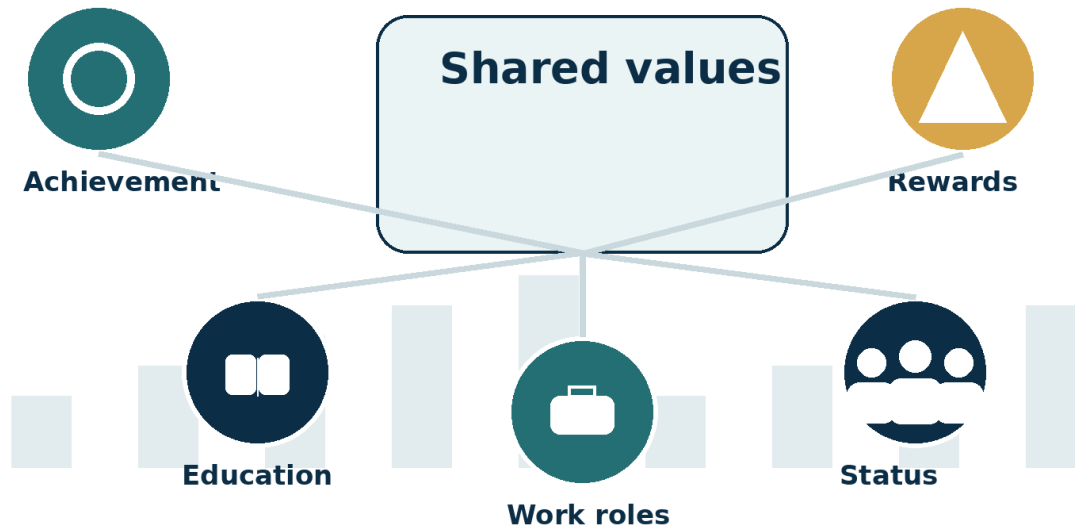


Parsons (1977): Social Inequality, Meritocracy and Value Consensus

Cambridge OCR A Level Sociology • Component 2 Section B • Understanding Social Inequalities

Full lesson resource pack with teacher guidance, activities, evidence, printable cards and exam practice.

Parsons: inequality rests on value consensus



Lesson overview

This lesson introduces Parsons' functionalist view that inequality is connected to shared social values, role allocation and meritocratic rewards. Students compare the argument with evidence on qualifications, earnings, wealth and social mobility, before producing an OCR-style evaluative paragraph.



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Teacher guide

Specification focus

Students should be able to explain Parsons' functionalist view of social inequality, especially the idea that stratification is linked to value consensus, achievement, role allocation and meritocratic rewards. They should also be able to evaluate whether contemporary Britain is sufficiently meritocratic for this argument to be convincing.

Learning objectives

- Define value consensus, meritocracy, role allocation and social stratification.
- Explain Parsons' view that inequality can help maintain social order when rewards appear legitimate.
- Apply Parsons to education, work, class inequality and social mobility.
- Evaluate Parsons using evidence on income returns to education, wealth inequality and unequal starting points.

Key concepts

Functionalism	Value consensus	Meritocracy	Role allocation
Achievement values	Social stratification	Status	Legitimacy
Social mobility	Life chances	Inequality of opportunity	

Suggested lesson sequence

Timing	Stage	Teacher notes
0-5	Starter: values auction	Students spend 10 imaginary tokens on the values they think society rewards most. Link to value consensus.
5-15	Teacher explanation	Introduce Parsons, functionalism, meritocracy and the 1977 link between equality, inequality and social values.
15-28	Activity 1: Values Auction Debrief	Students explain which values appear most rewarded and which groups benefit.
28-43	Activity 2: Role Allocation Grid	Students place occupations according to social value and reward; identify mismatches.
43-55	Evidence challenge	Students use evidence cards to decide whether Parsons is supported or challenged.
55-65	Activity 3: Evaluation Corners	Students argue for/against statements about meritocracy and inequality.
65-75	Exam paragraph	Write paragraph.



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Student knowledge sheet

Parsons' view in student-friendly language

Functionalist starting point

Parsons saw society as a system made up of connected institutions such as family, education, work, law and politics. These institutions help maintain social order by passing on shared values and encouraging people to perform expected roles.

Value consensus

Parsons argued that inequality is easier to understand if we look at the values a society shares. Modern societies often value achievement, qualifications, responsibility, work commitment and contribution. People and roles are then ranked according to these values.

Meritocracy

A meritocracy is a system where people are rewarded according to talent, effort and achievement. Parsons' view suggests that inequality can appear fair when people believe rewards are earned through performance rather than inherited privilege.

