The Cambridge Handbook of Social Sciences in Australia

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Chapter 24

Patterns of Social Inequality

Kathryn Dwan and John S. Western

Social inequality is a major feature of virtually all societies, and it is generally associated with differences in income and wealth. Such a view prevails among academic circles, as 'most of the modern literature on inequality and economic wellbeing is based on measures of after-tax income adjusted for need or equivalent disposable income' (Saunders 1998:1; emphasis added). The general consensus appears to be that the gap between the 'rich' and the 'poor' is increasing (Harding, Lloyd and Greenwell 2001; Tsumori, Saunders and Hughes 2002). More controversial is whether or not this is necessarily a bad thing, as it is associated with increases in income for the 'poor'. For instance, recent research has demonstrated that the disposable income of people in the lowest quintile (or one-fifth of the population) increased noticeably throughout the 1990s, although not as much as that of the 'rich' (Harding, Lloyd and Greenwell 2001).

Some researchers claim it is 'implausible' to label people at the bottom of the income hierarchy as 'poor' simply because the gap between their income and that of those at the top is increasing (Tsumori, Saunders and Hughes 2002:1); to do so is to engage in the 'politics of envy' (Hughes 2001:13). Others consider that the 'inherent injustices' of such a divide is an 'offence to moral sensibility' (Turrell 2001:83). At issue here, apart from methodological differences (Tsumori, Saunders and Hughes 2002), are the differences between relative and absolute poverty, and the normative standards by which they are assessed. Although these debates are of some importance, we believe that they arise from a lack of conceptual clarity. Turrell and Mathers (2000) are among the few researchers who have addressed this issue.

Theoretical framework

A feature of all societies is the presence of socially defined scarce and valued resources to which access is limited. These resources can be understood as factors impacting on quality of life and human wellbeing, and access to them leads to an enhanced quality of life, while their absence generally has negative consequences. We describe these scarce and valued resources as dimensions of inequality. They include income, to be sure, but also employment, health, education, welfare, housing, access to the legal and
political systems, access to leisure, and other matters. Of great importance is the fact that access to these resources is structurally patterned. By this we mean that access is determined by societal factors that rest largely outside the realm of individual agency.

John Western (1983) originally proposed seven social categories which appeared to influence one's chances in life — class, status, party, gender, ethnicity, Aboriginality and age. A decade later Western and Turrell (1993) refined this list to four structural bases that underpin and shape Australian society, specifically social class, gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality. Another way to think of these bases is as systems of social relations or systems of inequality. The collective and individual importance of these structural bases derives from their significance in group formation; their role in patterning, maintaining and reproducing social behaviour, attitudes, values and belief systems; and their influence on the allocation of society's scarce and valued resources. These four bases differ in contentiousness and clarity of definition, but before discussing them further it is important to summarise our conceptual position.

Building on the foundations laid by John Western and others, we identify four bases of social inequality: that is, the factors that give rise to inequality — class, gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality (Western, J. 1983; Western and Turrell 1993). The numerous dimensions of social inequality are the scarce and valued resources to which social groups have differential access, and the connections among the bases and dimensions express the empirical relationship each bears to the others. Within our rapidly changing society it is possible that other factors will emerge that conceptually belong among the bases or systems of inequality. Two probable candidates are space or geographical location, and the stages of the life course. Given the constraints of space, we will limit our discussion of the dimensions of social inequality to income, education and health, but we acknowledge that this is a much-abbreviated list. The relationships among the bases and dimensions are many, varied and, to date, inadequately specified, which is due in no small part to the difficulty in gathering valid and sufficiently complex empirical evidence on which to base them. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that some of these relationships may be causal, some may hold primacy over others, or alternatively, some may exert their influence only indirectly. The emergent patterns of relationships among bases and dimensions are the patterns of social inequality.

In brief, patterns of inequality can be understood in terms of the differential access certain social groups have to scarce and valued societal resources; because this access is socially patterned, the benefits from the resources are distributed inequitably. Our interest rests less with the inequality per se and rather more with its structurally patterned nature. Figure 24.1 presents this conceptual model diagrammatically. Illustratively, we have included a number of possible relationships, specifically the relationships among class, income and health; gender and income; ethnicity and education, and Aboriginality and health. The first relationship ("Class") in Figure 24.1 implies that class determines one's income, and that income and health interact in a complex yet uniform manner. The second relationship ("Gender") suggests that one's income may also be affected by one's gender. The third relationship ("Ethnicity") indicates that one's country of birth may impact on one's educational achievement. Finally, the fourth relationship ("Aboriginality") suggests that Aboriginal heritage influences access to the scarce and valued resource of health. These relations and others will be explored in the second half of this chapter.

**Literature**

Returning to our discussion of the structural bases, gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality divide the population into relatively unambiguous groups, and commonsense understandings of how these groups are formed and of whom they are comprised coincide fairly closely with sociological ideas about their composition (Western, M. 2000). Class, however, is more complex and less intuitive, therefore we shall devote comparatively more space to its discussion.

Gender encompasses the social categories of male and female; the categories are social because they define structural positions within the society which individuals occupy. It is true that theories of gender can be quite complex (England 1993; Ferree, Lorber and Hess 2000; Gatens and Mackinnon 1998), but, for simplicity, social scientists and other people typically associate males and females, men and women, girls and boys with the term 'gender'; they are social categories that are visible and familiar (Western, M. 2000).

Ethnicity is defined in terms of birthplace, ancestry and self-identification, and there are a number of visible signs of ethnicity, such as language, religion, culture and custom, which enable the identification of different groups in the population. Once again ethnicity is understood in much the same way by social scientists and members of the lay public, although of course the valuation placed on particular ethnic groups may differ enormously, as witness the demonising of particular groups at the 2001 federal election by members from all sides of parliament.

