

Family Autonomy and Class Fate¹

Gideon Calder

Abstract: The family poses problems for liberal understandings of social justice, because of the ways in which it bestows unearned privileges. This is particularly stark when we consider inter-generational inequality, or ‘class fate’ – the ways in which inequality is transmitted from one generation to the next, with the family unit ostensibly a key conduit. There is a recognized tension between the assumption that families should as far as possible be autonomous spheres of decision-making, and the assumption that we should as far as possible equalize the life chances of all children, regardless of background. In this article I address this tension by way of recent liberal egalitarian literature, and consideration of the different dimensions of class fate. I argue, firstly, that the tension may not be of the *a priori* nature which liberals have tended to identify – and secondly, that as well as distributive and recognition-based aspects, the notion of contributive justice provides a particularly illuminating way of analyzing what is wrong about class fate, and the role of the family in promoting it.

Keywords: family autonomy, contributive justice, inter-generational inequality, families, life chances

Introduction

Anyone studying sociology arrives early at the family: its make-up and roles, its relation to other social institutions, the pivotal part it plays in socialization. The details of all this – how the family matters, and how much – will of course be in dispute. But *that* it matters is not. It remains a standard prism through which to explore the shifting relations between individual and society, public and domestic, education and work. Meanwhile, students of political philosophy will wait much longer for the family to feature. It might not come up much at all. But when it does, it is often packaged as a niche interest, or a subsidiary one: something on the drop-down menu marked Gender, or Children. Key texts in the booming industry of theories of social justice since Rawls have found it easy not to dwell on the family, and even to bypass it altogether. Many still do. This is despite the prominence and sheer force of accumulated feminist analysis showing that even where the family is neglected in the analysis, it is still – as Susan Okin puts it – “*assumed* by theorists of justice” (Okin 1989, 9). Not mentioning the family does not somehow evaporate the pivotal work it will anyway do in the formation of those already-matured, fully-formed, independent

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beings who have long filled the brief as the subjects of typical discussions of what a fair or just society would be like.

If neglecting the family is to overlook crucial aspects of the dynamics of gender inequality, the same can be said of class. The delineation and reinforcement of class divisions play out crucially through the family unit. Specifically at stake in this article is the relationship between ‘class fate’ and the everyday workings of the family – and the normative implications of that relationship. ‘Class fate’ is a shorthand term used by the sociologists Robert Erikson and John Goldthorpe to refer to the processes by which individuals end up in this or that class position. For them, as perhaps the pre-eminent contemporary analysts of social mobility and its impediments, “the family is *the* unit of class ‘fate’” (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993, 233; emphasis added). If one wanted to design an ideally efficient vehicle for the transmission of inequality from one generation to the next, the modern nuclear family would be an intimidatingly strong contender. Partly, this is due to the social functions of the family, and the privileged sphere of influence that it represents. Yet at the same time, it is down to the family’s normative significance – the special status of the value placed on family life, and the kinds of social influence that this unit is accepted as being *entitled* to wield.

For particularly in the western democracies, family autonomy has something of a sacred status. An appeal to the special value of choices made within families, about families, by family members (mostly by parents)² underpins aspects of public policy from taxation to crime to education – both in the detail of the policy itself, and the rhetoric surrounding it. The assumption that a family unit should be governed by itself, without interference by outside authorities unless there is a compelling reason³ is widely taken to be key to what the family is, what makes family life valuable, the framing of the obligations of family members, and the family’s wider social roles and functions. This status endures despite major sociological shifts and changes in the relationship between family and state.⁴ Yet meanwhile, despite all this, there are long-acknowledged tensions between the autonomy of the family and equality of opportunity and life chances. These tensions are captured by the plain banality of the fact that “life chances of individuals are closely related to the socio-economic characteristics of their families” (Johnson and Kossykh 2008, iii). That

² Either ‘family autonomy’ or ‘parental autonomy’ would be a viable term, given the issues broached in this discussion. For its purposes I follow Fishkin’s preference for the former phrase, mainly because it is Fishkin’s characterization of the issues at stake from which the discussion departs.

³ The phrasing here is adapted from the definition of family autonomy given by Judith G. McMullen (McMullen 1993, 570).

⁴ Perhaps most prominently, in recent decades: the decline of the modern nuclear family and changes in the relationship between nuclear and extended families; the decline of (different-sex) marriage as a ‘default’ contractual basis for the family unit; changes in the status and rights of children; changes in the possible circumstances of reproduction.

this will come as a shock to nobody makes the dissonance between the values of family and equality all the starker.

Typically those tensions are framed synchronically: that is, between the generations within or originating from a household, at a given point in time. Ensuring that children have equal life chances is in conflict with the protection of parents' rights substantively to influence the development of those children. Thus Rawls famously concedes that even when fair equality of opportunity as he defines it is satisfied, "the family will lead to unequal chances between individuals" (Rawls 1999, 448). The operations of the family form one key reason why it will seem "impossible in practice to secure equal chances of achievement and culture for those similarly endowed" (Rawls 1999, 64). The picture given here is of children of in-principle similar potential born (as they will be) into unequal family circumstances, and finding their development inexorably shaped by those unearned circumstances in ways which then have material effects on what those children go on to achieve. A snapshot of the social positions occupied by any generation of adults will show the traces of these effects, in (again) quite unsurprising ways.

