Using Analogies in Sociology: Inequality as a Cause of Inequalities

Using Analogies: How Inequalities Create Inequality

This Lesson Outline is designed (yes, really) as a kind of skeleton structure you can flesh-out with ideas and information as and how you see fit. In other words, while it provides a basic structure for a lesson it doesn't tell you what to teach, which means it's not something you can necessarily just take off-the-shelf and use "as is". Having said that, it does make for something that's adaptable to a range of different lessons.

Most, admittedly, centred around notions of social inequality, but, hey, you can't have everything.

Preamble…

I've previously drawn attention to the usefulness of analogies in sociology teaching (Using Analogies in Sociology, Teaching Perspectives: Society is Like, Different Types of Society), most-latterly in relation to how we can think about social mobility, moving away from a conventional "ladder analogy" towards one - climbing a mountain - that I think better reflects both the daily reality of social mobility and how it can be conceptualised for students in terms of both:

● **social action**: the idea that mobility can have an individual dimension, one that reflects, for example, both the ability to rise above different types and degrees of disadvantage through a single-minded determination to succeed (upward mobility) or the inability to exploit the advantages of a privileged family and background (downward mobility).

This dimension, while important to keep in mind because it reflects the idea of individuals struggling to come-to-terms with - and sometimes overcoming - the problems created by societal forces largely beyond their individual ability to control, leads into the concept of:

● **social structures**: the idea there are social forces surrounding the individual that place barriers in the path of their mobility, or indeed open-up gateways to such mobility. These forces - economic, political and cultural - can be brought to life for students through the mountain-climbing analogy.

This dimension is important because concepts like social mobility, poverty and social inequality are frequently conceptualised in our culture in terms of "individuals" standing-apart in glorious isolation from the economic, political and cultural backgrounds against which their lives are framed.

These concepts, in other words, are frequently individualised - lack of mobility or poverty, for example, is framed in terms of individual failings - and the role of social structures systematically downplayed.
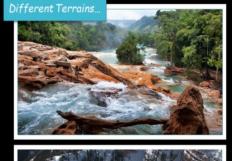
We can see this most clearly in relation to the "ladder analogy" of social mobility, where "the ladder" is simply conceived as a neutral mechanism for climbing up-or-down the social scale - and since it neither hinders nor facilitates mobility, the ability to climb up or down is reduced to something like individual determination or motivation.

If we replace this with a more realistic "mountain analogy" the reverse is true: movement up-or-down the social scale is hindered, blocked or facilitated by a wide range of structural factors - and this is where we can develop the analogy slightly to take-in concepts of poverty and social inequality.

And to understand how this occurs we can use the analogy to construct a couple of thought experiments that can be carried-out either face-to-face in a classroom or, particularly useful in these Covid times, online.

the Climbing a Mountain PowerPoint or create your own if you prefer. Using the former:

Setting the scene…

While it might be useful if your students have previously done some work on poverty and social inequality, such as learning basic definitions, it's not a deal-breaker if they haven't because the main objective here is to explore and understand how poverty is linked to inequality through the idea of "choices and chances": this involves not only understanding how our life chances are conditioned, restricted and sometimes determined by the choices we make, but also that our ability to make these choices is, in turn, conditioned, restricted and sometimes determined by a range of material and cultural factors embedded in the social structure of the society in which we live.

Part 1

The first part of the lesson familiarises students with the notion of "climbing a mountain".

Here the focus is on the challenges - known and unknown - they would face and the initial preparation they would need to make in order to both meet / avoid these challenges and, ultimately, achieve the goal of ascending to the summit. To this end you can use the slides I've already prepared in

Show your students a picture of a mountain (Slide 1) and tell them to think about what it would be like to climb.

Ask them to reflect on and discuss things like:

● The challenges and problems they would face on their climb (Slide 2).

● The equipment and resources needed to successfully achieve their goal (Slide 3).

● The guides they would find helpful, such as maps or skilled companions (Slide 4).