Aboriginality distinguishes between those who are defined in census terms as 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander', or who choose to define themselves in these terms or similar ones, and once again the conventional groupings and the sociological groupings are almost identical. So gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality, for the purposes of this chapter, are relatively unambiguous; the question with respect to social class, however, is a somewhat different matter.
The historical foundations of class and stratification

Class and its close relative social stratification are at the centre of sociological analysis. They are fundamental concepts relating to the basic structure of society. Two approaches to class analysis, the Marxist and the Weberian, have a long history in sociology. The social stratificationist perspective owes its origins to the French sociology of Émile Durkheim, although this paternity is not always acknowledged, with the perspective often being identified with an orientation in US sociology of the post-World War II period (Western, M. 1993).

A common thread underlies each of the three approaches, having its origins in a concern for economic activity and the economic relationships that are reflected in such activity. However, there is one important basic difference. Put simply, from either a Marxist or a Weberian perspective, the class structure consists of a relatively small number of fairly discrete class categories that exist in relationship to each other and that are defined in terms of the characteristics of people's jobs. This relational approach is contrasted with social stratificationist theories, which see the occupational structure as a continuous hierarchy of occupations that runs from high to low on some attribute such as occupational prestige or the level of education required by a particular occupation. While Marxist and Weberian approaches are both relational, there are substantial differences in emphasis. Useful summaries of both approaches are provided in M. Western (1993), Western and Western (1988), and J. Western (1983).

In contrast to the analyses of Marx and Weber, the stratificationist approach seeks to place individuals, families, households, and even aggregates such as communities and cities, in some hierarchical order reflecting their ability to produce and consume the scarce and valued resources of society. Three major papers published in the 1940s and 1950s, two by Parsons (1940, 1953) and one by Davis and Moore (1945), provide the basis for this approach.

Marx and Weber have spawned a number of followers. Of the numerous conceptualisations that have appeared in the past decade or so, two have come to assume particular prominence; they are Erik Wright's structural Marxist account, derived from an analysis of the social relations of production (Wright 1985, 1997), and John Goldthorpe's Weberian schema, based upon the work and market structure of particular occupational groupings (Goldthorpe 1987, 1996).

Wright (1985) begins his analysis of the class structure with the basic Marxist distinction between the owners of productive property and those who must work for someone else for a living. However, he asserts that the class structure is much more complex than just a division between owners and workers. Managers and supervisors should be differentiated from non-managers, and skilled professional and technical employees should be distinguished from employees without substantial skills. Thus it is on the basis of the ownership or non-ownership of productive property, the control of skills and organisational resources that Wright defines the class structure.

Following Weber, Goldthorpe (1996) argues that class situation depends upon market situation, and relationships of authority and autonomy in the workplace. The class structure for Goldthorpe then is defined by groups of occupations with comparable market and work situations (Goldthorpe, Llewellyn and Payne 1980). He identifies seven major classes, comprising individuals in professional occupations, managers and administrators, and proprietors of large establishments, routine non-manual clerical and sales employees, small proprietors and petty bourgeoisie, lower-level technical workers and supervisors, skilled manual workers, and unskilled blue-collar workers.

Wright and Goldthorpe provide contemporary expressions of the Marxist and Weberian approaches. But what of the stratificationist position? A great deal has been written in recent times. The first major national study of occupational prestige was undertaken by researchers at the University of Chicago in the early 1940s (Reiss et al. 1961). A great number of studies followed (Blau and Duncan 1967; Duncan 1951). Duncan proposed that prestige scores of occupations could be predicted well from level of educational achievement and mean income, and referred to this score as an 'index of socioeconomic status' (Duncan 1961). Updates of Duncan's pioneering work were made by Stevens and Featherman (1981), Stevens and Cho (1985), and Nakao and Treas (1994). Recently Hauser and Warren (1997) have argued that the index of socioeconomic status is most appropriately derived from the educational level of any occupation alone (Hauser and Warren 1997:251).

The Australian contribution to class and stratification

All three traditions, briefly sketched out in the preceding pages, find their adherents on the Australian sociological scene. R.W. Connell is a well-known proponent of a Marxist approach to class analysis. He has written about the Australian ruling class (Connell 1977) and, with Barry Irving, he has argued that class should be understood as a lived experience embedded in a historical context (Connell and Irving 1980). He has also examined how schools are related to the patterning of class and gender inequality in Australia (Connell 1985; Connell et al. 1982). In contrast to this type of Marxist class analysis, Janeen Baxter, Michael Emmison, Mark Western and John Western have conducted large-scale empirical studies based on Wright's structural Marxism (Baxter et al. 1991; Baxter and Western 2001). This study was the first empirical application of a modified version of Wright's class structure in Australia, an approach that has since been refined by one of the original authors (Western, M. 2000). The study measured class, gender, income and social mobility, and noted the relative permeability of class boundaries (Baxter et al. 1991).

Ron Wild's Banksia (1974), a study of class and status in a New South Wales country town, is still probably the most influential work in Australia from a Weberian perspective, although Ken Dempsey's Smellown (1990) and A Man's Town (1992), based on extensive fieldwork over a fifteen-year period from 1973 to 1987 in a Victorian farming community, come a close, equal second.

The first attempt at developing a prestige ranking of occupations in the Australian context was made by Athol Congalton in the early 1960s and was based on 134 occupations (Congalton 1963). Twenty years later, Ann Daniel (1983) developed a scale of occupational prestige based on sixty occupations. Using a strategy very similar to Duncan's index of socioeconomic status, Frank Jones, based at the Australian National University (ANU), in collaboration with others, developed a series of scales that assigns socioeconomic status scores to occupations included in the ABS Classification of Occupations (Broom and Jones 1976; Broom et al. 1980). These scales became known as the
ANU1, ANU2 and ANU3 scales. Most recently the ANU+ scale have been developed (Jones and McMillan 2001; McMillan and Jones 2000).

Structural bases and systems of inequality
We are finally done with this introduction to class and stratification. The account has been inevitably sketchy, but it was necessary to deal with the origins of the concepts and the theoretical advances that subsequently evolved. To return to our main argument, there are four structural bases to society — class, gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality — which shape much group formation in society. These bases are responsible for the patterning, maintenance and reproduction of social behaviours, attitudes, values and belief systems, and affect in particular the allocation of society’s scarce and valued resources. It is the latter point that is important here, because it highlights the importance of the structural bases for patterns of inequality.