But viewed diachronically – across longer-term passages of time, and further generations – this pattern is compounded, and the effects multiplied. The children and grandchildren of the least advantaged will tend to inherit the disadvantages characterizing the lives of their parents and grandparents. Ostensibly, this in large part *because* of family autonomy. This captures much of why class fate – or inter-generational inequality – seems both troubling and complex from the point of view of social justice. On the other hand, the large timescales involved allow plenty of room for political inattention to these details. As one commentator puts it, because the lack of social mobility between generations is "a phenomenon that plays out over entire generations, it can only ever be observed deep in the rear-view mirror" (Clark 2014, 159). Our view is liable to be dimmed further by the fact that the circumstances of one generation within a family will be visited upon its successors in ways that need not involve any deliberate attempt to harm the chances of others. Apparently, family autonomy can do much of the job by itself, via more-or-less indirect effects and not-necessarily-intended consequences. Crucial to the maintenance and reinforcement of inter-generational inequality are the everyday, often informal processes through which each family 'looks out for its own,' and the choices and actions issuing from those processes. Parents are *expected* to do the best by their children, at least as far as the rules allow, and regard this as an obligation. When the rules intrude on this – for example, with taxation of inheritance – this will often be regarded, even by those with little to bequeath, as an unwarranted thwarting of parental partiality, and of a natural tendency to privilege our own.

These tensions bite hard for liberal egalitarians, for whom family autonomy may seem a necessary corollary of the freedom of individuals to pursue their own conceptions of the good. Making choices about what goes on

domestically, and the raising of children, will be core to many such conceptions. Yet the challenges posed apply far beyond internal debates within the liberal mainstream staking out the balance between freedom and equality. They confront any position – and this will include most of the political spectrum, albeit in different ways and to different degrees – for which equality of opportunity matters, but which also wants to make at least some space for family autonomy.⁵ We find various ways of negotiating them, among treatments of the family and social justice – see for example Archard (2010); Brighouse and Swift (2014); Fishkin (1983); Vallentyne and Lipson (1989).⁶ While they differ in the details of their responses to it, these strategies hold in common a level of acceptance of the basic tensions at stake. Rather than resolving them, they offer alternative ways of living with them.

The aim of this article is not to add to the list of such strategies, nor to probe them individually – except for Fishkin's, some aspects of which are dwelt on in the next section. Rather, I intend to discuss a particular way of framing the tension itself, by putting stress on the diachronic aspect, and to argue that it has important implications neglected in those other accounts. I will do this by invoking the notion of contributive justice, as set out by Paul Gombert (Gombert 2007; Gombert 2010). While we might readily appreciate the impact of inter-generational inequality in distributive terms (for example, in terms of earning power) and in terms of recognition-related factors (such as respect and social status) it can also be viewed in terms of uneven access to opportunities to contribute, particularly via work. As the work of sociologists such as Annette Lareau (Lareau 2011) shows, class disadvantage is handed down within families as much in terms of what successive generations can *do*, e.g. in their working lives, as what they *get*, or how they are viewed by others. I will argue that taking due account of contributive injustice – that is, inequalities of access to meaningful work – reframes the tension between family autonomy and equality of opportunity, with knock-on effects for putative strategies for living with it.

The discussion proceeds in three main stages. First, I set out how the tension between family autonomy and the promotion of equal life chances emerges in a prominent treatment within the literature on the family and social justice – James Fishkin's *Justice, Equal Opportunity and the Family* (1983) – and show how this rests upon tacit assumptions about the wider context of distributive inequalities, as well as family influence. In section 2, I address the nature of inter-generational inequality, to confirm its various impacts and consider the family's role in their transmission – arguing here that these can be considered in terms of distributive, recognition-based and contributive aspects

⁵ We return to the relationship between equality of opportunity and equality of life chances below.

⁶ Of these, Brighouse and Swift offer the most sustained and deepest analysis of the proper limits of parental partiality in relation to other considerations of social justice. See Calder (2015) for an extended commentary.

of injustice. Section 3 makes a case for taking contributive injustice as a distinct and substantive dimension of the links between family autonomy and inter-generational inequality. I then conclude with some suggestions as to the implications of this for our understanding both of the tensions themselves, and of wider questions connected with these issues.

1. Family influence and equal life chances

In *Justice, Equal Opportunity and the Family*, James Fishkin presents the tension between equality of opportunity and family autonomy under the heading of ‘the problem of assignment’: the issue of to whom opportunities for valuable positions ought to be distributed. This problem, he argues, is “intractable within the framework of common liberal assumptions” (Fishkin 1983, 11) once we take the role of the family systematically into account. The reason for this is that three principles crucial to liberals cannot be fully realised in conjunction. They can be summarized like this (Fishkin 1983, 19-43):

The Principle of Merit: positions should be awarded via impartial evaluation of qualifications.

Equality of Life Chances: the prospects for eventual positions in society of children with equivalent capacities should not vary according to their ‘arbitrary native characteristics’ (race, sex, ethnic origin, family background).

Autonomy of the Family: “consensual relations within a given family concerning the development of its children should not be coercively interfered with except to ensure for the children the essential prerequisites for adult participation in the society” (Fishkin 1983, 35-6).

