

REX AND TOMLINSON: SOCIAL CLOSURE & ETHNIC INEQUALITIES



The Sociology Guy
helping students understand society

A Weberian explanation of how ethnic minorities are excluded from scarce resources and poorer life chances.

WHO ARE REX AND TOMLINSON?

- John Rex and Sally Tomlinson are Weberian sociologists.
- Their key work, *Colonial Immigrants in a British City* (1979), studied Handsworth, Birmingham.
- They argue that ethnic minorities often become an "underclass" because they face barriers to housing, jobs, education and political power.
- Ethnic inequality is produced through social closure – the protection of scarce resources by more powerful groups.



WHAT IS SOCIAL CLOSURE?

Social closure occurs when a group or institution:



Controls access to a scarce resource



Protects the advantages of insiders



Limits or blocks opportunities for outsiders



Maintains inequality in life chances



Key idea: Ethnic minorities are less able to compete for resources because rules, attitudes and institutions favour the dominant (usually White) majority.

KEY FEATURES OF SOCIAL CLOSURE FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES



HOUSING

Discrimination by housing officers, landlords and estate agents. Ethnic minorities are more likely to be allocated poorer housing or denied access to better areas.



EMPLOYMENT

Employers may prefer White applicants. Ethnic minorities are steered into low-skilled, insecure or low-paid jobs with limited promotion.



EDUCATION

Lower teacher expectations, language barriers and school catchment systems can limit access to high-achieving schools.



POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Ethnic minority groups are under-represented in local councils, trade unions and decision-making bodies, so their needs are less likely to be met.



LEGAL & INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

Different treatment in policing, benefits, immigration and the justice system can reinforce disadvantage.



CULTURAL ATTITUDES & PREJUDICE

Stereotyping and racism justify exclusion and blame minorities for their own disadvantage.

HOW SOCIAL CLOSURE IS MAINTAINED



Rules & criteria that appear neutral but favour insiders



Networks & social connections give insiders an advantage



Informal norms & attitudes that exclude outsiders



Gatekeeping by powerful individuals or organisations



Control of scarce resources (jobs, housing, places)



Administrative procedures that limit access



Institutional bias within agencies (housing, schools, police, courts)



Political exclusion – minority voices less heard in decisions



Intergenerational patterns that keep inequality in place

WHY THIS MATTERS

- ✓ Exclusion from key resources limits ethnic minorities' life chances.
- ✓ Creates and maintains an ethnic 'underclass'.
- ✓ Divides working-class groups and can encourage conflict rather than solidarity.
- ✓ Inequality is reproduced through institutions, not just individual prejudice.

CONTEMPORARY UK EVIDENCE



18% of Bangladeshi households and 25% of Arab households were overcrowded in England (2021–23) vs 2% of White British households. (EHCS, DLUHC 2023)



Employment rate (16–64) in 2022: 77% for White people vs 61% for Pakistani & Bangladeshi groups. (Ethnicity Facts & Figures, ONS 2023)



Home ownership (2021–23): 70% White British vs 37% Bangladeshi and 22% Black African households. (Ethnicity Facts & Figures, ONS 2023)

EVALUATION

STRENGTHS

- ✓ Links individual experiences to wider structures and institutions.
- ✓ Highlights the importance of housing, local politics and scarce resources.
- ✓ Supported by contemporary evidence on housing, employment and life chances.

LIMITATIONS

- ✗ Risk of overgeneralisation – not all ethnic minorities have the same experiences.
- ✗ Underestimates differences within groups and individual agency.
- ✗ Research based on 1970s context – society has changed.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

- Marxist (e.g. Castles & Kosack): focus on capitalism and the reserve army of labour.
- Individualist: emphasises education, culture and individual choices.
- Feminist: stresses intersection of gender, ethnicity and class.

EXAM-READY SUMMARY

Rex and Tomlinson argue that ethnic minorities face inequality because dominant groups use social closure to protect access to scarce resources such as housing, jobs and education. This creates an ethnic underclass with poorer life chances. Contemporary data on overcrowding, employment and home ownership support their argument. However, their analysis can overgeneralise and must be updated to recognise diversity within ethnic groups and greater equality in some areas today.



KEY TERMS: Life chances • Social closure • Housing class • Underclass • Institutional racism • Scarce resources • Gatekeeping