Are the systems of inequality ordered? That is to say, is one structural base more important than another? For instance, Marxists would argue for the primacy of class, while some feminists would claim a similar position for gender. Similarly, do the bases and dimensions interact? For example, do male expert managers earn more than female expert managers? Importantly, we believe these to be empirical questions. In the sections to follow, we examine the ‘independent effects’ of the systems or bases of inequality on access to scarce and valued resources, while also being alert to the possibility of ‘interactive effects’.

The Australian class structure
From the prior discussion it is clear that class is a multivalent concept that throws up many practical challenges, particularly with regard to its measurement. We have adopted a pragmatic approach to measurement, therefore, and impugn class from the occupational categories that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) provides. These nine categories contain elements of the definitions of both Wright and Goldthorpe, in that they give some indication of the skills possessed by workers and the organisational resources to which they have access; in doing so they highlight relationships of autonomy and authority. Unfortunately and significantly, ownership of the means of production is absent from the ABS categories; also absent are those who are unemployed. Table 24.1 provides a rough guide to how Wright’s and Goldthorpe’s categories map onto the ABS occupational categories. Also shown are the generic terms commonly used to describe different groupings. Having clarified how we propose to operationalise class, let us consider the proportions of employed Australians in each class or occupational category, and also the extent to which the other structural bases — gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality — interact with it.

Occupational categories and class
As can be seen from Figure 24.2, less than 10 per cent of the Australian workforce is engaged in senior managerial or administrative positions (8 per cent). In contrast, the professions is the most numerous occupational category, accounting for almost 20 per

| Table 24.1: ABS occupational categories, Wright’s class structure, Goldthorpe’s occupational groupings and the colloquial terms commonly used to describe the different groupings. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ABS occupational group | Wright class structure | Goldthorpe occupational groupings | Generic |
| Class 6 | Class 4 | Upper middle class | Upper white-collar |
| Class 5 | Class 1 | Lower middle class | Lower white-collar (skilled manual workers) |
| Class 7 | Class 3 | Skilled manual workers | Skilled manual workers |
| Land and transport | Class 2 | Intermediate production and transport | Intermediate production and transport |
| Class 1 | Class 4 | Upper middle class | Upper white-collar |
| Class 3 | Class 2 | Lower middle class | Lower white-collar (skilled manual workers) |
| Class 5 | Class 1 | Skilled manual workers | Skilled manual workers |
| Class 7 | Class 2 | Intermediate production and transport | Intermediate production and transport |
| Class 1 | Class 4 | Upper middle class | Upper white-collar |
| Class 3 | Class 2 | Lower middle class | Lower white-collar (skilled manual workers) |
| Class 5 | Class 1 | Skilled manual workers | Skilled manual workers |
| Class 7 | Class 2 | Intermediate production and transport | Intermediate production and transport |
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| Class 5 | Class 1 | Skilled manual workers | Skilled manual workers |
| Class 7 | Class 2 | Intermediate production and transport | Intermediate production and transport |
| Class 1 | Class 4 | Upper middle class | Upper white-collar |
| Class 3 | Class 2 | Lower middle class | Lower white-collar (skilled manual workers) |
| Class 5 | Class 1 | Skilled manual workers | Skilled manual workers |
| Class 7 | Class 2 | Intermediate production and transport | Intermediate production and transport |
ent of the Australian workforce (18.3 per cent), with a further almost 17 per cent of Australian workers classified as associated professionals (11.9 per cent). Thus the upper white-collar class accounts for almost 40 per cent of the workforce. The combined clerical, sales and service categories—that is to say the lower white-collar class—accounts to approximately 30 per cent of employees, which brings the total in the non-manual classes to more than 70 per cent of all employees. People who practise a trade (12.8 per cent) are as numerous as those in the associated professions, and in combination with the intermediate production and transport workers, and labourers (8.59 and 9.1 per cent respectively), form the blue-collar or manual class that accounts for the remaining 30 per cent of the employed population.

Gender and class

Women and men have different patterns of employment (Figure 24.3). While men are noticeably over-represented among senior managers and administrators, women are relatively more common among the professions and lower white-collar workers, such as sales and clerical workers. Women’s over-representation in the professions is largely due to their prevalence in teaching and nursing; these professions coincidentally tend not to be as highly esteemed as the archetypal professions of medicine and law (Jones and McMillan 2001).

The traditional configurations of masculinity and femininity are also played out in terms of manual and non-manual labour. Predictably, more men have a trade, and are more likely to be involved in production and transport industries—all manual occupations. Conversely, women are over-represented in clerical, sales and service positions at all levels—all non-manual occupations. Perhaps a little surprising is the relative parity of numbers between male and female labourers. Thus the data suggest that class is socially patterned along the lines of gender. However, do class and ethnicity interact in a similar manner?

Ethnicity and class

Immigrants take part in Australia’s workforce in roughly similar proportions to their Australian-born contemporaries, although overseas-born workers are slightly more likely to occupy professional positions. This is hardly surprising given that 44 per cent of immigrants between 1999 and 2000 were employed in professional or paraprofessional positions (DIMIA 2002:61). Indeed, Australian immigration policies favour applicants who demonstrate a high level of technical skill, a strong employment history and good English-language skills, and who are under 45 years of age (DIMIA 2000). With some justification, Iredale (1997) claims that there is an ‘increased attempt to synchronise immigration policy with economic policies’ (Iredale 1997:239), and that Australia is one of the few countries in the world that ‘select on the basis of economic considerations and social utility’ (Jupp 1993:245, cited in Iredale 1997:239-40).