● The skills - personal and social - they might need to reach the summit (Slide 5).
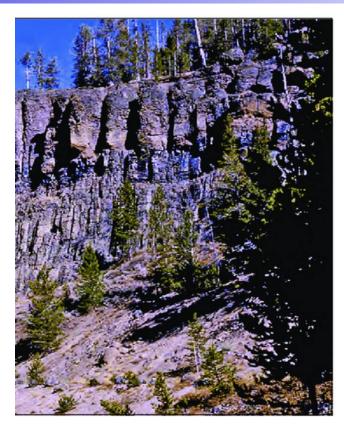
Part 2

If you want to extend this initial idea it lays the ground for a discussion of how climbers with unequal access to material and cultural resources (such as the right climbing equipment and access to accurate maps respectively) might cope in their quest to climb the mountain.

You can build this on whatever your students identified in *Part 1* as a potential challenge, such as being suddenly confronted by a 100' vertical cliff face blocking their progress.

How does having the right equipment (ropes, hammers, climbing pegs, etc.) and skills needed to safely climb the cliff give someone an advantage over competitors who lacks these resources?

This can lead into a general discussion about how the unequal distribution of resources advantages some climbers while disadvantaging others and provides an opportunity, if you haven't done so already, to introduce concepts of material, cultural and social capital that you initially apply to mountain climbing…

● *Economic*: if you can't afford materials such as a tent in which to shelter at night what would be your chances of being successful? Material support is arguably the most important resource in this context because it determines your chances of survival in a harsh and hostile environment.

● *Cultural*: how might having access to a cultural resource such as a map showing you the easiest route to the top advantage you? Maps help you anticipate and avoid major problems and plan your resource-allocation - what you will / won't need for each stage of the journey. The experience of others - people who've done the climb before - can guide you towards the easier paths as well as to what to expect and how to deal with it as you progress.

● *Social*: how might being able to climb with the help of a support group advantage you in the climb? They can, for example, provide material support, such as carrying extra supplies, and emotional support, such as offering help and guidance, motivation and so forth.

You might want to round this stage off with something like a general summary question along the lines of "How does poverty (or affluence) create / contribute to social inequality in mountain climbing?".

This should lead to the idea that meeting an objective challenge - such as physically climbing a mountain - requires a combination of personal determination allied to the skills and resources required to turn that determination into some form of achievement. These resources are not simply material ones - being able to afford the right equipment - but also non-material ones, such as having someone to guide and advise you on your journey because they've previously climbed the mountain.

Overall, the objective here is to sensitise students to the idea that "achievement in life" is not *simply* a quality of the individual; what people can or cannot achieve is conditioned - and perhaps in some instances determined - by the material and cultural resources they have at their disposal.

You can, if you wish, example this idea through an illustration of your choice of how an individual's choices are restricted by poverty and enhanced by affluence. For example, anyone

can choose to send their children to a fee-paying, high-achieving, high-status, private school.

How is the fact only the very rich actually exercise this choice explained by school fees ranging from £20,00 - 30,000+ per pupil per year?

Making the change…

Once your students have understood the basic ideas underpinning this analogy you can change the focus: give them a different (cultural) mountain to climb.

Depending on what you want to achieve you can do this by giving them something specific to consider, such as how being born into poverty or affluence affects your chances of gaining a degree from Oxbridge or landing a high-paying job with Google, or something more wide-ranging, such as looking at the different life-chances of people from poor and affluent social backgrounds from birth to death.

Whether your focus here is relatively tight - such as differences in educational achievement - or much looser, as in a general biographical overview of social inequalities, there is an opportunity to introduce a range of illustrative material here. This can be used to sensitise students to various forms of inequality or lay-down a general "background of inequality" against which the next part of the lesson can be overlaid.

This involves changing the focus from climbing an imaginary mountain to whatever cultural mountain (such as education) you've chosen to use. In this respect you are asking your students to use the same kind of logic and analysis they applied to climbing an actual mountain to climbing a cultural mountain.