Role allocation

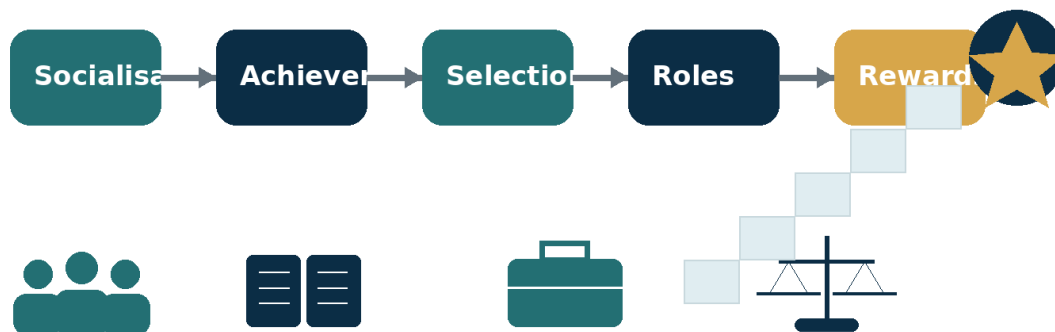
Education and work help allocate people to roles. Schools assess students through exams and qualifications, while employers use credentials, experience and performance to sort people into different positions.

Social order

If people believe unequal rewards are legitimate, inequality may produce less conflict. Parsons therefore helps explain why people may accept higher pay and status for some positions.

Role allocation in a meritocratic system

A functionalist chain of reasoning: shared values sort people into roles and justify rewards.



Activity 1: The values auction

Purpose

This quick activity introduces Parsons' idea of value consensus. Students identify which values they think are most rewarded in society and then ask whether those values are genuinely shared by everyone.

Instructions

1. Pairs receive 10 imaginary tokens.
2. They spend their tokens on the values they believe society rewards most.
3. They must justify their top two choices.
4. Pairs compare with another pair and decide whether there is a class consensus.
5. Teacher links the discussion to Parsons: inequality seems more legitimate if rewards fit shared values.

Values auction cards

Exam success Valued because qualifications are used to allocate people to courses and jobs.	Hard work Valued because effort is often treated as evidence of deservingness.
Wealth Valued because income and property often bring status and power.	Care for others Important for society, but not always highly rewarded in pay or status.
Creativity Valued in some industries, but rewards can be unequal and insecure.	Risk-taking Often praised in entrepreneurship and leadership.
Obedience May be valued in schools and workplaces, but not always rewarded highly.	Leadership Often linked to senior roles, authority and high rewards.

Debrief questions

- Which values were most popular?
- Which values are most likely to lead to money, status or power?
- Are these values shared by all social classes?
- Which important values are under-rewarded?
- How would Parsons explain the pattern?



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Activity 2: Role Allocation Grid

Purpose

Students apply Parsons’ theory to work and social class by comparing how much different occupations are valued and how much they are rewarded.

Student task

Draw two axes in your book: horizontal axis = low reward to high reward; vertical axis = low social value to high social value. Place each occupation onto the grid and justify three placements.

Doctor Long training; high responsibility; usually high reward.	Care worker High social value; often low pay and low status.
Cleaner Essential work; often low pay and limited status.	Teacher Important for socialisation and role allocation; moderate reward.
CEO High reward; debate whether functional importance justifies pay.	Delivery rider Useful service; often insecure and lower paid.
Engineer Specialist skills; often linked to training and rewards.	Influencer Can be highly rewarded, but social value is debated.
Nurse High social value and skill; pay/status debated.	MP Powerful role; debate over trust, status and contribution.

Analysis prompts

- Which occupation creates the biggest problem for Parsons?
- Which occupation best supports Parsons?
- Are high-reward roles always the most socially valuable?
- How might market situation or power explain reward better than value consensus?

Grid worksheet

Occupation	Social value score /5	Reward score /5	Parsons or critique?

Evidence mini-pack

How to use this evidence Students should decide whether each piece of evidence supports Parsons, challenges Parsons, or does both. The aim is to move beyond simply describing inequality and towards evaluation.
Evidence Card 1: Education and earnings The Social Mobility Commission reports that in the 3 years to 2024, young people aged 25-29 with a higher degree earned 41% more than comparable young people with no GCSEs. Those with an undergraduate degree earned 27% more. This partly supports Parsons because qualifications are linked to higher rewards.
Evidence Card 2: Qualifications are not the whole story The same evidence should be evaluated carefully. Higher earnings for graduates do not prove society is fully meritocratic, because access to qualifications is shaped by class background, school quality, family support and cultural capital.
Evidence Card 3: Wealth inequality ONS data for Great Britain, April 2020 to March 2022, shows that the wealthiest 1% of households held the same share of household wealth as the least wealthy 50% combined. This challenges Parsons because inherited wealth can affect opportunities.
Evidence Card 4: Unequal starting points House of Commons Library summaries show the wealthiest 10% of households had wealth of £1,200,500 or more, while the least wealthy 10% had £16,500 or less. This suggests that people do not all start the meritocratic competition equally.
Evidence Card 5: Local social mobility The Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation 2024 report maps opportunities locally, showing that chances differ by area. This challenges the idea that rewards are simply based on individual achievement.
Evidence Card 6: Essential but low paid work Roles such as care work, cleaning and delivery work are socially useful but often less highly rewarded. This creates a problem for Parsons because social importance and pay do not always match.