Multivariate studies demonstrate that the occupational achievement of immigrants is not commensurate with their education, at least relative to their Australian-born contemporaries in similar positions. For instance, Borooah and Mangan (2002:40) found
that Asian men and women with appropriate educational qualifications were less likely to be in professional, managerial and technical occupations than equivalently educated white, Australian-born men and women. This finding and others suggest that qualifications gained overseas may be less highly regarded in the domestic market. That teachers trained overseas find it difficult to secure teaching positions in Australia (Clyne 1998; Iredale 1997) adds weight to this contention. Interestingly, researchers have established that ‘having the cultural attributes of an English-speaking background was much more important for occupational success than a pedantic proficiency in English’, although poor English certainly appears to compound the problem (Boroohah and Mangan 2002:45–6).

While univariate national data suggest that immigrants are proportionally represented across the nine occupational categories, multivariate analyses suggest the situation is more complex than it initially appears. Miller and Neo claimed that recent immigrants are disadvantaged in terms of employment, and that this disadvantage persists for a considerable period (Miller and Neo 1997:156). In contrast, recent longitudinal studies have tended to maintain that the disadvantage initially experienced by immigrants does not persist beyond the first few years of residence and is further minimised with increased English proficiency (Richardson, Robertson and Isley 2001; VandenHeuvel and Wooden 1999). What of Indigenous Australians?

**Aboriginality and class**

Census data from 1996 clearly demonstrate the extent to which Indigenous Australians are under-represented in the more prestigious and better-paid occupations. Conversely, they are vastly over-represented among labourers; while less than one-tenth of the Australian population was engaged in unskilled manual labour in 1996, almost one-fifth of the Indigenous population was similarly employed in low-paid, unskilled work.

The recent paper by Boroohah and Mangan (2002) looked at ‘occupational discrimination’ rather than ‘earnings discrimination’ among Asian, Indigenous and white Australians, because although particular groups are less likely to be employed in prestigious or well-paid occupations (occupation discrimination), at any given level of employment members of these groups receive a wage equivalent to that of a white, Australian-born worker. Were they to receive a lesser salary, this would be an example of earnings discrimination. Because occupation correlates strongly with income, attention to occupational discrimination will indicate the extent to which Aboriginal and Asian Australians are disadvantaged in terms of income (Boroohah and Mangan 2002:32).

The researchers were particularly interested in racial disadvantage, defined as the probability of attaining an occupational status, which cannot be explained by sole reference to differences in non-racial attributes such as education. Their findings were grim and compelling. With respect to professional, managerial and technical occupations, Indigenous men faced an overall disadvantage of 35 per cent, two-thirds of which could be attributed to nothing other than their Aboriginality (Boroohah and Mangan 2002:45). Indigenous women fared better, because non-racial attributes, such as education, appeared to be the only thing preventing them from performing equally well in skilled and unskilled jobs, and they suffered no disadvantage in professional, managerial and technical occupations (Boroohah and Mangan 2002:45). The authors found this encouraging because, as they stated, ‘education [sic] limitations can be overcome more rapidly and effectively than the barriers posed by bigotry’ (Boroohah and Mangan 2002:45).

Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, Indigenous men are the most heavily disadvantaged group in the Australian labour market (Boroohah and Mangan 2002:45).

**Class summary**

This preliminary analysis suggests that Australian society can be thought of as comprising an upper middle class of managers and professionals making up approximately 40 per cent of the population, a lower middle class making up about 30 per cent, and a manual working class comprising the remaining 30 per cent. Women are less likely than men to be found in the managerial fraction of the upper middle class, but more likely to be found among the ‘lesser’ professions. Overall, however, among the upper middle class these gender differences even themselves out. Despite the differences we have at the aggregate level, ethnicity does not colour the class structure, although Aboriginality does, with Aboriginal men, in particular, being found disproportionately in semiskilled and unskilled manual jobs. So while Aboriginality, and to a lesser extent gender, affects one’s location within the class structure, ethnicity, by and large, does not. We turn now to the first of our dimensions of inequality, income, and as we shall see, class and income are related, but not in a linear fashion.

**Income**

We have already noted the contention surrounding notions of inequality. For instance, Hughes (2001) would have us believe that ‘equality of incomes ... is neither desirable nor feasible’ (Hughes 2001:13), while Turrell (2001:83) finds the income differences among classes morally offensive. Ideological preferences aside, let us look at the data, remembering that we are imputing class from occupation.

**Class and income**

A comparison of the income distribution between the first and fifth quintiles of Australian families over the years 1994 to 1998 reveals that families in the fifth, or bottom, quintile receive less than 4.5 per cent of the total income of all Australian families, while those families in the first, or top, quintile receive just under 50 per cent (Turrell 2001). Members of the upper middle class – managers, administrators and professionals – earn considerably more than members of all other classes, ranging from $770 per week for associate professionals to $1,260 per week for managers and administrators. The skilled manual workers – that is, those with a trade qualification – come next in the income hierarchy, with average weekly earnings of $690, closely followed by production and transport workers at $660 per week. The remaining white-collar workers – that is clerical, sales and service workers – earn notably less than these skilled and unskilled manual employees, averaging only $505 to $590 a week. Initially surprising is the finding that unskilled blue-collar workers earn more than their unskilled white-collar counterparts;
Gender and income

Despite the 1969 ruling by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission which granted ‘equal pay for equal work’, and its 1972 finding of ‘equal pay for equal value’, data on average weekly earnings of Australian employees indicate that women uniformly earn less than their male counterparts in all occupations (Figure 24.4). The greater tendency of women to seek part-time work is often used to explain this difference. However, even when we control for part-time work, men still, on average, take home fatter pay packets, giving an indication that gender remains a structural base of inequality for women, at least with respect to income. Regardless of the nature of their employment (full-time or part-time) women still tend to earn less than men, save for the incongruous finding that, in the best-remunerated category of managers and administrators, women employed part-time earn considerably more than their male counterparts (ABS 2001a). Wooden’s (1999:167) research on gender pay equity suggests that remuneration for very senior positions often rests outside the ambit of the industrial tribunals, and is determined by other factors such as private negotiations with senior managers and chief executive officers. Unfortunately, because his research did not include those employed in senior management, we are little closer to explaining this anomaly.