Fishkin’s case is that whenever any two of these principles are satisfied, the third cannot be. This case rests on an empirical assumption, spelled out independently by Vallentyne and Lipson (Vallentyne and Lipson 1989, 30):

Familial Influence (Familial Influence on the Development of Skills): If consensual relations within a given family governing the development of its children are not coercively interfered with, except to ensure for children the essential prerequisites for adult participation in society, *then* in general children with equivalent capacities will not have the same prospects for qualifications.

So: if Autonomy of the Family is satisfied, then children with the same capacities will not have the same chances to develop qualifications. And if positions are allocated on the basis of qualifications, then children of equivalent capacities will not have the same chances of being assigned this or that position (Fishkin 1983, ch. 3; Vallentyne and Lipson 1989, 31).

Fishkin’s first two principles reflect a familiar distinction between formal and substantive opportunities. This distinction is inherent in Rawls’s definition of fair equality of opportunity. Thus “positions are to be not only open in a formal sense, but ... all should have a fair chance to attain them,” so that

assuming there is 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. In all sectors of society there should be roughly equal prospects of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed. The expectations of those with the same abilities and aspirations should not be affected by their social class. (Rawls 1999, 63)

For our purposes, we will concentrate on the relationship between equal life chances (substantive equality of opportunity) and autonomy of the family. Let us assume as a given that the principle of merit applies. For egalitarians, the question then becomes: to what extent can we ensure that equivalently endowed and motivated children from different initial places in the social system might have the same real chance to convert their potential capacities into valuable positions? For Fishkin, where the principle of merit applies, we must choose between equal life chances and autonomy of the family: the three principles are not jointly satisfiable.

It is striking in these characterisations of the terrain that family autonomy sits in an ambiguous relationship to social class, causally speaking. One might argue that while family autonomy is sufficient to disrupt equal life chances, it is in the relationship between family autonomy and the stratifying effects of class and income inequality that the particularly pressing trouble lies. Or to put it another way: each of these by itself can do some disrupting, but in conjunction, their effects are multiplied. This sense emerges from typical invokings of the empirical assumption of family influence. Harry Brighouse writes:

As long as children are raised in families, we know that their prospects will be profoundly affected by their family circumstances and conditions – that is by factors which do not flow from their level of talent or willingness to exert effort. (Brighouse 2002, 6)

The varying of prospects will in key ways, and to some extent, be put down to ‘consensual relations within a given family:’ they might stem from active decisions made, or commitments to this or that goal, or levels of aspiration – all of which will vary with such relations. In cashing out this point, though, Brighouse continues like this:

One of the pertinent family circumstances is family wealth: wealthier parents can provide better healthcare and better educational opportunities, other things being equal, and these will impact on their children’s life prospects. *If the competitive benefits to children that flow from being raised in a family with superior wealth cannot be compensated for by redistributing other goods, then inequality of income and wealth is highly suspect, given the value of equality of opportunity. So one thing that fair equality of opportunity is likely to cast doubt upon is the idea that children should grow up in families with significantly unequal wealth.* (Brighouse 2002, 6; my italics)

The ‘flow’ referred to in the italicized passage might have various dimensions. *Prima facie*, though, it indicates the assumption of a more or less firm

determinate relation between (a) wealth and (b) decisions, commitments, and aspirations. Indeed, what we might infer from Brighthouse's depiction is that it is the effects of wealth itself that are rupturing equal life chances, whatever fine-grained contrasts may obtain between the choices of richer and poorer families. Just being richer, all things being equal and regardless of the internal qualities of 'consensual family relations,' is enough to confer unfair advantage.

This matters because of the pattern of causes and effects at work in the tension between family autonomy and equal life chances. For Fishkin, what we find here is a tension between two (out of three) liberal values. Yet the tension itself is not driven solely by the values themselves, and their relationship *as values*. It depends also on the empirical fact of family influence. But to the extent that this itself is stratified along class lines, so that family influence works better for the better off than the worse off, family autonomy is not the sole (or perhaps even the main) source of family influence. In unequal societies offering minimal scope for family autonomy – where, for example, state fostering of children from birth was the norm, or decisions about education and career paths were made by a centralized committee – it would be plausible to expect better-off children still to have better prospects. And the uneven distribution of life chances would remain a concern, even with the conflict with family autonomy thereby diluted or removed. To put this another way, the reason that children in better-off families have better prospects is not (only) because their parents use family autonomy as a vehicle to promote those prospects. It is also a symptom of the ways in which other goods are distributed – such as income and wealth – and indeed of wider aspects of social structure. Thus there is a danger of a problematic kind of methodological individualism in the framing of Fishkin's dilemma, and in Vallentyne and Lipson's unpacking of it. The danger is that the tension is framed exclusively around individuals' aims, intentions, plans and choices, and their effects on family units (themselves conceived in more or less atomized terms). So the assumption is that tensions between liberal values arise from different things which reasonable people find valuable, or different principles to which reasonable people might be expected to commit, rather than relations between individuals, principles and the structural conditions in which they do their reflecting, valuing and acting. If the intentions of individuals were the only factor at work, then family influence itself would be sufficient to ensure that family autonomy serves to exacerbate inequality of life chances. But it is not sufficient by itself. Background conditions of structural economic inequality must also apply.

