, while privileged workers may understand that status is often expressed through subtlety.

Class differences become moralized through these judgments. A privileged worker's understated appearance may be interpreted as confidence, maturity, and good taste. A working-class employee's brighter colours, visible branding, jewellery, or highly formal dress may be described as excessive, insecure, or inappropriate. Yet such presentation may express pride, respect for the workplace, personal achievement, or unfamiliarity with elite conventions of understatement. The judgment therefore concerns more than clothing. It classifies the person's relationship to status and evaluates whether that relationship appears natural.

The professional body is also regulated through posture, movement, weight, hair, facial expression, voice, and physical fitness. Workers are expected to appear energetic, controlled, healthy, and emotionally stable. Slouching, visible tiredness, nervous movement, or physical discomfort may be interpreted as a lack of confidence or

discipline even when they result from illness, disability, long commutes, stress, or exhausting working conditions.

Certain sports and leisure activities can also function as markers of discipline and leadership, even when they have little relevance to the job. Participation in skiing, rowing, sailing, golf, or endurance sport may communicate class background, access to resources, and familiarity with elite networks. These activities can then be reinterpreted as evidence of competitiveness, resilience, teamwork, or strategic thinking (Sølvberg & Rivera, 2025). The qualities attributed to the activity may be professional, but access to the activity is socially unequal.

Appearance standards intersect with gender, race, religion, disability, and age. Women may be expected to appear attractive but not sexual, authoritative but not severe, and fashionable but not distracting. Racialized workers may face pressure to modify hairstyles, clothing, accent, or bodily expression to match white middle-class expectations. Religious dress may be described as incompatible with neutrality, modernity, or client comfort. Older workers may be judged as outdated, while younger workers may be seen as insufficiently serious. Disabled workers may face standards of movement, energy, and bodily control designed around able-bodied norms.

These judgments are often defended as neutral requirements of professionalism, although they reflect the preferences of historically dominant groups. Once these preferences become institutionalized, they appear natural rather than social. Workers who do not fit them must make additional efforts to become acceptable.

The requirement to maintain a professional body also imposes unequal costs. Clothing, grooming, exercise, healthcare, transport, and time are easier to manage for workers with greater income and family support. Employees with caregiving responsibilities, insecure housing, long journeys, disability, or limited income may struggle to maintain the appearance of effortless order. Workplaces may then interpret unequal resources as differences in discipline, confidence, or commitment.

The professional body therefore becomes a mechanism through which material inequality is converted into moral and occupational evaluation. Workers are not judged only on what they can do. They are also judged on whether their appearance communicates familiari-

ty with the classed, gendered, and cultural expectations of the organization.

### **3. Accent, English Fluency, and the Linguistic Marketplace**

Language is a central component of classed professionalism. Workers are evaluated through accent, vocabulary, grammar, tone, speed, and conversational confidence. Professional speech is usually described as clear, neutral, polished, and articulate. These terms appear to refer to communication quality, but they often reward language styles associated with dominant educational and class backgrounds.

Bourdieu's idea of the linguistic marketplace explains why some forms of speech possess greater value. Language does not carry the same authority in every setting. A regional accent may communicate trust and solidarity within a community but lose value in a corporate office. Standardized English, an elite urban accent, or internationally recognized professional vocabulary can function as linguistic capital because organizations associate them with intelligence, education, and global competence.

English fluency is particularly important in postcolonial and globalized labour markets. It can provide access to multinational firms, law, technology, higher education, development organizations, and international mobility. Yet access to high-quality English education is deeply unequal. Privileged families purchase private schooling, tutoring, digital media, travel, and opportunities for repeated practice. Workers who later speak confidently are treated as individually talented, while the resources that produced fluency disappear.

Accent discrimination is often misrecognized as a legitimate concern about communication. Employers may say that a candidate lacks clarity, client readiness, or executive presence. The same words spoken in a prestigious accent may receive a more positive evaluation. Listeners are more familiar with dominant speech and therefore process it more easily. This familiarity is mistaken for objective clarity, while unfamiliarity becomes evidence of deficiency in the speaker.

Working-class and multilingual employees often respond through code-switching. They change pronunciation, vocabulary, tone, and rhythm according to audience. This can be an important occupational skill, but it is also labour. The employee must monitor speech while

performing the job. They may fear that stress, anger, or informality will reveal an accent associated with lower status. Dominant speakers can focus on content, while stigmatized speakers must manage both content and presentation.

Language inequality becomes professional inequality when fluency is confused with intelligence. A technically capable worker may hesitate because they are speaking in a second language or monitoring accent. Another worker may sound confident without possessing greater knowledge. Organizations reward the appearance of certainty and then interpret the reward as evidence of competence. Linguistic familiarity becomes professional merit.

#### **4. Communication Style, Emotional Control, and Body Language**

Professional communication involves more than vocabulary. It includes how workers disagree, ask questions, present achievements, respond to criticism, and display emotion. Organizations tend to reward communication styles associated with controlled confidence. The ideal employee speaks directly but politely, accepts feedback without visible defensiveness, and communicates ambition without appearing arrogant.

These expectations are classed because families and schools teach different relationships to authority. Middle-class children are often encouraged to negotiate, ask adults questions, and explain personal preferences. These experiences prepare them to speak comfortably with managers and senior professionals. Working-class children may be taught greater deference to authority or may learn direct communication in environments where clarity and practical action are valued. Neither style is inherently superior, but workplaces often interpret the first as leadership and the second as either passivity or roughness.

Emotional control is also evaluated unequally. Privileged workers are more likely to have their frustration interpreted as commitment or confidence. Marginalized employees may be judged as difficult, aggressive, unstable, or insufficiently professional for displaying comparable emotion. Women and racialized workers frequently face

contradictory demands. They must appear confident enough to lead but restrained enough not to threaten established authority.

Body language operates through similar classifications. Eye contact, posture, handshake, facial expression, physical distance, and speed of movement contribute to impressions of confidence and trustworthiness. These behaviours differ across cultures and social contexts. A person who avoids direct eye contact may be expressing respect, while an evaluator interprets the behaviour as insecurity. Someone who speaks with animated gestures may be read as passionate in one body and uncontrolled in another.

Professional communication therefore requires workers from disadvantaged backgrounds to engage in self-monitoring. They learn how much emotion is acceptable, when humour can be used, and how to disagree without becoming marked as a problem. This monitoring can be exhausting because the rules remain implicit and interpretations are inconsistent. Workers discover them through correction, exclusion, or stalled advancement.

The organization often treats successful adaptation as evidence of natural professionalism. It does not record the labour required to achieve it. Emotional restraint, accent modification, and bodily control become invisible forms of work. Employees who cannot or refuse to perform them are judged as lacking fit even when their technical performance is strong.

## **5. Unpaid Internships, Referrals, and the Hidden Infrastructure of Entry**

Recruitment is presented as a competition among individuals, but access to professional work often depends on resources acquired before an application is submitted. Unpaid internships, informal referrals, elite degrees, extracurricular activities, and knowledge of recruitment cycles provide hidden advantages. They allow privileged candidates to build experience while appearing more motivated than applicants who lacked access to the same opportunities.

Unpaid internships are especially classed because participation requires the ability to work without income. Students may need to pay for transport, accommodation, clothing, food, and technology while receiving no salary. Families with greater resources can finance these

periods as investments in future careers. Working-class students may need paid employment and are therefore excluded from experiences employers later treat as evidence of commitment.

The inequality is concealed because the final résumé records experience but not the financial conditions that made it possible. One candidate appears proactive and professionally prepared. Another appears to have fewer relevant experiences because they spent the same period in paid work supporting themselves or their families. Recruitment converts freedom from economic necessity into a sign of superior ambition.

Informal referrals also shape entry. Vacancies may be advertised publicly, but applicants connected to employees, alumni, clients, or professional networks receive information, advice, and credibility. A recommendation reassures employers that a candidate is trustworthy and understands the organization. Privileged families are more likely to contain people who can provide such connections.

Networking itself is treated as an individual skill, but opportunities to network are socially distributed. Elite universities, professional associations, sports clubs, family events, conferences, and internships place some candidates near influential people. Others are advised to build networks without being given access to the spaces in which valuable relationships form.

The result is a hidden infrastructure of opportunity. Recruitment appears open because anyone can apply, yet some applicants arrive with experience, referrals, coaching, and institutional familiarity. Employers then describe these advantages as evidence that the candidate is more prepared. Class privilege is converted into professional readiness.

## 3.3 Family as Safety Net and Social Trap

### 1. The Family as an Emotional and Economic Institution

The family is commonly imagined as a private sphere of love, care, sacrifice, and belonging. It is where children receive affection, protection, identity, and moral guidance. Family relationships are often treated as separate from the competitive institutions of education, employment, housing, and wealth. Yet the family is also an economic institution. It distributes money, housing, time, care, information, property, security, and social connections. These resources shape who can study, move, take risks, recover from failure, and enter positions of social advantage.

Families differ greatly in what they are able to provide. Some can finance education, purchase homes, transfer property, arrange internships, support unpaid career periods, and protect children from economic shocks. Others provide equally intense love and commitment but possess fewer material resources. Their care takes place under conditions of insecure work, debt, crowded housing, poor health, limited transport, and constant financial calculation. The emotional meaning of support may be similar, but its social effects differ because families occupy unequal positions.

Sociology therefore examines the family as a mechanism through which class inequality is transmitted across generations. Children do not inherit only money. They inherit language, confidence, expectations, habits, knowledge, social contacts, and practical understandings of institutions. They learn what futures are normal, which risks are manageable, and how authority should be approached. These forms of inheritance influence later education, occupation, marriage, housing, and geographic mobility.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital is especially useful here. Economic capital includes money, savings, property, and other material resources. Cultural capital includes language, knowledge, credentials, tastes, and dispositions. Social capital refers to relationships that provide information, trust, recommendations, and access. Families transmit all three forms, often through ordinary acts of care. A parent who reads with a child, introduces them to professional contact, or al-

lows them to live at home during an internship is expressing love while also increasing future advantage.

The family is therefore both protective and stratifying. It protects individuals from insecurity, but because protection is distributed unequally, it also reproduces inequality. The sociological issue is not that families should stop caring for their members. It is that societies rely heavily on private family resources to determine access to public opportunity. When education, housing, employment, and security depend upon what families can provide, differences in family wealth become differences in life chances.

## **2. The Transmission of Economic, Cultural, and Social Capital**

Economic capital is the most visible form of family advantage because it can be directly observed in the resources available to children. Affluent parents can pay school fees, purchase books and technology, finance transport, and provide quiet study space. They can choose better schools, arrange private tutoring, fund extracurricular activities, and cover the costs of examinations or applications. These advantages improve educational performance not only by providing superior materials but also by reducing the practical difficulties that interfere with learning.

Economic support often continues beyond childhood. Families may finance university education, professional examinations, migration, unpaid internships, business creation, or periods of unemployment. Young adults from affluent households can delay full-time employment while developing qualifications or waiting for better opportunities. They may accept low-paid entry positions because their basic needs remain covered. They can also recover more easily from failure because another application, course, relocation, or business attempt remains financially possible.

These transfers reduce the immediate pressure to earn and allow young people to make long-term investments in education and careers. A student who does not need to combine full-time study with paid work possesses more time for reading, networking, and preparation. A graduate supported during unemployment can search selectively rather than accepting the first available job. Family wealth

therefore provides not only material comfort but also time, patience, mobility, and protection from risk.

Cultural capital is less visible but equally important. Parents transmit vocabulary, interactional styles, educational knowledge, habits of self-presentation, and familiarity with prestigious institutions. Children learn how to speak to teachers, ask questions, present achievements, select educational pathways, and interpret professional expectations. They become familiar with the language through which competence is recognized.

Such knowledge is often acquired informally through ordinary family life. Conversations at home may expose children to academic vocabulary, political discussion, professional experiences, books, travel, and cultural activities. Parents may explain how universities work, which qualifications are valuable, how interviews are conducted, or how authority figures should be approached. These capacities later appear as intelligence, confidence, ambition, and natural professionalism, although they were developed through years of socialization.

Cultural capital also helps individuals understand the unwritten rules of institutions. Formal requirements may be publicly available, but successful participation often depends on knowing how to interpret them. Students must understand which subjects carry prestige, how to write applications, when to request assistance, and how to demonstrate interest without appearing uncertain. Those who possess this familiarity can move through institutions with greater ease.

Social capital operates through relationships. Parents introduce children to teachers, employers, professionals, neighbours, and relatives who possess useful information or influence. A family friend may recommend an internship, explain an application process, review a curriculum vitae, or arrange an interview. A relative may provide temporary accommodation near a university or help a young person enter a profession.

These opportunities may appear to result from individual initiative because the child still submits the application, attends the interview, or performs the work. However, the opportunity itself may depend upon inherited access to people who occupy advantageous positions. Social capital does not necessarily guarantee success, but it in-

creases access to information, recognition, and institutional entry points.

James Coleman (1988) emphasizes the value of relationships within and around families. Parents who are connected to schools, teachers, and other parents receive information about programmes, institutional risks, educational changes, and emerging opportunities. Their children benefit from a wider network of adults who share knowledge, reinforce expectations, and monitor institutional decisions. These relationships can identify problems early and provide support before difficulties become severe.

Working-class families may possess strong kinship solidarity, emotional support, and mutual obligation while lacking connections to influential educational and professional institutions. Their networks may be highly valuable for care, survival, and everyday assistance but may not provide access to prestigious schools, employers, or decision-makers. The issue is therefore not the absence of social relationships, but the unequal institutional value attached to different networks.

The different forms of capital reinforce one another. Money purchases education, education expands professional networks, networks improve employment prospects, and employment allows property accumulation. Cultural familiarity makes it easier to use economic resources effectively because families know which investments are likely to produce advantage. Social connections help convert qualifications into interviews, recommendations, and employment opportunities.

Family advantage is therefore cumulative. It rarely operates through one decisive gift. It is produced through repeated interventions such as paying a fee, explaining a form, contacting a teacher, arranging transport, introducing a professional, or supporting another attempt after failure. Each intervention may appear minor, but together they increase the probability of success and widen the range of futures a child can realistically pursue.

### **3. Parenting, Educational Investment, and Institutional Confidence**

Class shapes parenting not because one class loves children more than another but because families possess different resources and face different constraints. Annette Lareau's (2011) US research distinguishes between concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth. Middle-class parents often organize children's time through lessons, sport, tutoring, clubs, and structured activities. Working-class parents may provide greater unstructured time, stronger kin relationships, and expectations of independence.

Concerted cultivation develops skills that schools reward. Children learn to speak with adults, negotiate rules, ask questions, and explain preferences. They become comfortable requesting attention and expecting institutions to respond. These dispositions later appear as confidence and leadership. The advantage is not only the activity itself but the interactional style produced through repeated participation.

Educational investment also includes private tutoring, examination preparation, school choice, technology, language training, and international exposure. Affluent families can respond quickly when a child struggles. They can hire a tutor, change schools, seek a specialist assessment, or provide additional coaching. Temporary difficulty is prevented from becoming a permanent disadvantage.

Working-class and poor parents may value education just as strongly but have less power to intervene. Irregular work schedules, limited transport, unfamiliarity with institutional procedures, and fear of authority can restrict participation. A parent may hesitate to challenge a teacher even when a child is treated unfairly. The institution then interprets limited parental presence as lack of interest.

Class therefore shapes children's relationships with institutions. Middle-class children often learn that schools, hospitals, and administrative systems can be negotiated. Working-class children may learn that institutions must be obeyed or endured. These lessons influence self-belief. One group develops a sense of entitlement to support, while the other may treat access as a favour that should not be questioned.

#### **4. Housing Support and the Unequal Geography of Opportunity**

Housing is one of the most important ways families transmit advantage. Where a family lives influences school quality, safety, transport, health, peer networks, digital access, and proximity to employment. Affluent families can purchase homes in areas with well-funded schools and valuable public services. Housing wealth therefore produces educational and social advantages before any direct inheritance occurs.

Parents also support adult children through housing. They may provide a rent-free room during university, finance a deposit, guarantee a mortgage, or transfer property. These forms of assistance allow young adults to save, accept lower-paid entry positions, or move to cities with better opportunities. Without such support, the same decisions carry greater financial risk.

The ability to live with family can be enabling or restrictive depending on circumstances. In a spacious and secure home, living with parents can support study and career development. In overcrowded housing, it may reduce privacy, concentration, and autonomy. The phrase “living at home” conceals major differences in space, safety, transport, and family resources.

Housing support also affects geographic mobility. A graduate whose parents can finance relocation can move for an internship or professional opportunity. Another may be unable to pay deposits, transport, and initial living costs. Employers interpret one person’s mobility as ambition and the other’s immobility as limited commitment, although the difference reflects family resources.

Property can contribute to long-term inequality because it can build equity and be transferred across generations. Ownership may provide security and an asset that supports borrowing, education, and retirement, although its benefits depend on prices, debt, maintenance costs, and housing policy. Renting does not build equity in the dwelling, but it does not preclude saving through other assets. The housing market therefore connects family position to educational, occupational, and intergenerational outcomes.

## 5. Unpaid Care and the Hidden Infrastructure of Achievement

Families provide enormous amounts of unpaid care. Parents care for children, adult children care for ageing parents, relatives support people with disabilities, and family members manage cooking, cleaning, transport, illness, and emotional crisis. This labour is essential to society but is rarely counted as an economic contribution.

Unpaid care enables achievement. A student can study because someone prepares food, maintains the home, or cares for younger siblings. A professional can work long hours because another person manages domestic life. A migrant can seek employment because relatives care for children left behind. Public success often depends upon private labour that remains invisible.

Care is gendered. Women perform a disproportionate share of domestic and emotional labour in many societies. Their unpaid contributions support the education and careers of others while limiting their own employment, income, savings, and pension rights. Family advantage can therefore be produced through gender inequality within the household.

Affluent families can purchase care through childcare, domestic workers, private healthcare, tutoring, and elder services. This reduces the direct burden on family members and allows adults to maintain careers. Poor families rely more heavily on unpaid kin because formal services are unaffordable or unavailable. The same care needs therefore have different consequences across class positions.

Unpaid care can both enable and restrict mobility. A relative may provide childcare that allows a young mother to continue education. At the same time, caregiving obligations can prevent another person from moving, studying, or accepting demanding work. The effect depends on how care is distributed and whether families possess resources to share its costs.

## 3.4 The State, Bureaucracy, and Unequal Treatment

### 1. Encountering the State in Everyday Life

Citizens rarely encounter the state as an abstract constitutional order. They encounter it through concrete institutions, documents, officials, buildings, websites, queues, police checkpoints, classrooms, courtrooms, hospitals, welfare offices, and local administrative departments. The state becomes visible when a person applies for an identity card, registers a birth, seeks medical treatment, requests a school place, reports a crime, pays a tax, claims a benefit, contests a property record, or asks a local authority to provide water, sanitation, transport, or housing. These encounters shape how citizens understand both the state and their own social position within it.

The same state can appear protective to one person and threatening to another. For a secure middle-class citizen, public institutions may provide education, healthcare, legal protection, pensions, property recognition, and professional opportunity. For a poor citizen, the same institutions may be experienced through waiting, surveillance, repeated verification, suspicion, fines, police attention, and the risk of losing essential support. These differences do not necessarily arise because different laws apply formally. They often emerge through unequal capacities to understand, navigate, negotiate, and endure administrative systems.

State encounters are therefore classed experiences. Citizens arrive with unequal literacy, language competence, confidence, time, money, transport, digital access, and social connections. A form that appears simple to an educated applicant may be inaccessible to someone unfamiliar with official vocabulary. A requirement to return the following week may be inconvenient for a salaried worker but economically disastrous for a daily wage labourer. An online application may increase convenience for a household with devices and reliable internet while excluding people dependent on shared phones, expensive data, or distant service centres.

Gender, region, ethnicity, disability, migration status, and family position further shape administrative experience. Women may need permission, accompaniment, or childcare to visit offices. Rural citi-

zens may travel long distances to institutions concentrated in cities. Migrants may lack recognized documentation or fluency in the official language. Disabled people may encounter inaccessible buildings and procedures. Members of stigmatized communities may expect officials to question their honesty, belonging, or competence.

The sociology of the state therefore examines more than laws and policies. It studies how rights are delivered, delayed, interpreted, and sometimes denied through everyday interaction. The state can reduce inequality by redistributing resources, protecting rights, and providing universal services. Yet it can also reproduce inequality when access depends on cultural familiarity, administrative endurance, and favourable treatment from frontline officials.