Numerous Australian studies have indicated the presence and persistence of a wage gap based on gender (see, for example, Borland 1999; Gregory 1999; Wooden 1999). These studies of the ‘gender pay gap’, as it is known, reflect two main influences: differences ‘justified’ in terms of average skills or job types between male and female employees; and ‘unjustified’ differences in returns on the skills or job type between male and female employees (Borland 1999:268). Using the 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey, Reiman (2001:12) sought to reconcile the tensions between institutional or econometric variables, such as employer’s gender bias, size of firm, profitability of workplace and competition intensity, and theories of human capital that use variables such as working hours, schooling, firm-specific workplace training, and family background (Gregory 1999).

Reiman (2001) found that when all else is held constant, men earn 7 per cent more than women, and further pointed out that 61 per cent of the gender gap is attributable to ‘unjustified’ differences, the foremost being gender. Nevertheless, this situation is a vast improvement on the early twentieth century, when women earned less than half the award rate of men, and the 1950s, by which time the pay ratio had improved by 25 per cent (Borland 1999). As a result of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission’s 1969 ruling, the gender pay ratio improved a further 30 per cent in six years (Gregory and Daly 1991, cited in Gregory 1999). Borland (1999) agrees that institutional factors, such as the equal-pay cases, have improved women’s wages (Borland 1999:268), and Wooden’s (1999) recent research detects only about a 3.5 percentage-point differential between male and female employees (Wooden 1999:169). However, Gregory (1999) is less sanguine, suggesting that low-paid women will be adversely affected by changes in the labour market, such as the weakening of unions and the decentralisation of pay-setting (Gregory 1999:277).

While we do not have specific figures for the average weekly earnings of overseas-born Australians, the previously mentioned study by Borooah and Mangan (2002) indicates that their occupations and thus income are not commensurate with their qualifications. Similarly, Miller and Neo (1997:155) state that if immigrants’ marketable characteristics were rewarded in the labour market in the same way that the Australian born’s characteristics are rewarded, then immigrants would experience considerably lower unemployment rates than those of the Australian born.

Overseas-born Australians would consequently earn higher salaries. What of another Australian-born group – Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders?

Aboriginality and income

During the census week of 1996, the average personal income of Indigenous Australian’s was 25 per cent less than that of the total population (ABS 1996:47), and this disparity was retained even when comparing employed Indigenous Australians with the total employed population (ABS 1996:48). Furthermore, when we consider average weekly

Figure 24.4 Average weekly earnings of male and female, Australian employees located in each occupational category, May 2000

$450 compared with $345 per week. However, the internal logic of discrimination becomes apparent when we recall our findings of occupation relative to gender (see Figure 24.3) and we note that men dominate unskilled blue-collar work, while women dominate less-well-paid unskilled white-collar work (ABS 2001b).
Women and Indigenous Australians are likely to be paid less than men and non-Indigenous Australians, respectively, and our earlier discussion on ethnicity and class indicates that being born outside Australia is likely to lead to occupational discrimination and hence to earnings discrimination (Borrocho and Mangan 2002). Education is the next of the dimensions of social inequality that we will consider. Predictably, the level of education one achieves is influenced by the class of one’s parents, but it also influences one’s class.

**Education**

**Class and schooling**

Between the ages of 6 and 15 years, school attendance is compulsory for all Australian children (ABS 2001a). Completion of Year 12 is optional, but nevertheless strongly encouraged because it improves one’s chances of finding steady employment (Lamb 2001; Lamb and McKenzie 2001). The acquisition of post-school qualifications, which often, but not always, depends upon completion of Year 12, further enhances one’s job prospects, particularly for the better-paid occupations (Lamb 2001). Therefore, retention rates may give some early indication of patterns of inequality. As can be seen from Figure 24.6, retention rates have improved markedly since the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1981, for instance, around two-fifths (39 per cent) of Australian young people completed Year 12, but by 2001 that rate had almost doubled (75.4 per cent). Closer examination of the data reveals that retention rates at non-government schools improved by 26 per cent, while government schools saw an even greater improvement of 38 per cent. Non-government schools have better retention rates historically, thus the proportionally better progress of government schools has gone some way to closing the gap between the two.

The distinction between government, Catholic and independent schools is of some importance to our discussion of education. Unpublished data from the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth indicates that while independent schools educate roughly 12 per cent of Australian children, 67 per cent of those children have parents who are in professional or senior managerial/administrative occupations. In contrast, while more than three-quarters of the children educated at government schools have parents who are unskilled manual workers, only 7 per cent of children at independent schools have parents similarly employed. Catholic schools fall between the two, but more closely reflect the patterns of the independent schools. In addition, the retention rates of independent schools are noticeably better than those of the other two school types (Lamb and McKenzie 2001). Because social background is strongly related to the smooth transition from school to full-time work and higher education (Lamb and McKenzie 2001), class plays an important role in determining one’s life chances.

**Gender and schooling**

Historically, females have received more formal schooling than their male counterparts (Lewis and Kosby 1999). Not only has this trend continued into the twenty-first century.
but it has grown (see Figure 24.7). Whereas the retention rate for females has hovered just below 80 per cent for a decade, rates for males have only just reached 70 per cent. Over the past decade these high levels of school completion by young women have translated into completion of tertiary education, and attainment of positions commensurate with that education (Birrell et al. 1995; Rapson 1997). And yet this is not enough to completely negate the power of gender as a structural basis of inequality. Women are yet to make any significant inroads into the fields of engineering and computing (Rapson 1997: 64–5). For instance, they make up no more than 10 to 15 per cent of the student population in tertiary education programs in these areas. Nevertheless, women are doing well relative to Indigenous Australians, who, along with their over-representation in poorly paid, unskilled occupations, do not attain the same level of schooling as non-Indigenous Australians.