We might argue, then, that the assumption of Family Influence as depicted by Vallentyne and Lipson needs some tweaking. For it is not only family influence that we are talking about. To the extent that the effects of family influence vary on class lines, the latter form an inextricable element of the disruption by family influence of equal life chances. The original might then be rephrased like this:

If consensual relations within a given family governing the development of its children are not coercively interfered with except to ensure for children the essential prerequisites for adult participation in society, and *if* background conditions of unequal distribution apply, *then* in general children with equivalent capacities will not have the same prospects for qualifications.

Consider one prominent focal point of family influence (other examples will surface later): the development of children's cognitive capacities. Research has repeatedly shown that these develop more slowly in children from low social classes than in their counterparts in higher social classes. As one prominent British study has it: by 120 months, the brightest of low class children at 22 months are overtaken by the weakest of high social class children at 22 months (Feinstein 2003). Such influence is not the simple result of family autonomy – of deliberate decisions made by parents to enhance the capacities of their children. It may, for sure, be *fuelled* by family autonomy, insofar as the incubation of young children within family units helps protect the circumstances in which the benefits of class advantage can take hold. And certainly, some extra-pushy parents will make it their business to 'hothouse' their kids into as much early cognitive advance as they can possibly achieve. Family autonomy is a willing and very capable accomplice in the process. But taking a wider picture of the seesawing of life chances among children, where those from privileged backgrounds rise as those from poorer backgrounds fall, it seems sociologically naïve to say that family autonomy is the sole or indeed the chief causal factor in play. Recent work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the UK, surveying studies exploring the link between income and educational performance, has found strong evidence that "children in lower-income families have worse cognitive, social-behavioural and health outcomes in part *because they are poorer*, not just because low income is correlated with other household and parental characteristics" (Cooper and Stewart 2013, 1; my emphasis). What is at work here is something not traceable simply to the conscious choices of family members to promote the interests of their own: these must be indexed to the wider differential distribution of life chance-promoting goods and resources.

Might it then be that family autonomy is at odds with equal life chances *only* in so far as economic distributions make family autonomy a vehicle for the protection of class inequalities? This seems an overstatement: family autonomy does a lot of direct work, all by itself, to interrupt the possibility of equal life chances. But it is not clear that there is a *necessary* tension between family autonomy and equal life chances, unless other forces are already at work. The tension may not be inherent in the values themselves, *a priori* – or if it is inherent, the tension may not be of the vicious proportions of Fishkin's trilemma. Rather, the scale of its viciousness depends on the backdrop against which those values operate. In other words: family autonomy is in problematic tension with equality of life chances wherever the wider distribution of goods is such that non-interference with consensual relations within a given family governing the

development of its children, except to ensure for children the essential prerequisites for adult participation in society, will mean that in general children with equivalent capacities will not have the same prospects for qualifications.

2. Inter-generational inequalities and modes of injustice

Points made in the previous section might be summed up like this. There is indeed a tension between the principles labelled by Fishkin as merit, equal life chances and family autonomy. This tension does indeed depend on what Vallentyne and Lipson call the assumption of family influence. Yet this assumption needs rephrasing to include the assumption of enduring structural inequalities – in shorthand, class inequalities. In this section, we turn to inter-generational inequalities. The aim is partly to reinforce the point that the family works as a key conduit in the reproduction of inequalities across generations, and that this applies especially starkly to inequalities of life chances. Again: the family is *the* unit of class fate. Looked at diachronically, Fishkin's trilemma takes on a distinct aspect: its lines become sharper. For if merit, equal life chances and family autonomy are not jointly satisfiable at any one time, or within a generation, the same applies *a fortiori* when we take a diachronic view.

