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Gershuny, Jonathan

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Social structure and life chances

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ISER Working Paper 2001-20

Social Structure and Life Chances

Jonathan Gershuny

September 17 2001

ABSTRACT

This paper deploys a series of arguments drawn from Rawls' **A Theory of Justice** to demonstrate that the study of relative mobility rates implements a particular view of social justice, "liberal equality". Rawls himself proposes a different view, of "democratic equality" in which the strongly meritocratic requirements of liberal equality are tempered by concerns with the actual conditions of life of the members of the society. It sets out, in general terms, the design of a programme of research that looks beyond issues of mobility between social positions, to consider the impact of positions on material conditions, and the reciprocal impact of conditions on subsequent positions, discussing also the theoretical basis of various of the measures that will be used in the study.

KEYWORDS – social justice, social mobility, social dynamics.

This work forms part of the scientific programme of the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change, part of the Institute for Social and Economic Research, Essex University.

NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This Working Paper is a *working* paper, an intermediate output, indeed the initial product of my project to write a book about British life chances and social structure, using the BHPS (perhaps augmented by some work on the ECHP and other materials) during AY 2001/2.

It sets out:

- An argument, derived from Rawls' **A Theory of Justice** to the effect that a study of social structure should contain analysis both of mobility between positions in a society and of the distribution of advantages and disadvantages to people in those positions. Social mobility on its own provides an incomplete basis on which to assess the justice or otherwise of present social arrangements; and the relative mobility chances of people starting out from different points in the social structure are by no means the most important consideration.
- A brief discussion of how social mobility between positions relates to the social and economic conditions attached to the positions.
- And discussions in outline also of the various indicators of positions (including the Essex Score) and conditions (including the construction of economic satisfaction and non-monetary poverty indices) that I propose to use in the study.

Various questions remain open at the moment:

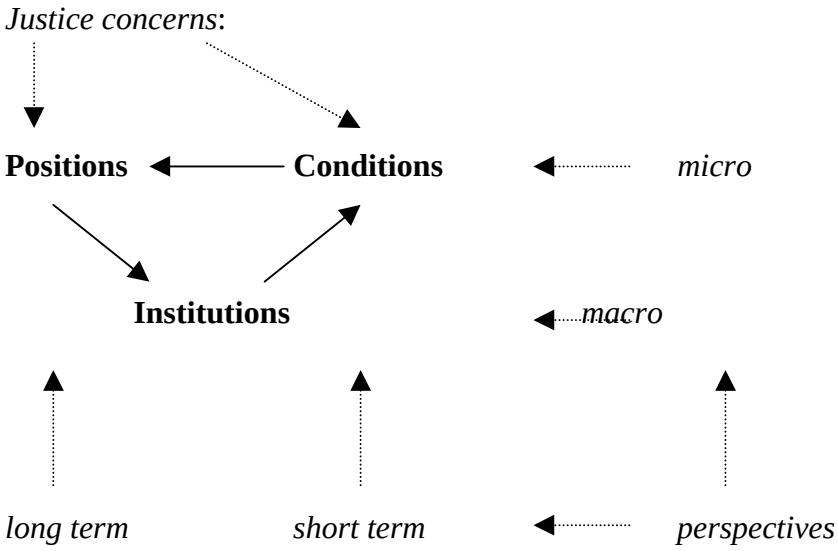
- To what extent will the analysis be limited to the experience of the BHPS sample during the 1990s? How far will I be able to use the retrospective evidence in the BHPS to throw some light on the different experiences of the various age-cohorts?
- "Life chances" relate in some way to risk; but so far the argument concerns mostly the advantages attached to particular positions. Is "risk" in fact covered adequately by considering the different degrees of uncertainty attached to the various positions? (For example, is risk just less *risky* for the rich; are they less frequently subjected to risks, are the risks that they face less serious than those imperiling the poor?)
- The work is UK focused. Can I get away without a cross-national comparative section? Or am I condemned to work for a certain spell with the ECHP?

I produce this as a Working Paper now, in its very preliminary form, in the hope that colleagues (both inside the ISER and outside it) will be tempted to reply, both with arguments with what I've written and with suggestions for how to improve it

Social Structure and Life Chances

Jonathan Gershuny

September 12 2001



1 Prologue

Social justice is not itself a sociological topic. The methodology used by political philosophers bears no relation to any observable sociological reality. The fact that some philosophical professionals use some particular argument to justify some moral principle, does not mean that these arguments are thought to hold in the minds of the members of any particular society under study. They may or they may not do so, but this is not the reason they interest us as sociologists; rather they are of importance to us as guides for the way we conduct our investigations. They inform us as social analysts, in just the same way that the arguments of mathematicians about the legitimacy of certain inferences from our sample surveys influence us, irrespective of the views of those we study. We use these considerations to set *our* professional standards. The philosophical study of justice provides a sort of "Archimedean point" from which the basic structure of society can be appraised (Rawls p.260). The professionals may differ in the advice they give us; it is nevertheless our job to construct a consistent view based on their arguments and considering their advice on how to interpret them, and then to implement this in our work.

What follows is a draft prospectus to a study of social structure using longitudinal materials (mainly the BHPS). It poses, as a preliminary question: what are the standards or measures against which we should evaluate social structure? It is hardly a new idea to take the philosophical study of the nature of social justice as such a starting point. The purpose here however is not merely to use the study of justice as a means of establishing a general orientation to such issues as mobility and equality, but in addition to arrive at one specific conclusion about the conduct of the enquiry: a requirement to *give equivalent weights to issues of access to social positions and to the distribution of the material conditions* that are associated with those positions.