## **2. Bureaucratic Equality and Street-Level Discretion**

Max Weber's account of bureaucracy (1978) describes an organizational form based on written rules, specialized offices, hierarchical authority, official records, and formal procedures. As an analytical ideal type, it helps explain how administration can become more predictable and less dependent on personal favour. This is not a guarantee of democracy or fairness: bureaucratic organizations can administer unequal laws and serve authoritarian power. In a democratic setting, the promise is that decisions will follow relevant legal criteria and remain open to review, so that wealth, personal connections, or familiarity with officials do not determine treatment.

Written procedures can make public authority more accountable. Records allow decisions to be reviewed, while clearly defined responsibilities make it possible to identify which office is responsible for a particular service. Standardized forms and eligibility criteria can protect citizens from decisions based entirely on prejudice or personal preference. Bureaucracy can therefore expand equality by turning access to public services into an entitlement rather than a favour granted by a patron.

In practice, however, rules never determine every decision. Michael Lipsky's (2010) concept of street-level bureaucracy draws attention to teachers, police officers, social workers, nurses, welfare officials, court staff, and other frontline workers who translate policy into everyday outcomes. These officials occupy the point where ab-

stract rules encounter complex lives. They possess discretion because policies are often incomplete, resources are limited, and individual cases do not fit neatly into administrative categories.

Frontline workers decide how quickly to process an application, how much explanation to provide, whether to request additional documents, and whether to interpret a mistake sympathetically. They also make informal judgments about whether a citizen appears cooperative, deserving, suspicious, responsible, or difficult. Such judgments can shape access even when formal eligibility remains unchanged. Two citizens entitled to the same service may therefore experience the institution very differently.

Discretion can promote fairness when officials adapt rigid rules to individual circumstances. A welfare officer may help an elderly claimant complete a complicated form. A teacher may recognize that a student's lateness results from unreliable transport rather than indiscipline. A hospital worker may prioritize a patient whose condition is urgent despite incomplete documentation. These decisions acknowledge that identical treatment does not always produce equal outcomes.

Without some discretion, bureaucracy can become mechanically indifferent to human need. Rules designed for typical cases may punish people whose lives are shaped by disability, poverty, family crisis, displacement, or limited literacy. Compassionate interpretation can prevent formal procedures from producing unreasonable harm. Discretion is therefore not simply a failure of bureaucracy. It is often necessary for making general rules workable.

Discretion can also reproduce inequality. Evelyn Brodtkin's (2012) work shows how organizational pressures and informal practices shape what citizens actually receive. Frontline workers often manage heavy caseloads, limited budgets, performance targets, and insufficient staff. Under such conditions, they rely on shortcuts, categorization, rationing, delay, and selective attention. These practices help organizations manage scarcity, but they can shift the burden of institutional pressure onto citizens.

People who communicate confidently, produce complete documents, understand official language, and know how to follow up are easier to process. They can explain their circumstances in forms that institutions recognize. Citizens with complex lives, language difficul-

ties, unstable addresses, incomplete records, limited digital access, or unfamiliarity with administrative procedures require more time. They may therefore be treated as administrative problems rather than as people facing greater need.

Class, education, language, and social confidence influence encounters with officials. Privileged citizens may know how to request a review, contact a supervisor, cite a rule, or seek legal assistance. Disadvantaged citizens may fear authority, misunderstand instructions, or accept an initial refusal as final. Even where formal rights are equal, the capacity to activate those rights is unequally distributed.

The outcome is a gap between formal entitlement and experienced access. A policy may promise universal healthcare, education, welfare, or legal protection, yet frontline routines determine whether that promise becomes real. A service may exist legally while remaining difficult to reach in practice because of delays, documentation demands, repeated visits, inaccessible language, or dismissive treatment.

Bureaucratic inequality is therefore often produced without explicit exclusion. It emerges through thousands of ordinary decisions about whose case receives time, whose explanation is believed, whose mistake is corrected, and whose difficulty is treated as personal failure. The sociological question is not only whether rights exist on paper, but also how institutions organize the practical conditions through which people can claim them.

### **3. Documents, Forms, and Bureaucratic Literacy**

Documents are central instruments of state power. Birth certificates, identity cards, school records, medical reports, employment letters, land titles, tax forms, and proof of residence transform people into administratively recognizable subjects. A person may exist socially within a family and community while remaining invisible to the state if the correct document does not exist. Without documentation, citizens can struggle to access education, welfare, voting, employment, healthcare, inheritance, mobility, and legal recognition.

Matthew Hull's (2012) study of bureaucracy in Islamabad emphasizes that documents do not merely record bureaucratic decisions.

They help produce them. Forms organize information into categories the state can recognize. Files move through offices, collect signatures, and establish official reality. What cannot be entered into the correct box may become difficult to acknowledge. Complex lives are simplified into categories such as married or unmarried, employed or unemployed, citizen or non-citizen, eligible or ineligible.

Bureaucratic literacy refers to the ability to understand these categories, complete forms, gather evidence, follow procedures, and communicate in official language. It includes knowing which office to visit, which documents to carry, how many copies are required, whose signature has authority, and how to respond when an application is rejected. This knowledge is not distributed equally. Educated and professionally connected families often acquire it through experience, while marginalized citizens learn through costly mistakes.

Documentation requirements can appear neutral while producing unequal burdens. A request for proof of address disadvantages people in informal housing. A requirement for a father's identification can create barriers for single mothers or children in unstable households. A demand for formal employment records excludes informal workers. The rule does not mention class, gender, or region, yet its effects follow these divisions.

Akhil Gupta's (2012) research in India shows how official procedures can produce suffering even when no individual intends harm. Missing papers, contradictory instructions, and repeated visits can prevent access to essential services. The state appears present through its demand for documentation but absent when citizens need assistance. Administrative recognition becomes a condition for survival, while the means of obtaining recognition remain unequally available.

#### 4. Waiting and the Unequal Distribution of Time

Waiting is one of the most common ways citizens experience administrative power. People wait in welfare offices, hospitals, courts, police stations, schools, licensing departments, and municipal buildings. They wait for appointments, signatures, decisions, investigations, hearings, payments, and documents. Waiting appears passive, but it communicates hierarchy. The person who waits is dependent upon the institution that controls when action will occur.

Javier Auyero's (2012) research in Argentina shows that administrative delay can teach marginalized citizens to become patient and compliant. Poor people are often required to spend hours or days demonstrating their willingness to endure. They cannot demand a clear timetable because they fear angering the official who controls the case. Waiting becomes a political lesson about who is entitled to immediate attention and who must remain available to the state.

The burden of waiting is classed because time has different economic meanings. A salaried professional may take paid leave, make a telephone call, or hire someone to handle a procedure. A daily wage worker loses income for every hour spent in an office. A rural applicant may pay for repeated travel and accommodation. A caregiver must arrange childcare or leave a dependent person unattended. The same delay therefore imposes radically unequal costs.

Administrative time is also uncertain. Citizens may be told to return tomorrow, next week, or after an unspecified review. Uncertainty prevents planning. A welfare applicant cannot know when income will arrive. A patient cannot know when treatment will begin. A person involved in a court case cannot predict when the dispute will end. This uncertainty can become more damaging than the length of the delay itself.

Waiting is often justified through staff shortages, resource constraints, and procedural necessity. These explanations may be accurate, but they do not remove distributive consequences. Institutions frequently protect their own time by consuming the time of citizens. Marginalized people absorb administrative inefficiency through lost wages, travel costs, anxiety, and disrupted family life. Time becomes one of the hidden currencies through which inequality is reproduced.

## 5. Verification, Suspicion, and the Politics of Deservingness

Poor and marginalized citizens are often required to prove the truth of their need repeatedly. Applicants to means-tested welfare programmes may have to document income, family structure, disability, unemployment, residence, and job-search activity. Migrants must prove identity and legal status. Patients may need to demonstrate eligibility for subsidized treatment. Students must verify poverty to receive assistance. Repeated verification can make applicants feel that the institution begins from suspicion rather than trust.

Verification is necessary in many systems because public resources are limited and fraud can occur. The sociological issue is the unequal intensity of verification. Affluent citizens receive major public benefits through property law, tax arrangements, infrastructure, pensions, and subsidized institutions without being subjected to the same moral scrutiny. Poor citizens must often disclose intimate details in order to receive modest assistance.

Piven and Cloward (1993) argued that US welfare systems regulate poor populations as well as support them. Assistance can be expanded or restricted in ways that manage labour, political unrest, and social order. Joe Soss (2000) similarly demonstrates that welfare institutions teach citizens lessons about government, authority, and political participation. A claimant who repeatedly encounters suspicion may learn that the state does not view them as a rights-bearing citizen but as a potential cheat.

Frontline officials often make judgments about deservingness. A polite elderly person may be seen as genuinely needy, while an angry unemployed person is classified as irresponsible. A mother who appears clean, humble, and cooperative may receive sympathy, while another is judged through clothing, family structure, or emotional expression. These moral classifications influence how rules are explained and applied.

Suspicion therefore produces both material and symbolic inequality. It can delay benefits, increase sanctions, and discourage applications. It also communicates that marginalized citizens possess questionable moral status. The applicant must prove not only eligibility but worthiness. Public support becomes conditional upon performing the identity of the disciplined and grateful poor.

# The Emotional Life of Inequality

Shame, Dignity, Desire, and Resentment

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- 4.1 Shame and the Internalization of Class
- 4.2 Dignity, Recognition, and the Struggle to Be Seen
- 4.3 Desire, Consumption, and the Dream of Escape
- 4.4 Resentment, Blame, and the Politics of Division

## 4.1 Shame and the Internalization of Class

### 1. Shame as a Social Emotion of Comparison and Judgment

Shame is often experienced as a deeply personal feeling, but its origins are social. It develops when people imagine themselves through the judgments of others and conclude that they have failed to meet a valued standard. Unlike guilt, which usually concerns a particular action, shame can attach to the whole self. A person does not merely think that they have done something wrong. They begin to feel that they are the wrong kind of person. Thomas Scheff (2000) describes shame as a central social emotion because it signals threatened social bonds, rejection, loss of status, or fear that others no longer regard the person as worthy of full membership.

Comparison is essential to this process. People become conscious of class differences when they compare homes, clothing, schools, accents, family occupations, consumption, and opportunities. A child may not initially understand household poverty as a structural condition. Poverty becomes shameful when the child sees that classmates possess objects, experiences, or forms of confidence that the family cannot provide. The material difference becomes an emotional judgment. The child does not simply recognize that others have more. The child may conclude that their own family is inferior, careless, backward, or unsuccessful.

Andrew Sayer (2005) argues that class is experienced through evaluative judgments as well as income and occupation. People care about how they are valued, and unequal societies distribute respect unequally. Affluent lifestyles are associated with success, intelligence, responsibility, and good judgment. Poverty is associated with failure, dependence, ignorance, and lack of discipline. These associations provide people with unequal bases for self-respect. Those with money can display socially approved signs of achievement, while those without it must repeatedly defend their moral worth against the negative meanings attached to deprivation.

Sennett and Cobb's (1972) concept of the hidden injuries of class captures this emotional dimension of inequality. Working-class people may be essential to the economy and proud of their labour, yet they are often denied the recognition attached to prestigious occupa-

tions. Their effort does not produce the same public respect as professional status, educational credentials, or wealth. The injury lies not only in receiving fewer resources but in being made to feel that one's life has lower value. Material inequality becomes an injury to dignity when society interprets unequal outcomes as evidence of unequal people.

Shame is therefore relational rather than purely internal. It emerges from the gap between how people wish to be recognized and how they believe others see them. The emotion may remain hidden, but it reflects public standards of worth. Poverty, low-status work, accent, family background, and neighbourhood become shameful only within a social order that ranks these characteristics. Shame is one of the emotional languages through which class hierarchy enters the self.

## **2. Poverty, Accent, Clothing, Family Occupation, School, and Neighbourhood**

Poverty can become a source of shame because it is socially visible even when people try to conceal it. Housing conditions, food, transport, school materials, digital access, and the ability to participate in leisure reveal differences in family resources. Children may avoid inviting friends home because the house is small, crowded, unfinished, or located in a stigmatized area. Adults may feel embarrassed when they cannot contribute to ceremonies, purchase appropriate clothing, or join social activities. The lack of money becomes more than a practical limitation. It threatens participation in ordinary rituals through which belonging is confirmed.

Accent can carry similar emotional weight. Regional, rural, working-class, migrant, and minority accents are often treated as signs of limited education or intelligence. A person may understand that their speech connects them to family and community while also fearing that it will attract ridicule in school or work. Repeated correction can produce linguistic self-consciousness. The speaker begins to monitor pronunciation, vocabulary, and volume. A voice that once felt natural becomes something that must be managed. Shame enters speech when people hear their own history through the contempt of dominant listeners.

Clothing is another visible marker of class. Uniforms, professional dress, fashion, shoes, and accessories communicate whether a person possesses money and cultural knowledge. A student wearing an old uniform or inexpensive shoes may fear mockery even when the clothing is clean and functional. An employee may worry that formal clothes look cheap or poorly fitted. Affluent people can present simplicity as taste because the quality of their clothing remains recognizable. Poor people risk being judged either for visible deprivation or for spending too much effort on appearance.

Family occupation can also become a source of concealment. Children may avoid telling classmates that a parent works as a cleaner, labourer, driver, domestic worker, street vendor, or low-level employee. The embarrassment does not arise from the work itself. It arises from the social ranking of occupations. Necessary labour is frequently denied prestige, while professional work receives symbolic recognition. A child may love and respect a parent while becoming ashamed of the way others classify that parent. This conflict can produce guilt because the child recognizes that embarrassment feels like betrayal.

School background and neighbourhood complete this map of class signs. Elite institutions carry assumptions of intelligence, confidence, and future success. Poorly funded or stigmatized schools are associated with disorder and low ability. Similarly, affluent neighbourhoods communicate safety and respectability, while poor areas are associated with crime, dependency, and social failure. Individuals carry these institutional and geographic labels into new settings. Before their abilities are assessed, their school or address may already have shaped expectations. Shame develops when people learn that ordinary facts of biography can lower their value in the eyes of others.

### 3. How Shame Individualizes Structural Disadvantage

One of shame's most powerful effects is its ability to convert structural disadvantages into personal inadequacy. A person may face unemployment because of economic recession, weak labour demand, regional inequality, discrimination, or limited educational opportunity. Yet public culture often interprets unemployment as lack of effort, discipline, or ambition. The individual begins to ask what is wrong with them rather than what is wrong with the organization of opportunity. Structural conditions disappear, while personal failure becomes emotionally real.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence explains this process. Symbolic violence occurs when dominated groups adopt the categories through which dominant groups judge them. Social hierarchies then appear natural and legitimate. People who have been denied opportunity may conclude that they lack intelligence, talent, or proper conduct. They judge themselves by standards produced through unequal access to education, wealth, language, and cultural capital. Domination becomes most effective when the disadvantaged participate in explaining their own disadvantage.

Sayer (2005, p. 161) describes a related condition as structural humiliation. Working-class people are expected to compete according to standards established by groups with greater resources. They face the same examinations, interviews, housing markets, and cultural expectations without the same preparation or protection. They are therefore more likely to experience failure and to interpret themselves as failures. The formal equality of competition hides the unequal conditions under which competition occurs. Shame completes the transformation by attaching the outcome to personal worth.

Meritocratic ideology intensifies this process. When society teaches that success results mainly from effort and talent, those who fail lose the language through which structural barriers can be named. A student who cannot afford tutoring sees a low grade as proof of limited intelligence. A worker unable to relocate because of family obligations sees missed opportunities as lack of ambition. A poor parent unable to provide educational resources feels personally responsible for circumstances produced through low wages, inadequate services, and unequal housing.

Self-blame can appear more manageable than structural analysis because it creates the hope that personal improvement will solve the problem. People promise to work harder, speak better, dress more carefully, or become more disciplined. These efforts may produce limited gains, but they also protect unequal institutions from criticism. Shame individualizes inequality by making people search within themselves for the cause of conditions produced beyond them. It turns public injustice into private emotional failure.

#### **4. Concealment, Withdrawal, Respectability, and Help-Seeking**

People often respond to class shame through concealment. They hide poverty, edit family histories, and avoid conversations that could expose social background. A student may give vague answers about a parent's occupation or pretend not to be interested in an activity the family cannot afford. An employee may conceal the neighbourhood in which they live or avoid inviting colleagues home. Upwardly mobile people may remove regional expressions from speech and avoid discussing relatives whose behaviour could be judged as unprofessional. Concealment protects the person from immediate embarrassment but reinforces the belief that the hidden identity is unacceptable.

Shame also produces withdrawal from social spaces. People avoid restaurants, professional events, school meetings, ceremonies, and friendship groups where they expect class difference to become visible. A person may decline an invitation because of transport, clothing, or cost but offer another explanation. Repeated withdrawal reduces access to relationships and information. The person appears antisocial or uninterested, while the real cause is fear of exposure. Social exclusion is therefore reproduced partly through anticipation. People remove themselves before others could reject them.

Education is particularly affected. Students who feel ashamed of accent, clothing, school background, or family poverty may remain silent in class. They avoid asking questions because uncertainty could confirm stereotypes about low ability. A single incorrect answer feels more dangerous when the student believes that they already appear out of place. In workplaces, shame can produce similar caution. Employees hesitate to negotiate salaries, seek promotion, challenge un-

fair treatment, or admit that they do not understand an unwritten rule. Their silence is then interpreted as lack of confidence or ambition.

Another response is the overperformance of respectability. People attempt to disprove stigma by appearing exceptionally clean, disciplined, hardworking, grateful, modest, and emotionally controlled. A poor family may spend beyond its means on clothing or ceremonies to prevent public humiliation. A worker may accept extra duties without complaint to demonstrate commitment. A welfare recipient may speak with exaggerated politeness because any anger could be interpreted as proof of irresponsibility. Respectability provides temporary protection, but it also requires continuous monitoring of the self.

Shame can prevent people from seeking assistance. Welfare offices, food support, debt counselling, healthcare, and school assistance may be avoided because using them publicly confirms an identity of need. Research on poverty shows that people sometimes endure hardship rather than enter a setting where they expect humiliation. Means-tested systems can deepen this problem by requiring applicants to prove deprivation repeatedly. The person must expose private hardship to strangers and then wait to be judged deserving. A service intended to reduce material inequality can reproduce emotional inequality when access is organized through stigma.

## **5. Shame, Silence, and the Self-Policing of Inequality**

Shame is an effective form of social control because it does not require constant external punishment. Once dominant judgments have been internalized, people monitor themselves. They adjust clothing, speech, relationships, ambitions, and emotional expression before anyone issues a direct command. The possibility of ridicule or rejection becomes enough to regulate behaviour. Inequality enters the self as anticipation.

This self-policing can begin early. Children learn which occupations should not be mentioned, which accents produce laughter, and which homes are safe to display. Adolescents learn which clothes communicate poverty and which ambitions appear unrealistic for students from their school. Adults learn how much of their family

background can be discussed in professional settings. Through these lessons, people become observers of themselves. They imagine the judgment of others and correct their own behaviour in advance.

Silence is central to this control. Shame makes experiences difficult to articulate because speaking about them risks further exposure. A person may be ashamed not only of poverty but of feeling ashamed of poverty. This can create the self-reinforcing shame described by Scheff (2014). The original injury remains unspoken, while anger, withdrawal, or self-criticism appears in its place. Others see the behaviour without understanding the humiliation beneath it.

Silence also prevents structural grievance from becoming collective. When unemployment, educational exclusion, or welfare stigma is understood as individual failure, people lack a shared language of injustice. Each person believes that others are coping successfully and that their own difficulty is unique. Potential allies remain isolated. Shame fragments groups that might otherwise recognize common conditions. It can even lead disadvantaged people to shame others whose poverty is more visible, thereby distancing themselves from stigma and weakening solidarity.

The controlling power of shame therefore lies in its ability to reduce the need for open coercion. People avoid demanding rights because they fear appearing entitled. They avoid public spaces because they fear being judged. They overwork to prove worth and conceal hardship to preserve dignity. The unequal order appears stable because those injured by it often police themselves more harshly than institutions could. Shame turns social domination into an internal discipline.

## **6. Dignity, Recognition, and the Challenge to Shame**

Shame can be challenged when people receive recognition that separates human worth from class position. Axel Honneth (1995) argues that identity depends on relations of love, legal respect, and social esteem. People need to be recognized as individuals with rights and as contributors whose activities possess value. Misrecognition damages the self by communicating that a person or group is inferior, invisible, or undeserving. Dignity is restored when individuals are treated as worthy before they prove economic success or cultural conformity.