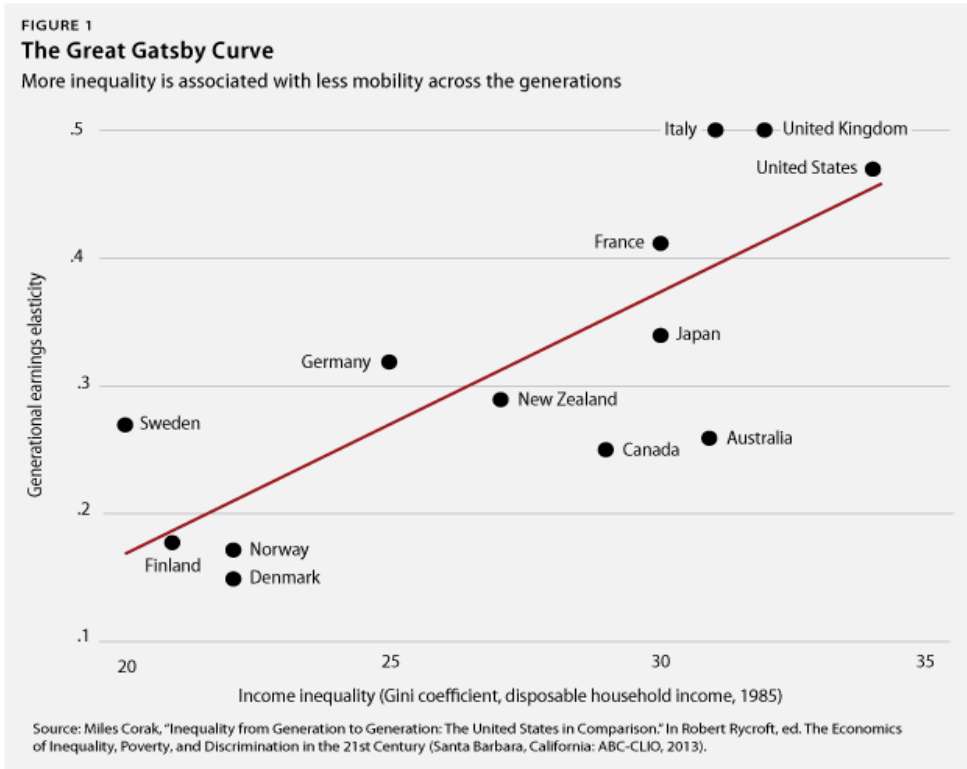
This section's other aim is to highlight that class fate, in turn, unfolds in different dimensions. To illuminate this, it is worth distinguishing between injustices of distribution, recognition and contribution. The distinction between the first two is familiar from the work of Nancy Fraser (see Fraser 1997 for the *locus classicus*, though it has been revised and supplemented since). The third is elaborated most fully by Paul Gomberg (Gomberg 2007; Gomberg 2010). The customary means to distinguish between maldistribution and misrecognition is to invoke a contrast between economic and cultural forms of injustice. For our purposes here, this version of the contrast is not quite conducive, because contribution (or malcontribution) carries both an economic and a cultural dimension. In any case there is rather a minefield to step into, in drawing lines of distinction which for some must remain intrinsically unstable. But in the name of finding a simple basis for comparison: here goes. Distributive elements of social justice are those for which the chief focus is money, and the differences in opportunities and quality of life to which any distribution of income and wealth in society will give rise. Recognition-based elements of social justice are those for which the chief focus is identity and difference, and the ways in which perceptions of and discourses about these can reinforce patterns of social inclusion and exclusion. Contributive elements of social justice are those focused not so much on what we receive (economically or culturally, from institutions or others) but on what we do – and the extent to which people are able to exercise and extend their faculties via meaningful work.⁷

⁷ Presenting the contrast in this way is not to commit to any order of priority between the three aspects of social justice, nor to assume that there is such an order of priority. Such

Instances and patterns of class fate can be identified under each of these three headings. Evidence of the stark resilience of inequalities between families across generations indicates how the roles families play in preserving patterns of inequality tends (especially in countries of low social mobility, such as the UK) to be amplified with the passing of time. To the extent that family autonomy is implicated in this process, given the assumption of family influence, inter-generational family autonomy is a key operative factor in the undermining of inter-generational equality of life chances. On the one hand, as Vallentyne and Lipson point out, liberals have not always seen very clearly that “the right to an equal opportunity to pursue one’s conception of the good is a right to which children will lay claim when they become adults” (Vallentyne and Lipson 1989, 44). Thus choices made under the auspices of family autonomy threaten the protection of that right as children grow up within families. On reaching adulthood, some will find it realised far more fully than others. On the other hand, such choices extend into the future, and become sedimented, against a background of class inequality. These processes have indirect implications for future generations born within those same family lines. Inherited disadvantages highlight how the values at stake do not adequately ‘track’ the social forces operating to provide the social landscape in which life chances emerge and play out. To use our earlier phrasing, equality of opportunity may have to be addressed diachronically rather than synchronically, in order to map adequately onto the contours of that landscape.

The ‘big picture’ of inter-generational inequality is often best conveyed in graphic form to highlight the gaps which emerge between those with more and less. There are a great many options from which to choose: such data has mushroomed as gaps between rich and poor have grown, as they have in the UK since the late 1970s. Distributive factors feature prominently, as we might expect. Here, I pick out some representative samples. An especially stark depiction is provided by the Great Gatsby curve, which as Tom Clark points out, is really more of a straight line. It shows how from generation to generation, as he puts it, “unequal parents breed kids with unequal chances” – or that “in countries where income is more unequally spread, the next generation enjoys less mobility” (Clark 2014, 158-159).

bigger, ontological questions are sidestepped for present purposes: the contrast is simply offered as an analytical rubric. Of course, even if not crucial here, those bigger questions do matter. For Gombert (Gombert 2007), contributive justice is prior to distributive justice. For critics of Fraser such as Iris Young, the very distinction between redistribution and recognition is too shaky a construction (see *inter alia* Young 1997). Other critics (e.g. Barry 2000; Rorty 1998) come at Fraser from the reverse direction, and argue that the very stress on recognition is a distraction from the core, redistributive work of social justice.