2 Social Justice: A Contractarian View

The subject of justice is the consideration of how (if at all) particular systems of *differentiation of advantage and disadvantage* in societies can be justified or vindicated.

The classical approach to this vindication, is to imagine a state of society (ie system of differentiation) that might be written into a "social contract" entered into voluntarily by rulers and ruled. The modern version of "contractarianism", as exemplified in John Rawls' **A Theory of Justice**, imagines a discussion among a group of constitutional experts, placed behind a "veil of ignorance" such that they are able to choose among the alternative social arrangements with no knowledge or general expectations of what positions they themselves might occupy in any of them (the "original position"). The concept of the original position provides us with a methodology for thinking about the propriety of alternative social arrangements.

Rawls uses this methodology to derive his two *principles of justice*, which he states (in a preliminary form) as follows:

1 Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.
2 Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage; and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all

The first principle is to take priority if any conflict emerges.

This is a preliminary statement, only insofar as the two clauses of the second principle are rather vague and in need of refinement. There are two alternative interpretations of each of these clauses, and hence four competing systems for arranging social and economic inequalities: "natural liberty", "liberal equality", "natural aristocracy" (which receives a only a passing, but as we shall see rather important, mention from Rawls) and finally "democratic equality".

	"everyone's advantage" →	
"open to all" ↓	**Efficiency principle**	**Difference principle**
	NATURAL LIBERTY	**NATURAL ARISTOCRACY**
Equality as **careers open to talents**	• Free market determines rewards to positions.	• Mainly inherited positions with traditional rewards. • Advance the obviously able where this benefits the disadvantaged.
	LIBERAL EQUALITY	**DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY**
Equality as **equality of fair opportunity**	• Free market determines rewards to positions. • Systematically improve the starting positions of disadvantaged children.	• Rewards to the advantaged are justified by benefits to the disadvantaged. • Systematically improve the starting positions of disadvantaged children.

(adapted from Rawls 1971 p65)

The principle of "natural liberty" assumes the operation of something like a free market economy. Salaries and other advantages are determined on a basis of open competition, and are as a result "efficiently" distributed in the Pareto-optimal sense that it is impossible make one person (or more) better-off without making at least one person worse-off. There are legally protected open rights of access to all positions of advantage. But there is no attempt to establish an equal base from which to compete for these positions of advantage. The normal operation of social systems gives those coming from privileged backgrounds easier access (eg via the educational system) to desirable positions. And privileged backgrounds derive in turn from previous distributions of advantage. A system whose allocative

outcomes are determined in so arbitrary and history-bound a manner can hardly be considered just.

The system of "liberal equality" recognises that justice is not achieved merely by *opening* the most attractive careers to those with an appropriate natural endowment of talents. In addition, all should have a fair and equal chance to attain them. "Assuming…a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system" (Rawls p.73). Clearly, if nothing is done to make the initial conditions of access equal irrespective of origin, then the opening of careers to the talents is no more than the opening of the tea room of the Savoy to those of the Blackfriars Bridge homeless who can pay for their own cakes. Liberal equality requires that these unfair advantages of access be swept away, by ensuring "*fair* equality of opportunity". It is not entirely clear how this might be achieved (indeed, as we shall consider in a moment, this may not be completely achievable); in Rawls' own view this requires, at the least, that excessive capital accumulation should be prevented, and in particular that school systems should be designed to compensate for class advantages.

But, Rawls asks, why *should* we consider that those given the most talents in the natural lottery of genetic endowments, ought necessarily to attain the most privileged positions? The meritocratic outcome which distributes advantage on the basis of the genetic lottery, is exactly as "arbitrary from a moral perspective" as is allowing the access to future advantages and wealth to be influenced by historic wealth and social position as in the case of "natural liberty". The entry of "meritocracy" to the English language was, after all, as a mocking description of a *dystopic* society (Young 1958). (We might also reflect that perhaps the principle objection to the unconstrained operation of a meritocracy is the potentially damage to the self respect of the losers – and self respect is precisely one of those "primary goods" whose distribution most concerns the experts in the original position.)

Rawls is even more dismissive of the concept of the system of "natural aristocracy". Positions, in this scheme, are mainly inherited, there is no requirement for a market to determine salaries and other benefits, and there is no attempt to move beyond the limited formal requirement of "careers open to talents" – except (*noblesse oblige*) insofar as doing so will indirectly benefit the worse-off members of the society in the future. Interventions in the

operations of "natural liberty" are thus limited to such activities as the provision of scholarships to recruit the obviously talented poor to the future ranks of the rich – and provisions to prevent the rich acting so as to make the poor poorer (eg by brigandage). This provides yet more arbitrary and historically contingent outcomes than does "natural liberty"; Rawls in fact only mentions this scheme in order to point out that the grounds for his rejection of are precisely symmetrical to those for his rejection of liberal equality:

> "Once we are troubled by the influences of either social contingencies or natural chance on the determination of distributive shares, we are bound on reflection to be bothered by the other. From a moral standpoint the two seem equally arbitrary." Rawls 1971 p75.

There needs to be some "morally relevant difference" between individuals to justify their unequal treatment (Marshall, Swift and Roberts 1997 p.9; see also their discussion of Miller 1989 on pp160-1). It must be admitted that there may on first reading seem to be something counter-intuitive in Rawls' position here; we *expect* special ability to be specially rewarded. Nevertheless, it is clear that, behind the veil of ignorance, there are simply no *a priori* grounds for considering that the possession of special degrees of natural ability justifies the award of advantageous positions. Why should this particular form of merit take priority over special personal needs (eq a large and hungry family), or an exalted degree of religious virtue? Natural ability (or hard work) may appear to some academics as being specifically meritorious (one might suspect that it is the especially able and hard working academics who are particularly prone to this opinion). But once behind the veil of ignorance, these have no more claim to moral relevance in the determination of social outcomes than has family background, or, for example, special beauty of person or spirit. These constitute differences, certainly, but not differences which are morally relevant to the allocation of social or economic advantages; "..one might have doubts about the justice of rewarding people for the possession of some genes rather than others" (Marshall et al 1997 p 171). So: *are* there moral grounds to justify social positional differentiation?