Figure 24.6 Retention rates from years 10 to 12 at government and non-government schools, 1976 to 2001

Figure 24.7 Retention rates of male and female children from years 10 to 12, 1976 to 2001

being in the order of 12 to 21 percentage points. At Year 11 the differences are even greater, ranging from 30 to 39 percentage points, reaching a maximum in Year 12 of between 38 and 43 percentage points. It is also interesting to note that the greatest difference in retention rates among Indigenous students occurs between years 10 and 11, suggesting that the final two years of high school are still a luxury for the great majority of Indigenous young people.

Class and higher education
Data from the mid-1970s, after the abolition of university fees by the Whitlam government, indicated that close to 60 per cent of students attending tertiary-educational institutions came from professional and managerial backgrounds, while no more than 15 per cent of the comparable adult male population fell into the same occupational category (Anderson et al. 1980). More recently, longitudinal research undertaken by ACER demonstrates that the children of upper-middle-class parents were more likely to have completed Year 12 and to have participated in higher education by the age of 19 than children from any other class background (Long, Carpenter and Hayden 1999). Correspondingly, those attending non-government schools were more likely than students from government schools to be attending university (Long, Carpenter and Hayden 1999).

Furthermore, an analysis of academic performance of the same students in Year 9 indicates that one's socioeconomic background is a stronger determinant of entry to higher education than any other factor (Marks, McMillan and Hillman 2001). Put bluntly, the children from upper-middle-class homes are more likely to complete Year 12, acquire post-school education, earn a comfortable living and enjoy the benefits of their class location than the children of unskilled workers.

Aboriginality and schooling
The educational picture for Indigenous Australians is stark. Indigenous children are far more likely to drop out of school than their non-Indigenous contemporaries, and increasingly so in the higher grades. Table 24.2 presents the difference in retention rates for the two groups since 1994. The generally downward trend from 1994 to 2001, across years 9 to 12, indicates that Indigenous students are remaining at school longer than they did previously. However, it also demonstrates that their retention rates relative to non-Indigenous students are still disturbingly low. Since 1994, nearly all Australian children have completed Year 9, although retention rates are between 3 and 10 per cent lower for Indigenous children. Again, while nearly all non-Indigenous students complete Year 10, far fewer Indigenous young people do so, with the difference
Table 24.2 Difference in retention rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, years 9 to 12, 1994 to 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Year 10</th>
<th>Year 11</th>
<th>Year 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>-7.3</td>
<td>-18.8</td>
<td>-38.8</td>
<td>-43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>-10.1</td>
<td>-20.4</td>
<td>-35.4</td>
<td>-42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-2.8</td>
<td>-21.5</td>
<td>-37.1</td>
<td>-43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
<td>-17.0</td>
<td>-35.7</td>
<td>-42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>-4.7</td>
<td>-14.4</td>
<td>-32.9</td>
<td>-40.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>-6.0</td>
<td>-15.9</td>
<td>-30.4</td>
<td>-38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-4.1</td>
<td>-15.0</td>
<td>-32.6</td>
<td>-36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
<td>-12.2</td>
<td>-31.5</td>
<td>-38.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS 2001d.

As well as generating financial benefits for the graduates, tertiary education benefits the Australian government, because graduates achieve a greater average income throughout life, and consequently provide the government with greater tax revenue (Johnson and Lloyd 2000). However, the graduate is the ultimate beneficiary, as the government underwrites tertiary education through subsidisation and the provision of Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) loans (Johnson and Lloyd 2000). The children of more privileged classes therefore benefit appreciably not only by virtue of their education securing them a well-paid position, but also because the society as a whole supports their education, via the taxation system.

Aboriginality and higher education

The pattern of disadvantage we have been characterising the Aboriginal population is maintained when we examine their tertiary qualifications. Table 24.3 presents the ratios of Indigenous men and women to their non-Indigenous counterparts in terms of the highest qualification they achieved in 1991 and 1996. There has been an improvement in the proportion of Indigenous women, compared with Indigenous men, receiving education or training in all categories except undergraduate diplomas, and overall a very slight improvement in the ratio. However, in 1996 they still remained significantly disadvantaged relative to their non-Indigenous counterparts (odds ratio 0.55). Despite achieving proportionately more associate diplomas and basic vocational qualifications than their counterparts (odds ratio 1.03 and 1.13), bachelors’ degrees and postgraduate qualifications still elude Aboriginal women; they are two-thirds and one-tenth as likely to acquire these credentials as their white counterparts.

Aboriginal men do not fare even as well as Aboriginal women. While once again there has been a slight improvement overall of 0.05 in the odds ratio, Indigenous men are only half as likely as non-Indigenous men to acquire further education and training. Like Indigenous women, they also improved in all categories, except higher degrees, between 1991 and 1996. The fact remains, however, that non-Indigenous men are almost twice as likely as Indigenous men to acquire a postgraduate degree. That Indigenous men and women tend to achieve basic vocational qualifications in greater proportions than their opposite numbers suggests that Aborigines are less likely to move beyond these basic qualifications, and thus they are profoundly disadvantaged in the employment market.

The reasons for relatively poor educational attainment among Indigenous people are multifarious, but include the relatively high rates of suspension and expulsion, absenteeism, high death rates and the consequent social obligations, high arrest rates, and high mobility (Groome and Hamilton 1995; Hunter and Schwab 1998; Schwab 1998). Gray, Hunter and Schwab (2000) counter the ‘politics of envy’ (Hughes 2001) by stating that ‘if minority groups fail to keep up with the rate of increase of other Australians, it is likely that they will suffer increasing disadvantage and marginalisation in labour markets’ (Gray, Hunter and Schwab 2000:101–2). This is important, because completing Year 12 and achieving well in school have significant employment and earnings outcomes for young people a decade or more after leaving school (Lamb and McKenzie 2001).

Table 24.3 Highest level of qualification in the working-age population, 1991 to 1996; Indigenous education participant and attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher degree</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate diploma</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate diploma</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate diploma</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled vocational</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic vocational</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total qualification</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gray, Hunter and Schwab 2000.