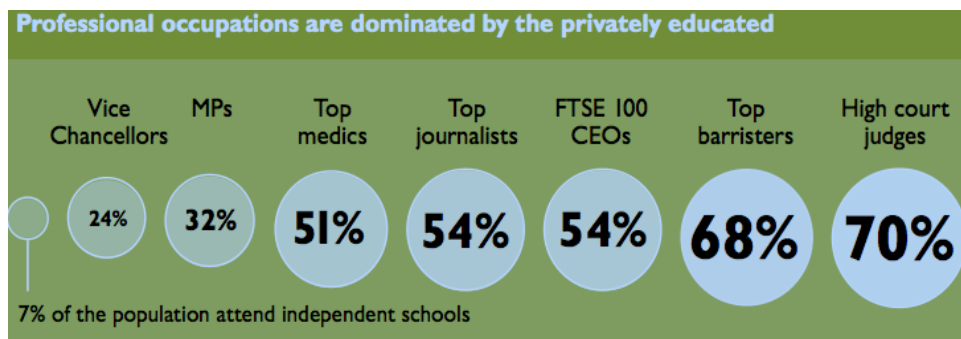
(Corak 2012)

Moving horizontally from left to right represents a movement from low inequality to high inequality, as the Gini coefficient rises. Moving vertically from bottom to top (where 'elasticity' refers to the strength of the link between what a parent earns and what their child goes on to earn) represents a movement from more mobility in economic status across generations to less economic mobility (Corak 2012). It is a graph which, like so many of those deployed in Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010), shows the ripple effects of inequality of outcome. It provides, straightforwardly, and on an international scale, a picture of the knock-on effects of large inequalities in the distribution of income. Such graphs seem to speak of maldistribution in one generation begetting maldistribution in the next, without reference to what Cooper and Stewart call 'other household and parental characteristics.' Of course, this is a brief and simplistic reading of the data, and risks occluding the range of other possible contributing factors feeding into those figures. Even so, the data does suggest that remedies to the lack of mobility among follow-on generations, and thus movement towards greater equality of life chances, will be centred on

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levers of distribution – and specifically, aiming at a smaller income gap between higher and lower earners.

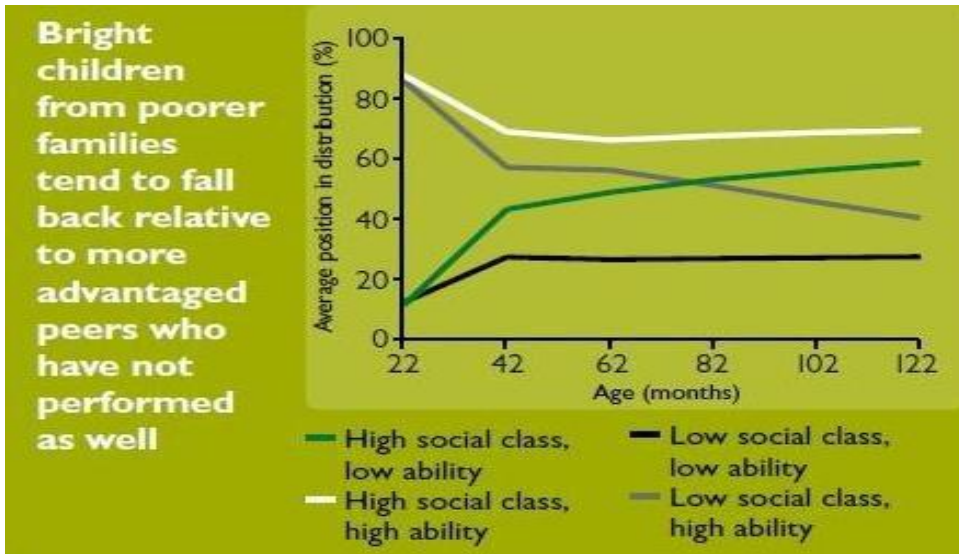
Other inter-generational inequalities hinge not so much on what members of subsequent generations earn, but on their eventual social status. This graph features in a UK government strategy document on improving social mobility:



(HM Government 2011, 9)

Here the implied concern is not about earnings, as such. It is also about access to positions carrying with them the promise of respect and esteem – and the extent to which in the UK, the restriction of such access within higher social strata has proved remarkably resilient (these figures are, in general, not noticeably improving). To the extent that the barriers here are recognition-centred, so prospective remedies too will focus on attitudinal factors – for example, encouraging academically well-equipped children from poorer backgrounds to see themselves as plausible future high court judges, stoking the career confidence of those who have not traditionally occupied such positions. (Of course, there would be other possible steps, like restricting the influence of private schools or abolishing them. But in large part these steps too would be geared towards changing perceptions of class differences and their implications for the life chances of children and young people.) Here it seems that ‘other household and parental characteristics’ – in part, the realm of family autonomy – is fundamental both to the way the impacts happen, and their effects.

A third example. Much has been made by UK politicians of evidence showing that the educational performance of less academically gifted children from privileged backgrounds will tend to overtake that of brighter children from lower class backgrounds by about the age of 7 (the latter having been performing on a par with their privileged counterparts at age 2). Here is another diagram taken from the same UK government strategy document:



(HM Government 2011, 9)

While the previous diagrams would also resonate with questions of contributive justice, this one hooks up with them directly – particularly viewed in parallel with the previous one. It shows a tendency for class background to trump native ability in determining children’s educational performance, which will then carry forward into the contributions those children are in a position to make, once adults. Countervailing measures in this case would centre on both education and labour market, and on lessening the grip of class privilege in ‘streaming’ children from better-off backgrounds into better jobs – perhaps by, as recommended by both Gomberg (Gomberg 2007) and Sayer (Sayer 2009), freeing up the division of labour to remove the effective ringfencing around more fulfilling occupational roles.

