

## What is Equality of Opportunity

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### 1. Introduction

Equality of opportunity is a popular idea, not just advocated by sociologists, economists and other social scientists but widely supported by the general public at large. It is recognised that considerable inequalities exist, but the ideal is that everyone should have the same chances to advance to a better situation. The opportunity is generally understood as social status or class improvement, usually in terms of occupation or income, and often all of them together. There are other inequalities such as power, inherited wealth and health, but there is no general expectation that these can be equal for all. The ideal is that occupational and status opportunities should be equal for everyone.

For instance, Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England, said

capitalism is fundamentally about delivering a basic social contract comprised of relative equality of outcomes; equality of opportunity; and fairness across generations [1].

This sums up the general conception of equality of opportunity as a desirable principal, as expressed by a member of the powerful elite. It is widely supported by the public at large. Politicians love it because it sounds and looks good, yet nothing ever happens to actually apply the principal. This lack of action is to be expected as we shall see.

The principal is always seen as an opportunity for

upward mobility, to be gained by the workers' efforts or by their natural ability. Yet if some can move up there must be opportunities for others to move down, though this is rarely considered. In many years of research, I have only once come across a man who was truly happy to have moved down socially and occupationally. Having started at a "good" school he was found a senior occupation position, but unhappy in the job he moved to a less demanding job. After several such downward moves, he ended up happily as a park-keeper. Such happy downward mobility is rarely acknowledged, even if it happens. The assumption is always that desirable mobility is upward, and the financial and status rewards depend on upward mobility. Opportunity is always opportunity to gain a better job, or a better position in society.

### 2. Discussion

To understand why the principle never gets anywhere it is necessary to recognise that it is a logical contradiction. Opportunity requires an unequal structure; the successful individual needs to advance to a better position in the social structure. Even if all in the society start as equals, those who take the opportunity to move up (or down) inevitably create an

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unequal structure. Once the inequalities exist the opportunities cannot be equal. This is not to say that two people cannot have equal opportunities in some respect, but for everyone it is impossible. If the social structure is supposed to remain equal, then opportunity would have no meaning. The principle would simply be equality for everyone in the society, with no mobility up or down.

It is well known that the social structures of societies are very far from equal. Numerous studies over many years and in a variety of ways have clearly established the extreme range of social inequality. Probably the first studies of 'class' inequality in the UK were in the early Nineteenth century; previously inequalities were associated with the concept of rank. It seems that this development was similar in other industrially developed countries. Then the system of hierarchical classes was introduced in the 1911 UK Census by Stevenson. More recently the work of Goldthorpe and colleagues on social class has been extensive [2 - 4] while there have been numerous other important studies [5 -7]. At present, however, there seems to be less enthusiasm for the study of class.

These examples are largely based on the United Kingdom. However, the inequalities exist and are important throughout the world. Economic development may have changed the nature of the occupational structures and the entailed inequalities, but the inequalities have long been influential. Probably the earliest form of 'class' inequality was in ancient Rome, where the 'proletariat' class was defined for tax purposes. Earlier civilisations certainly had established inequalities, with powerful ruling elites at one extreme and slaves at the other, but any attempt to apply analysis in class terms seems to be a more recent practice. For examples of occupational inequality in countries of the contemporary world, including Germany, Italy, Russia, Britain, Scotland, South and South East Asia, Post-Socialist countries and the United States see the chapters in Lambert et al (Eds) [8].

Apart from the work of some archaeologists,

historians and anthropologists, relatively little is known about the social lives and occupational structures of the earliest humans. Communities were small and consequently the scope for social divisions was limited. It is unlikely that the idea of equality of opportunity existed then or for many years after, as human societies developed.

In the contemporary world the inequalities are usually expressed in the form of different levels of occupations, in terms of social stratification, class, status, wealth or income [9 – 11]. However, the occupational inequalities continue, in a modified form, after retirement [12, 13].

Processes in society continue to reproduce the structures of occupational inequality. For instance, the educational systems differentiate the population in preparation for filling occupational roles at different levels, with more privileged families exploiting the opportunities to secure the most favourable outcomes for their children [14]. Then universities, and particularly the elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge and Harvard, prepare young men and women for senior occupational positions [15, 16]. It does not follow that the most successful are entirely happy with their attainments [17] but, with rare exceptions, they do not choose to give up their advantages. All this is very far from the popular ideas of equality of opportunity.

However, there is another sense in which opportunities may be thought of as equal. In the extremely unequal societies of the contemporary world, it may be argued that everyone has an opportunity to advance to a better position - in particular to a better occupation or higher status. Of course, this does not hold for the many retired people and others without occupations. They are generally ignored in any discussion of opportunities. However, most research and discussion is focussed on the world of work, and on the people, who perform the work.

It is true that workers can progress from occupations at any level. The extent of the advance may be highly variable. A low-paid worker may welcome, and need,

a modest increase in pay of ten dollars (or ten pounds) a week, while a senior executive may be upgraded with a reward of several thousand, and company directors may award themselves even more. Furthermore, the opportunities for workers to advance depends very much on the type of work for which they are employed. There are many jobs in which there are no normal expectations of promotion, while in some jobs there is a fairly high rate of advancement. Not surprisingly, in the former type of work the employees accept their lack of advancement, while in the latter the (unpromoted) workers are critical of their chances. Even if we ignore the retired and unemployed, the situation is far from equality and opportunities are widely variable.

Whereas the law may, in principle, apply equally to all citizens of a country, the equality may often be quite irrelevant. As France [18] remarked:

The Law, in its majestic impartiality forbids the rich, as well as the poor, to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.

On the other hand:

Society allows the poor, as well as the rich, to live in expensive houses, to own racehorses, and to relax on their own luxury yachts [19].

These differences depend on the fundamental inequalities in the societies, and reflect the diverse opportunities.

The irrelevance of the need to beg or the opportunity to own racehorses, for different sections of the population, depends on the extent of the inequalities between them. The size of the inequalities in a society has a significant bearing on the degrees of opportunity. In the period immediately after the second World War, that is the 1940s and 1950s, the wealth inequalities were at an unusually low level (though still quite substantial) in many industrialised countries. That was, therefore, a period of relatively high opportunity for much of the population. Since then, the financial inequalities have grown enormously, and with them the inequalities in life-

styles. The countries have become richer but this has simply increased the extent of inequalities in favour of the wealthier citizens.

The basic problem with the concept of equality of opportunity is that equality is never, or hardly ever, attainable. Equality is simply the zero point in the infinite range of inequality [19]. In different societies people occupy different positions on the scale of inequality with respect to any variable, including opportunity, whether the opportunity is regarded as the usual advancement in work or any other opportunity. To make sense of the concept we need to focus on the inequality. The inequalities can, and do, vary over a wide range. So, the aim should not be equality but reducing the level of inequality. Unfortunately, in the contemporary world the extent of inequality has been rising for 40 years, and is likely to continue to do so. As Wilkinson and Pickett [20] demonstrate, on the basis of many years research in a range of countries, everyone does better in societies where the inequalities are less. Yet the inequalities continue to grow. Not only does this make the notion of equality of opportunity more evidently impossible, but takes us further into a world of unnecessarily huge inequalities.

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