Ethnicity and education

Finally we consider the extent to which ethnicity influences participation in education. As early as 1975, the Schools Commission stated that ‘the multicultural reality of Australian society needs to be reflected in school curricula’ (cited in Iredale 1997:91); and by 1993, Western and Turrell’s review of the available evidence suggested that ‘settled migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds experience few problems with education participation’ (Western and Turrell 1993:204). However, it is misleading to assume that all ethnic groups are homogeneous in their educational experiences and outcomes. For instance, Australian schools are generally described as ‘free, secular and compulsory’, whereas for Muslims, education is a ‘religious obligation not a secular process’ (Clyne 1998:281). In contrast to the disciplinary style of Muslim education, where students rote-learn known facts, Australian educators are moving towards more student-centred learning that encourages scepticism, promotes individual rights over
the community's, and tends to coeducate young men and women after puberty (Clyne 1998:285). All these factors sit uncomfortably with Australian Muslim parents.

In addition, data from the mid-1980s suggests that students do not perform as well at primary and secondary level, but that 'more students perform below the national average' in numeracy (Marsh 1998:13, cited in Western and Turrell 1993:205). Williams et al. (1993, cited in Iredale 1997:250) support this finding by noting that students from non-English-speaking backgrounds tend to 'choose subjects that appear to require a minimum of English expression, focusing instead on mathematics and science subjects'. But having gained entrance to university, they may then experience learning and adjustment difficulties.

In contrast, the national picture suggests that, far from being disadvantaged, young people between the ages of 15 and 24 who were born overseas but are currently living in Australia are much more likely to be attending an educational institution than not (ABS 1999). These data are supported by ACER studies, which further add that this difference is not reflected in access to TAFE programs or apprenticeships (Long, Carpenter and Hayden 1999; Marks et al. 2000). Indeed, while slightly more than half the Australian-born people aged between 15 and 24 years are engaged in some form of education, almost two-thirds of overseas-born young Australians are similarly engaged. Furthermore, overseas-born students are more likely to be completing higher degrees than their Australian-born counterparts. These data must be treated with caution because they do not reflect the students' reading within Australia for the purposes of study and who intend to return to their country of origin (ABS 1999). Tellingly, the number of visas issued for temporary migration is eighteen to twenty times larger than the number of permanent visas (Sloan and Kennedy 1992, cited in Iredale 1997:242).

Education summary
Education is determined by one's class, gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality, but not equally so. Class determines the school system one enters, retention rates, and the likelihood of going on to higher education. While women perform well at school, they have only recently moved into non-traditional fields, which are yet to be transformed into 'equal pay for equal work'. Immigrants are similarly affected, as they tend to be underpaid relative to their educational achievement. Once again Indigenous Australians fare poorly. Although recent Year 10 completion rates have improved, senior high school is still not a reality for many young Aboriginal Australians, and tertiary education a luxury for a minority.

Health
In this section we adopt an ecological view of health. That is, the individual's health is not necessarily nor exclusively seen to be a consequence of his or her individual characteristics; the social, economic and environmental circumstances in which one lives also influence one's health (Turrell 2001:85).

The health of Australian men and women
In considering structurally patterned access to health, we rely heavily upon an excellent study by Turrell and Mathers (2000). The study examined the differences in mortality rates across high, medium and low socioeconomic groups, and also considered the changes in these rates between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. The mortality rates of Australian men and women in all age groups, and from all socioeconomic backgrounds, increased over the ten-year period that separated the two data collections (Turrell and Mathers 2000:35). Nevertheless, the mortality rates are clearly stratified according to the socioeconomic characteristics of the area in which the respondents lived, suggesting a class-based pattern of health inequality. It is worth noting that the authors' chosen method is likely to have underestimated the rates of inequality. In essence, socioeconomic disadvantage translates into poorer health for Australian men and women (Turrell and Mathers 2000), and once ill, unskilled workers are less likely to receive as much time as general practitioners devote, on average, to patients from professional occupations (Wiggers and Sanson-Fisher 1997). Related findings have been widely reported (see, for example, Najman 2000, and also his chapter 29, this volume).

Utilising the Gini coefficient (Creedy 1996, Turrell and Mathers 2000) found that in the period from 1985 to 1987, death rates for all-cause mortality increased significantly with decreasing socioeconomic status for men and women in the three age groups studied: 0 to 14 years, 15 to 24 years and 25 to 64 years. Despite an overall decline in rates in the decade to 1995–97 the socioeconomic differences were maintained (Turrell and Mathers 2000). The use of the blanket all-cause mortality hides changes in specific causes of death. For instance, while overall mortality rates decreased for men aged 15 to 24 years in the decade, there was a rise in rates for suicide and an increase in the socioeconomic differential (Turrell and Mathers 2000).

As already noted, the overall pattern for women is relatively better than that for men, but also more complicated. All-cause mortality fell significantly among all age groups across the decade for women. However, an increase in mortality inequality was found for SIDS (0 to 14 years), motor vehicle traffic accidents (15 to 24 and 25 to 64 years), and coronary heart disease, diabetes mellitus, cancer and diseases of the respiratory system (25 to 64 years). As a further point of clarification, a decrease in inequality may result either from greater death rates among those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, or a decrease in mortality rates among those of the working classes. The evidence presented by Turrell and Mathers (2000) agrees with the international literature, which suggests that increases in mortality inequality across socioeconomic groups are due mainly to greater declines in death rates among those from higher socioeconomic positions (Turrell and Mathers 2000:238). Thus while the poor are not becoming any sicker, the rich are becoming healthier.

Ethnicity and health
Concern was first expressed for the health of Australia's migrants in the 1976 Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (Martin 1976). However, good-quality survey data relating to health and ethnicity is difficult to obtain, given the
In summary, the apparent benefit of being born outside Australia pertains mainly to the stringent health requirements that must be met before immigration, and to the government's preference for well-qualified immigrants (DIMA 2000). In addition, the technical problems involved with gathering representative and reliable data of sufficient size make it difficult to undertake analyses that better indicate the extent to which one's ethnicity can be detrimental to one's health outcomes (Powles and Gifford 1990:79).