Across the second and third issues, the concern is not primarily with what the children of poorer parents have, but with what and how they are doing – and with how this is shaped by their lives’ early bearings: “the home they’re born into, the neighborhood they grow up in or the jobs their parents do” as the UK’s then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg puts it in the preface to that strategy document (failing noticeably to add: their parents’ level of income – HM Government 2011, 3). It risks crassness to pick out different exemplars of inter-generational inequality and point each in isolation towards separate modes of injustice. Each is not paired exclusively with each, as if concerns about access to prestigious positions somehow had everything to do with recognition and nothing to do with money, or again as if concerns about class impacts on educational performance were not implicated with concerns about what those

students go on to earn. There is a high degree of overlap between the three modes of injustice, and between different aspects of inter-generational inequality. But notwithstanding all that, the point here has simply been to draw out dimensions of the ways in which inter-generational inequality hooks up with questions of justice. Some will seek to translate all of this into a single rubric – and file all such questions under the primary heading either of distribution or recognition. In the following section, I hope to show why, whether or not one shares that ambition, questions of contributive justice are important to address in their own right.

3. Families and contributive injustice

So inter-generational inequality directly undermines equality of life chances, even in conditions where the principle of merit applies. This is for reasons familiar at least since Bernard Williams, in “The Idea of Equality,” pointed out that equality of opportunity is rather more demanding than its less radically minded adherents might hope. As he says there, “one is not really offering equality of opportunity to Smith and Jones if one contents oneself with applying the same criteria to Smith and Jones at, say, the age of eleven; what one is doing there is to apply the same criteria to Smith as affected by favourable conditions and to Jones as affected by unfavourable but curable conditions” (Williams 2006, 111). To give both Smith and Jones equality of opportunity requires abstracting them from their conditions, where these are curable, and equalizing those conditions. Jones’s environment is unfavourable but curable. Jones’s prospects will remain less favourable than Smith’s unless the imbalance in their respective environments is addressed.

In the previous section we saw three ways in which such unfavourability might be couched: in terms, respectively, of distribution, recognition and contribution. Much of the ground we have covered so far, in considering the relationship between family autonomy, equality of life chances and inter-generational factors, has shown the complexity of the relation between those three factors. In effect, in addressing such complexity, we are addressing the intricate textures of the effects of class on people’s lives, and of the normative issues to which these give rise.⁸ Looking at things across generations, we find such textures reproduced in complex ways – some to do with what people have, some with how they are seen by others and themselves, and some with to do with their opportunities to make a fulfilling contribution to society. This casts important light on Fishkin’s trilemma.

Recall that Fishkin casts that trilemma as a ‘problem of assignment,’ concerned with how opportunities for valuable positions ought to be rationed. Two presumptions inherent in this characterization of the problem are worth stressing. One is that it is explicitly a distributive matter. It is about the benefits

⁸ For an authoritative treatment of these intricacies, see Sayer (Sayer 2005).

people receive – with the *distribuenda* including life chances. The individuals concerned are positioned as entitled recipients, getting or not getting their due. From this angle, matters which seem *prima facie* as if they are to do with recognition or contribution must be rendered in distributive currency. The other presumption is that opportunities for valuable positions will necessarily be rationed. Equality of opportunity is thus understood as equality of competitive opportunity – a model for which, in Gomberg’s phrasing, “there are limited positions of advantage, [and] each should have an opportunity to attain those positions without being disadvantaged by anything irrelevant to one’s suitability for the position” (Gomberg 2007, 18). So on these terms, the problem with family autonomy in relation to equality of life chances, where the principle of merit obtains, is the unlevelling effect that family autonomy has on the playing field. Liberal neutralist resistance to subscribing to commendation of this or that notion of the good makes this a natural couching of the issues at stake. Extended inter-generationally, Fishkin’s trilemma is simply inflated, *pro rata*, so that the unlevel playing field is writ large. Successive generations of family members from certain backgrounds are denied equality of life chances due to the side-effects of family autonomy.

I have argued already that to cash out the trilemma, we need to say more about the assumptions on which it is based – namely, about family influence and the wider terrain of inequality. We can now see too that the particular bind which Fishkin places us in depends on the assumption of competitive opportunity. Thus a crucial reason that protecting family autonomy sits in such tension with promoting equality of life chances is not just that there are class inequalities in society, but that valuable opportunities are limited in a particular way. Viewed this way, inter-generational inequalities seem to provide an extra reason for liberal egalitarians not to treat family autonomy as sacrosanct.⁹ This reason is that inherited patterns of inequality make harder to dislodge the class inequalities upon which the tension between merit, equal life chances and family autonomy supervenes.

Yet arguably, this leaves out of account the factors identified above as primarily matters of recognition or contribution, rather than distribution. From the point of view of equality of life chances, what is troubling about inter-generational inequality is not simply that it sustains a distribution of scarce opportunities that favours the already advantaged. It is the extent to which it defines in advance the contributions which those from less advantaged backgrounds are able to make – what they are able to *do*. This is one reason why class-based differentials in children’s school performance are so dismal from the point of view of social justice. The workings of this are borne out in longitudinal ethnographic studies such as those compiled in Annette Lareau’s *Unequal*

⁹ Vallentyne and Lipson respond to Fishkin’s trilemma by arguing that of the three principles, it’s family autonomy which, for liberals, has to go.