The next stage in Rawls' argument is to provide a criterion that our impartial constitutional experts *will* indeed consider relevant to the justification of social and economic advantages. His "difference principle" establishes that:

> "….the higher expectations of those better situated are just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of the community."
>
> Rawls 1971 p75

This is a mechanism closely analogous to the procedure adopted by greedy men who have to decide how to divide a cake: he who cuts the cake, gets the last slice. For a whole society there is one further complication: the size-distribution of the individual slices may increase or decrease the overall size of the social product – hence the difference principle. It is an example of pure procedural justice: if the procedure is followed, then, as long as the correct assumptions have been made about motivation (in these cases principally greed), the outcome is a just one. Our experts behind the veil are in the same position as the man who cuts the cake: they must divide up the social cake among the different social categories without knowing which of those social categories they themselves will belong to.

One potentia1 objection to the difference principle concerns its relationship to the principle of efficiency. Rawls himself provides some rather specialised argument (concerning "close-knittedness" and "chain-connectedness") to demonstrate that we may expect the difference principle to be also Pareto-efficient. But it may be more straightforward to say simply that an additional requirement for efficiency in this sense is perfectly compatible with the central idea if the difference principle.

The difference principle effectively removes the previous affront to our intuitions by, conditionally, allowing rewards to ability and hard work. These still have no *a priori* moral call on reward. But it may be that to mobilise them effectively for the good of the society – for example, to increase the social product and hence the size of the surplus available for the support of the worst-off – the able and hard working must be differentially rewarded. Otherwise, those with special talents might be tempted to hide them, and those capable of hard work might nevertheless not be led to work hard.

This has been suggested (Marshall et al p 12 and again p179) that this argument is self-contradictory. Given the altruistic motivations implicit in the difference principle, why should individuals need some special inducements to use their capabilities to the benefit of the society as a whole? I cannot see this as a serious problem. Remember, the altruism

implicit in the difference principle, is the abstract moral sentiment that operates behind the veil of ignorance, that we sociologists embody in our choice of research design, and is quite distinct from any notions we might discover in the operations of the societies we investigate. It seems perfectly possible to have, as sociologists, some general moral views about the propriety of social arrangements, of the sort that will impress our experts "in the original position", and command general respect in the population as a whole, yet still expect people to behave to some degree selfishly in ways that conflict with those general moral sentiments in private life.

Of course, some people's private morality concords better with the collective moral consensus. For such people (amongst whom we find many teachers, nurses, firemen) who are willing to act in some degree altruistically in private life, the Rawlsian condition for the link between this sort of merit and reward is not met – and hence low pay for a tranche of public servants is not generally considered an affront to public morality.

The general point is that our intuition that special abilities are to be specially rewarded was correct. But they attract rewards, not for their own sake, but only through the difference principle – by virtue of their role in a more general scheme which improves the well-being of others worse-off.

Rawls' preferred system, among the four competing alternatives, is that which combines the "fair equality of opportunity" version of the "open to all" clause with the "difference principle" interpretation of "everyone's advantage" – the system he refers to as "democratic equality". Within this system, he distinguishes two cases of the application of the difference principle:

> "The first case is that in which the expectations of the least advantaged are indeed maximized.... No changes in the expectations of those better off can improve the situation of those worst off. The best arrangement pertains, in what I shall call a perfectly just scheme.
>
> The second case is that in which the expectations of all those better off at least contribute to the welfare of the most unfortunate. That is, if their expectations were

> decreased, the prospects of the least advantaged would likewise fall. … Such a scheme is, I shall say, just throughout, but not the best just arrangement."
>
> Rawls 1971 pp78-9

The first case is a theoretical ideal, almost certainly an unachievable one, and the second represents the effective realm within which the social analyst must normally operate. Within this realm, policy choices are rarely clear-cut, but there is at least some guidance from the difference principle for choice among pairs of alternative states of society on the basis of the relative positions of the worst off groups.

Similarly, the second component of democratic equality is less than absolute in its application:

> "…the principle of fair opportunity can only be imperfectly carried out, at least as long as the institution of the family exists. The extent to which natural capacities develop and reach fruition is affected by all kinds of social conditions and class attitudes. Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in an ordinary sense is itself dependent on happy family and social circumstances."
>
> Rawls 1971 P74

There may, for example, be interventions to try to compensate children of less fortunate families for lack of those advantages of material well-being and beneficial socialisation that are the lot of the more fortunately placed. But most families seek the good of their children. And better-off families have the means to develop new sorts of differentiating advantages for their children whenever societal interventions to promote "fair equality of access" mean that the old ones lose their effectiveness. Since we do not consider removing children altogether from their parents, we can only ever consider fair opportunity as a matter of degree, not as an achievable objective.

We should remember that parents' motives in this context do not necessarily reflect simple material greed on behalf of their offspring. There is also the entirely legitimate pursuit of cross-generational continuity, the desire to pass-on knowledge, experience, life styles, culture in the widest sense, which is facilitated if children occupy similar social positions to their parents. We could even toy with the thought that some limited degree of right to such

passing-on down the generations might be among the primary goods to be allocated behind the veil of ignorance. I want my daughter and son to ski down the same slopes that I have done; I consider that among the perquisites of my position in the social structure, is a right to take steps to enable this (and also perhaps allow them to climb a little higher) as long as these are consistent with whatever measures are currently in place to promote fair equality of opportunity.