Michèle Lamont's work shows how marginalized groups construct alternative standards of worth. Working-class people may emphasize honesty, care, loyalty, hard work, and responsibility rather than wealth or elite taste. These moral boundaries can provide protection from dominant class judgments by separating economic position from human value. However, dignity becomes more durable when it is collective rather than based only on individual moral performance. People need shared narratives that explain disadvantages structurally and refuse the idea that poverty reveals personal inferiority.

Solidarity helps transform private shame into public understanding. Trade unions, community organizations, peer groups, social movements, and supportive educational spaces allow people to recognize that their experiences are not unique. A student who hears others describe class embarrassment can reinterpret silence as a response to exclusion rather than lack of intelligence. A welfare recipient who joins a claimant organization can understand administrative humiliation as institutional practice rather than personal failure. Shared language converts shame into criticism and sometimes into political action.

Institutions also play a central role. Schools can avoid humiliating children through public identification of poverty. Workplaces can value low-status labour and challenge accent and class prejudice. Welfare systems can simplify procedures, protect privacy, and treat assistance as a right. Healthcare and food support can be organized so that people do not have to display deprivation in public queues. Respectful treatment does not replace material redistribution, but it affects whether redistribution restores dignity or reproduces stigma.

Challenging shame requires changing both material inequality and the judgments attached to it. Recognition without resources can become symbolic consolation, while resources delivered through humiliation can deepen injury. A more equal society would provide security and refuse to treat need as moral failure. It would allow people to speak about poverty, accent, family, school, and neighbourhood without being judged as if these features determine intelligence or worth. Shame loses its controlling power when structural disadvantage can be named openly and when dignity is treated as a social right rather than a reward for success.

## 4.2 Dignity, Recognition, and the Struggle to Be Seen

### 1. Dignity as the Demand to Be Treated as Fully Human

Dignity is the demand to be treated as a person of equal human worth. It is not satisfied merely because someone receives food, income, shelter, education, medical treatment, or administrative assistance. These resources are essential, but dignity concerns the social relationship through which they are provided. A person can be helped while being humiliated, managed while being ignored, and protected while being denied autonomy. Dignity therefore requires recognition of the individual as a thinking, feeling, rights-bearing subject whose voice matters. It rejects the idea that poor, dependent, displaced, stigmatized, or socially marginalized people should be grateful for whatever treatment institutions choose to provide. To treat someone with dignity is to recognize that need does not reduce humanity, dependency does not eliminate agency, and social disadvantage does not justify contempt.

Axel Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition provides a central framework for understanding dignity. Honneth argues that personal identity depends upon several forms of recognition. Love and care support basic self-confidence. Legal rights support self-respect by confirming that the individual is a legitimate member of the political community. Social esteem supports self-worth by recognizing that the person's activities and contributions possess value. When these forms of recognition are denied, people suffer more than material harm. Abuse damages bodily confidence, exclusion from rights damages self-respect, and humiliation damages self-esteem. Dignity is therefore relational. People develop a secure sense of self through interactions in which they are treated as worthy of care, rights, and social appreciation. Disrespect becomes an injustice because it damages the conditions through which people can understand themselves as full participants in society.

Andrew Sayer extends this argument by emphasizing that people are evaluative beings. They care about what is good, worthwhile, admirable, and shameful. Class inequality matters not only because some possess more money but because societies attach different

moral values to different social positions. Professional occupations are often associated with intelligence, discipline, and success, while low-paid work is associated with limited ability. Wealth can be interpreted as evidence of merit, while poverty is read as personal failure. These evaluations distribute dignity unequally. People performing necessary but low-status labour may be treated as socially replaceable even when institutions depend upon them. Their work is economically useful but symbolically devalued. Inequality therefore reaches beyond resources into the distribution of honour and respect.

Dignity also differs from pity. Pity recognizes suffering but can preserve distance between the observer and the person who suffers. The pitied individual is viewed as unfortunate and deserving of kindness, but not necessarily as an equal capable of judgment and action. Charity can operate through a similar hierarchy. A donor, institution, or official decides what the recipient needs, under what conditions assistance will be offered, and what gratitude should follow. The recipient appears as an object of compassion rather than as a participant with rights. Recognition requires more. It demands that people affected by hardship be allowed to describe their own needs, influence decisions, question treatment, and refuse arrangements that violate their values. Dignity is present when assistance strengthens agency rather than confirming dependence.

The demand for dignity is therefore a demand for social standing. It asks whether workers are respected, whether students are heard, whether migrants are treated as members of society, whether domestic workers are recognized as labouring subjects, whether minorities can appear in public without being stereotyped, and whether welfare recipients are treated as citizens rather than suspects. Dignity does not eliminate differences in role, responsibility, or knowledge. A teacher may possess academic authority, a doctor medical expertise, and an administrator legal responsibility. Yet these differences do not justify treating others as voiceless or inferior. Dignity requires that institutional power be exercised without denying the full humanity of those subject to it.

A society committed to dignity must therefore judge institutions not only by what they distribute but by how they classify and address people. A hospital may provide treatment while ignoring a patient's explanation. A school may admit a poor student while mak-

ing poverty publicly visible. A welfare office may issue assistance while repeatedly questioning the claimant's honesty. A workplace may pay wages while treating some employees as incapable of leadership. In each case, material provision and symbolic disrespect coexist. Dignity names the claim that this coexistence is unjust. People need resources to live, but they also need social relations in which they are not reduced to problems, burdens, cases, bodies, or beneficiaries. To be treated with dignity is to be recognized as fully human in both material and symbolic life.

## **2. Redistribution, Recognition, and the Two Dimensions of Justice**

Material redistribution concerns the allocation of income, wealth, housing, education, healthcare, employment, and other resources that shape life chances. It addresses inequalities created through low wages, unemployment, property concentration, unequal schooling, poor infrastructure, and limited access to public services. Redistribution asks who possesses resources, who carries economic risk, and how institutions can reduce deprivation. It includes taxation, labour protection, social insurance, public education, healthcare, housing support, pensions, and income transfers. Without redistribution, appeals to dignity can become empty. A person cannot live securely through respect alone if they lack food, shelter, treatment, or income.

Symbolic recognition concerns how individuals and groups are valued, represented, and treated. It addresses stigma, humiliation, cultural domination, invisibility, stereotyping, and exclusion from equal social status. Recognition asks whose language is treated as intelligent, whose work is valued, whose identity is considered normal, and whose voice is heard in public decisions. A person may receive material support while remaining socially subordinate. A welfare claimant may receive money but be described as dependent. A minority student may enter university but be treated as an exception. A domestic worker may receive wages while being denied privacy, respect, or freedom from verbal abuse. Recognition focuses attention on these injuries to status and worth.

Nancy Fraser (in Fraser & Honneth, 2004) argues that redistribution and recognition are analytically distinct but practically intertwined dimensions of justice. Economic arrangements can produce

deprivation, while institutionalized cultural values produce status subordination. Neither can be reduced completely to the other. Poverty is not merely a problem of cultural disrespect because it involves real material scarcity. Racism, sexism, caste, ethnic exclusion, and stigma cannot be solved only through income transfers because they also organize social standing. Fraser's principle of participatory parity proposes that justice requires social conditions in which people can interact as full partners. This demands both sufficient material resources and cultural patterns that recognize equal status.

The distinction is important because policies can succeed in one dimension while failing in another. A programme may transfer income effectively but deliver it through degrading procedures. A school may provide scholarships but isolate recipients through public identification. A workplace may adopt diversity language while maintaining unequal pay and authority. Conversely, an institution may celebrate cultural identity while leaving economic inequality untouched. Symbolic inclusion without material transformation can become ceremonial. Material provision without recognition can become paternalistic. Justice requires attention to both the substance of distribution and the quality of social relations.

Honneth (in Fraser & Honneth, 2004) approaches the relationship differently by arguing that many distributive conflicts are themselves struggles for recognition. Low wages communicate that certain work is not socially valued. Unemployment can damage social esteem because paid work remains a central source of recognition. Exclusion from healthcare or education signals that some lives are less worthy of public investment. Economic injustice is therefore experienced morally as disrespect. Fraser nevertheless warns that recognition language should not obscure political economy. Employers can express appreciation while continuing to underpay workers. States can praise sacrifice while failing to provide resources. Recognition must not become a substitute for redistribution.

The most adequate understanding treats resources and recognition as mutually necessary. Material inequality weakens the ability to participate, speak, resist, and exercise choice. Symbolic inequality makes deprivation appear deserved and can discourage people from claiming resources. A poor person who has been repeatedly humiliated may avoid public assistance. A worker who believes their occupation

has little worth may accept exploitation. A minority group represented as incapable may receive fewer institutional investments. Maldistribution and misrecognition therefore reinforce one another. Economic disadvantage lowers social standing, while low social standing makes economic exclusion easier to justify.

Following Fraser's (2005) three-dimensional account, justice should be evaluated through three related questions. First, do people possess the resources required for security and meaningful participation? Second, are they treated as social equals rather than inferior or dependent subjects? Third, do they have a voice in the decisions that shape their lives? Redistribution addresses resources. Recognition addresses status. Representation addresses political voice. Together, these dimensions reveal why dignity cannot be added to social policy as a minor matter of courtesy. Dignity is part of the structure of justice because material support is incomplete when people remain unable to participate as equals.

### **3. Everyday Struggles for Dignity in Work, Education, Migration, and Welfare**

Workers struggle for dignity when their labour is necessary but socially devalued. Low-paid employees may clean offices, transport goods, care for patients, prepare food, guard buildings, or maintain public spaces while remaining invisible to those who benefit from their work. They can be spoken to through commands rather than conversation, denied breaks, or treated as replaceable. Dignity in work therefore concerns more than wages. It includes autonomy, safety, recognition, predictable schedules, and the right to speak without fear. Workers frequently defend dignity by taking pride in skill, reliability, endurance, and responsibility. These moral claims challenge the assumption that occupational prestige determines personal worth.

Domestic workers face particularly intimate forms of inequality. Their labour takes place inside private households where the boundary between employment and personal service is often unclear. They may cook, clean, care for children, support older people, and manage the emotional rhythms of family life. Yet because this work is associated with femininity, servitude, migration, and lower class status, it is often treated as naturally available rather than professionally valu-

able. Domestic workers may be addressed by first name while employers expect formal titles, denied private space, monitored closely, or excluded from the family's social life while being told they are part of the family. Such language can disguise hierarchy. Recognition requires clear labour rights, fair pay, privacy, rest, and respect for the worker's life beyond the household.

Students struggle for dignity when institutions interpret social background as intellectual worth. Working-class, rural, minority, and first-generation students may encounter assumptions that they are underprepared or culturally deficient. A teacher's dismissive tone, public correction of accent, or surprise at strong performance can communicate that the student does not naturally belong. Scholarships can provide access while marking recipients as poor. Students protect dignity by forming peer groups, valuing community knowledge, resisting stereotypes, and demanding curricula that recognize their histories. Educational dignity requires more than admission. It requires being treated as a legitimate learner whose questions, language, and experience have intellectual value.

Migrants experience dignity struggles through borders, workplaces, housing, language, and citizenship. They may be economically welcomed as labour while socially represented as outsiders. Their qualifications may be ignored, their accents mocked, and their legal status used to limit bargaining power. Migrants often perform difficult and necessary jobs while being told that they should remain grateful for opportunity. This demand for gratitude weakens their ability to criticize exploitation. Recognition requires treating migrants not merely as labour inputs or humanitarian objects but as persons with rights, families, histories, and political voices. It also requires acknowledging that integration is a two-sided process. Institutions must change as well as individuals.

Minorities struggle for dignity when stereotypes define them before interaction begins. Religious, ethnic, racial, linguistic, sexual, and other minorities may be treated as suspicious, backward, dangerous, dependent, or culturally incompatible. Everyday disrespect can include jokes, mispronounced names, intrusive questions, exclusion from networks, or expectations that one person represent an entire group. These acts may appear small, but repetition communicates unequal membership. Collective identity claims often emerge as re-

sponses to this misrecognition. Groups demand that histories, languages, and ways of life be recognized without being reduced to exotic difference. The aim is not special praise but equal standing.

Welfare recipients experience dignity struggles at the point where need meets administration. They may be required to explain poverty repeatedly, prove compliance, reveal private relationships, and accept officials' judgments about deservingness. Assistance can be accompanied by surveillance, sanctions, and moral instruction. Recipients respond by concealing need, avoiding programmes, or presenting themselves as exceptionally responsible. A dignity-preserving welfare system would recognize dependency as a normal part of human life. Children, sick people, unemployed workers, disabled persons, older adults, and caregivers all depend on social support. The issue is not whether people depend on others but whether dependence is organized through rights and reciprocity or stigma and control.

Across these settings, dignity struggles reveal a common demand. People want to be seen as more than the category through which institutions process them. Workers are more than labour costs, students more than test scores, migrants more than legal statuses, minorities more than identities, and welfare recipients more than cases. Everyday recognition occurs when people are listened to, addressed respectfully, trusted, and allowed to exercise agency. These practices cannot replace structural reform, but they determine whether institutions reproduce subordination in the very act of providing employment, education, protection, or assistance.

#### 4. Disrespect, Humiliation, and the Deepening of Inequality

Disrespect deepens inequality because it affects how people understand themselves and how willing they are to participate in institutions. Material disadvantage already limits choices, but humiliation adds an emotional cost to seeking help, education, work, or legal protection. A person may technically possess a right yet avoid using it because previous encounters produced shame. A welfare office can distribute benefits while discouraging future claims. A hospital can provide treatment while making patients reluctant to return. A school can offer education while convincing students that they do not belong. Disrespect therefore changes behaviour and can convert partial material inclusion into continued social exclusion.

Erving Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma explains how social categories can become spoiled identities. A stigmatized person is not evaluated only through individual conduct. They are interpreted through a discrediting label. Poverty becomes evidence of irresponsibility, migration evidence of foreignness, disability evidence of dependence, and low-status work evidence of limited intelligence. Once a category is stigmatized, ordinary behaviour is read differently. Anger confirms aggressiveness, silence confirms incapacity, and requests for support confirm dependency. Stigma therefore narrows the range of actions available without negative interpretation.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence shows how such judgments become internalized. Dominant classifications appear natural because institutions repeatedly reward them. A student begins to believe that an elite accent signals intelligence. A domestic worker accepts being addressed disrespectfully because employers are socially superior. A welfare recipient feels ashamed because public discourse presents independence as moral virtue. The dominated adopt the language through which domination is justified. Inequality becomes durable because people begin to police their own claims, ambitions, and emotions.

Humiliation also produces practical disadvantages. Workers who fear being labelled difficult may not report harassment or unpaid wages. Students who expect ridicule may avoid speaking in class. Migrants who anticipate suspicion may avoid police or healthcare institutions. Welfare recipients may decline assistance rather than under-

go intrusive verification. Disrespect therefore reduces access to resources and protection. It also weakens the information institutions receive about their own failures. When people remain silent to preserve dignity, abusive systems appear to function without complaint.

Material policies can intensify these effects when they are organized paternalistically. Food assistance delivered through visible queues may expose recipients publicly. Housing programmes may place families under intrusive monitoring. Welfare systems may require repeated proof that claimants are searching for work or using money correctly. These procedures express distrust. The recipient receives a resource but loses control over how need is defined. Material support becomes conditional upon accepting an inferior status. The policy addresses scarcity while reproducing misrecognition.

Disrespect can also divide marginalized groups. People protect themselves from stigma by distancing themselves from those considered less respectable. A worker may emphasize that they are not like other poor people. A migrant may distinguish between deserving and undeserving migrants. A welfare recipient may condemn claimants believed to be fraudulent. These distinctions offer temporary moral protection but reproduce the hierarchy that causes shame. The struggle for dignity becomes individualized rather than collective.

For this reason, respectful treatment must be understood as part of policy effectiveness. It is not an optional improvement added after material goals are achieved. Institutions that humiliate citizens reduce participation, trust, and compliance. They make rights difficult to exercise and deepen the psychological injuries of inequality. Respectful procedures, privacy, clear communication, meaningful choice, and opportunities to appeal are therefore substantive components of justice. They protect both the person's self-respect and the practical accessibility of public support.

## 5. Charity, Recognition, Agency, and Collective Struggles for Worth

Charity responds to need through voluntary assistance. It can save lives, relieve hardship, and express genuine solidarity. Families, religious groups, community organizations, and donors often provide support where public institutions fail. Yet charity can preserve hierarchy when the giver controls the terms of assistance and the recipient must demonstrate gratitude. The relationship remains unequal because help depends on generosity rather than enforceable rights. Recipients may be expected to appear humble, deserving, and emotionally thankful. Their voices are weaker because assistance can be withdrawn.

Recognition differs from charity because it affirms equal status and agency. It treats the person not as an object of kindness but as a participant entitled to shape decisions. Recognition asks what people identify as their needs, what knowledge they possess, and how institutions can support autonomy. A domestic worker recognized as a worker can negotiate conditions and claim legal protection. A welfare recipient recognized as a citizen can appeal decisions. A migrant recognized as a political subject can participate in debates about integration. The shift is from benevolence to rights.

Fraser distinguishes between affirmative remedies that address outcomes while leaving underlying structures intact and transformative remedies that change the relations producing inequality. Charity often operates affirmatively. It provides food without challenging low wages, pays school fees without changing unequal education, and supports migrants without reforming exclusionary legal systems. Transformative recognition examines why some groups appear naturally dependent and why others possess the authority to decide. It seeks institutions in which assistance does not confirm inferiority.

Collective struggles for dignity emerge when individuals reinterpret disrespect as a shared injustice. Honneth describes experiences of humiliation as part of the moral grammar of social conflict. People mobilize when they recognize that injuries once experienced privately follow a common social pattern. Labour movements transform individual exploitation into demands for worker rights. Feminist movements make domestic and sexual domination publicly visible.

Minority movements challenge stereotypes and exclusion. Disability movements reject pity and demand accessibility, autonomy, and participation.

Identity claims play an important but complex role. Marginalized groups may affirm identities that dominant institutions have devalued. Pride movements convert shame into collective worth. Linguistic minorities defend languages treated as backward. Migrants reclaim histories ignored by national narratives. Such claims do not necessarily demand that every cultural practice be praised. They demand that group membership should not disqualify people from equal participation. Recognition is therefore linked to status rather than simple celebration of difference.

Lamont's work on recognition gaps shows how cultural repertoires influence whether groups can defend worth. Communities draw on values such as hard work, care, responsibility, solidarity, and contribution to contest dominant definitions of success. These alternative standards protect self-respect. Yet recognition should not depend only on proving moral excellence. Poor people should not have to be exceptionally hardworking before being treated with dignity. Minorities should not have to demonstrate cultural usefulness before receiving rights. Equal humanity must precede performance.

Collective organization makes this principle politically effective. Trade unions, community groups, student associations, migrant networks, and social movements provide language, visibility, and institutional pressure. They create spaces where people can speak without translating experience into dominant categories. Collective action also changes the direction of recognition. Marginalized people do not merely ask powerful groups to view them kindlier. They claim the authority to judge institutions, define injustice, and participate in constructing social values.

## **6. Justice as Redistribution, Recognition, and Equal Participation**

Justice requires resources because dignity cannot flourish under severe material insecurity. People who lack food, housing, healthcare, education, and income cannot participate as equals. Scarcity forces dependence, narrows choices, and exposes individuals to exploitation. Workers accept abusive conditions because they need wages. Migrants tolerate discrimination because legal status is insecure. Students leave education because families require income. Welfare recipients accept humiliation because assistance is necessary. Redistribution reduces these inequalities by providing material foundations for autonomy.

Justice also requires recognition because resources alone do not remove subordination. A person can receive a wage while being treated as inferior, attend school while being regarded as incapable, and receive welfare while being stigmatized as dependent. Material support delivered through contempt can reproduce hierarchy. Recognition affirms that people possess equal moral standing and legitimate voices. It requires institutions to examine whose conduct is treated as normal, whose knowledge counts, and who is allowed to participate in defining rules.

Representation forms a third dimension. People affected by policies must be able to influence them. Without representation, redistribution can become paternalism and recognition can become symbolic display. Welfare recipients should participate in designing administrative procedures. Domestic workers should help shape labour regulations. Students should have a voice in educational institutions. Migrants and minorities should participate in decisions affecting citizenship, language, and public culture. Equal participation converts people from managed populations into political subjects.

