



Grenfell Tower - Social Class

Introduction

A news story broke on Wednesday 14th June 2017 that would have a devastating effect, both at the time and continue to have impact within the larger society. A 24-storey tower block in North Kensington **Grenfell Tower** became engulfed in fire, and 71 people died. Some residents escaped, but others were trapped inside. The blaze took hold quickly, and emergency services were called just before 1.00am on 14/06/2017. It is believed the fire started on the fourth floor and spread rapidly. The blaze was not brought under control until 1.14am on Thursday 15th June – 24-hours later.



The information in this Factsheet would be relevant to exam questions on the topic of stratification and differentiation. It could also be used within other topic areas for example: family and households, culture and identity, poverty and welfare.

Activity: Do some research into news stories of the fire and write up a report on the key facts.

Background

Grenfell Tower was built in 1974 by Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council. A refurbishment costing approximately £8.6 million was completed in 2016. This work included new exterior cladding, replacement windows and a communal heating system. There were then 129 flats across 21 residential floors and 3 levels of mixed use. The tower was managed by Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, on behalf of the council. Kensington and Chelsea is one of the richest areas of the country but in this London Borough there is a big gap between rich and poor. No other local authority in the UK has such a large gap between the highest and lowest earners.

In the aftermath of the fire:

- Both the Council Leader and Chief Executive resigned.
- As at 05/07/17 only 14 out of the 158 affected families had accepted offers of temporary accommodation.
- It was discovered that the material used in the cladding that covered Grenfell Tower was the cheaper, more flammable version of the two available options.

Activity: Do some research into the demographics of Kensington and Chelsea and write up your findings, making observations and evaluations on what you find.

Activity: Following the fire, a headline in the *Independent* on Wednesday 14th June 2017 read 'Grenfell Tower cladding that may have led to the fire was chosen to improve appearance of Kensington block of flats.'

Why do you think this cladding was used, given the area the block of flats was located? Write down your thoughts.

Lynsey Hanley writing in the *Guardian* on Friday 16th June argues that tower blocks are generally the least popular form of housing, particularly for people raising families.



Danny Dorling found that black and minority ethnic people in social housing are disproportionately housed in flats and that the majority of children who live above the fourth floor of tower blocks, in England, are black or Asian. This however, is not to do with a shortage of housing, but is a reflection of the fact that not only are ethnic minorities more likely to be working-class by wage or occupation, but they experience discrimination when allocated housing.

It is clear when reading through news stories in the aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower that a class and ethnic divide was evident within this one event. More working class and minority ethnic groups were housed in Grenfell tower than middle class white individuals who resided in the surrounding area overlooked by Grenfell Tower.

Activity: Look up a list of the 71 people who died in the fire and try to ascertain (where possible) ethnicity, in as many cases as you can. Are you able to then draw some conclusions from what you find out?

So Why is Social Class an Issue in the Grenfell Fire?

From the moment we are born, the social class of our parents has a profound effect on our life chances. Even the notion of surviving birth is lower within the unskilled working class than within the professional and managerial class.

Activity:

1. Make a list of all the ways social class can affect life chances. Think about infant mortality rates, language skills, educational achievement, health, housing, socialisation, crime rates and any other factors.
2. Once you have made your list, try to explain how these factors could explain the make-up of Grenfell Tower residents and the make-up of the area surrounding the tower block.

Exam Hint: Making sociological concepts relevant to a specific event/topic is a skill you need to practice. For example, educational achievement is relevant in lots of different topics – how could it be relevant here?

Activity: Many ethnic groups were housed in Grenfell Tower. Can you explain why ethnic minority groups were housed in Grenfell Tower? Try to explain how ethnicity is linked to social class.

Exam Hint: Showing how ethnicity and social class are linked shows good sociological understanding.

Sociology Perspectives

How would the different sociological perspectives explain the Grenfell Tower disaster?

Functionalists

Functionalists see society like a human body, with each part of the body needed for the healthy functioning of the whole. They would argue different social groups are interdependent, each of the classes dependent on the others. In this way, different social classes in Kensington and Chelsea would be interdependent on each other.

Activity: What might Functionalists make of the Grenfell Tower disaster? Write a paragraph with your explanation.

New Right

From a New Right perspective, Peter Saunders (1990) makes the following suggestions about stratification:

- Inequality of reward motivates people to work hard.
- Inequality promotes economic growth, by encouraging people to set up businesses or train for a better job.
- Equality of opportunity is vital for a healthy economy, because it encourages growth.
- The driving force of a stable economy are market forces, and those people who can supply services in high demand can earn the highest rewards.
- High rewards for services in high demand means that society operates as a meritocracy.
- The middle classes have higher incomes because they are more able, they train and work harder than working-class people.

Activity: How do you think Peter Saunders would explain the Grenfell Tower disaster? Write a paragraph with your explanation.

Marxist

Marx (1848) argued that the basis of all stratification systems is the ownership and control of the means of production. After the Industrial Revolution this became based on manufacturing – the ownership and

control of manufacturing, and the production of essential supplies. Society is therefore, divided into just two groups: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie is the minority group, but own all primary production, the factories and the financial institutions, including banks. They are the employers of the proletariat, who work for them and are paid the minimum to survive. They sell goods produced by the proletariat for profit, and so get richer and bigger.

Activity: What might Marx make of the Grenfell Tower disaster? Write a paragraph with your explanation.

Postmodernists

Social class, it could be argued, is becoming less important in our society. We are more likely to define ourselves by our gender, ethnicity or age than by our social class. However, Postmodernists would argue that not just class, but gender and ethnicity are concepts that are no longer relevant today. The explanations that cover class, gender and ethnicity, have been replaced by an individualistic society, in which consumerism and choice are much more important. The choices that each individual consumer makes now give them their identity.

Activity: How would a postmodernist theorist explain what has happened since the fire at Grenfell Tower? Write a paragraph with your explanation.

Currently, there is an ongoing inquiry – *The Grenfell Tower Inquiry*, which is an independent public inquiry, set up to examine the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower on 14th June 2017: <https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk>.

Activity: Look up this inquiry, and read what has been published so far. It will enhance your understanding of what has been going on since the fire. Does this give any more information on social class?

Exam Hint: Though you are not going to have an exam question on something as specific as Grenfell Tower, this is a very good illustrative contemporary example you could use in an exam question on Stratification and Differentiation.

It is important to have notes on recent news stories so that you can use them in the exam to illustrate your points. It will show critical autonomy, which is what examiners are looking for at the higher end of the mark scheme. This Factsheet provides the important information you could use. Think about how you could use the information in this Factsheet in questions such as 'Outline and explain two ways in which social class may affect life chances' or 'Evaluate the view that social class is the most important dimension of inequality today'.

Activity: Write up an evaluative summary of your position on how much social class (and to some extent ethnicity), has played a part in the Grenfell Tower fire disaster.

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