To object that these actions are in some way unfair to other people's children, is to make an error similar to the "lump of labour fallacy" in which we might think of "classes as pigeon-holes" (and that conclude that the recruitment of researchers to the ISER is limited by the number of letter spaces in the common room). The number of each sort of social position is not given, but socially produced, through exactly equivalent processes to those I use to improve my children's life-chances.

Mobility theorists describe higher relative probabilities of the children of the middle classes being themselves middle class, as "hoarding". (I don't know who is ultimately responsible for this usage.) Middle-class parents can only be said to *improperly* "hoard" their positions if it can be demonstrated that they use improper means, or that the worst-off (or indeed anyone) is worse-off as a result of what they do. I may bribe a Tutor for Admissions, or use the services of a "cramming" establishment to mislead the public examination system about my daughter's capabilities so as to provide her with a job that she is unable to excel in; in the first case I am corrupt and should be imprisoned, in the second case the examination system is failing and should be improved; in both cases the outcome is an improper one. But there are other actions that I can take that certainly fall short of Rawls' "perfect justice", but which are nevertheless, in his terms, thoroughly just. She may have less ability – in some specific dimension of capacity assessed by this or that patented test – than some less privileged child. But what is the moral relevance of the test to her eventual job?. Since the advantages I purchased for her by living in a suburb well-served by a good girls school, consist of excellent study skills, a clear analytic mind and a fine English style, then, I hypothesize, her eventual performance as a social worker/lawyer/journalist, will as a result be at least as good as that of the hypothetically more able person without these advantages. The hypothesis of the functional equivalence of native ability and training may be at some level testable, and may in fact be incorrect in this case. But to raise this possibility as an objection would be to miss the point, which is that native ability *in itself* has no relevance. On the basis of the

"class as pigeon holes" fallacy, I contend that my daughter's more able working class competitor will not in fact be worse-off as a result of my daughter's good fortune. And even if this person *were* worse-off her loss must be set against my gain as a parent who has achieved what parents want to achieve. Once we recognise that fair equality of opportunity is merely *a* priority, and not *the overriding* priority, the problem of hoarding is reduced to the much less wide-spread or weighty issue of *improper* hoarding.

So we have two desiderata for democratic equality. As regards the difference principle, the improvement of the circumstances of the worst off in the society (and the avoidance of improvements in the circumstances of the better off that worsen the conditions of the worst-off). As regards the principle of fair opportunity: the improvement of the starting conditions for fair competition for those from less advantaged backgrounds. And these two desiderata may potentially compete with each other. We can certainly envisage circumstances in which we would have to accept a solution which compromised one of them in order to advance the other.

We can sum up this section by setting out a comparison between the requirements of the systems of liberal equality and democratic equality:

Both of them address issues of liberty, and in the same way: by providing formal rights of access to positions of advantage, and by giving these rights lexical priority over other social provisions. (This, incidentally, has the effect of preventing certain forms of "affirmative action").

Both address issues of equality. The liberal approach does so through the principle of fair equality of access alone. The democratic approach does so by combining the principle of fair equality of access with the difference principle. Indeed (this is the previous point about the Pareto-optimality of the difference principle) we might in effect think of this second principle as being superimposed on the principle of fair equality, so that the choice among alternative sets of social arrangements under the difference principle is a subset of the choices available under conditions of fair equality.

Democratic equality, unlike liberal equality, also addresses issues of fraternity. There are other aspects of this idea of fraternity —such as civic friendship and social solidarity (Rawls

pp 105-6)—that do not have any very obvious practical reflection in the system of democratic equality, but the difference principle itself is a specific implementation of at least one aspect of the idea.

But for the wider purposes of my argument the crucial difference between the two systems is in their implications for the conduct of empirical research into social structure. The system of liberal equality has a single and simple index which might be straightforwardly optimised. We measure relative mobility chances of individuals starting from various positions of advantage or disadvantage. If (having controlled for any differences in "natural abilities") we find that those from advantaged origins have a better chance of reaching advantaged destinations, then the meritocratic optimum has not been achieved.

By contrast, the democratic equality approach has two somewhat distinct (though as we shall see also ultimately quite closely related) sorts of index against which to test social structure. The first is identical to the liberal approach, the comparisons of the relative mobility chances of those from different origins. The second is, admittedly, problematical. The issue is that where fair equality of opportunity has a defined (if frankly quite implausible) optimum, the difference principle requires a counterfactual. To set against the society that *is*, the difference principle requires the counterposition of *another society that doesn't exist*, and perhaps will never exist, that hypothetical society in which the conditions of the worst off are better than they are in present reality. But despite this indeterminacy, three distinct research strategies are applicable.

The first is *historical comparison*. Consider the society at two successive points in time. Have the poor got poorer? This could be the case without contravening the difference principle, as long as the rich have *also* got poorer. But if the poor have become (in an absolute sense) poorer and the rich have got richer (and the general economic circumstances—international markets, the weather, reserves of natural resources—have not changed in some decisive way) we might conclude that the requirements of the difference principle are not met. The second is *cross-national comparison*. It operates in much the same way: compare societies, then, controlling as far as possible for the differences in their general economic circumstances, use each as a counterfactual against which to test the others. The third is, ultimately, the method of *microsimulation*. We develop models of the operation of the society, and use them to *construct* counterfactuals. It may be that we do not get very

far in constructing these simulations. It may be that we are able only to identify some of the mechanisms through which advantages and disadvantages are distributed in the society, and that these findings are for the moment insufficient to allow us to provide complete models. But even in this case, the partial evidence we gather about how the conditions of the society are distributed among those who occupy the various social positions, can contribute to at least an *informal* evaluation of the social structure in the terms required by considerations of social justice.