The integration of redistribution, recognition, and representation changes how policy is evaluated. A welfare programme should be judged by whether it reduces poverty, whether it treats recipients respectfully, and whether recipients can challenge its rules. A school should be judged by access, by the recognition of diverse knowledge, and by student participation. A workplace should be judged by wages, dignity, and worker voice. Justice is not achieved when one

dimension compensates for failure in another. Respect cannot replace income, and income cannot justify humiliation.

Institutional design therefore matters. Universal services can reduce stigma because access does not require public proof of inferiority. Clear rights reduce dependence on personal discretion. Privacy protects individuals from exposure. Accessible appeals protect voice. Labour standards reduce the power of employers to convert economic needs into submission. Anti-discrimination rules challenge status hierarchy. Participatory structures allow marginalized groups to influence implementation. These mechanisms connect material support with recognition.

Dignity should not be understood as a vague moral ideal. It has practical institutional requirements. People need control over personal information, freedom from degrading treatment, opportunities to speak, and assurance that requesting help will not reduce their standing. Workers need rights to organize and refuse abuse. Students need recognition as capable learners. Migrants need legal protection and political voice. Minorities need equal membership without assimilation as the price of acceptance. Welfare recipients need assistance without suspicion as a default.

Justice ultimately concerns the kind of social relationships through which resources are produced and distributed. An equal society is not merely one in which goods are divided more evenly. It is one in which people can appear before one another without being classified as naturally superior or inferior. They can receive care without losing agency, depend on public support without losing citizenship, and participate in institutions without erasing identity. Redistribution provides the material conditions of equality. Recognition provides equal status. Representation provides voice.

The demand for dignity brings these dimensions together. It insists that people must not only survive but live as recognized members of society. Workers, domestic labourers, students, migrants, minorities, and welfare recipients all reveal how inequality operates through both resources and respect. Their struggles show that material deprivation and symbolic degradation are not separate injuries. They reinforce one another. Justice therefore requires institutions that redistribute resources while transforming the relationships of authority, judgment, and recognition through which inequality is lived.

## 4.3 Desire, Consumption, and the Dream of Escape

### 1. Consumer Culture as a Field of Visibility and Class Aspiration

Consumer culture is one of the main arenas in which inequality becomes visible. Income, wealth, occupation, education, and family background are not always immediately observable, but consumption translates these differences into objects, spaces, and styles that can be seen. Phones, cars, homes, clothing, schools, holidays, restaurants, weddings, and beauty practices communicate where people stand or wish to stand within a social hierarchy. Consumption is therefore not simply the private satisfaction of needs. It is a public language through which individuals present identity, claim belonging, and interpret the social position of others. In unequal societies, where wealth and opportunity are distributed unevenly, consumer goods become symbols of who has succeeded, who is moving upward, and who remains excluded from socially valued ways of life.

Thorstein Veblen's (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption remains central to understanding this process. Veblen argued that the wealthy display economic power through visible expenditure. Expensive goods communicate that the owner possesses resources beyond immediate necessity. Luxury therefore functions as evidence of status. The value of a costly object is not limited to its practical use. Its social value lies partly in the fact that others recognize its price, rarity, or exclusivity. A car transports its owner, but a luxury car also communicates occupational success, wealth, and distance from economic insecurity. A large wedding celebrates marriage, but it can also display family honour, social connections, and the ability to spend beyond ordinary needs.

Georg Simmel (1957) argued that fashion performs two apparently contradictory functions. It allows people to belong to a group while also distinguishing themselves from others. Individuals adopt styles to demonstrate that they understand contemporary social expectations, yet they also use those styles to create a sense of uniqueness. As fashions move downward through the class hierarchy, elite groups often abandon them and search for new forms of distinction. The ob-

ject itself may remain useful or attractive, but its ability to separate one class from another declines. Consumer culture is therefore characterized by constant movement. What was once exclusive becomes common, and what becomes common is often reclassified as vulgar, outdated, or ordinary.

Pierre Bourdieu extended these insights by showing that distinction does not depend only on obvious luxury. Taste itself becomes a marker of class. Food, music, furniture, clothing, travel, education, and leisure communicate whether a person possesses the cultural knowledge associated with a particular social group. Established elites may avoid crude display and instead value understatement, authenticity, simplicity, and cultural sophistication. A visibly expensive object can be dismissed as pretentious, while a less obvious but culturally recognized object communicates distinction to those who understand it. This creates a hierarchy between loud and subtle consumption. The newly mobile may display success openly because they need others to recognize it, while secure elites can afford to appear unconcerned with status.

Consumer aspiration develops within this field of visible ranking. People do not desire goods in isolation. They encounter objects already surrounded by meanings. A particular phone represents technological competence and modernity. A certain school represents future success. A fashionable home represents taste and family stability. A wedding venue represents respectability and honour. Individuals learn these meanings through family, peers, advertising, entertainment, workplaces, and social media. Aspiration is therefore socially organized. People desire not only the object but the social identity attached to it. Consumption becomes a way of imagining movement from one class position to another.

This does not mean that consumers are simply manipulated or that every purchase is a conscious attempt to impress. Many goods provide pleasure, convenience, safety, comfort, and genuine self-expression. The sociological argument is that these practical and emotional benefits are shaped by social hierarchy. A person can sincerely enjoy fashion while knowing that appearance affects how others treat them. A family can value education for intellectual reasons while also recognizing that a prestigious school communicates status. Consumer culture combines use, desire, recognition, and inequality. It

makes social difference visible while encouraging individuals to imagine that personal consumption can overcome the injuries created by unequal class relations.

## **2. Phones, Fashion, Cars, Weddings, Housing, Beauty, Education, and Lifestyle**

Phones have become powerful symbols of mobility because they combine utility, style, technological competence, and public visibility. A smartphone provides communication, work, banking, entertainment, education, and access to social networks. Yet the brand and model can also signal whether a person is modern, successful, connected, or left behind. In schools and workplaces, an old or inexpensive phone may generate embarrassment even if it performs necessary functions. A new device can produce a temporary sense of inclusion because the owner no longer appears technologically inferior. The purchase is not simply about possessing a tool. It can be a claim to participation in a world where digital access has become closely linked to competence and social relevance.

Fashion operates through similar processes. Clothing communicates age, gender, occupation, taste, religion, class, and cultural belonging. People use fashion to enter professional environments, friendship groups, universities, ceremonies, and marriage markets. A person may spend heavily on clothing because appearance influences hiring, dating, respect, and everyday treatment. Lower-income individuals are often criticized for buying fashionable goods rather than saving, yet their clothing may serve important social purposes. Looking appropriately dressed can reduce stigma, protect against assumptions of poverty, and increase confidence in situations where first impressions matter. What appears to be unnecessary consumption may function as a form of social protection.

Cars are especially visible symbols of progress and adulthood. They offer mobility, safety, privacy, and independence, particularly in places with weak public transport. At the same time, cars are publicly ranked. Their size, brand, age, and condition communicate income and professional standing. For lower-middle-class families, purchasing a car can represent arrival into a more secure class position. It allows participation in social and professional spaces that are difficult to reach otherwise. Yet maintaining the vehicle can create

long-term financial pressure through fuel, repair, insurance, and debt. The car can therefore provide both practical freedom and symbolic obligation.

Weddings concentrate consumer aspiration into a single highly visible event. They involve clothing, food, venues, photography, jewellery, transport, and hospitality. Families may spend far beyond their means because the wedding represents honour, respectability, and collective standing. A modest event can be interpreted as evidence of poverty, weak family connections, or insufficient care for the couple. Expenditure becomes a public statement that the family is capable, generous, and socially established. The emotional significance of marriage makes these pressures especially intense. Parents may accept debt because reducing the event feels like publicly reducing the value of their children.

Housing communicates security more deeply than most consumer goods. A home represents stability, privacy, adulthood, family success, and protection from rent or displacement. The neighbourhood, size, architecture, furniture, and interior design all carry class meanings. Homeownership is often treated as proof of maturity and financial discipline, even when access depends on inheritance or parental support. Families without property may experience insecurity and shame despite years of work. Housing aspiration is therefore not merely a desire for display. It reflects a search for control over space, safety, family continuity, and freedom from dependence on landlords or relatives.

Beauty, education, and lifestyle complete this symbolic landscape. Skin care, fitness, dental treatment, cosmetic procedures, and grooming are linked to self-esteem but also to workplace and marriage evaluation. Education is consumed through school fees, tutoring, language courses, professional certificates, and university brands. Parents invest because credentials promise mobility and because particular institutions communicate family ambition. Lifestyle consumption includes restaurants, travel, health practices, cultural activities, and leisure. Together, these goods and experiences form a visible image of the successful person. They communicate not only what someone owns but whether they appear disciplined, informed, healthy, cultured, and prepared for the future.

### 3. Social Comparison, Media, and Consumption as Emotional Escape

Consumption is shaped by comparison. Individuals judge their income and lifestyle not only against absolute need but against the lives of people around them. James Duesenberry (1949) emphasized that consumption depends upon relative position. People compare themselves with neighbours, colleagues, relatives, and peers. A household may possess more goods than an earlier generation yet still feel deprived because its reference group has advanced further. The standard of adequacy rises as visible lifestyles improve. What once appeared luxurious becomes necessary for belonging, while what remains unavailable becomes a reminder of inferiority.

Social media can intensify this process by expanding the number of people available for comparison. Users encounter carefully selected images of homes, holidays, weddings, meals, clothing, cars, bodies, schools, and careers. These images present exceptional moments as ordinary life. The viewer compares the difficulties of everyday existence with the polished achievements of others. Because the labour, debt, family support, editing, and insecurity behind the image remain hidden, the displayed lifestyle appears effortless. Social media therefore compresses social distance. Luxury is no longer seen occasionally in elite neighbourhoods or magazines. It enters the phone repeatedly throughout the day.

Upward comparison can motivate aspiration, but it can also generate inadequacy. A person may feel that they are falling behind even when their material situation has improved. The comparison is not only economic. It concerns beauty, parenting, marriage, health, career, travel, and social activity. A family sees expensive educational routines and fears that its children are being deprived. A young adult sees engagement ceremonies and feels delayed in personal life. A worker sees professional clothing, devices, and travel and concludes that others are advancing more quickly. Consumer culture makes inequality emotionally immediate by turning every visible lifestyle into a possible standard of judgment.

Consumption offers an emotional escape from these injuries. Purchasing a desired object can provide pleasure, control, and temporary relief from feelings of exclusion. A new phone, outfit, cosmetic treat-

ment, household item, or restaurant experience allows the individual to enter the image of a better life. Material acquisition creates a moment in which class limits feel less final. The person can act upon the self and environment even when larger structures remain unchanged. For those facing unstable work, limited mobility, or social disrespect, consumption may be one of the few areas where choice appears immediate and personally controllable.

This emotional function helps explain why consumption persists under conditions of scarcity. Materialism can operate as a coping response when people experience low control and weak recognition. The purchased object offers a visible sign that hardship has not completely defeated the person. Parents may buy children branded clothing, so they are not mocked at school. A worker may spend heavily on professional appearance to protect against class prejudice. A young person may finance a phone that allows participation in social networks. These decisions may be financially risky, but they are not necessarily irrational within a society that attaches belonging and competence to visible goods.

The relief is usually temporary because the system of comparison continues. The desired object becomes ordinary, a newer version appears, or another person displays something more prestigious. Consumer escape can therefore create a cycle in which emotional injury produces spending, spending produces temporary dignity, and renewed comparison produces further desire. The individual appears endlessly dissatisfied, but the deeper problem lies in a social environment where worth is repeatedly communicated through objects. Consumption becomes both the remedy offered for class injury and one of the mechanisms that keeps the injury active.

#### **4. Debt, Display, and Pressure on the Lower and Middle Classes**

Debt allows people to obtain goods before they possess the income required to purchase them. Credit cards, instalment plans, personal loans, vehicle finance, mortgages, and informal borrowing make consumption possible under conditions of limited cash. Credit can be productive when it finances housing, education, business, transport, or essential needs. It can also become a mechanism through which class pressure is transferred into future obligation. People borrow not only because they desire luxury but because social participation increasingly requires access to costly goods and services.

Lower-income households often face the sharpest contradiction. They possess the least economic security but may encounter strong pressure to demonstrate respectability. Clothing, school materials, phones, transport, ceremonies, and housing all affect how families are judged. A household that refuses visible consumption may protect its finances but expose members to stigma. Parents understand that children can be excluded for lacking particular goods. Workers understand that appearance can influence employment. Families therefore spend in order to avoid the social consequences of poverty, even when the spending increases economic insecurity.

The middle classes face a different but related pressure. Their social position is often based on continuous performance rather than secure wealth. They must maintain housing, education, transport, professional dress, technology, healthcare, and social participation. A family may appear comfortable while carrying loans and lacking savings. The lifestyle is not purely chosen. It is tied to the requirements of remaining within a professional or respectable class position. Falling behind can threaten school opportunities, neighbourhood membership, marriage prospects, and workplace credibility.

Emerging middle-class groups may display status more visibly because their position is uncertain. A newly acquired car, renovated house, expensive wedding, or prestigious school communicates that the family has moved beyond an earlier condition. Visible consumption also corrects what may be experienced as a historical absence of assets and recognition. Established elites can criticize such display as vulgar because their own status is secured through property, net-

works, and inherited cultural knowledge. The critique hides the difference between those who must demonstrate arrival and those whose belonging is already assumed.

Debt transforms aspiration into discipline. Monthly payments restrict future choices and increase dependence on employment. A worker with vehicle finance, school fees, housing costs, and consumer loans is less able to reject an abusive employer or endure unemployment. The goods that symbolize mobility can therefore reduce actual freedom. Families may cut food, healthcare, leisure, or savings to maintain visible commitments. The emotional achievement of consumption is followed by anxiety about repayment. Status becomes an obligation that must be defended through continued labour.

This cycle can intensify inequality when affluent households can accumulate assets while poorer households must borrow to meet essential costs or social expectations. Property and education may improve future security, although returns are not guaranteed, while many consumer goods depreciate. Yet the distinction between investment and display is not always clear. A car may be necessary for work, a phone for employment, clothing for interviews, and a wedding for social belonging. The problem is not simply poor financial judgment. It is a social order in which the costs of appearing competent and respectable are privatized, while the economic risks of achieving that appearance are carried by individuals and families.

## **5. Consumption, Respectability, and the Search for Dignity**

Consumer aspiration is often dismissed as shallow because it focuses on objects, appearance, and lifestyle. This interpretation ignores the relationship between consumption and recognition. In societies where worth is visibly ranked, access to valued goods can communicate that a person is respectable, competent, modern, and capable of caring for family. Consumption becomes one way of demanding treatment that should, in principle, be available without purchase. The individual does not merely want the object. They want the social response associated with possessing it.

Michèle Lamont's work on moral boundaries shows that people seek respect through standards such as hard work, responsibility, care, and honesty. Yet these moral qualities are often judged through

material signs. A well-maintained home appears to demonstrate family discipline. Educated children demonstrate parental sacrifice. Professional clothing communicates seriousness. A large wedding communicates generosity and social connection. The problem is that the ability to display moral worth depends on economic resources. People with similar commitments are judged differently because one can make those commitments visible through consumption.

Andrew Sayer emphasizes that class inequality distributes unequal opportunities for dignity. People are not indifferent to how others evaluate them. They want to be seen as competent parents, reliable workers, attractive partners, and responsible citizens. Consumer goods become tools in this struggle because social institutions often use appearance as evidence. A person may buy expensive clothes for a job interview because employers interpret dress as professionalism. A family may pay private school fees because education signals ambition. Consumption becomes a practical attempt to protect dignity in environments where poverty is read as personal failure.

Beverley Skeggs's analysis of respectability is especially relevant. Working-class people, particularly women, may invest heavily in cleanliness, appearance, family care, and proper conduct because they are denied automatic respect. Respectability must be demonstrated continuously. Consumption provides materials through which this demonstration occurs. The home must appear orderly, children appropriately dressed, and ceremonies properly conducted. Failure is not treated as lack of money alone. It can be interpreted as evidence of poor character. The person therefore consumes in order to defend moral identity.

The same object can carry different meanings across classes. Frugality by the affluent may be praised as simplicity or environmental responsibility. Frugality among the poor may be interpreted as deprivation. Minimalist living is admired when chosen by people who could consume more, while limited consumption is stigmatized when imposed by scarcity. Similarly, expensive display by the wealthy is treated as evidence of success, while display by the poor is criticized as irresponsibility. Consumption is judged not only by what is purchased but by who purchases it.

Consumer aspiration should therefore be understood as a search for dignity under unequal conditions. It can produce waste, debt, and

competition, but its emotional foundation often lies in the desire to escape humiliation. People want their children to avoid shame, their families to be respected, and their own work to appear successful. The tragedy is that dignity pursued through consumption remains insecure. Recognition depends on continued display and can be withdrawn when income falls. A more equal society would separate human worth from purchasing power, but until that separation occurs, consumer aspiration will remain one of the main languages through which people claim social value.

## **6. Consumer Desire, the Reproduction of Inequality, and Alternative Standards of Worth**

Consumer desire reproduces inequality by legitimizing dominant images of success. When the good life is represented through expensive housing, private education, cars, travel, beauty, and technological access, those who possess these goods appear to have achieved what society values. Their consumption becomes evidence of merit. The structural advantages that made the lifestyle possible are hidden. Inheritance, family networks, secure employment, and property disappear behind the image of the successful consumer. Wealth is translated into moral worth.

Those unable to reach the standard are encouraged to interpret exclusion personally. They may believe they have failed to work hard enough, plan properly, or improve themselves. Consumer culture therefore individualizes structural inequality. Housing shortages become a failure to buy property. Weak public education becomes a failure to purchase private schooling. Poor transport becomes a failure to own a car. Limited healthcare becomes a failure to afford private treatment. Collective problems are reframed as individual purchasing deficits.

Desire also reproduces inequality through emulation. Lower groups attempt to adopt the lifestyles of those above them, but elite groups continuously redefine distinction. Once a fashion, neighbourhood, school, or leisure activity becomes widely accessible, its status value may decline. New forms of exclusivity emerge. This movement ensures that consumer equality remains difficult to achieve. Even when more people gain access to particular goods, distinction is rebuilt through quality, authenticity, location, knowledge, and subtlety.

At the same time, consumer desire reveals real deprivation. The wish for a home may express insecurity in rental housing. The desire for a car may reflect unsafe transport. Educational consumption may reflect distrust of public schools. Beauty spending may reflect discrimination based on appearance. Expensive weddings may reflect the social importance of family honour. To criticize desire without examining these conditions risks blaming people for responding to institutions that have made dignity dependent on private purchase.

Alternative value systems can weaken the connection between consumption and worth. Religious traditions, community solidarity, labour movements, environmentalism, and moral cultures can emphasize care, contribution, restraint, and collective well-being. Yet even these alternatives can become classed. Sustainable consumption may become a middle-class identity, while the everyday frugality of poor households remains unrecognized. Ethical consumption can provide moral distinction to those able to afford higher prices. Alternative standards must therefore avoid creating new hierarchies around the correct lifestyle.

Public provision offers a more structural response. When high-quality education, healthcare, transport, housing, recreation, and digital access are available as social rights, families are less dependent on private consumption to secure dignity. Universal services reduce the symbolic distance between those who can buy opportunity and those who cannot. They also weaken the pressure to display private success as proof of worth. Consumption remains meaningful and pleasurable, but it carries less responsibility for delivering security and recognition.

The central issue is not whether people should desire phones, fashion, cars, weddings, homes, education, beauty, or leisure. Desire is part of social and emotional life. The question is why access to these goods has become a measure of human value. Consumer aspiration is not simply greed or superficiality. It is often a response to societies that rank people visibly and treat material display as evidence of competence, care, and success. Understanding this relationship allows sociology to criticize the inequalities reproduced through consumption without dismissing the hopes, injuries, and dignity claims expressed through consumer desire.

## 4.4 Resentment, Blame, and the Politics of Division

### 1. Resentment as a Response to Blocked Mobility and Perceived Unfairness

Resentment is an emotional response to the belief that one has been denied something that should have been available. It differs from simple disappointment because it contains a moral judgment. The resentful person does not merely feel unfortunate. They believe that an unfair advantage, broken promise, humiliation, or violation has occurred. Resentment can emerge from low income and hardship, but it is especially intense when people compare their lives with the lives of others and conclude that effort, loyalty, sacrifice, or patience have not been rewarded fairly. It is therefore closely connected to blocked mobility. People are taught that education, hard work, discipline, and respectability will produce improvement. When these promises fail, inequality appears not only painful but deceptive. The resulting anger is directed at institutions, groups, or individuals believed to have broken the moral agreement through which social hierarchy was justified.