Evidence judgement grid

Evidence	Supports Parsons	Challenges Parsons	Judgement
Card 1			
Card 2			
Card 3			
Card 4			
Card 5			
Card 6			

Activity 3: Parsons Evaluation Corners

Purpose

This movement-based discussion activity helps students practise AO3 evaluation with very limited resources. Use four corners of the room: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree.

Statements

Statement 1

Inequality motivates people to work harder.

Statement 2

Education is broadly meritocratic.

Statement 3

High pay usually reflects social importance.

Statement 4

Social inequality creates order more than conflict.

Statement 5

Parsons explains why people accept inequality, but not whether inequality is fair.

Rules

6. Read one statement aloud.
7. Students move to the corner that matches their view.
8. Each corner must produce one reason using Parsons and one reason using evidence.
9. Students may move corner if another argument persuades them.
10. Finish by asking which statement produced the strongest disagreement.

Teacher prompts

- What would Parsons say?
- What evidence supports that view?
- What evidence challenges it?
- Which social group might disagree?
- Which perspective would offer the strongest critique?



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Exam practice: OCR-style paragraph builder

Exam skill focus	
Students need to move from description to analysis and evaluation. A strong paragraph should include clear concepts, specific application and a reasoned judgement.	
Step	Student writing scaffold
Point	Parsons argues that social inequality...
Explain	This is because society ranks people and roles according to...
Apply	For example, in education/work...
Evidence	This is partly supported by...
Evaluate	However, this is limited because...
Judgement	Therefore, Parsons is useful for explaining..., but weaker at explaining...

Model paragraph

Parsons argues that social inequality can be understood through value consensus and meritocratic role allocation. In modern societies, people often value achievement, qualifications and responsibility, so those who are seen to perform these values receive higher rewards. This can be applied to education because qualifications help allocate people to different occupational roles. Evidence from the Social Mobility Commission shows that higher qualifications are linked to higher earnings among young adults, which partly supports Parsons' view that achievement is rewarded. However, this argument is limited because wealth inequality and unequal access to education mean people do not all start from the same position. Therefore, Parsons is useful for explaining why inequality may appear legitimate, but less convincing as a full explanation of how privilege is reproduced.

Peer assessment checklist

- Does the paragraph explain value consensus clearly?
- Does it apply Parsons to education or work?
- Does it use evidence rather than generalisation?
- Does it evaluate meritocracy or unequal opportunity?
- Does it reach a final judgement?



Teacher answer guide

Likely student misconceptions

Misconception	Correction
Parsons says all inequality is good.	Parsons argues inequality can be functional when linked to shared values and role performance; this still needs evaluation.
Meritocracy means society is equal.	Meritocracy means unequal rewards are supposedly based on achievement, not that everyone has the same outcome.
High pay proves high social value.	Pay may reflect scarcity, power, market situation or ownership rather than contribution.
Education is automatically fair because everyone sits exams.	Students have unequal access to resources, support, housing, cultural capital and networks.
Functionalism ignores conflict completely.	Functionalism emphasises order and consensus, but critics argue it underestimates conflict and power.

Strong evaluation points

- Marxists argue shared values may reflect ruling-class ideology rather than genuine consensus.
- Weberians argue status, market situation and social closure can shape rewards.
- Feminists argue unpaid and caring labour may be essential but undervalued.
- Contemporary social mobility evidence challenges the assumption of equal opportunity.
- Parsons is still useful for explaining why unequal rewards may be seen as legitimate.

Testing Parsons: fair rewards or reproduced privilege

Supports



Qualifications can lead to higher pay and status



Challenges



Class, wealth and power shape who gets opportunities

Printable exit ticket

Exit ticket

Students complete this in the final three minutes. It can be collected for quick assessment of AO1, AO2 and AO3.

1. Define value consensus in one sentence.

2. Explain one way Parsons links inequality to meritocracy.

3. Give one piece of evidence that supports or challenges Parsons.

4. Final judgement: how useful is Parsons for explaining social inequality?

References used for teacher evidence

- Parsons, T. (1977) writings on equality, inequality and social stratification.
- Social Mobility Commission: income returns to education, data for the 3 years to 2024.
- Office for National Statistics: Household total wealth in Great Britain, April 2020 to March 2022.
- House of Commons Library: Wealth in Great Britain briefing.
- Cambridge OCR A Level Sociology: Component 2, Understanding Social Inequalities.



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