…….

These paragraphs can do no more than scratch at the troubled surface of a deep debate. In particular the discussion fails to cover in any way the competing claims of desert and entitlement. At what point, for example, does a particular circumstance (eg access to comprehensive health care) cease to be numbered among the various advantages that are allocated according to the second of Rawls' principles and enter instead the list of circumstances of "liberty" which is covered by the first principle? There is certainly much else that might have been argued that has been left out. My intention however has been a rather specific one. The distinction between *inequality of position* and *inequality of* ***access*** *to positions* is obvious, and an essential element of the foregoing discussion; I hope to have convinced readers of the desirability, indeed the necessity, of considering these two aspects of social justice in parallel.

The system of liberal equality might be seen as providing a sanction for an exclusive concentration on issues of inequality of access. Or, to put it the other way round, we might interpret a sociological study which concentrates exclusively on issues of equality of access as effectively or tacitly espousing the liberal equality view. The system of democratic equality by contrast, with its inherently non-optimisable pair of desiderata, might be interpreted as requiring, as an irreducible minimum, that any empirical study be at least *concerned* with both sorts of inequality. Else, for example, we might approach equality of mobility chances at the inexcusable cost of immersing the losers in the competition for advantageous positions in unjustifiably miserable circumstances. The criterion for judging social arrangements under the system of liberal equality is simple, elegant and straightforward: we just look for evidence of equality in chances of mobility to positions of advantage. The criteria under democratic equality are much less neat and tidy. In addition to mobility chances, we must also be concerned with the conditions of life of people in different

positions. We may not know exactly how to implement the difference principle (indeed this indeterminacy might be used by some as a justification for adopting the more straightforwardly operationalisable liberal system). But, under democratic equality, we are at least certain that there are in principle some sorts of degradation of conditions of life that could not be justified by any degree of improvement in the operation of meritocratic processes. An analyst concerned with social justice who espouses this system, in short, could not be satisfied with a line of sociological research which concerns itself exclusively with issues of mobility.

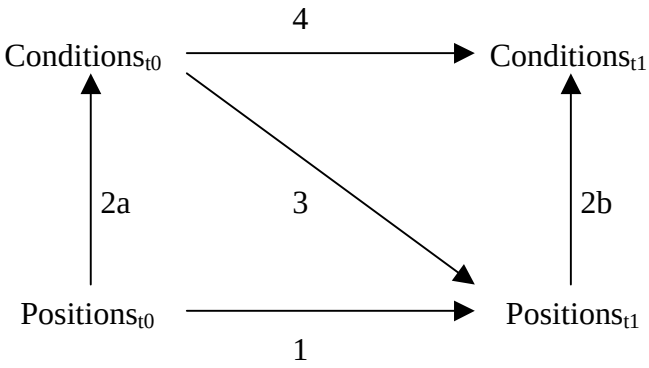
3 Positions, Conditions and Institutions.

The foregoing discussion relies on the assertion that we can distinguish between two sorts of micro-social phenomena:

- Positions (eg social class, status) with long-lasting characteristics, slow to dissipate, which interact with macro-sociological institutions (such as workplaces, service providers, voluntary associations) to provide access to…
- conditions of life – whether conceptualised as consumption levels, well-being or states of satisfaction.

Positions are seen, in the first instance, as determining conditions. And hence (since positions are long-lasting) they also predict future conditions, or "life-chances".

Over the last few decades, large-scale survey research on social structure in the UK has focused on individuals' sequences of positions. However, potentially there is more to do. Consider the following programme of activity:



Arrow 1 represents traditional British mobility studies. The positions in question in these studies are *class* positions. There has been some serious methodological work, attempting to validate class concepts in terms of their internal consistency (eg Evans 1992) and much serious thought has been devoted to establishing the relation of class theory to the analysis of changing social structure (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). But virtually all the substantive empirical research concentrates on modeling chances of mobility among class positions between t_0 and t_1.

However, it must be clear from the foregoing discussion that there can be no simple one-way relation between positions and conditions. In that discussion we classified people according to their conditions—"better off", "worse off"— and then considered which sorts of benefits should go to these groups. So there is a recursive relationship; the classification of positions, how we choose to group or otherwise identify people's positions, partly depends on how the conditions are distributed (since, as a result of the conclusions arrive at behind the veil of ignorance, individuals might be moved between these groups). Alternative systems of distribution, lead to *different* groupings of people. It is also quite likely, in any given state of society, that not all categories of social advantage and disadvantage are distributed on the same basis. So even within one system of distribution at a single historical juncture there may be multiple different positional characteristics relevant to different sorts of conditions.

Arrow 2a represents the process of considering the conceptualisation of positions, (i) on the basis of what sorts of conditions we are concerned with and hence (ii) considering precisely which sorts of characteristics are causally implicated in producing them.

Positional. characteristics take their effect only through social institutions. We have carpentry skills, but a woodworking firm provides us with a job as a carpenter. We may be

poor, but it takes a social security system to make us a welfare recipient. Different employment practices, different eligibility rules, at different times, would lead to differences in individuals' social positions. Arrow 2b reminds us that the relationship between positions and conditions may change as institutional practices change. This means in turn that we may have to consider a progressive reconceptualisation of positional categories – leading to potential problems for a straightforward social mobility estimate concerned with movements between a fixed set of social pigeonholes.

