obese Americans could fit the definition of minority group without much difficulty. Although we should not be whimsical or capricious about matters of definition, it is important to note that the analyses developed in this book can be applied more generally than you might realize at first and may lead to some fresh insights about a wide variety of groups and people.

The Pattern of Inequality

As I mentioned earlier, the most important defining characteristic of minority group status is inequality. As documented in later chapters, minority group membership can affect access to jobs, education, wealth, health care, and housing. It is associated with a lower (often much lower) proportional share of valued goods and services and more limited (often much more limited) opportunities for upward mobility.

Stratification, or the unequal distribution of valued goods and services, is a basic feature of society. Every human society, except perhaps the simplest hunter-gatherer societies, is stratified to some degree; that is, the resources of the society are distributed so that some get more and others less of whatever is valued. Societies are divided into horizontal layers (or strata), often called social classes, which differ from one another by the amount of resources they command. Many criteria (such as education, age, gender, and talent) may affect a person’s social class position and his or her access to goods and services. Minority group membership is one of these criteria, and it has had a powerful impact on the distribution of resources in the United States and many other societies.

This section begins with a brief consideration of theories about the nature and important dimensions of stratification. It then focuses on how minority group status relates to stratification. During the discussion, I identify several concepts and themes used throughout this book.

Theoretical Perspectives

Sociology and the other social sciences have been concerned with stratification and human inequality since the formation of the discipline in the 19th century. An early and important contributor to our understanding of the nature and significance of social inequality was Karl Marx, a noted social philosopher. Half a century later, a sociologist named Max Weber, a central figure in the development of the discipline, critiqued and elaborated on Marx’s view of social inequality. Here, we will also consider the views of Gerhard Lenski, a contemporary sociologist whose ideas about the influence of economic and technological development on social stratification have considerable relevance when comparing societies and understanding the evolution of intergroup relations.

Karl Marx. Although best known as the father of modern Communism, Karl Marx was also the primary architect of a political, economic, and social philosophy that has played a major role in world affairs for over 150 years. Marxism is a complex theory of history and social change in which inequality is a central concept and concern.