Ted Robert Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation helps explain why resentment is not determined by absolute poverty alone. Relative deprivation refers to the gap between what people believe they deserve and what they believe they can obtain. A person may possess more material comfort than an earlier generation yet feel deeply deprived if expectations have risen more rapidly than opportunities. Economic development, mass education, advertising, political promises, and digital media expand people's awareness of possible lifestyles. They encourage expectations of professional work, secure housing, mobility, consumption, and social respect. If wages stagnate, employment becomes precarious, or access remains restricted, aspiration turns into frustration. The person can see the social world they were encouraged to desire but cannot enter it. Blocked mobility becomes emotionally powerful because the barrier appears after hope has already been created.

Class inequality produces resentment through unequal recognition as well as unequal resources. Sennett and Cobb's account of the hid-

den injuries of class shows how working-class people can experience social hierarchy as a wound to dignity. Their labour may be necessary, demanding, and morally serious, yet public respect is often attached to credentials, professional occupations, wealth, and cultural polish. When effort does not produce recognition, people may feel that society has misjudged them. Axel Honneth's theory of recognition explains this as a violation of expectations of respect and esteem. Individuals need to be recognized as rights-bearing members of society and as contributors whose work and experience possess value. When recognition is withheld, anger can arise even if basic material needs are partly met. Resentment therefore reflects the unequal distribution of social worth.

Humiliation intensifies this response because it transforms inequality into a personal encounter. A worker who is spoken to disrespectfully, a welfare recipient treated as dishonest, a student mocked for an accent, or a migrant questioned as though they do not belong experiences more than disadvantage. They are placed below others in a visible moral hierarchy. Repeated humiliation creates a memory of denied dignity. The person may remember not only what was lost but who appeared comfortable while they were embarrassed. Resentment develops around this comparison. It asks why some people can demand respect while others must prove deservingness. It also asks why the sacrifices of the disadvantaged are treated as ordinary while the privileges of the powerful are interpreted as achievement.

Resentment is therefore not irrational. It can be an accurate emotional perception that social arrangements are unfair. The emotion becomes politically significant because it contains both pain and explanation. It searches for a cause, a responsible actor, and a possible form of redress. Yet resentment does not automatically identify the true structure of inequality. A person may correctly feel that life chances are blocked while misunderstanding why. They may blame an immigrant for employment insecurity, a welfare recipient for taxation, a woman for changing gender roles, or an ethnic minority for receiving recognition. The emotional perception of unfairness can be valid while the causal interpretation is false. This gap between felt injustice and structural understanding creates the political danger of resentment.

## 2. Humiliation, Shame, Status Anxiety, and Resentment

Resentment often develops from emotions that are difficult to admit publicly. Shame, fear, insecurity, and wounded pride can be converted into anger because anger feels more active and less exposing. Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger's (1991) account of shame-rage cycles is useful here. Shame signals threatened social bonds and a fear of negative judgment. When acknowledged, it can lead to reflection, apology, or a search for support. When denied or repressed, it may become anger directed outward. A person who feels unsuccessful may find it easier to blame a group than to speak about insecurity. A community that feels ignored may express rage rather than admit humiliation. Resentment can therefore protect the self from a painful recognition of vulnerability.

Class societies generate many conditions for this transformation. People are expected to demonstrate competence, independence, and progress. Unemployment, debt, dependence, poor housing, or low-status work can be experienced as threats to adult identity. Men may feel that they have failed to provide. Parents may feel that they cannot offer children the future they deserve. Workers may fear that their skills have become obsolete. Middle-class families may live with constant anxiety about losing educational, occupational, or housing status. These experiences can produce shame because economic difficulty is interpreted through moral ideas about effort and responsibility. When the structural causes of insecurity remain unclear, anger may seek a more visible object.

Max Scheler's (1998) concept of resentment describes a condition in which feelings of powerlessness and inferiority are not resolved through effective action. The injured person cannot confront the actual source of domination, so desire is redirected toward devaluing or punishing others. Resentment does not simply express anger at injustice. It rearranges moral evaluation. Qualities possessed by others are condemned because they appear unattainable, while hostility provides a substitute for lost agency. The person gains emotional relief by believing that another group is corrupt, undeserving, impure, or dangerous. Their own suffering becomes proof of moral superiority. Resentment therefore converts blocked aspiration into a politics of degradation.

Status anxiety is central to this process. People compare not only income but recognition, visibility, and cultural standing. A worker may fear that educated professionals look down on them. A majority ethnic group may believe that minorities now receive more attention. Men may interpret women's advancement as evidence of their own decline. Established citizens may view migrants' claims to rights as a reduction in their own status. These perceptions do not require an actual transfer of material advantage. Recognition can be experienced as scarce. When a previously marginalized group becomes more visible, others may feel that their own social centrality has been threatened. Resentment develops from the belief that someone else's recognition has come at one's expense.

Erich Fromm's account of authoritarianism and the study by Theodor Adorno and his collaborators offer interpretations of how insecurity can encourage a desire for strong leadership (Fromm, 1941; Adorno et al., 1950). Individuals who feel powerless in economic and institutional life may seek emotional compensation through identification with a powerful nation, leader, religion, race, or gender order. Obedience to authority provides certainty, while hostility toward weaker groups allows the person to participate symbolically in power. The authoritarian leader appears to restore dignity by promising order, punishment, and national greatness. Yet this restoration is selective. It does not necessarily reduce inequality. It offers emotional recognition to supporters by identifying enemies who can be blamed and disciplined.

Humiliation, shame, and status anxiety therefore do not lead automatically to progressive or reactionary politics. Their direction depends on the explanations available. If people understand insecurity as the result of low wages, weak public services, concentrated wealth, and unequal power, resentment may support democratic reform. If insecurity is interpreted as the result of immigrants, minorities, women, welfare recipients, or cultural elites, the same emotion may support exclusion. Ressentiment becomes politically dangerous when the need for dignity is satisfied through the degradation of others rather than through changes in the institutions that produced humiliation.

### 3. Political Narratives and the Redirection of Anger

Political actors do not create all resentment, but they shape how it is interpreted. Elites, politicians, media organizations, parties, and institutions provide narratives that identify causes, victims, and enemies. A person may know that wages are low, services are declining, housing is unaffordable, or employment is insecure. These experiences do not explain themselves. Political narratives connect them to a story. The story may identify concentrated ownership, labour deregulation, corruption, and weak social protection. It may instead identify migrants, minorities, welfare recipients, feminists, or urban cultural elites. The direction of resentment depends greatly on which explanation becomes emotionally and culturally available.

In *Policing the Crisis*, Stuart Hall and his collaborators (1978) analyse how a British crisis of law and order was organized through moral panic and popular common sense. Similar mechanisms can operate in other settings. Complex problems are condensed into images of disorder, dependency, crime, or cultural decline. Media attention focuses on visible groups who appear to embody the crisis. A welfare recipient becomes the symbol of public waste. A migrant becomes the explanation for pressure on housing or employment. A minority protest becomes evidence that national unity is under attack. These images simplify structures that are otherwise difficult to see. Financial systems, ownership relations, tax policy, and labour markets are abstract. The scapegoat is concrete, visible, and emotionally available.

Ernesto Laclau's (2005) work on populism helps explain how political leaders construct "the people" by linking different grievances into a shared identity. Citizens may be angry about wages, corruption, housing, cultural change, and political exclusion. Populist discourse connects these concerns by naming an enemy who allegedly blocks the will of the people. This enemy may be an economic elite, a political establishment, a racial minority, migrants, or a combination of groups. The political power of the narrative lies in its ability to give scattered frustrations a common language. Resentment becomes collective when people recognize their separate injuries as parts of one story.

Arlie Russell Hochschild's (2016) study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana examines a political narrative in which people believe that

they have waited patiently in a moral line for prosperity and recognition, only to see others move ahead through undeserved assistance. This perception is emotionally powerful even when it does not accurately describe public policy. A person who has worked for years without achieving security may resent groups described as receiving special benefits. Politicians can reinforce the image that immigrants, racial minorities, women, or welfare recipients are being unfairly prioritized. Structural inequality is transformed into a struggle between ordinary people over who deserves recognition and resources.

Media institutions amplify this redirection through repetition and selection. Exceptional cases of fraud, crime, or conflict are presented as representative. The daily advantages enjoyed through inheritance, property ownership, financial regulation, and elite networks receive less attention because they appear normal and technically complex. The result is an unequal visibility of wrongdoing. Poor people's minor claims are scrutinized publicly, while the institutional mechanisms of wealth accumulation remain distant. Resentment follows what can be seen. Citizens become angry at individuals who appear to take from the system while overlooking actors with far greater power to shape the system.

Political redirection succeeds because it addresses real emotions. People do feel insecure, disrespected, and ignored. A narrative that simply tells them their anger is irrational will fail. Effective scapegoating recognizes the injury but misidentifies the cause. It offers the emotional satisfaction of blame and the political simplicity of punishment. The task of democratic politics is therefore not to suppress resentment but to provide a more accurate account of its origins. Unless structural explanations become emotionally meaningful, scapegoating narratives will continue to convert legitimate anger into hostility against those with little power.

#### 4. Horizontal Conflict Among Disadvantaged Groups

Inequality often produces conflict not only between elites and disadvantaged groups but among people who occupy similarly insecure positions. Horizontal conflict emerges when groups compete over employment, housing, welfare, recognition, public space, and moral status. Scarcity makes these conflicts more likely because gains for one group are interpreted as losses for another. Instead of asking why resources are limited or unequally distributed, people ask which group deserves priority. Class inequality is thereby reorganized as competition among the disadvantaged.

Gordon Allport's (1954/1979) work on prejudice shows how social categories can become targets of hostility when frustration seeks an object. Scapegoats are usually groups with limited power but high visibility. They can be portrayed as responsible without being able to control the institutions that generate insecurity. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory further explains how people protect self-esteem through group boundaries. Individuals derive value from belonging to groups they can view positively. Under conditions of threat, they may exaggerate differences between "us" and "them." Even minor distinctions can become morally significant when group status feels uncertain.

Muzafer Sherif and colleagues' (1961) research on realistic group conflict shows how competition over scarce resources can generate hostility. When groups believe they are competing for jobs, benefits, housing, or political influence, negative stereotypes become more persuasive. Structural scarcity can therefore intensify ethnic, religious, regional, and class boundaries. Yet the competition is often politically organized. Workers may be placed in labour markets where employers benefit from divisions between citizens and migrants. Poor families may compete for limited housing because public investment is insufficient. Communities may fight over welfare because support is means-tested and narrowly targeted.

Anti-poor prejudice is one expression of horizontal resentment. Lower-middle-class and working-class people may distance themselves from welfare recipients to protect their own moral status. They emphasize that they work, pay taxes, and remain responsible despite hardship. Welfare claimants are represented as lazy, dependent, or

dishonest. This distinction allows insecure workers to claim dignity, but it leaves the broader organization of low wages and weak social protection unchallenged. The poor are divided into deserving and undeserving categories, and each group fears being placed on the lower side of the boundary.

Gender resentment follows similar patterns. Men facing unemployment, declining wages, or loss of occupational status may interpret women's educational and professional gains as the cause of their insecurity. Women are blamed for changing family roles, refusing traditional dependence, or receiving institutional preference. At the same time, poor women may be blamed for fertility, welfare use, or family breakdown. Gender becomes a convenient explanation for changes produced by labour markets, housing costs, and reduced public support. Resentment is directed horizontally toward women rather than vertically toward institutions that distribute work and care unequally.

Ethnic blame and migrant scapegoating intensify when cultural and economic insecurity overlap. Migrants may be accused of taking jobs, lowering wages, using services, or changing national identity. Minority groups may be blamed for receiving attention or legal protection. Yet migrants and minorities often occupy insecure employment and housing positions themselves. Horizontal conflict prevents recognition of shared interests. Employers, landlords, and political elites can benefit from a fragmented population that competes downward. Inequality becomes self-reproducing when disadvantaged groups struggle to avoid becoming the lowest-status category rather than challenging the hierarchy itself.

## **5. Anti-Elite Anger, Authoritarianism, and the Political Danger of Misidentified Injustice**

Anti-elite anger can express a legitimate recognition that wealth, authority, and political influence are concentrated. Citizens may observe that powerful groups avoid consequences, shape policy, and remain protected from economic crises. They may resent politicians, financial institutions, media organizations, universities, and professional classes that appear distant from ordinary life. This anger can support democratic demands for accountability, redistribution, and institutional reform. Yet anti-elite resentment can also become confusing, selective, and politically exploitable.

The category of “elite” is often deliberately blurred. Economic elites who control property and capital can be combined with cultural professionals, teachers, journalists, civil servants, academics, or minority activists. This fusion allows economic power to disappear behind cultural conflict. A billionaire politician can present themselves as an opponent of elites because they attack universities, media, or public institutions. Supporters receive an emotionally satisfying target while concentrated wealth remains untouched. Anti-elite language becomes compatible with policies that strengthen economic elites.

Authoritarian leaders mobilize resentment by presenting themselves as the direct voice of humiliated people. They promise to bypass institutions, punish enemies, and restore national or social greatness. Complexity is represented as deception, and legal restraint as weakness. The leader’s aggression is interpreted as strength because it symbolically reverses supporters’ experiences of powerlessness. Insults directed at minorities, migrants, journalists, or opponents demonstrate that the leader is willing to violate the norms associated with groups perceived as condescending.

The accounts developed by Fromm and by Adorno and his collaborators help interpret why submission to authority can coexist with rebellion against institutions. The authoritarian personality is not simply obedient. It may submit to power above while directing aggression downward. Identification with a powerful leader provides borrowed status. The supporter participates emotionally in the leader’s capacity to command and punish. Those classified as out-

siders become acceptable targets because their degradation confirms the restored hierarchy. Resentment is transformed into authoritarian solidarity rather than democratic equality.

The political danger is greatest when people can feel injustice but cannot identify its institutional structure. They know that promises of mobility have failed, that some groups possess excessive power, and that their own dignity has been injured. Yet they may lack concepts for understanding ownership, taxation, labour markets, administrative design, or cultural domination. The resentment remains available for capture. Political actors provide simplified explanations that personalize structural problems and moralize social differences.

Misidentified injustice can therefore strengthen the arrangements that created resentment. Workers angry about insecurity may support attacks on unions, welfare, or migrants. Citizens angry about corruption may support leaders who weaken oversight. People angry at distant elites may defend wealthy figures who perform cultural familiarity. The emotional truth of resentment makes political error more durable. Individuals are not simply deceived. They are offered recognition, belonging, and an explanation. Democratic alternatives must provide these emotional goods while connecting them to a more accurate account of power.

## **6. From Resentment to Solidarity and Democratic Justice**

Resentment does not have to lead to scapegoating or authoritarianism. It can become a starting point for solidarity when people learn to connect personal injuries to shared structures. C. Wright Mills's sociological imagination is central to this transformation. It allows individuals to understand private troubles as public issues. Unemployment becomes connected to economic organization, housing insecurity to property systems, and humiliation to class hierarchy. The person no longer sees hardship as an isolated failure or the result of a nearby group's advantage. They begin to identify patterns that link their experience with the experiences of others.

Paulo Freire's (2018) concept of critical consciousness similarly emphasizes the movement from passive suffering to reflective action. People develop a language to name the conditions that shape their lives. Dialogue is essential because individuals discover that others

share experiences of disrespect, blocked mobility, and insecurity. This recognition weakens shame and isolation. It also changes the direction of anger. Rather than attacking a scapegoat, people can ask how institutions organize scarcity and whose interests are served by division.

Honneth's theory of recognition shows why solidarity requires more than economic interest. Groups must see one another as worthy participants whose dignity is connected. Workers may share material interests but remain divided by race, gender, migration status, or occupation. Recognition challenges the hierarchies within disadvantaged populations. It asks citizens to understand that another group's rights do not diminish their own worth. Mutual recognition allows differences to exist without becoming rankings of humanity.

Nancy Fraser's framework adds that recognition must be joined to redistribution and representation. Cultural respect without economic change leaves material inequality intact. Redistribution without recognition can reproduce stigma and paternalism. Representation is necessary so that marginalized groups participate in defining problems and solutions. Democratic solidarity therefore requires resources, equal status, and political voice. It does not ask people to abandon grievance. It transforms grievance into demands for institutions that reduce insecurity for everyone.

Collective action can redirect resentment by creating shared goals. Trade unions, tenant organizations, welfare movements, women's movements, migrant associations, and community campaigns bring people into relationships that challenge inherited divisions. Cooperation reveals that groups previously seen as competitors can benefit from common reforms such as higher wages, affordable housing, universal services, labour rights, and democratic accountability. Shared struggle also produces emotional recognition. People who felt invisible become participants in a collective project.

The transformation of resentment requires institutions capable of hearing anger before it is captured by exclusionary politics. Public forums, representative organizations, accessible media, responsive welfare systems, and democratic workplaces can provide channels through which grievance becomes articulated. When people are ignored, resentment intensifies and seeks alternative outlets. When they are heard but nothing changes, cynicism grows. Solidarity there-

fore requires both recognition and effective action. Resentment becomes democratically productive when it identifies the structures that produce humiliation and connects the pursuit of dignity with the dignity of others. It becomes dangerous when injury is real, explanation is false, and political belonging is built through the punishment of those with even less power.



# Reimagining Equality

From Private Aspiration to Collective Possibility

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- 5.1 Against the Escape Model of Mobility
- 5.2 Rebuilding Institutions for Dignity
- 5.3 Cultural Democracy and the Right to Belong
- 5.4 The Collective Social Imagination

## 5.1 Against the Escape Model of Mobility

### 1. The Escape Model of Mobility

The escape model of mobility defines justice as the ability of selected individuals to leave disadvantaged social positions behind. In this model, poverty, working-class life, marginalized communities, weak schools, insecure neighbourhoods, and low-status occupations are treated as places from which ambitious people should escape. Social progress is measured through the number of individuals who move upward into universities, professional employment, entrepreneurship, affluent neighbourhoods, or prestigious marriages. The central moral figure is the exceptional person who rises through effort despite difficult circumstances. Their success is presented as evidence that social order is open. Justice becomes less about changing the conditions of disadvantaged groups and more about identifying talented individuals who can be removed from those conditions.

This model is emotionally powerful because it transforms inequality into a story with a recognizable hero. Structural change is complex, slow, and politically contested. A mobility story is personal and dramatic. It begins with hardship, follows struggle and sacrifice, and ends with recognition. The scholarship student enters an elite university. The migrant finds success abroad. The poor entrepreneur builds a company. The working-class child becomes a doctor, lawyer, professor, or executive. These stories provide hope because they show that social origins do not determine every outcome. They also allow families and communities to see their sacrifices represented in the success of one member. Mobility stories can therefore inspire genuine ambition and reveal real human agency.

The problem is not that such success is false or unimportant. Individual advancement can transform life. A secure salary can provide housing, healthcare, education, and protection from uncertainty. A scholarship can open intellectual and professional opportunities that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Migration can allow a person to support relatives and escape political or economic insecurity. The limitation lies in treating these individual changes as evidence that inequality itself has been solved. When one person leaves a disadvantaged group, this does not by itself transform the conditions affecting

the group. The poor neighbourhood remains underfunded, the occupation remains low paid, the school remains unequal, and the labour market continues to distribute insecurity.

Michael Young's critique of meritocracy helps explain the ideological strength of the escape model. A society that claims to reward ability and effort can present hierarchy as deserved. Those who move upward appear to have proved their merit. Those who remain below are more easily interpreted as lacking ambition, intelligence, discipline, or courage. The exceptional person becomes the standard against which everyone else is judged. If one child from a poor school reaches an elite university, the failure of others appears individual rather than institutional. If one migrant becomes wealthy, structural barriers facing migrants can be dismissed. Mobility stories therefore turn rare success into a moral test for the majority.

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis shows that this model ignores the unequal distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital. Individuals do not compete only through talent. They compete with different family resources, language styles, institutional knowledge, networks, and protection from risk. The successful outsider may possess unusual ability, receive crucial support, encounter a mentor, or benefit from an exceptional opening. Celebrating the outcome while ignoring these conditions makes the path appear more widely available than it is. Mobility becomes a spectacle that conceals reproduction.