For any given set of positions and conditions, it is also the case that conditions at some t_0 affect positions at t_1. For example the collapse of a firm might lead some skilled worker into a period of unemployment, which state provides negative cues to prospective employers, "scarring", reducing re-employment chances, leading in turn to a loss of skills, and after an extended period, re-employment as an unskilled worker. Arrow 3 indicates research into such chains of events. This activity is not relevant where the researcher is working with 2-point data on cross-generational social class positions. But is does become more interesting where (i) we have detailed evidence of successive positions within a particular life-course, and (ii) where the positional indicators are continuous (such as those which I shall discuss in the next-section-but-one related to human capital), and able to show gradations of change on a more continuous basis.

The tradition in mobility research has been to consider transitions between successive social positions in a *simple* probabilistic way. Research along the lines of arrow 3 allows us to move to something more like *conditional* probabilities. That is, in traditional class-mobility terms, we become able to describe someone more likely to suffer downward mobility in *this* contingency than *that* (as in previous example of the collapse of the employing firm). Or, to put it in terms of my preferred vocabulary, we can establish empirically the processes that lead to the accumulation or dissipation of human capital.

Arrow 4 represents a conventional form of social policy research, which considers the micro-dynamics of social conditions (most notably poverty dynamics, but also unemployment dynamics and benefit dependency duration analysis). I intend to incorporate this in to the more general sociological discussion, on a contention along the lines of:

(arrow 1 + arrow 2a + arrow 2b + arrow 3) = arrow 4

There is of course the strongest of distinctions between individual dynamics and social change: the processes through which individuals change their circumstances tell us about the current operation of the society. Micro-dynamics, in this sense, are social statics. Social change is the second derivative: *change* in micro dynamics. Change in, for example, mobility regimes, of course takes place over the long term (at least in the context of an individual researcher's career). Data limitations on the current study (the BHPS being only 10 years old) mean that the research programme prefigured here is mostly concerned with social statics. The work will be significantly simplified by assuming for the moment that 2a is identical to 2b.

In short: the British mobility research tradition has been very effective in establishing facts along the lines of arrow 1, which corresponds to the evaluation of the societies against the standards of liberal equality (as it was always intended to do: Goldthorpe et al 1980, Ch.1). Now with the information available from longitudinal data sources (I have BHPS specially in mind, but the same applies to other longitudinal materials particularly the NCDS and BCS70) there is the prospect for a broader programme of evaluation along the lines indicated by Rawls "democratic equality", looking also at the distribution of conditions in the society. Perhaps this means returning to something more along the tradition established by Blau and Duncan 1967, while still incorporating the insights of the traditional British approach. The ultimate interest in this present work is, as in the last-mentioned study, in that arrow 5, absent from the diagram, which points from *positions at time t_0 to conditions at time t_1* – which indicates the processes of structuring and differentiation of life chances.

4 Conditions and Consumption

So far we have talked, in the manner of philosophers, rather abstractly about these positions and the conditions attached to them. But what, concretely, in a modern society, do they consist *of*? In the spirit of the previous discussion, in which positions were characterised by the material conditions shared by contrasted social groups, it would seem appropriate to consider first what constitute the social and economic advantages and disadvantages that are under discussion.

We can think of several different potentially relevant indexes of advantage. In addition to the more strictly economic advantages, there are indicators of health status, psychological adjustment, social adjustment in the narrow sense of satisfaction with various domains of life, as well as the broader sense of satisfaction with ones position in society. There are measures in the BHPS for each of these, which will be used in the study. But among the most important of the relevant "conditions" are, I contend, outcomes of processes of consumption.

We could simply take individuals' money incomes as an indicator of these. But personal incomes provide no direct indication of conditions, since some people have no incomes of their own at all while others' incomes are shared with other members of their families. Equivalised household incomes, adjusting for numbers and types of people, and distributed across household members are more appropriate; some of the work in the following chapters will look directly at equivalised household income.

But equivalised income is still less than completely satisfactory. There is a series of steps that take us from income to what we might think of as "final economic satisfactions". At each step, new distributions of inter-personal variation emerge, any or all of which might in principle be appropriate to consider as relevant "conditions".

From current after-tax income, the effective disposable income depends on the extent of required repayments and servicing of debt. In turn disposable income differs from current purchasing power insofar as different material circumstance (eg tenured vs permanent vs seasonal employment) and different personal inclinations (fiscally prudent vs imprudent) lead to different rates of saving. And any given level of current purchases of goods and services might in turn give rise to a wide range of different levels of final consumption – since goods and services are not in general directly consumed, but rather combined with household equipment (which varies only to a degree with income—since some may be gifts or hand-me-downs), deploying the time of household members with their different levels of skill in domestic production (which may also vary independently of income, but in ways related to individuals' households of origin) to produce those ultimate services that are actually consumed. And this consumption also varies to a considerable degree against individuals' satisfaction with their life circumstances.

So in addition to equivalised income as an index of the distribution of social and economic advantages, I have in mind the use of several other indicators of the conditions that arise as the *outcome of consumption*.

There are three distinct lines of social theory that may contribute to these. The first is an **economic approach** (deriving ultimately from Becker 1965, via articles by Reuben Gronau in the 1970s, and papers by Kooreman and Kapteyn in the 1980s). This line of argument concerns individual or household *production functions* for final satisfaction combining money expenditures on particular goods and services, with the time available for production and consumption. The household is viewed, as it were, as a factory; the purchased commodities are the materials, the household domestic equipment are considered as the capital goods, the available consumption time of the various household members as the labour. These various factors of production are combined to produce the final output – which is the household consumption. The factors of production are, as in a conventional production function, related together to some degree in a multiplicative manner so that, for example, the lack of free time (eg because of long hours of paid work) may limit the effective final consumption irrespective of the size of the individual's disposable income. (I have some experience in "estimating full income" from a project with Stephen Jenkins and Brendan Halpin, see for example Jenkins and O'Leary 1996; some reasonably appropriate data on time use and income is available from the BHPS.)