Although if your heart is set on Eton, that will set you back around £45,000 per child, per year.

If you want you can break this down into the "three types of capital" categories we've noted previously.

For example, in relation to educational achievement:

1. Economic capital: Explore the ways material poverty or affluence can advantage and disadvantage individuals from different social backgrounds as they pass through the education system.

This is likely to provoke a wide-ranging discussion around various forms of material deprivation and affluence - from home-based problems such as not having access to computer and online materials to things like the ability to buy private education, employ personal tutors and the like - but students should be encouraged to develop and apply their ideas and examples to the various ways these promote or enhance social inequality in education.

If you want to reference the original analogy, get students to focus on possible barriers to progress in the educational system and the various ways that access / lack of access to economic / material resources can help or hinder the individual progress of students from different social backgrounds.

2. *Cultural capital*: Explore ideas about how cultural resources can advantage and disadvantage individuals from different social backgrounds as they pass through the education system.

While this area may throw-up fewer examples to explore you can reference the original analogy to get students to focus on how cultural factors related to family and schools may reproduce social inequalities.

For example, the original example referred to the use of maps and guides and their equivalent here might be something like the advice and experience of people, such as parents and teachers, who have already made the journey on which students are embarking. How might their experience help or hinder?

In other words, where the education system throws-up barriers to individual progress (which you may or may not want to identify and explore), how can parents and / or teachers actively increase or decrease the chances of educational success? Here you can explore both positive and negative reinforcements (such as parents who have attended Oxbridge or, conversely, parents with little-or-no educational achievement).

A further dimension to cultural capital might be the emotional labour parents invest in their children's education. This is manifested in terms of things like the academic help and support parents are able and willing to give to their children to the pressure parents place on schools and individual subject teachers to ensure their children succeed academically. There's a wealth of research into these areas you can use to illustrate these ideas if necessary (such as Reay (2006) "Doing the dirty work of social class?" and De Fraja et al (2005) "Must try harder").

3. *Social capital*: As with its cultural counterpart, it's possible to explore a range of ideas about how access to different types of social network, such as family and family friends, can advantage students in their educational journey.

Again, there may be fewer examples to identify and examine here, but you could include things like the so-called "Old Boy network" (that presumably now applies to Old Girls?) that may ease entrance into popular (and, of course, expensive) Public Schools and using family and friendship contacts to facilitate university applications and interviews.

A further dimension here if you're focusing on education generally and entrance into Oxbridge specifically might be structural imbalances in class-based entrance whereby around 30% of the available places are taken-up by students with a Public Education background (Sutton Trust, 2018) - although equally interestingly this may be starting to erode…).

Learning the Lessons…

The basic idea here is to construct a lesson narrative based on a simple analogy that allows students to understand how concepts of poverty and affluence can be related to explanations of social inequality. It can also, of course, be used as a backdrop to more-intensive work on these concepts, such as:

● Different definitions of poverty and the implications these have for how we understand and interpret social inequality.

● Structures of poverty: how individual behaviours are, for example, structurally constrained, limited or eliminated. What obstacles does society, for example, place in the path of individuals trying to achieve particular socially-desirable goals?

● How individual life choices and chances and are enhanced or reduced by social structures.

● The overlap between different forms of economic, cultural and social capital can be explained, illustrated and applied to understanding poverty and its effects. That is, you can introduce the idea, if necessary, that this methodologically-discrete categories also have transgressive elements: how control of high levels of economic resources impacts on levels of cultural and social capital.

Being able, for example, to afford to pay a personal tutor to supplement a child's schooling is one thing, but the initial desire to give your child "a helping hand" over and above their formal schooling reflects a specific form of cultural capital (a belief that one should be able to buy educational advantage).

It may also reflect social capital in the sense that in a highly-competitive market for "the best tutors", people in your social network, such as friends, colleagues and acquaintances, may be able to recommend certain tutors or, where they're particularly popular, persuade them to coach your child.

ShortCuts^{tv}

Chris. Livesey: 2021