The escape model also carries a hidden judgment about the people and places left behind. It implies that dignity belongs to those who depart. A poor person establishes worth by becoming unlike other poor people. A working-class child proves ability by entering a middle-class profession. A rural student succeeds by moving to the city. This logic does not improve the value attached to working-class labour, rural life, caregiving, or ordinary community participation. It confirms their lower status. Justice is reduced to selective exit rather than collective transformation.

## **2. Why Mobility Stories Are Emotionally Powerful but Politically Limited**

Mobility stories endure because they connect hope with personal identity. They allow individuals to imagine that effort can overcome inherited limits. For people living under conditions of insecurity, this belief can provide motivation, discipline, and a reason to endure sacrifice. Parents invest in education because they imagine a different future for their children. Students tolerate difficult journeys, debt, and exclusion because success appears capable of transforming family life. Workers save for migration or business because these routes seem to offer independence. The emotional power of mobility comes from its promise that suffering is temporary and meaningful.

These stories are also attractive to institutions and political leaders. Governments can celebrate scholarship recipients, entrepreneurs, migrants, and first-generation graduates as evidence of progress. Universities display successful poor students as proof of access. Corporations present individual promotions as evidence of diversity. Charities highlight exceptional beneficiaries to demonstrate impact. Such stories are easier to communicate than changes in wage structures, taxation, housing, labour rights, or public services. They allow institutions to claim openness without altering the conditions that make upward mobility rare.

Michael Sandel's critique of meritocratic society helps explain why mobility narratives can become politically limited. When success is attributed to talent and effort, winners are encouraged to interpret their position as deserved. This can produce meritocratic hubris. Successful people may underestimate luck, family support, institutional access, and historical advantage. Those who do not succeed experience the opposite emotion. They are encouraged to regard their position as evidence of personal failure. The mobility story therefore divides society morally between those who appear to have earned advancement and those who appear to have failed to use opportunity (Sandel, 2020).

The political limitation is especially clear when exceptional cases are used to block structural criticism. A scholarship student is cited against arguments about unequal schooling. A successful female executive is used to deny gendered workplace barriers. A migrant en-

trepreneur is presented as proof that migration systems are fair. An individual from a minority background in high office becomes evidence that racism has disappeared. In each case, the exceptional person is made to represent the normal accessibility of success. Their achievement becomes a shield protecting institutions from broader examination.

Mobility stories can also narrow political imagination. They encourage people to ask how individuals can compete more effectively rather than why basic security depends on competition. Educational reform becomes training disadvantaged students to enter elite institutions rather than improving all schools. Employment policy becomes preparing individuals to market themselves rather than strengthening wages and labour protection. Housing policy becomes helping selected families purchase property rather than guaranteeing secure housing. The horizon of justice contracts around individual advancement.

This narrowing affects how social problems are narrated. Poverty becomes a lack of skills. Unemployment becomes insufficient adaptability. Low wages become a failure to improve qualifications. Regional decline becomes reluctance to migrate. The solution is always personal movement. Individuals must study, retrain, relocate, network, borrow, or take risks. Institutions remain stable while people are required to transform themselves repeatedly. Mobility becomes a demand placed upon the disadvantaged rather than a measure of institutional openness.

The emotional appeal of the story therefore coexists with political weakness. Hope is organized around departure rather than change. People imagine a better life for themselves or their children but not necessarily a better social order for everyone. The individual dream can remain sincere and necessary, yet it becomes politically limiting when it replaces collective demands. Mobility stories are most powerful when they show that change is possible, but most dangerous when they imply that justice consists only in allowing a few to escape.

### 3. Individual Pathways of Success and Their Structural Limits

Scholarship success is one of the clearest forms of individual mobility. A student from a poor or working-class family gains access to an institution that would otherwise be unaffordable. The scholarship may provide tuition, accommodation, networks, credentials, and a route into professional work. It can transform family expectations and create new opportunities for siblings. Yet the existence of a scholarship does not change the unequal school system that prepared some students far better than others. It selects a small number of individuals from a wider population whose schools, teachers, housing, and digital access remain unequal.

Elite employment creates a similar transformation. A working-class graduate who enters law, finance, medicine, academia, technology, or senior administration may gain income and authority far beyond the family of origin. The achievement is real, but the profession can remain culturally and socially exclusive. Recruitment may still favour elite universities, unpaid internships, polished speech, and professional networks. One person's entry does not remove the class ceiling. The institution can celebrate diversity while preserving the standards and relationships that continue to advantage privileged applicants.

Migration can alter individual and family life more dramatically. A migrant may earn higher wages, send remittances, finance education, improve housing, or escape political restriction. Migration can also produce new forms of knowledge and independence. Yet it does not necessarily transform the unequal regional or national conditions that made departure necessary. A village may become dependent on remittances while local employment remains weak. A country may lose skilled workers while celebrating their success abroad. Mobility occurs geographically, but the structural hierarchy between places remains intact.

Entrepreneurship offers another powerful story of escape. The entrepreneur appears to create opportunities through courage, innovation, and risk. A successful business can provide income, employment, and autonomy. Yet entrepreneurial success is unevenly distributed because people begin with different capital, networks, market knowledge, and capacity to survive failure. A person with family

property can borrow, experiment, and recover. A poor entrepreneur may risk household survival. Celebrating successful businesses without examining failed ventures, debt, and unequal starting conditions turns survival bias into social theory.

Marriage can also produce upward mobility. A partnership may provide housing, social connections, citizenship, cultural capital, or entry into a more privileged family. This can change a person's security and social position. Yet marriage mobility does not alter the class system. It may instead reinforce it by concentrating resources within families and making intimate relationships part of social closure. Those who marry upward are treated as fortunate, while others remain subject to unequal marriage markets shaped by education, family reputation, beauty, gender, and property.

These pathways demonstrate the difference between changing a life and changing a structure. A scholarship changes who enters an elite institution. Structural reform changes the quality and accessibility of education for whole groups. Elite employment changes an individual's occupation. Labour reform changes wages, security, and authority across occupations. Migration changes where a person earns. Regional development changes the need to leave. Entrepreneurship changes one household's income. Redistribution changes access to capital and protection from risk. Marriage changes personal resources. Equality changes how security is distributed independently of family connection.

Individual mobility therefore matters, but it cannot carry the full burden of justice. It is valuable as freedom and opportunity. It becomes inadequate when used as a substitute for transformation. The question is not whether people should pursue scholarships, professions, migration, business, or advantageous relationships. The question is why access to dignity and security depends so heavily on these selective routes. A just society would allow individual movement while refusing to make escape the primary solution to unequal conditions.

#### 4. The Emotional Costs of Upward Mobility

Upward mobility is often narrated as a simple movement from hardship to success. Sociological research shows that the experience is emotionally more complicated. Friedman's studies (2014, 2016) show how some upwardly mobile people experience being caught between worlds. They may feel pride in achievement and gratitude toward those who support them. At the same time, they may experience shame about their origins, guilt about leaving others behind, and uncertainty about whether they belong in the destination class. Success changes social position without erasing the history embodied in speech, taste, memory, and family obligation.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus clivé* describes a divided habitus produced by movement across distant social fields. The upwardly mobile individual has learned dispositions associated with the class of origin and later acquires the codes of a new environment. These dispositions can conflict. At home, professional language or new tastes may appear pretentious. At work, accent, family history, or unfamiliarity with elite culture may mark the person as an outsider. The individual becomes skilled at moving between contexts but may feel completely natural in neither.

Sam Friedman's (2012) work shows that mobility can produce cultural homelessness. The person no longer fully belongs to the community left behind but is never completely accepted by the elite world entered. Colleagues may treat the person as an exception, while relatives may believe that success has created distance. The mobile individual learns to code-switch, edit biography, and manage impressions. This flexibility can be a strength, but it also requires emotional labour. Belonging must be continuously negotiated.

Guilt is especially significant when mobility is supported by family sacrifice. Parents may work long hours, siblings may accept fewer resources, and relatives may provide care or money. The successful individual knows that achievement was collective, yet the rewards are concentrated personally. A professional salary may create expectations to support extended family. Refusing assistance can feel disloyal, while continuous support can prevent the accumulation of personal security. Mobility creates moral obligations that colleagues from privileged families may not carry.

Embarrassment can intensify this conflict. The upwardly mobile person may feel uneasy about family speech, clothing, home, or behaviour in elite settings. This embarrassment is followed by shame because the individual recognizes it as a judgment against people they love. Emotional injury lies in adopting standards that devalue the very community that made success possible. Mobility becomes not only a change in position but a change in perception. The person begins to see family through the eyes of the destination class.

The community of origin also experiences mobility. Relatives can feel pride, dependence, loss, and perceived rejection. They may believe the mobile person no longer understands ordinary difficulties or has become ashamed of them. The individual may try to prove authenticity by emphasizing loyalty, modesty, or practical skills. These acts seek what can be called authentication. Success must be presented as compatible with origin.

The psychosocial costs do not make mobility undesirable. They reveal that movement through an unchanged class structure demands adaptation from the individual. Institutions rarely change to receive newcomers. The newcomer must learn new codes, repair relationships, and carry divided belongings. A model of justice based on escape therefore places both practical and emotional costs on those who move, leaving the structure that produced the division largely untouched.

## **5. How Exceptional Success Legitimizes Inequality**

Exceptional success legitimizes inequality by making unequal outcomes appear attainable and deserved. When a person rises from poverty to wealth, the story suggests that barriers can be overcome through sufficient effort. Success is real, but its political use can be misleading. Rare outcomes are presented as representative possibilities. The exception becomes evidence about the fairness of the rule.

This legitimating function depends on selective visibility. Successful scholarship recipients, entrepreneurs, migrants, and professionals are celebrated publicly. Those who worked equally hard but encountered illness, discrimination, debt, family responsibility, or institutional exclusion receive less attention. Failure appears ordinary and

individual, while success appears instructive and universal. The social conditions distinguishing between the two disappear.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps explain how this process works. Institutions use dominant cultural standards while presenting them as neutral. Students are judged through language, confidence, taste, and educational familiarity that privileged families transmit more easily. When an outsider succeeds, the institution appears open. Yet the standards remain unchanged. The successful person often proves the ability to acquire dominant capital rather than the absence of exclusion.

Exceptional success also requires a background population against which distinction becomes visible. A scholarship winner is exceptional because most students from similar schools do not receive the scholarship. An entrepreneur is exceptional because many ventures fail. A migrant success story stands out against insecure labour and legal vulnerability. The narrative depends upon the persistence of disadvantage. If everyone possessed security and opportunity, escape would lose its heroic character.

Meritocratic celebration can therefore deepen the stigma attached to those who remain. If one person escaped, why did others not? The answer is sought in motivation, culture, or character. Communities become divided between aspirational individuals and supposedly passive masses. Working-class life is judged by the standard of departure. Those who remain in manual work, caregiving, rural communities, or low-income neighbourhoods are treated as people who failed to move.

Michael Sandel argues that meritocracy damages both winners and losers. Winners develop pride in deservingness, while losers experience humiliation. The successful person may sincerely acknowledge luck and support, but public narratives still transform achievement into proof of a fair system. Institutions use the person as evidence that opportunity exists. The individual becomes symbolically responsible for legitimizing arrangements they did not create.

The ideological effect is especially strong when mobility stories substitute for redistribution. A government can fund a small number of scholarships while leaving public schools unequal. A corporation can promote a few working-class employees while maintaining low wages for the wider workforce. A society can celebrate migrant re-

mittances while failing to create employment at home. Selective mobility becomes cheaper than structural reform.

Exceptional success should therefore be interpreted carefully. It shows that individuals possess agency and that institutions are not completely closed. It does not show that the distribution of opportunity is fair. A just analysis asks not only who succeeded but how many could realistically follow, what resources enabled the path, and what happened to those excluded. Success becomes socially meaningful when it expands collective possibility rather than merely proving that escape is possible for a few.

## 5.2 Rebuilding Institutions for Dignity

### 1. Dignity as a Principle of Institutional Design

Institutional reform is usually evaluated through efficiency, cost, coverage, and measurable outcomes. These criteria matter because schools, workplaces, welfare systems, hospitals, and local governments must use public and organizational resources responsibly. Yet institutions also shape how people understand their own worth. A student can receive instruction while being treated as intellectually inferior. A worker can receive wages while being denied voice. A welfare recipient can receive income while being made to feel dishonest. A patient can receive treatment while being ignored. Dignity-centered reform begins from the principle that institutions must not merely deliver services or manage populations. They must recognize each person as fully human, capable of interpretation, entitled to respect, and able to participate in decisions affecting their life. Dignity is therefore not a decorative value added after material goals have been achieved. It is a criterion for judging whether an institution distributes resources without reproducing humiliation, subordination, or dependence.

A dignity-centered institution differs from a paternalistic one. Paternalistic systems may provide help while assuming that professionals, officials, or managers know what recipients need and that recipients should remain grateful. Such systems classify people as cases, clients, beneficiaries, risks, or labour units. These categories may be administratively necessary, but they become degrading when they

erase personal history and agency. Recognition requires more than polite treatment. It requires the institutional acknowledgment that people possess knowledge about their own circumstances and should influence how support, discipline, employment, and care are organized. A decent institution, in Avishai Margalit's (1996) sense, is one whose arrangements do not humiliate. This means that rules, forms, waiting systems, classroom procedures, workplace evaluations, and clinical encounters must be examined for the status messages they communicate.

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition clarifies why institutional treatment has deep consequences. Individuals develop self-confidence through care, self-respect through rights, and self-esteem through social appreciation. Institutions contribute to or damage all three. Schools can confirm that a child is capable of learning or repeatedly communicate deficiency. Workplaces can recognize contribution or reduce employees to replaceable labour. Welfare systems can affirm social citizenship or portray recipients as moral failures. Healthcare can protect bodily integrity or make vulnerable patients feel invisible. Local government can recognize residents as co-owners of public space or treat poor communities as obstacles to planning. Institutional disrespect is not merely an unpleasant experience. It can alter confidence, participation, trust, and willingness to seek help. Recognition therefore has practical as well as moral value.

Dignity-centered reform must be structural rather than dependent on individual kindness. A compassionate teacher, nurse, manager, or welfare officer can reduce harm, but personal goodwill cannot compensate for systems built around overcrowding, impossible workloads, arbitrary discretion, inaccessible language, or punitive targets. Staff may want to treat people respectfully yet lack the time, authority, or resources to do so. Reform must therefore change institutional routines, evaluation criteria, staffing, accountability, and channels of participation. Anti-bias training has value, but it is insufficient if hiring continues through informal networks, welfare requires repeated proof of deprivation, schools publicly identify poor students, or hospitals communicate only through technical language. Dignity has to be designed into procedures rather than left to personality.

Recognition must also be connected to redistribution. Respectful language cannot repair a school without teachers, a clinic without

medicine, or a household without income. Equally, additional resources do not automatically create dignity if they are delivered through suspicion and control. A scholarship can increase access while marking its recipient as poor. A welfare payment can reduce hunger while subjecting the claimant to humiliation. A public housing programme can improve shelter while excluding residents from decisions about location and design. Dignity-centered reform therefore joins material provision with equal status and voice. It asks what people receive, how they receive it, and whether they can influence the conditions of provision.

Institutions should consequently be assessed through a broader public ethic. Efficiency asks whether a service is delivered quickly and economically. Equity asks whether resources reach people according to need. Dignity asks whether the process protects self-respect and recognizes agency. Participation asks whether those affected can shape decisions. These standards are mutually reinforcing when reform is well designed. Clear information can improve efficiency and reduce anxiety. Accessible services can expand coverage and reduce exclusion. Fair procedures can increase trust and cooperation. Voice can reveal errors that managers cannot see. The central claim of dignity-centered reform is that institutions are successful not only when they process people effectively, but when people leave encounters feeling that their humanity has been recognized rather than diminished.

## **2. Dignity-Centered Schools and Inclusive Educational Practice**

Schools distribute knowledge, credentials, discipline, recognition, and expectations about the future. They can widen opportunity, but they can also reproduce class humiliation through curriculum, language, ability grouping, punishment, fees, uniforms, and assumptions about families. A dignity-centered school begins by rejecting the belief that social background indicates intellectual worth. Students from poor, rural, working-class, migrant, minority, or stigmatized communities should not have to erase accent, family history, clothing, or local knowledge before being treated as capable learners. Educational reform must therefore examine not only enrolment and examination results but classroom interaction, teacher expectations, peer culture, administrative procedures, and the emotional meaning of participation.

Inclusive language policy is central to this reform. Schools often reward the speech of dominant groups while treating regional accents, multilingual practices, or nonstandard expression as evidence of weak intelligence. Students may stop speaking because each contribution risks correction or ridicule. A dignity-centered language policy distinguishes between expanding a student's communicative repertoire and degrading the language they already possess. Teachers can teach formal academic language without presenting home speech as defective. Multilingual support, translation for families, careful correction, and curricula that explain linguistic diversity can make language acquisition additive rather than assimilative. The purpose should be to give students more ways to communicate, not to make them ashamed of the voice through which they first learned the world.

Curriculum and pedagogy also communicate recognition. When textbooks present only elite, urban, male, majority, or national perspectives, students from other backgrounds learn that their histories are secondary. Inclusive curricula should represent labour, migration, rural life, domestic work, minority communities, disability, gender, and regional experience as legitimate subjects of knowledge. This does not mean replacing academic standards with uncritical celebration. It means allowing students to connect formal concepts with lived realities and to see that intellectual authority is not monop-

lized by dominant groups. Participatory teaching can reinforce this recognition through dialogue, group inquiry, student-led discussion, and opportunities to question. A classroom organized only around obedience may produce compliance, but it rarely develops confident democratic agency.

Discipline must be reformed because humiliation is often built into how schools manage behaviour. Public scolding, corporal punishment, exclusion, class-based assumptions, and collective shaming can damage students long after the incident. Poor students may be punished for lateness caused by transport, missing materials caused by poverty, or absence caused by care responsibilities. Dignity-centered discipline investigates circumstances, separates behaviour from personal worth, and gives students a meaningful opportunity to explain. Restorative approaches can require accountability while avoiding degradation. Transparent rules, recorded decisions, appeal mechanisms, and monitoring of class, gender, disability, and minority patterns can reduce the discretionary reproduction of bias.

Material redistribution is necessary if dignity is to be more than an interpersonal promise. Schools need adequate staffing, safe buildings, libraries, transport, digital access, counselling, meals, and learning support. Assistance should be designed to avoid public exposure. Free meals, uniforms, books, or devices can be provided universally or discreetly so that students are not marked as poor before their peers. Scholarships should not require recipients to perform gratitude or display personal hardship repeatedly. Parent engagement should account for work schedules, literacy, language, transport, and digital barriers. A parent's inability to attend a midday meeting should not be interpreted as indifference. Institutions should create multiple routes for communication and treat family knowledge as a resource.

Student voice completes the dignity-centered school. Students need councils, confidential complaint systems, participatory rule-making, and representation in decisions about discipline, facilities, safety, and curriculum. Voice should not be ceremonial. Students must see that participation can produce change and that criticism will not invite retaliation. Teachers also need professional dignity, reasonable workloads, training, and involvement in reform. An exhausted and insecure workforce cannot sustain respectful classrooms. Schools

should therefore be judged by whether they distribute knowledge and credentials, but also by whether students learn that their questions matter, their backgrounds are intelligible, and institutions can be engaged without fear. Education becomes dignity-centered when it builds competence without demanding shame and authority without requiring submission.

### **3. Fair Workplaces, Inclusive Hiring, and Recognition of Labour**

Workplaces are central institutions of income, identity, social contribution, and recognition. They determine not only who earns but whose knowledge is trusted, whose time is valued, and who is considered capable of authority. Dignity-centered workplace reform must therefore move beyond formal statements of equal opportunity. It should examine recruitment, pay, contracts, evaluation, scheduling, promotion, discipline, harassment, and everyday interaction. Workers can be materially employed yet symbolically degraded through insecure contracts, arbitrary supervision, exclusion from decision-making, or assumptions that classed styles of speech and appearance reflect competence. A just workplace recognizes that people sell labour, not their right to self-respect.

Fair hiring requires reducing the influence of inherited cultural familiarity. Employers often interpret accent, dress, confidence, elite education, unpaid internships, and shared leisure as signs of professionalism. These criteria favour applicants whose families and schools prepared them for dominant organizational cultures. Dignity-centered recruitment should use clear job-related criteria, structured interviews, work-sample assessments, accessible application language, and diverse selection panels. Employers should remove unnecessary credential requirements and pay internships so that entry does not depend on family support. Referral systems should be monitored because informal networks can reproduce existing class, gender, ethnic, and racial composition. The aim is not to eliminate judgment but to ensure that judgment concerns the work rather than resemblance to those already in power.