There is a somewhat parallel **sociological** literature (eg Bourdieu 1984) which adds to the factors of household production, beyond purchased goods and services, also unpaid work and consumption time, as well as consumption skills. It is after all not just consumption time that determines the state of satisfaction that results from a consumption activity, but also the extent that the consumer is practised, knowledgeable or experienced in that particular branch of consumption. The skilled skier, the experienced opera-goer, gets more pleasure per hour than the neophyte. Bourdieu uses this concept as an element in an argument about the selection of patterns of activity, so as to maximise the returns on such consumption skills, and to promote their personal "distinction" terms of lifestyle. (I am not yet quite certain how if at all this might be developed in the context of present study – but certainly fits at a conceptual level, and BHPS data on leisure consumption patterns may, in combination with the domain satisfaction data, be appropriate for some empirical estimation).

A third, **social policy approach** is the development of non-monetary indicators of well being (Seebohm Rowntree in 1930s, most recently Whelan, Laite and Lemaitre 2001). The most recent examples of this work, using data from the European Community Household Panel Survey present some complications in relation to the "household-as-factory" argument. It combines what are, in terms of the Becker approach, *input* indicators (housing characteristics, access to household equipment and state of household repair) with what might be considered *outputs*, such as the ability to afford participation in common activities (eat hot meals, entertain friends) and *outcomes* such as domain satisfaction indices. There is a degree of overlap with the previous discussion, but I suspect that the study will draw from this literature a distinct "non-monetary deprivation index" to put alongside (or maybe even in some way combine with) the equivalised income and the estimate of the value of household consumption. (We have been working with the ESRI group as part of the EPAG project; it will be possible to transfer some at least of the Whelan et al work on ECHP to a BHPS base.)

5 Positions and power

The theory of justice provides a beguiling abstraction from more mundane sociological propositions. In reality "conditions" are not *given* to people in particular "positions" at the behest of disinterested philosopher-experts. Rather, the positions under discussion relate to power in societies. It is power that gives access to social and economic advantages.

Sociologists traditionally think of three aspects of power: class, status, authority. Of these **authority** fits the least well into the framework that I am constructing. Plainly in some societies individuals still have the sort of peremptory control over access to material conditions that might come with particular offices. Some limited examples, persist, medical doctors in one context, examining magistrates in another… But for the moment I propose to leave these sorts of position on one side.

Class refers to the possession or disposition of fungible resources, including fixed assets and financial resources (which together constitute "disposable capital"), and human capital. Of these, empirically speaking, human capital is quite the most important for the largest part of the population of most modern societies. Class is traditionally treated as a categorical characteristic. Classes were groups with contrasting relations to the means of production.

Where some people owned disposable capital and others did not, and when disposable capital was the main source of power, it probably made good sense to think of discrete class*es*. But in a context where human capital is the dominant source of power, and most people possess some sort of human capital to some degree; are classes still discrete and opposable groups? The Erikson and Goldthorpe reformulation of class as representing various sorts of social relations *in* production, where the differences turn on the degrees of trust – and hence independence of action – that the employing organisation must invest in the employee, strikes me as important, if perhaps overly dependent on mid-20th century technological assumptions about the possibilities for the flexible and intelligent surveillance and control of employees. But presumably the degree of required trust, and hence the operational independence, depends on the extent and complexity of special knowledge and skill that the employee is required to deploy. So why not take precisely that degree of "extent and complexity of special knowledge and skill" as itself the indicator of social position?

Human capital has various different meanings. Underlying them all is a notion of capability or capacity to achieve some definite object. Different sorts of capital are salient to different ends. In general, as I previously asserted, human capital is salient in the first instance to institutions. The "special knowledge or skill" allows people to operate in or with those institutions (firms, opera houses) so as to achieve particular ends of production or consumption. Bourdieu's view of human capital is very general, including human capital relevant to consumption as well as production. Here I am more concerned with the economists' notion (Mincer, Becker) of human capital relevant to production

Everyone has at least the potential to develop some human capital for production. And it is human capital for production that yields the income that in turn provides the command over commodities input to consumption that constitute some of the main "conditions" discussed in the previous section. Other closely related causal sequences lead to the connection between human capital and others of those conditions. For example: the powerful association between social class and susceptibility to heart disease identified in the "Whitehall Study" of civil servants (Marmot 1996) operates, it is to be presumed, through the relationship between, on one hand, the varying ratio between responsibility and control in the various junior, mid-ranking and senior civil service grades, and on the other, the degree of stress. Mid-ranking grades, with heavy responsibilities, but strongly limited degrees of independence of action, suffer the most stress, and hence the most heart disease. I would expect just the same

"inverted U-shape" relationship between a continuously measured human capital variable and the degree of stress from employment.

Though a departure from tradition, it seems for this reason most appropriate to think of "class" in modern societies in continuous terms rather than categorical. This makes for a terminological problem, since we would as a result have "class" without distinct "classes". So I propose to refer to these, for the moment, as "class-type resources".

Status presents some rather different issues. This term is sometimes rather indiscriminately used to indicate prestige, or social standing. But these seem to me to correspond more to what I am calling "conditions". They represent an outcome, rather than a positional characteristic, insofar as they are ascribed by others in recognition of the ability to determine outcomes rather than determinants in themselves. Of course this recognition may itself be a source of power, but in themselves prestige and standing have more in common with aspects of satisfaction, self-image, self-respect; clearly matters of condition rather than position.

