

Principles of Sociology 101

**The Sociology of
To Kill A Mockingbird**

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Race

Under the category of race, I have chosen the court scene for its intense racial bias. More specifically, I refer to the trial of Tom Robinson (Lee 1960:204), whose ascribed master status is as a black male slave and is the defendant in the case (Hess, Stein, and Farrell 2001:44). Robinson is accused of having raped the plaintiff, whose ascribed status is as a disadvantaged white female named Mayella Ewell. Atticus Finch's master status is that of a white, middle class male who has an achieved status as a lawyer (Hess et al. 2001:114).

The setting is in Maycomb County, a tired old community in Alabama in the 1930s. During Atticus's opening statement to the all-white male jury, his relating of the circumstances is obvious, yet necessary. The situation is severely slanted in favor of the white man. "Just being white is a privileged status" (Hess et al. 2001:134). "And so a quiet, respectable, humble Negro who had the unmitigated temerity to 'feel sorry' for a white woman has had to put his word against two white people's" (Lee 1960:204). Tom Robinson was clearly not being tried by a *jury of his peers* (Hess et al. 2001:321). Indeed, according to the sociological set up of the scene for the time in which it was depicted, the man did not stand a chance.

The legal ramifications of the time being not only blatantly obvious but absurd were referred to in the phrase "in the cynical confidence"—that the jury would go along with the *evil* assumption—"that *all* Negroes lie, that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings, that *all* Negro men are not to be trusted around our women" (Lee 1960:204). In 2005 we, of course, know that one cannot, or should not, put such social stigma on an entire race. This is prejudice, which is literally to *pre-judge* (Hess et al. 2001:142). This

is an example of ideological hegemony whereas, at the macro-level, the court has control or influence over the ideas and thinking (Hess et al. 2001:109). In its entirety, the scene is an example of our social hierarchy and stratification system (Hess et al. 2001:108). The courtroom itself was set up within the structure of *differential* treatment, or a *shared identity* with whites on the ground floor and blacks (“Negroes”) in the balcony looking down (Hess et al. 2001:132). This segregation occurred *de jure*—as a matter of law (Hess et al. 2001:140). Segregation laws had not changed until the 60s.

The ***master status*** is the trait with the strongest impact on how an individual first appears to another. It is how we determine how to treat another individual by race, sex, or age. An ***ascribed*** status is one in which a person is born into and is unchangeable for the most part, such as Tom Robinson being an African-American male and born into slavery, and Mayella Ewell being a Caucasian female. An ***achieved*** status is a characteristic an individual can change, such as education, income, or occupation. Atticus’s role as an attorney is an example of an achieved status, since he accomplished this on his own volition. The Caucasian or ***white*** race is sometimes overlooked as being a *race* at all. And with that, many overlook the extent to which whites take that ascribed status as an advantage. It’s a given that whites will have the better chance at all aspects of life; jobs, schooling, housing, mortgages, bank accounts, and behavior in general.

In the United States, a person such as Tom Robinson, who is accused of committing a crime, is not only permitted to be told the nature of his crime, and allowed legal counsel, but is entitled to be tried by a ***jury of his peers***, or status equals. In this case, the only other black people in the courtroom in support of Tom Robinson were

adhering to the **differential** treatment of black vs. whites, along with an **awareness of a shared identity** by sticking closely with one another in the “upper bunk” of the room.

They were permitted to view the trial only by looking down at it.

The posturing and positioning of the members of the courtroom were directly influenced by **ideological hegemony**. For instance, it was apparent who did or did not have power on the micro-level, as in the judge versus Tom Robinson. On the meso-level, the jurors, the attorneys, the town people were in control of the physical situation, and who controlled the thinking and ideas on the macro-level, or within the court system of the state. No black people spoke. Only Tom Robinson was allowed to speak and even when he did, the white males in charge coerced him, and even by the lower class members of the community, many, if not all of whom attempted to lynch Robinson the night before.

The **hierarchy** is a set of ranked statuses from high to low. The judge would be placed in the high status rank and Tom Robinson would be in the lowest strata. Within this **hierarchy** are layers of people in a **stratification system** based on their claim to or control over wealth and power. The **segregation jure** means as a matter of law as opposed to **de facto** or a matter of fact. In 1954, the Supreme Court declared segregation as unconstitutional stemming from a school district case, *Brown v. the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas*.

Class

Atticus viewed three generations of Ewells as a disgrace to Maycomb County. To support this statement, it could be argued that none of the Ewells had done an honest

day's work. Atticus offered to take Scout with him to discard the Christmas tree when the time came just to show her where and how the Ewells lived. In his estimation, they may have been born as humans but they lived like animals (Lee 1960:30).