Aboriginality and health

At all ages, Indigenous Australians die at rates disproportionate to their representation in the general population. Almost one-fifth of the deaths among children who do not live to celebrate their first birthday are Indigenous children, and yet they constitute only 6 per cent of all children in that age group. Put another way, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under 12 months of age are 2.6 times as likely to die as their white counterparts (ABS 2001c:115), and even if they survive the first twelve months they continue to experience much poorer health than the general Australian population (Edwards and Madden 2001).

Arguably, things do not get really bad for Indigenous Australians until they turn 25, when they are 4.5 times more likely to die than the rest of the population. Their death rates relative to those of white Australians peak between 35 and 44 years of age at the not inconsiderable ratio of 5.5 times the norm (ABS 2001c:115; Edwards and Madden 2001:115). Diseases of the circulatory system, cancer and external causes account for 60 per cent of all identified Indigenous deaths (Edwards and Madden 2001:4), and according to 1995–97 data, respiratory conditions are the major contributors (ABS 1997b). While these conditions are also significant killers among the white population, they affect Indigenous people at much younger ages. After 65 years the mortality rate, while still higher than Indigenous representation in the general population would suggest, substantially decreases to the point where one is only three times as likely to die as other similarly aged Australians. Unremarkably, given the above trends, Indigenous males and females can expect to live twenty years fewer than non-Indigenous Australians. The life expectancy for Aboriginal males, currently 56 years, is the same as that for white Australian men who lived at the turn of the twentieth century. Similarly, the 63 years of life reasonably expected by Indigenous women is comparable to the life expectancy of white Australian women in the early 1920s (Edwards and Madden 2001:4).

National surveys in 1994 and 1995 indicated that Indigenous people exhibit many characteristics and behaviours that are detrimental to good health; for example, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, obesity and exposure to violence (Edwards and Madden 2001:4). Some authors regret the lack of well-designed studies (defined as randomised controlled trials) assessing medical intervention in Aboriginal health matters (Morris 1999), while others argue that a culturally sensitive, community-based approach to health care is needed (Morgan, Slade and Morgan 1997; RACGP 2000). The dismal national state of Indigenous health continues, despite the federal government spending an additional 22 cents on Indigenous health for every dollar spent on the health of non-Indigenous Australians (Edwards and Madden 2001:3).
Health summary

This section has shown that social class exerts a considerable influence on health, and decreasing mortality rates reflect an improvement in the health of the advantaged compared to the less advantaged in socioeconomic and educational terms. We also saw that men are likely to die earlier than women, whereas overseas-born Australians, particularly those from Asian countries, appear to enjoy greater longevity than the Australian born. Yet again Indigenous Australians find themselves more disadvantaged than any other group.

Conclusion

Structurally based social inequality is ubiquitous. It is a characteristic of all countries of the world, and with increasing globalisation the nation-state as a structural basis for global inequality is likely to warrant serious consideration. Our concern with inequality is the manner in which it is socially patterned; that is to say, the extent to which social groups differ in their access to scarce and valued resources. The structural bases define the social groups in which we are interested, and the scarce and valued resources to which they have variable access are labelled the dimensions of inequality. Having considered the structural bases of class, gender, ethnicity and Aboriginality along three dimensions of inequality — income, education and health — we have made some interesting findings.

When compared with Australia of the late 1970s and early 1980s, not much has changed as far as social class is concerned (Western, J. 1983). The upper middle class still earns substantially more than the lower middle class and the manual working class, although the last of these have improved their position somewhat in comparison to the lower middle class. They now clearly earn more than the lower middle, while in the earlier period they were only marginally in front. As far as education is concerned, the more advantaged do better. The differentials that were observed in the early 1980s still obtain, although the differences are not as great as they were then. Nothing much has changed as far as health is concerned. Class location is still an important determinant of age-specific mortality rates and life expectancy.

Women are doing better than they were in the earlier period. Although income differentials are apparent they are not as great, and while entry into particular professions is still slight, for engineering and IT in particular, these areas are opening up. School retention rates for women have increased substantially, and women comprise more than 50 per cent of the tertiary student population. Life expectancy is greater than it is for men and age-specific mortality rates are lower. There has been little change in these differentials over time.

Writing in 1976, G.W. Ford suggested that 'migrants are concentrated in those sectors of manufacturing with the worst physical working conditions, the worst pay, and the jobs which are physically hard and contain the most menial tasks'. Conditions have changed. While in the 1970s more than 60 per cent of employed migrants could be classified as manual workers, compared with only 42 per cent of the Australian born (Western, J. 1983), today less than a third of each group are manual workers.

Migrants are also marginally more likely to be professionals. They are also more likely to be engaged in tertiary study than the Australian born, but tend to be underpaid relative to their educational achievement. These latter two findings suggest perhaps generational differences, with the second-generation migrants being the more likely to be undertaking tertiary studies and the first-generation migrants being the more likely to be underpaid. As a group, migrants are healthier than the Australian born, but do exhibit higher ratios for infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Ethnicity perhaps needs to be revisited, because it may be too homogenous a term for too heterogeneous a group.

Aboriginality is little different from class; very little has changed over the past twenty years. Indigenous Australians are disproportionately found among manual workers. Their levels of education and school retention rates are low. Life expectancy and age-specific death rates when compared with the non-Indigenous population also clearly reflect their disadvantaged status. A marginal improvement in the life situation of Indigenous women is the only positive change that has occurred over time.

In summary, class and Aboriginality are still major structural bases of inequality, and gender and ethnicity appear to be less significant than they were twenty years ago. There are also two new contenders for consideration as structural bases, it would appear: They are spatial location and life-course position. Spatial location draws attention to issues of rurality and urban and suburban living; while life-course position highlights the consequences of youth and ageing, in particular. We have not had the opportunity to consider these issues in the present chapter, but we know enough about ageing and poverty and the exigencies of rural and outer-suburban living to recognise that these factors importantly colour the life circumstances of groups of people. However, these are matters that await empirical assessment.

Notes


References