Childhoods (2011). Lareau's study of the experiences of children from twelve different families of varying class backgrounds in the same contemporary US city, finds clear class divides in the ways in which children are brought up and oriented towards the world. "For working-class and poor families," she writes, "the cultural logic of child-rearing at home is out of synch with the standards of institutions" (Lareau 2011, 3).

Middle-class children, parented via strategies described by Lareau as 'concerted cultivation,' gain a sense of entitlement and confidence vis-à-vis the world beyond home and school, afforded by parental stress on reasoning, self-development, and induction into adult modes of discourse and interaction. Meanwhile working-class and poor parents tend to pursue what Lareau calls 'the accomplishment of natural growth' – where the parent-child relationship features less dialogue, less micro-organization of children's lives towards developmental activities, and more freedom for children to determine how their own leisure time is spent. Both versions of childhood may be happy; both afford opportunities to develop, albeit in different ways. But by adulthood, the possibility of higher education, and entry into the job market, there is only one set of winners. Middle-class children have been equipped in advance with the kind of 'cultural repertoire,' which enables them to slip far easier into the dynamics of the worlds of business and work. They have a confidence to contribute, and thus to achieve higher-status positions affording meaningful, fulfilling work and the realization of potentials which, as we have seen, would have been evenly distributed among children of all class backgrounds at the outset. Of course, these processes are not completely rigid or uniform. As Lareau says, "Some working-class and poor youth, often with the assistance of an influential teacher, become first-generation college students. Armed with college degrees, they are able to defy the odds and become upwardly mobile" (Lareau 2011, 311). But these are variations. "Middle-class families' cultural practices, including their approach to child-rearing, are closely aligned with the standards and expectations – the rules of the game – of key institutions in society" (Lareau 2011, 311).

Why does all this matter for our present discussion? It matters because it helps encapsulate how the different modes of injustice hook up with class-based inequalities of life chances. What we find in studies such as Lareau's are analyses of the architecture on which such inequalities rest. Part of the story is to do with those with lower incomes bringing up children who themselves go on to occupy a similar economic position. But much of what we find concerns the significance and effects of recognition – how children from different class backgrounds are viewed by others, institutions and themselves, and how such patterns tend to be transmitted to subsequent generations within respective sections of society. And much of it is to do, distinctly, with contributive injustice. For as Sayer puts it, children's experience of middle-class modes of parenting and upbringing "prefigure lives of working in occupations where they are allowed to use these

reasoning powers and take decisions, and where they can deal with gatekeepers as equals” (Sayer 2009, 12). Thus, “through its influence on the distribution of abilities and skills, the unequal social division of labour [and here, we might add, the notion of equality of competitive opportunity] produces effects which appear to legitimize it.” (Sayer 2009, 12) These factors are not directly on the radar of Fishkin’s model. They loom larger than its framing allows.

Conclusion

There are indeed tensions between family autonomy and the promotion of equal life chances, and these are accentuated when we take an inter-generational view. Yet the viciousness of such tensions is not intrinsic to two principles themselves, or their relation. Their degree of ‘bite’ depends on circumstantial factors, including family influence and certain kinds of structural inequality. Thus to address the tensions need not entail a simple trade-off between family autonomy and the promotion of equal life chances. In particular, the elements of contributive injustice involved in how these different factors play out may be addressed via changes to the impacts of relevant social institutions and structures. Much of their bite would be lessened by changes to the way the labour market works (as recommended by Gomberg and Sayer) or by educational reform. These would be ways of avoiding the situation where class inequality has such a weighty and conclusive impact on the relative opportunities for children from more and less privileged backgrounds to achieve their potential across the lifespan. It is important that none of this serves to deny the value of family autonomy. It leaves intact the claim that this is a basic right, reflecting fundamental interests, and a vehicle by which distinctly valuable goods are achieved. What we do not have is any right that the operations of family autonomy might work systematically to erode the life chances of others.

There is a wider, methodological point here about the relationship between normative debates about social justice and relevant aspects of sociology and social theory. The former kind of work, often (and sometimes especially) at its most meticulous, goes on at a clear distance from the latter. As I have written elsewhere (see e.g. Calder 2008), this brings with it various potential drawbacks. One is simply that discussions of social justice are often curiously abstracted from many of the most significant contours of the landscape to which they purport to apply. Debates in political philosophy often reflect the sociological ‘common sense’ of the time at which seminal, towering texts were written. At times, this gives them the kind of anachronistic, dislocated feel of a contemporary manual of football coaching with examples taken from the great European Cup finals of the 1960s – where the referent seems out of sync. But the point carries more than just a chronological aspect. It runs deeper: political philosophers do not, typically, feel that they ‘need’ much sociology. Another drawback is that at the ‘purely’ conceptual level, the notion that normative discussions swing free of, or can be conducted without reference to, contested

aspects of social facticity and ontology is itself far more difficult to sustain than is suggested by the presuppositions underlying much of the most technically expert work in normative argument. Normative discussions of equality which do not factor in the best contemporary understandings – theoretical and empirically based – of the workings of social class might be as elegant and point-missing as a beautifully executed coaching manual written as if the game were still played as it was in 1963. Spending time with the complexities of class inequality makes demands on normative theories. As we find when navigating the relationship between family autonomy, class fate and wider considerations of social justice, those demands are vital.

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