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Q5(b)

Does the structural-functionalist perspective on social stratification promote a status quo? Give reasons for your answer.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Stratification and Mobility: Concepts

Stratification and Mobility: Concepts - equality, inequality, hierarchy, exclusion, poverty and deprivation; Theories of social stratification - Structural functionalist, Marxist, Weberian; Dimensions - Class, status groups, gender, ethnicity and race; Social mobility - open and closed systems, types, sources and causes.

Core demand of the question

- **State the structural-functional view of stratification:** Davis-Moore, Parsons
- Show how it can justify existing hierarchy as necessary
- Give reasons that it promotes a status quo, and any openings (Merton, dysfunction)
- Use Tumin or conflict theory as critique

Revision summary

Davis and Moore treat unequal rewards as devices to fill important positions.

Parsons ties ranking to a shared value system and role allocation.

That logic easily sanctifies the present hierarchy as necessary.

Tumin asked who defines importance and why talent and reward match so neatly.

Unpaid gendered labour and caste inheritance expose the payoff story.

Merton's dysfunctions qualify equilibrium but do not make functionalism a conflict theory.

Introduction

Structural-functionalism treats society as a system of interrelated parts that tend toward order. Its theory of stratification, especially Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, asks what inequality does for the system. The question is whether that perspective quietly defends the status quo. The honest answer is that it often does, because it reads existing rewards as functional necessities rather than as outcomes of power.

Body

The functional claim

Davis and Moore argued that some positions are more functionally important and more scarce in talent. Unequal rewards are the device that places the right people in those positions and motivates them to train. Talcott Parsons added that stratification expresses a shared value system: achievement, universalism and the ranking of roles in a modern society. Inequality, on this view, is not an accident and not mainly exploitation. It is a mechanism of allocation.

Why this promotes a status quo

If high pay and honour measure functional importance, then the present hierarchy looks deserved. The theory underplays inheritance, caste, gender and the political making of

"importance". Melvin Tumin asked who judges functional necessity, why talent is assumed scarce, and why the less rewarded must find the system legitimate. The argument can become a sociology of consolation: the poor are where the system needs them. Conflict theorists, from **Marx** to later critics of Davis-Moore, reply that surplus is extracted, not allocated by consensus. Feminist readers add that unpaid care is functionally vital and poorly rewarded, which already breaks the payoff rule.

- **Robert Merton's functions and dysfunctions slightly open the door:** a hierarchy may stabilise one group and injure another. Classical functional stratification still leans toward equilibrium. In India, a functional story of caste as division of labour served the status quo until Dalit sociology named graded inequality. Reasons for the "yes" are theoretical and political: it naturalises winners. Mertonian dysfunctions do not make Davis-Moore a theory of radical change.

Flow diagram

Structural functionalism -> Davis-Moore unequal rewards
Structural functionalism -> Parsons value consensus
Davis-Moore unequal rewards -> Status quo justified
Tumin conflict feminism -> Status quo justified
Merton dysfunction -> Status quo justified

Conclusion

The structural-functional perspective on stratification tends to promote a status quo because it treats unequal rewards as system needs. Tumin and conflict theory show the circularity of that claim. Functional analysis can still describe order; it is a weak theory of injustice and transformation.

Facts & figures

Davis-Moore thesis

Stratification is a universal device for placing talent in functionally important roles through unequal incentive.

Tumin's critique

Functional importance is circular, talent is socially restricted, and inequality has dysfunctions for motivation and cohesion.

Parsonian ranking

Roles are ranked by shared values such as achievement, which can read existing elites as value-realisers.