Nevertheless, there are some aspects of status that do clearly correspond to positional characteristics in the present sense. These are aspects of position that *interact* in specific ways with class-type resources. I have in mind particularly gender, age and health status, and possible family status. For example: gender interacts with human capital in the determination of wage rates. We estimate similar wage equations, with age, educational attainment, general and specific experience on the right hand side. And we arrive at similar models – but the size of the coefficients vary systematically, women getting less benefit for given levels of human capital. Female gender apparently has some independent, quasi-stigmatising effect. Other status categories—age, disability—may impose this same sort of quasi-stigma.

My intention is to continue to develop the continuously measured Essex Score (Gershuny 2000a), which combines class-type resources and certain sorts of status indicator in interaction, as the main indicator of social position for this study. In addition I shall also use categorical class indicators as auxiliary predictors of social conditions where this is appropriate – particularly in relation to family background and intergenerational mobility.

6 Conclusion: Applying Democratic Equality

Marshall and his colleagues conclude their discussion of social justice with the following:

> "…this book does not consider the possible justice or injustice of the differential disadvantage of class positions, except insofar as this is taken to be an issue concerning access to these different location. This is by no means to say that we regard fair access as all there is to justice. It merely reflects our decision to focus, in this book, on the kinds of inequality that has been most prominent in current debates about the relation between social class and social justice."
>
> (Marshall et al 1997 p 17)

I hope to have demonstrated that the focus to which they refer cannot be viewed merely as a matter of emphasis. In effect, if not necessarily in intent, it also represents a substantive view of the nature of justice itself. There is a view of social justice, described by Rawls as the system of liberal equality, which does indeed contend that fair equality of access to privileged positions *is* all there is to justice. But to set against this, is the system of democratic equality which holds that fair equality must be considered in the context of differential advantages.

There is, finally, no point in debating the competing merits of these two systems, since, once all the arguments have been put, the choice among them is a matter of taste. My contention has been that there is a tenable consistent view that holds that the "strong meritocracy" implicit in the focus on relative mobility rates, is not in itself a route to social justice. I counterpose a weak meritocratic view, which focuses on the effects of present social positions on the future conditions of those who occupy them – so that we can consider, in addition to meritocratic objectives, also means of improving the conditions of those in the worst-off positions, in ways that might, in the worst case, *not* improve (or even conceivably worsen) the chances of those initially worst placed to move to better positions. This view of social justice is what informs the design of my study.

Appendix 1

Draft outline of study as at 16/9/2001

1 Introduction: Justice – positions and conditions.

2 UK 1900 – 2000: changing employment, incomes and households: BHPS as compared with the standard sources – the UK in the1990s.

3 Conditions – money and non-money – measures of consumption and satisfaction.

4 Positions – human capital as a positional indicator.

5 Intergenerational mobility: household of origin → education → first job.

6 Intragenerational progressions, the life-course as career: school → current job.

7 Households, families and fertility: consequences of formation and dissolution for positions and conditions.

8 After the career: social differentiation of conditions in retirement.

9 International comparisons – CASMIN and ECHP.

10 Conclusions.

Appendix 2

An Aside: The coiled coil of experience

Arrow 3 (diagram in section 3) alludes to a process that might be set out a little more explicitly in relation to this research programme. The distinction between positions as "long-term" and conditions as "short-term" is not really adequate. It might perhaps be better to think of position as accumulating from a succession of conditions, which in turn determine conditions through individuals' interactions with social institutions, in an endless recursive sequence.

We might think of a coiled coil in which the activities of the day repeated day by day, looped into weeks and years, with certain repeated activities amassing into the personal characteristics that fit in specific ways with specific institutions. The fact of arriving at a particular workplace at a particular time, and doing certain sorts of work, and then leaving at another particular time, day after day, week-in week-out, accumulate to form the human capital, which in turn allow an individual to gain some promotion or a new job in another similar organisation.

Consider the analogy with dna sequences. A particular sequence produces an organism with particular characteristics which flourish in a specific ecological niche. So formation of positional characteristics is like speciation – individual workers may specialise to form appropriate habitual work patterns, and firms appear as specific ecological habitats requiring particular bundles of experience. The firms and the individuals work-habits appear and develop in parallel, feeding off each other as habits and institutions always do (see Berger and Luckman 1967 pp 70-85)

More than just work, the coiled coil of experience includes leisure activities as well as work. Repeated leisure activities mean the development of consumption skills, which are combined with goods and services purchased from labour income to produce the final satisfactions. And the leisure activities constitute, in part, the consumption of other people's work.

So, in material terms, the debate "in the original position" about alternative societies is also a debate about alternative activity sequences, which are subject to a particular set of constraints. Consider: there is a "Great Day" which consists of all the minutes of all the

members of the society. These minutes must be mixed in appropriate proportions: there must be enough work time to produce the goods and services, and there must be enough consumption time to combine with those goods and services to produce the final consumption satisfactions discussed in Section 4; and the historical sequences for all the members of society have to produce the work-skills to fill all of the occupation-related positions discussed in Section 5, and consumption skills and habits that lead to the particular mixture of work and leisure minutes in the society's Great Day. I have set out, in a preliminary fashion, the arithmetic of the Great Day elsewhere (Gershuny 2000b Chapters 4 and 8); but this discussion as whole goes well beyond the scope of the present study.

What *is* precisely to the present point, however, is that ultimately conditions and positions are just the same phenomena viewed through different temporal apertures. The experts behind the veil of ignorance are not choosing a set of positions and arbitrarily attaching a set of conditions to them. The positions and the conditions are integrally related; it is that set of intermeshed temporal sequences that constitute the society's habitual pattern of life, which determines both the conditions and the positions. The sociology of the present study is, as it were, the systematically descriptive, classificatory aspect of biology; this is situated within a wider field, an ecological/temporal model of sociology (like, for example, evolutionary biology), which will not be touched-on further here.

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