From the two theoretical perspectives, **functional** and **conflict**, functional as derived from Talcott Parsons's work on the American family states the family unit consists of husband, wife, and minor children. To the best of my knowledge, this could apply to the Ewells. Although a mother figure was never mentioned in the book, one would assume there had to be one or two women in the picture somewhere down the line in order to produce the three generations mentioned on page 30. Robert Merton's study of *functional* analysis concluded that "no social act has only one outcome; there are always unintended and often undesirable consequences" (Hess et al. 2001:12). Merton's study would apply more aptly to the Ewells since there was always conflict among the elder members and the younger members of this dysfunctional family with other, outside members of society. *Conflict analysis*, or the theoretical approach that assumes there is tension in the social system when the distribution of resources is scarce may be applied to the Ewell children. One child, Burris, is brought to the reader's attention as a classmate of Scout's. The boy had lice, or similar insect common to the time, in his hair, which was referred to as "cooties," and he was supposedly unbathed (Lee 1960:26).

The boy's fingernails were black with dirt and the backs of his hands were rusty. When questioned about it by the teacher and told to go home and wash up, he was disrespectful and threatened never to return. "You ain't sendin' me home, missus. I was on the verge of leavin'—I done done my time for this year." (Lee 1960:27). The fact

that he believed it was acceptable to “show up” the first day of school and held no further responsibility with the educational institution was a part of his **social construction**. This was not a part of his daily routine and his father did not set a positive pattern of rules or behaviors for him to follow (Hess et al. 2001:32).

This scene could also apply to the *disadvantaged* 13% of the **socioeconomic status** construction based on occupational, educational, and income level (Hess et al. 2001:114). The disadvantaged portion appears at the very bottom of the pyramid, or in this case, the diamond as illustrated in Figure 5.2.

Gender

Jean Louise Finch’s—better known as Scout—femininity, or the lack thereof, was a running theme throughout the book. She rather liked Uncle Jack, Atticus’s brother, but her relationship with “Aunty,” or Aunt Alexandra, Atticus’s sister, was challenged at best. While Uncle Jack addressed her rough language at the dinner table (“pass the damn ham, please” (Lee 1960:79), it was Aunty’s disdain with her boyishness that was at the root of her angst. It was the only time Scout ever heard Atticus speak sharply to anyone. Aunty commented on Scout’s wearing overalls and Atticus replied, “Sister, I do the best I can with them!” (Lee 1960:81). In the genderization *identity* of Scout, since Atticus was raising a female daughter by himself, his sister imposed herself as the *agent* with whom Scout was to learn the feminine socialization processes (Hess et al. 2001:165). Scout grew up with a brother just four years her senior and her *cognitive structures* were largely set in this manner (Hess et al. 2001:166).

Considering the social construction of feminine and masculine, **gender** is difficult to define. Gender is not as simple as being either *male* or *female*. Across the institutional board, religion, education, home, job, and even sex-based abilities, its meaning is structurally different. Still, in the **socialization process**, even in infancy before the slightest hint of sexuality becomes evident, parents envision their male children being tough and husky and their daughters being soft and cuddly (Hess et al. 2001:164-5). Being raised in a household with a close male sibling, Scout's **cognitive structures**, the way she processed information, were determined by a male. She shared a certain bond with Jem, and with their other playmate being a male, she saw herself as "one of the boys." These micro-level interactions between the three children reflected Scout's attitude about her gender (Hess et al. 2001:166).

Even in role-playing, she unwillingly played assorted ladies. In one sentence she states with glee, "the three of us were the boys who got into trouble" (Lee 1960:39). One could argue that this cognitive structure could have been the basis for her *self-image*, and self-confidence.

Atticus's skill as a single parent for the time, were arguably above average. Despite the fact Scout exhibited strong tomboy tendencies, in his gentle wisdom, Atticus knew he could do very little to counteract that. Atticus demonstrated gender equality in his everyday interactions with his motherless children. He simply accepted Scout's refusal to behave or dress in a feminine manner. He didn't view these habits as deviant as most everyone else did within their realm.

Race, Class and Gender

Calpurnia's character spanned the sociological elements of race, gender, and class. She was, by *master status*, black, which put her in a subservient category, yet not quite a slave. She was in the 19% of lower working class as depicted in the SES Distribution of U.S. Adults (Hess et al. 2001:114). Her feminine gender made way for her in the role of gender-specific jobs such as cook, housemaid, child rearer/disciplinarian, and occasional overnight caregiver. In the 30s, this was the norm.

Class and Gender

"Boo" Radley's character added an air of mystery and deviance as described in Durkheim's Societal Reaction Model (Hess et al. 2001:71). Deviance in his case was not considered so much a threat to social order as odd. That is, unless you want to consider that he stabbed [someone in the house] in the leg with a scissor as he was cutting newspaper. While he didn't lead the kind of life the youngsters, and I suppose some of the more mature members of the community believed he should, his only crime was that he didn't leave the house much. Adding to the "Boo" Radley mystique was the belief that he left various items in the knothole of a nearby tree for safekeeping that Jem and Scout religiously kept track of (Lee 2001:59).

Bibliography

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- Lee, Harper. 1960. *To Kill A Mockingbird*. New York, Boston: Warner Books.