Inclusive language and communication policies are equally important. Professionalism should not be defined through a narrow accent, vocabulary, or emotional style when these are unrelated to perfor-

mance. Workers should be able to communicate in ways that are clear and respectful without being required to imitate elite cultural codes. Organizations can provide language development, digital training, and institutional orientation as resources rather than using their absence to justify exclusion. Meetings should be structured so that authority is not captured by those most comfortable with interruption, self-promotion, or abstract language. Written agendas, rotating facilitation, multiple channels for contribution, and explicit recognition of practical knowledge can widen participation.

Dignity also depends on the organization of work itself. Secure contracts, predictable schedules, living wages, safe conditions, rest, privacy, and freedom from harassment are material foundations of respect. Precarious workers often experience a double injury. They face economic insecurity and are treated as less worthy because their position is insecure. Domestic workers, cleaners, drivers, care workers, security staff, and other low-status employees may be essential to organizational functioning while remaining invisible in ceremonies, consultation, and promotion. Dignity-centered reform recognizes all work that sustains the institution. This includes fair titles, access to facilities, respectful forms of address, opportunities for development, and protection against degrading commands or surveillance.

Evaluation and promotion systems require scrutiny because subjective categories such as leadership presence, polish, fit, and attitude can conceal classed judgments. Organizations should publish promotion criteria, document the distribution of high-value assignments, conduct pay audits, and require explanations for disparities. Workers need access to feedback that is specific enough to act upon and appeal processes that do not depend entirely on the same manager whose judgment is challenged. Mentoring should be supplemented by sponsorship and equitable assignment because advice alone cannot compensate for unequal visibility. Trade unions, worker committees, and collective bargaining are important dignity institutions because they allow employees to contest decisions without appearing personally disloyal.

Workplace voice should extend beyond complaint. Employees possess lived knowledge about workflow, safety, customers, technology, and organizational failure. Participatory structures can include elected councils, joint safety bodies, consultation on scheduling, and

worker representation in governance. Such arrangements treat workers as contributors to institutional intelligence rather than costs to be managed. They can also improve efficiency because people closest to daily operations often identify problems first. The workplace should ultimately be judged not only by productivity and profit but by whether employment expands or diminishes human agency. A dignity-centered workplace pays fairly, protects rights, and communicates that every worker's contribution has value even when occupations differ in authority and expertise.

#### **4. Welfare and Healthcare Without Stigma or Humiliation**

Welfare systems exist to protect people from poverty, unemployment, illness, disability, care burdens, and other risks that individuals cannot always control. Yet welfare can become a site of humiliation when assistance is organized through suspicion, moral judgment, and intrusive verification. Recipients may be required to prove need repeatedly, disclose private relationships, wait in degrading conditions, or accept officials' views about responsible behaviour. Anti-stigma welfare design begins from social citizenship. It treats support as a right created through collective interdependence rather than as charity granted to morally questionable individuals. Everyone depends on public institutions at different stages of life, even when some forms of dependence are more visible than others.

Administrative design should minimize learning, compliance, and psychological costs. Eligibility information must be clear, available in multiple languages and formats, and communicated through trusted community channels. Forms should request only necessary information and use data already held by government where appropriate. Applications should be possible in person, by telephone, on paper, and digitally so that modernization does not become exclusion. Claimants need free assistance, privacy, transparent timelines, written reasons for decisions, and accessible appeals. Missed appointments or incomplete documents should trigger supportive contact before sanctions, especially where illness, transport, disability, care work, or unstable housing may explain noncompliance.

Universal or broadly inclusive programmes can reduce stigma because recipients are not publicly separated into categories of deserving and undeserving poor. School meals, child benefits, healthcare,

pensions, and basic services can be organized around membership and need without requiring repeated performances of deprivation. Where targeting is necessary, procedures should remain confidential and respectful. Frontline staff need training in rights, trauma, disability, gender, class, and cultural difference, but they also need reasonable caseloads and discretion to respond humanely. A welfare officer cannot preserve dignity if performance targets reward rapid rejection, sanctioning, or numerical processing over careful assistance.

Healthcare requires a related transformation. Patients often enter institutions at moments of pain, fear, dependence, and bodily exposure. Dignity-centered care requires privacy, informed consent, clear communication, and recognition of the patient's knowledge of their own body and circumstances. Clinicians possess expertise, but expertise should not eliminate dialogue. Patients need explanations in understandable language, opportunities to ask questions, interpretation where necessary, and participation in treatment decisions. Respectful care is not opposed to medical efficiency. Respectful communication gives patients space to ask questions and participate in care; it must be supported by adequate staffing, continuity, and affordable access.

Healthcare inequality also arises when institutions interpret behaviour without considering social conditions. A patient who misses appointments may lack transport or paid leave. A person who cannot follow dietary advice may face food insecurity. A woman may need permission or childcare to attend. A migrant may fear documentation checks. A disabled patient may encounter inaccessible buildings or communication. Dignity-centered healthcare asks what barriers make compliance difficult before labelling patients irresponsible. Community health workers, mobile clinics, flexible appointments, transport support, and integration with social services can make care more accessible while respecting lived experience.

Redistribution and recognition are inseparable in both welfare and healthcare. Income support without respectful administration can produce shame, while respectful conversation without adequate benefits leaves deprivation intact. Medical politeness without staff, medicine, or affordable access is equally insufficient. Institutions should be judged by whether people receive the resources necessary to live and whether the process confirms their equal status. A person should not have to exchange dignity for survival. Welfare and health-

care become just when support is adequate, accessible, and organized so that seeking assistance does not require accepting an inferior identity.

## **5. Participatory Local Governance and Accessible Public Services**

Local governance is where many citizens encounter the state most directly. Water, sanitation, roads, waste collection, housing, markets, parks, transport, permits, land records, and neighbourhood safety shape everyday life. These services are often discussed through budgets and technical plans, but their distribution also communicates recognition. A neighbourhood repeatedly ignored learns that its residents do not count equally. A community consulted only after decisions are finalized experiences participation as theatre. Dignity-centered local governance therefore requires more than efficient delivery. It requires that residents be treated as legitimate interpreters of place and co-authors of public priorities.

Participatory planning should begin early enough to shape decisions. Authorities can use neighbourhood assemblies, citizen panels, participatory budgeting, community mapping, and targeted consultation with women, disabled people, migrants, tenants, youth, older residents, informal workers, and linguistic minorities. Meetings must be scheduled at accessible times and locations, with childcare, transport support, interpretation, and disability access where necessary. Digital consultation can widen participation but should not replace face-to-face routes. The goal is not to collect approval for a predetermined plan. It is to allow residents to define problems, compare priorities, examine constraints, and influence resource allocation.

Lived experience is a form of institutional knowledge. Engineers, planners, doctors, teachers, and administrators possess technical expertise, but residents understand how services function in practice. They know which streets flood, where women feel unsafe, when water arrives, how transport fares affect employment, and why a formally available clinic remains inaccessible. Dignity-centered governance combines professional knowledge with experiential knowledge rather than ranking one as rational and the other as emotional. Officials should explain technical limits honestly while remaining open to local correction. Communities should not have to translate

every concern into elite administrative language before it becomes credible.

Accessible public services require simplification and proximity. One-stop service centres, mobile offices, multilingual forms, clear signage, transparent fees, published timelines, and complaint tracking can reduce dependence on brokers and political patrons. Staff should be trained to assist citizens rather than merely identify errors. Local governments should monitor waiting times, repeated visits, digital failures, and differences in service quality across neighbourhoods. Accessibility must include physical access for disabled and older citizens, communication access for people with limited literacy, and financial access for those unable to absorb transport or documentation costs.

Accountability is essential because participation without power can deepen cynicism. Residents need public information about budgets, contracts, project timelines, and reasons for delay. Complaint systems should protect people from retaliation and provide meaningful remedies. Independent ombuds offices, social audits, public hearings, and community monitoring can expose unequal treatment. Yet accountability should not become another burdensome procedure available only to educated citizens. Institutions must actively support complaints, publish responses in understandable form, and show how feedback changed practice. Trust grows when people can see a connection between voice and outcome.

Dignity-centered local governance also requires redistributive attention. Equal procedures cannot compensate for historically unequal infrastructure. Poor, rural, informal, and marginalized communities may require greater investment because they begin with deeper deficits. Participatory planning should therefore be linked to equity-based budgeting rather than allowing the loudest or best-organized neighbourhoods to capture resources. Local government should be judged by service coverage and financial efficiency, but also by whether residents experience public authority as responsive, intelligible, and open to influence. A city or district becomes more democratic when people do not need wealth, status, or personal connections to be heard.

## 5.3 Cultural Democracy and the Right to Belong

### 1. Cultural Democracy as Equal Recognition

Cultural democracy begins with the principle that different ways of speaking, dressing, celebrating, learning, working, and living should not be arranged automatically into a hierarchy of superior and inferior forms. Every society contains diverse cultural practices shaped by class, region, religion, ethnicity, language, gender, occupation, migration, generation, and local history. These practices provide people with meaning, belonging, memory, and identity. Yet institutions rarely treat them equally. Some ways of speaking are defined as articulate, while others are described as broken or uncultured. Some clothing appears refined, while other clothing is judged as vulgar or backward. Some festivals are treated as national heritage, while others are dismissed as local custom. Cultural democracy challenges these classifications by insisting that public recognition should not depend on resemblance to the culture of dominant groups.

This principle goes beyond tolerance. Tolerance allows the powerful to permit cultural differences while retaining the authority to define what counts as normal. Cultural democracy asks who has the power to establish cultural standards and whose experiences are represented in schools, museums, media, government, and public space. It seeks equal participation in the production of culture rather than occasional inclusion in institutions whose underlying hierarchies remain unchanged. Marginalized groups should not appear only as objects studied, displayed, helped, or celebrated by others. They should possess authority to represent themselves, preserve their histories, develop new cultural forms, and influence the institutions through which society defines common life.

The concept is therefore closely connected to dignity. People experience cultural humiliation when their language, home, neighbourhood, occupation, dress, food, or customs are treated as evidence of inferiority. A person may possess legal rights and material resources yet continue to feel that public life has no place for people like them. They may alter speech, conceal family practices, or avoid institutions where they expect ridicule. Cultural recognition expands the condi-

tions of participation because people are more willing to speak and act when they believe their background will be understood rather than used against them. Visibility communicates that one's life is socially intelligible and worthy of public attention.

Cultural democracy does not require treating every belief or practice as beyond criticism. Cultures contain inequalities, exclusions, and internal conflicts. Traditions can reinforce patriarchy, caste, racism, sectarianism, violence, or control over younger generations. Equal recognition cannot mean that harmful practices are protected from democratic challenge. The purpose is to reject the assumption that elite culture alone possesses rationality and that non-elite cultures are defined by deficiency. All cultural practices should be open to criticism, including the practices of dominant groups. Elite schools, professional norms, museum classifications, and media standards are also cultural arrangements rather than neutral expressions of universal refinement.

Cultural democracy must also remain connected to material equality. Recognition without redistribution can romanticize poverty. Rural simplicity can be praised while rural communities lack healthcare, transport, education, and political power. Working-class resilience can be celebrated while wages remain low and labour conditions insecure. Indigenous knowledge can be displayed in museums while communities lose land. Cultural recognition becomes superficial when institutions honour symbols but leave unequal structures untouched. The aim is not to make deprivation appear beautiful. It is to distinguish the value of people and their cultural knowledge from the unjust material conditions under which they may live.

The central promise of cultural democracy is that people should not have to abandon their origins before becoming visible as full members of society. They should be able to acquire new knowledge, move across institutions, and criticize inherited practices without being required to regard their communities as sources of shame. Cultural democracy therefore expands freedom in two directions. It protects the right to cultural belonging, and it protects the right to transform culture from within. Equality requires institutions where different ways of life can meet through dialogue without one group appearing as the universal standard and all others as deviations from it.

## 2. Challenging Elite Culture as the Universal Standard

Elite culture often presents itself not as one cultural tradition among others but as the universal measure of refinement. Forms of language, literature, art, music, dress, food, behaviour, and education are treated as evidence of intelligence and sophistication. Their social origins disappear. A style associated with privileged schools, affluent families, metropolitan institutions, or professional classes becomes simply correct. Other styles are then interpreted as local, informal, excessive, crude, or insufficiently developed. Cultural hierarchy works most effectively when the culture of dominant groups is no longer recognized as culture but appears as neutral competence.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital explains how this hierarchy reproduces class inequality. Families transmit language, taste, confidence, familiarity with institutions, and knowledge of legitimate culture. Schools, universities, galleries, and professional organizations reward these dispositions while describing their judgments as objective. A student familiar with canonical literature, formal speech, museum etiquette, or academic argument appears naturally intelligent. Another student may possess extensive knowledge of local history, agricultural practice, oral tradition, craft, religious interpretation, caregiving, or community organization, yet this knowledge is not recognized as evidence of intellectual capacity. Cultural advantage becomes merit because institutions value what privileged families already provide.

The universalization of elite culture also affects the body. Refined conduct may include restrained emotional expression, controlled movement, quiet speech, understated clothing, and confidence in formal settings. These behaviours reflect class history. They are not inherently more rational or ethical than direct speech, expressive gestures, decorative clothing, or communal celebration. Yet institutional gatekeepers often interpret bodily style as evidence of maturity and competence. A person can be technically qualified while being judged as lacking polish. Cultural democracy exposes these judgments as social preferences rather than necessary measures of ability.

The critique of elite standards does not require rejecting scholarly knowledge, formal language, classical art, or professional skill. These cultural forms can be valuable and should remain accessible to every-

one. The problem arises when access is confused with assimilation and when knowledge is used to rank people rather than expand human possibility. A democratic institution should teach students how to use formal language without teaching them to despise home speech. It should make classical literature available without implying that oral narratives or popular forms lack complexity. It should provide access to museums and concert halls while also recognizing community arts, crafts, music, and performance as legitimate cultural achievements.

Elite culture itself is neither unified nor timeless. What counts as refined changes historically. Practices once associated with popular groups may later be appropriated by elites and reclassified as authentic. Food, music, clothing, and urban styles can move upward in the cultural hierarchy once separated from the people who created them. Dominant groups often possess the power to consume widely without losing status. They can appreciate working-class or minority culture as adventurous taste, while members of those communities continue to face stigma for embodying the same practices in everyday life. Cultural hierarchy therefore depends not only on what is consumed but on who has the authority to define its meaning.

Challenging elite culture as the universal standard means democratizing access to cultural authority. Critics, teachers, curators, publishers, broadcasters, and public officials should come from a wider range of social backgrounds. Evaluation criteria should be made visible and open to debate. Institutions should ask whether their standards measure genuine quality or familiarity with dominant codes. The goal is not to eliminate judgment but to make judgment more reflective, plural, and accountable. Cultural democracy begins when refinement is no longer treated as the inherited property of one class and when people can enter public life without being told that legitimacy requires cultural self-erasure.

### 3. Curriculum, Education, and Epistemic Justice

Education is one of the most important institutions through which cultural hierarchy becomes durable. Curriculum determines which histories are remembered, which writers are canonical, which languages are legitimate, and which forms of knowledge appear scientific or serious. A curriculum may describe itself as national or universal while representing the experience of dominant groups. Students from marginalized communities then encounter education as a world in which their families, labour, beliefs, and local histories are absent or simplified. They learn academic content, but they also learn whose lives are considered worthy of knowledge.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps explain this process. Schools impose dominant meanings while concealing the power relations behind them. Students who recognize themselves in the curriculum experience familiarity as ability. Those who do not may experience distance as personal deficiency. A rural child may possess detailed knowledge of land, seasons, animals, water, and community relationships but be treated as academically weak because this knowledge does not fit classroom categories. A multilingual student may use language creatively across contexts but be assessed only through proficiency in the dominant language. The school does not merely measure knowledge. It decides which knowledge counts.

Cultural democracy in education requires a curriculum that includes working people, women, minorities, migrants, rural communities, indigenous groups, domestic labourers, and other populations often treated as peripheral. Inclusion should not be limited to occasional festivals, heroic biographies, or decorative cultural days. The histories and intellectual contributions of these groups should be integrated into the central narrative of society. Students should examine how ordinary labour, social movements, local institutions, oral traditions, and community knowledge have shaped public life. Such inclusion allows marginalized students to see themselves as historical actors rather than recipients of civilization created elsewhere.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers a democratic approach to this transformation. Education should not treat students as empty containers into which official knowledge is deposited. Students bring experiences that can become the starting point for inquiry. Dialogue

allows them to connect personal life with social structures and to understand how history shapes present conditions. Teachers remain responsible for introducing new knowledge and challenging error, but authority becomes accountable rather than authoritarian. The aim is not to affirm every existing belief. It is to create a learning relationship in which students can question both dominant knowledge and inherited assumptions within their own communities.

A culturally democratic curriculum must avoid romanticizing poverty. Local knowledge should be recognized without suggesting that disadvantaged communities do not need material change. A child's familiarity with agricultural labour should not become an excuse for weak science education. Respect for community solidarity should not conceal gender inequality, debt, poor health, or lack of public services. Recognition should expand educational opportunity rather than confine students to their origins. A non-affirmative approach is useful because it neither treats dominant culture as unquestionable nor celebrates marginalized culture uncritically. It equips students to understand existing worlds and participate in changing them.

Epistemic justice requires changes beyond content. Assessment, classroom language, teacher training, participation, and school organization must also change. Students should have multiple ways to demonstrate understanding. Teachers need preparation to recognize classed, linguistic, and cultural bias. Parents and communities should participate in curriculum discussions without being treated as obstacles to expertise. Libraries and digital resources should include diverse voices. Education becomes culturally democratic when students gain access to powerful knowledge while also learning that knowledge can emerge from many social locations. The purpose is not to replace one canon with another but to create institutions in which the authority to know is no longer monopolized by dominant groups.

#### 4. Media Representation and Public Culture

Media plays a central role in shaping how class, region, ethnicity, gender, work, and lifestyle are imagined. Television, film, news, advertising, social media, and digital entertainment provide images through which people learn what success, normality, intelligence, beauty, and respectability look like. These representations affect how groups are treated in everyday life. If poor communities appear mainly through crime, disorder, dependency, or tragedy, audiences begin to associate poverty with moral failure. If elite lifestyles dominate entertainment and advertising, affluence appears normal while the lives of most people appear incomplete.

Class representation is often unequal in both visibility and complexity. Wealthy characters are shown with professions, relationships, ambitions, and psychological depth. Poor characters may appear as victims, threats, comic figures, or inspirational exceptions. Working-class accents can be used to signal ignorance, aggression, or authenticity without allowing speakers intellectual authority. Domestic workers, labourers, drivers, farmers, and informal workers appear in the background while professionals occupy the centre of the story. This symbolic arrangement teaches audiences whose inner life deserves attention.

News media contributes to cultural hierarchy through selection and framing. Welfare fraud, street crime, migration conflict, and public disorder are highly visible, while tax advantages, inherited wealth, low wages, labour exploitation, and unequal ownership receive less personal and emotional coverage. Problems caused by structural inequality are represented through the behaviour of marginalized groups. A poor neighbourhood becomes a dangerous area rather than a community shaped by underinvestment. A protest becomes disruption rather than a response to exclusion. Media does not merely describe social difference. It can transform inequality into a moral judgment about the people who experience it.

Cultural democracy in media requires more than increasing the number of minority faces on screen. Representation concerns who produces stories, who controls editorial decisions, who owns media institutions, and whose perspective organizes the narrative. Journalists, writers, directors, actors, editors, and producers from diverse

class and regional backgrounds can bring experiences otherwise excluded. Yet individuals entering elite media institutions may still be pressured to adopt dominant assumptions. Organizational reform must therefore address hiring, commissioning, language, funding, and accountability. Community media and public broadcasting are especially important because they can provide space for stories that are not immediately profitable to commercial markets.

Counter-narratives allow marginalized groups to challenge imposed identities. Social movements, local media, independent film, community radio, podcasts, and digital platforms can present people as political subjects rather than objects of pity or fear. Communities can document their own histories, humour, conflicts, labour, and aspirations. These representations need not present idealized images. Cultural democracy includes the right to complexity. Marginalized groups should be able to portray disagreement, failure, contradiction, and change without those portrayals being used to condemn the entire group.

Public culture is democratic when people can recognize themselves without being reduced to stereotypes. Media institutions should be judged by whose voices are heard, whose language is allowed authority, and which lives receive narrative depth. Equal representation does not mean that every group receives identical coverage or that criticism disappears. It means that cultural membership is not determined by proximity to elite life. A democratic media environment expands the range of people who can appear as thinkers, creators, experts, workers, parents, citizens, and historical actors. Visibility becomes meaningful when it is joined to the power to define oneself.

## 5. Museums, Language Policy, and Local Traditions

Museums, archives, monuments, libraries, and heritage institutions decide what a society remembers. They preserve objects and stories, but they also classify them. Elite art may be displayed as universal culture, while working-class, rural, indigenous, or minority objects are presented as folklore, craft, or anthropology. This distinction establishes a hierarchy between culture that is treated as timeless and culture that is treated as evidence about particular groups. Cultural democracy requires questioning who collected objects, who interpreted them, and whether the communities represented possess authority over meaning.

Museums can become democratic spaces when communities participate in collection, interpretation, exhibition, and governance. Oral histories, family archives, labour records, domestic objects, migration stories, local music, protest material, and everyday technologies can reveal forms of social life ignored by traditional collections. Community participation should not be limited to consultation after curatorial decisions have already been made. People should help determine what is preserved and how it is described. Repatriation and shared custodianship may also be necessary where objects were acquired through colonialism, coercion, or unequal exchange.

Language policy is equally central because language carries memory, identity, and cultural authority. States and institutions often present one language or standardized form as the neutral medium of education and citizenship. Other languages become informal, regional, or private. Speakers may be allowed to use them at home but not in courts, schools, administration, media, or professional life. This creates unequal citizenship. People must translate themselves into the language of power before their needs become intelligible. Linguistic hierarchy also affects confidence because accents and grammar are used to rank intelligence.

A culturally democratic language policy promotes access to dominant languages without requiring the disappearance of other languages. Multilingual education, translation in public services, regional broadcasting, support for literature and publishing, and recognition of sign languages can expand participation. Standard language may remain necessary for communication across regions, but its

practical function should not become a claim of cultural superiority. Students should gain proficiency in widely used languages while retaining the right to develop knowledge in their first language. Additive language policy expands capacity. Subtractive policy produces shame and cultural loss.

Local traditions also require democratic recognition. Festivals, crafts, oral histories, food, music, architecture, and forms of community cooperation can provide belonging and continuity. Yet public recognition often depends on tourism, commercial value, or approval from cultural elites. Traditions may be preserved as attractive performances while the communities sustaining them face displacement and economic insecurity. Cultural democracy treats tradition as living practice rather than museum scenery. Communities should control how traditions are represented, adapted, and shared.

Recognition must remain critical. Some traditions exclude women, lower-status groups, religious minorities, younger generations, or people who challenge authority. Democratic cultural policy should support internal debate rather than allowing powerful local actors to define authenticity. Individuals have a right to belong, but they also have a right to dissent and change. Cultural democracy protects traditions from external contempt while protecting members from domination within traditions. Museums, language policies, and heritage programmes become democratic when they preserve memory without freezing culture and recognize communities without silencing internal difference.

## 5.4 The Collective Social Imagination

### 1. From Individual Awareness to Collective Imagination

Social imagination begins when individuals recognize that their private difficulties are connected to wider social arrangements. A worker who experiences low wages, a student who feels out of place, a family unable to secure housing, or a welfare recipient humiliated by administrative procedures may initially interpret these experiences as personal failure. Social imagination interrupts that interpretation. It connects biography with history, emotion with structure, and individual hardship with the organization of institutions. Yet awareness alone is not enough. A person can understand that inequality is structural while still feeling politically isolated and practically powerless. The concluding task is therefore to expand social imagination from an individual capacity for interpretation into a collective capacity for constructing alternatives. A society becomes capable of change when people do not merely see the social causes of suffering but begin to imagine themselves as participants in a shared project of transformation.

Collective imagination is not produced simply by placing many individuals with similar opinions in the same space. It develops through language, institutions, stories, practices, and relationships that allow people to understand themselves as part of a larger “we.” Shared narratives help individuals interpret separate experiences as connected. A teacher facing impossible workloads, a parent struggling with school fees, and a student excluded by unequal education may begin to see that their problems arise from the same institutional choices. A tenant facing rising rent and a young family unable to purchase housing may recognize a shared interest in housing reform. Collective imagination emerges when personal grievances acquire a common explanation and when people can see that the freedom of others is connected to their own.

Periods of crisis sometimes reveal this interdependence clearly. Economic collapse, pandemics, disasters, and political upheaval expose the degree to which individual survival depends upon public institutions and the labour of others. During such moments, mutual aid groups, neighbourhood networks, food distribution systems, and

community care can emerge rapidly. These practices do more than provide assistance. They create what the literature describes as *commoning*. People produce and protect shared resources through cooperation. They discover that collective capacity already exists within ordinary life. The importance of these practices lies not only in emergency relief but in their ability to change political perception. Individuals who were treated as isolated consumers become neighbours, caregivers, organizers, and participants in a common world.

Collective imagination also depends on emotion. People do not join together through analysis alone. They require trust, recognition, hope, anger at injustice, and a sense that action has meaning. Shared emotional experience can create a reflective space in which a community begins to understand itself differently. Shame may become dignity when people discover that others have endured similar treatment. Resentment may become solidarity when anger is directed toward institutions rather than vulnerable scapegoats. Grief may become commitment when loss is interpreted as preventable rather than inevitable. Emotion does not replace political understanding, but it supplies the energy through which understanding becomes action.

Institutions influence whether collective imagination expands or contracts. Schools can teach that society is a competitive ladder or that it is a shared project open to democratic revision. Media can present hardship as individual deficiency or reveal the structures connecting separate lives. Welfare systems can divide citizens into taxpayers and dependants or express the principle that vulnerability is universal. Workplaces can isolate employees through competition or create representative bodies through which shared interests become visible. Public institutions therefore do more than distribute resources. They shape the categories through which people understand society and their place within it.

The movement from individual awareness to collective imagination is therefore both intellectual and institutional. It requires people to see patterns, but it also requires spaces in which those patterns can be discussed and acted upon. Trade unions, neighbourhood organizations, student associations, public libraries, community centres, civic forums, and social movements provide such spaces. They enable individuals to test explanations, hear unfamiliar experiences,

and develop shared priorities. Social imagination becomes collective when people cease to view society as a fixed environment to which individuals must adapt and begin to view it as a human creation that can be reorganized. This shift is the foundation of democratic hope because it transforms suffering from evidence of personal inadequacy into knowledge about what must change.

## **2. Beyond Meritocracy, Charity, Competition, and Individual Escape**

Meritocracy promises that individuals can improve their position through ability and effort. This promise is attractive because it appears to respect agency and reward contribution. Yet meritocratic individualism accepts the competitive structure of society and focuses primarily on making entry into the competition appear fair. It asks how more disadvantaged individuals can rise without asking why dignity, security, and social worth are distributed through a hierarchy that requires most people to remain below others. The alternative is not to deny effort, skill, or responsibility. It is to refuse the claim that unequal outcomes provide a reliable measure of unequal merit. People act under different conditions, inherit different resources, and face institutions that recognize some abilities more readily than others. A more equal imagination values achievement without converting it into a justification for domination.

Charity offers another limited response to inequality. It can relieve suffering and express genuine moral concern, but it often leaves the relationship between giver and recipient unchanged. The giver retains authority, while the recipient must demonstrate need and gratitude. Charity responds after deprivation has occurred and depends upon voluntary generosity rather than enforceable social responsibility. A collective alternative is grounded in social rights. Education, healthcare, housing, income protection, and care should not depend entirely on benevolence. They should be secured through institutions that recognize equal membership. This does not eliminate voluntary care or generosity. It places them within a wider framework where people are not forced to depend on pity for the conditions of a dignified life.

Competition can generate innovation, effort, and choice, but when it becomes the dominant model of social organization, it changes how

people view one another. Students become rivals for scarce places. Workers compete for security. Communities compete for investment. Welfare recipients compete to appear more deserving. Families compete through housing, education, and consumption. Competition becomes especially destructive when access to basic goods depends upon winning. A society can permit competition in particular domains while refusing to make survival, healthcare, education, or dignity competitive prizes. The alternative is not the elimination of all differences but the creation of a secure social floor beneath them.

The model of individual escape is closely connected to meritocracy. It celebrates those who leave poor neighbourhoods, low-status occupations, marginalized communities, or disadvantaged regions. Scholarships, migration, elite employment, entrepreneurship, and advantageous marriage can transform individual lives. Yet escape leaves the original conditions intact. It may even confirm their inferiority by implying that success consists of departure. A collective imagination asks how people can flourish without abandoning their communities and how mobility can become one option among many rather than the only route to dignity. Development should allow people to remain, return, move, or change without being punished by unequal geography and class hierarchy.

Alternatives to these models already exist in partial form. Universal public services distribute security without requiring people to prove exceptional merit. Cooperatives allow workers to share ownership and decision-making. Social insurance recognizes that illness, unemployment, disability, and old age are collective risks. Public housing separates shelter from speculative wealth. Community wealth-building directs local economic resources toward shared benefit. Participatory budgeting allows residents to influence public investment. These arrangements are imperfect, but they demonstrate that institutions can be organized around contribution, need, reciprocity, and democratic membership rather than competition alone.

Moving beyond meritocracy, charity, competition, and escape requires a different moral language. People must be valued not only for exceptional achievement but for care, participation, reliability, creativity, and ordinary contribution. Dependence must be recognized as a universal condition rather than a defect of particular groups. Success must be understood as socially supported rather than purely

self-created. Freedom must include the capacity to refuse exploitation and participate in collective decisions, not merely the possibility of climbing above others. The purpose of equality is not to make everyone identical or eliminate aspiration. It is to create a society in which aspiration does not depend on another person's subordination and in which dignity is not reserved for those who win.

### **3. Public Provision, Social Rights, and the Institutionalization of Solidarity**

Public provision can transform solidarity from an occasional moral feeling into a durable social arrangement. Education, healthcare, transport, housing, sanitation, digital access, libraries, parks, and social insurance allow people to meet essential needs through shared institutions rather than private purchasing power alone. Their importance is not limited to the services they provide. Public services communicate that certain conditions of life should be available because people are members of society. They create a material basis for equality by reducing dependence on family wealth, employers, landlords, and charity. They also create everyday experiences of common membership when people from different backgrounds use and support the same institutions.

Universal public services are especially important because they can weaken the division between those who provide and those who receive. Means-tested assistance may be necessary in some circumstances, but narrowly targeted systems can produce stigma and political fragility. Universal services reveal that everyone depends on collective provision. Affluent families use roads, schools, legal systems, healthcare, public infrastructure, and economic stability even when they also purchase private alternatives. Universalism makes this interdependence visible. It encourages citizens to understand taxation and public provision not as transfers from independent people to dependent people but as the institutional expression of shared vulnerability.

Social rights give this principle legal and political force. A right to education, healthcare, housing, income security, and care means that access does not depend entirely upon market success or personal favour. Rights transform recipients into claimants who can demand explanation and remedy. Yet rights must be practically accessible. A

constitutional guarantee means little when services are distant, underfunded, or humiliating. The institutionalization of solidarity therefore requires resources, administrative capacity, respectful implementation, and democratic accountability. Social rights are real when people can exercise them without extraordinary bureaucratic knowledge or loss of dignity.

Public institutions also shape expectations about what members of society owe one another. A strong welfare state teaches that unemployment, illness, care, and old age are collective concerns. Public education teaches that every child's development matters beyond the family. Accessible healthcare teaches that bodily vulnerability should not lead to financial ruin. These lessons are political as well as practical. They construct a moral community in which people understand that their well-being depends upon systems they share with strangers. Such institutions can expand solidarity across class, region, ethnicity, and generation when they are inclusive and reliable.

Public services must nevertheless be designed democratically. Bureaucratic institutions can become distant, paternalistic, and unresponsive. Centralized systems may ignore local knowledge, while professional expertise may silence users. Institutional solidarity therefore requires voice. Patients, students, workers, caregivers, tenants, and residents should participate in shaping services. Public provision is not democratic merely because it is state-owned. It becomes democratic when those affected possess meaningful influence, when information is transparent, and when officials remain accountable. Participation can protect public services from becoming systems of passive management.

The defence of public provision also requires a cultural shift. Market ideology often presents private consumption as freedom and public provision as dependency. Yet private solutions frequently reproduce inequality because only some can purchase security. Public services can expand freedom by reducing the penalties attached to low income and uncertain employment. A person with healthcare, housing protection, education, and income security can change work, care for family, participate politically, and resist abuse. Social rights therefore do not eliminate individual responsibility. They create the conditions under which responsibility can be exercised without fear.

Institutionalized solidarity is ultimately a commitment across time. Current workers support children, older people, and those unable to work, knowing that their own circumstances may change. Present generations invest in infrastructure and education whose benefits will extend into the future. Regions with greater resources support areas facing deeper need. Public provision expresses the idea that society is not merely a collection of transactions among isolated individuals. It is an intergenerational and interdependent project. Equality expands when this project is visible in the institutions through which people live.

#### **4. Cooperative Institutions, Community Care, and Democratic Participation**

Cooperative institutions provide an alternative to organizations in which ownership, authority, and reward are concentrated. Worker cooperatives, mutual associations, community land trusts, credit unions, and democratically governed social enterprises can distribute decision-making among members or communities directly affected by institutional outcomes. Their significance lies not only in producing goods or services differently. They create practical experiences of shared power. A worker in a cooperative is not merely an employee subject to management but a participant in decisions about investment, wages, working conditions, and organizational purpose. Democratic participation becomes part of economic life rather than an activity limited to elections.

Community wealth-building extends this principle beyond individual enterprises. Local institutions such as councils, hospitals, universities, and public agencies can direct procurement, investment, land, and employment toward community benefit. Instead of allowing wealth produced locally to flow outward to distant owners, these strategies seek to retain value within places and distribute it through local workers, cooperatives, and public institutions. Such models challenge the assumption that economic development must depend upon attracting external capital at any social cost. They ask how existing resources can be organized democratically and how economic activity can strengthen rather than fragment community life.

Community care is another foundation of collective imagination. Care is often treated as a private family responsibility, disproportion-

ately performed by women and lower-paid workers. Yet every society depends upon childcare, eldercare, disability support, emotional labour, and the maintenance of households. Recognizing care as a shared responsibility requires public services, fair wages, workplace flexibility, and community networks. It also requires rejecting the idea that independence is the normal human condition. People move through periods of dependence and caregiving throughout life. A society organized around care acknowledges this reality rather than hiding it within families.

Mutual aid shows how community care can emerge through direct relationships. Neighbours share food, transport, childcare, information, and emergency support. These practices can build trust and reveal collective capacity, but they should not be romanticized as substitutes for public institutions. Communities facing the greatest deprivation often carry the heaviest unpaid care burdens. Mutual aid becomes transformative when it is connected to demands for rights, funding, and institutional reform. It should expand democratic power rather than allow governments to withdraw responsibility.

Democratic participation links cooperative economics, public provision, and community care. Participation should occur in workplaces, schools, hospitals, neighbourhoods, and welfare systems as well as formal politics. People gain political capacity by practising decision-making in everyday institutions. Participatory budgeting, worker councils, tenant associations, student bodies, patient boards, and community planning forums allow people to deliberate about shared priorities. These arrangements are difficult. They involve disagreement, unequal confidence, and conflicts of interest. Yet democracy is weakened when complexity becomes a reason to exclude people and leave decisions entirely to professionals or owners.

Meaningful participation requires material support. People cannot attend meetings when they lack childcare, transport, time, translation, or protection from retaliation. Institutions must therefore create conditions for inclusion. Participation should be compensated where it requires substantial labour. Information must be understandable. Decision-making authority must be genuine rather than ceremonial. Marginalized groups may require targeted representation because open forums can be dominated by those with greater education and confidence. Democratic participation is not achieved simply by invit-

ing everyone into a room. It requires attention to unequal capacities to speak and be heard.

Cooperative institutions and democratic care practices expand social imagination because they allow people to experience alternatives rather than merely discuss them. They demonstrate that authority can be shared, resources can be governed collectively, and care can become a public responsibility. Such institutions will not eliminate conflict or guarantee equality. They can fail, reproduce hierarchy, or become bureaucratic. Their value lies in providing spaces where democratic habits can develop and where people learn that collective organization is possible. Equality becomes imaginable when it is practised in the ordinary institutions of work, care, neighbourhood, and public life.

## **5. How Solidarity Can Overcome Resentment and Division**

Inequality generates resentment because people experience blocked mobility, humiliation, insecurity, and unequal recognition. Resentment is not inherently irrational. It can reveal a genuine perception that social arrangements are unfair. The danger arises when anger is redirected toward migrants, minorities, welfare recipients, women, or other groups with limited power. Structural forces are difficult to see, while vulnerable groups are visible and politically available. Solidarity must therefore do more than encourage kindness. It must provide a more accurate explanation of suffering and create relationships through which people recognize shared interests.

Shared vulnerability offers one foundation for solidarity. Every person depends on care, public infrastructure, social cooperation, and the labour of others. Illness, unemployment, ageing, disability, and family crisis can affect people across class positions, although resources shape the consequences. Recognizing vulnerability challenges the meritocratic idea that secure individuals are self-sufficient while others are dependent. It reveals that dependence is universal but organized unequally. Solidarity begins when people understand that another person's need is not evidence of moral failure but an expression of conditions that could affect anyone.

Recognition is also necessary because material interests alone do not automatically unite people. Workers may share economic con-

cerns while remaining divided by ethnicity, gender, citizenship, religion, occupation, or region. Solidarity in difference requires people to see one another as equals without demanding sameness. The rights of migrants do not reduce the dignity of citizens. Women's equality does not eliminate men's social worth. Recognition of minority culture does not require the humiliation of majority groups. Political narratives often present dignity as scarce, but democratic solidarity rejects this zero-sum model. Equal recognition can expand rather than diminish collective freedom.

Institutions can either support or weaken solidarity. Universal public services create shared interests because different groups depend on the same systems. Segregated services encourage social distance and allow affluent groups to withdraw from the public sphere. Labour protections reduce competition among workers by establishing common standards. Inclusive unions can connect citizens and migrants rather than allowing employers to use legal status to divide them. Affordable housing, education, and healthcare reduce the scarcity that intensifies horizontal conflict. Solidarity becomes more plausible when institutions reduce the material conditions through which groups are forced to compete.

Collective action can transform resentment by giving anger a constructive direction. Tenant movements connect individual rent struggles to housing policy. Labour organizing connects workplace humiliation to ownership and bargaining power. Welfare movements challenge deservingness narratives by presenting claimants as rights-bearing citizens. Feminist and minority movements transform private experiences of disrespect into public demands. Through organization, people discover that grievances are not isolated and that action can produce change. Resentment loses some of its destructive force when individuals gain political agency.

Solidarity must remain realistic about conflict. Groups do not always possess identical interests, and historical injustices cannot be resolved through appeals to unity alone. Some groups have benefited from the subordination of others. Recognition may require uncomfortable changes in authority and resource distribution. Solidarity therefore cannot mean suppressing difference or asking marginalized people to postpone justice for the sake of harmony. It must be built

through negotiation, accountability, and willingness to change unequal arrangements. Unity without justice reproduces silence.

The transformation of resentment into solidarity depends on the stories societies tell. A narrative of competition asks who is taking resources from whom. A narrative of shared responsibility asks why basic goods are scarce and how institutions can provide them fairly. A narrative of deservingness divides citizens morally. A narrative of interdependence recognizes contribution and vulnerability across social positions. Solidarity becomes politically powerful when it combines emotional recognition with structural analysis and practical institutions. It allows people to say that their suffering is real, that another marginalized group is not its cause, and that a common struggle for dignity can address the conditions producing insecurity.

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CLASS / CULTURE / POWER

# The social world in everyday life

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Inequality and the Social Imagination examines how class, culture, and power shape ordinary encounters and the possibilities people learn to imagine. Dr. Saira Siddiqui traces the social meanings attached to taste, language, respectability, and belonging, and considers how schools, workplaces, families, and the state reproduce unequal treatment.

Across five chapters, the book connects these everyday processes with the emotional experience of shame, dignity, desire, and resentment. It questions the promise that individual mobility alone can resolve structural inequality, then explores institutions, cultural democracy, and collective imagination as resources for a more equal social life. The discussion invites readers to connect personal experience with social relationships and to reconsider what equality requires in practice.

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