

The Influence of Socioeconomic Factors on Perceptions of Equal Opportunity

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Abstract

God's greatest creation is human life. In a sociological/cultural sense, one aspect is reproduction and food, and the other is education. In this case, food and reproduction are for the maintenance and transmission of culture. And in education, culture is preserved and transmitted. In the sociological and philosophical fields of equality of opportunity, socioeconomic status explains how and why the perception and experience of "equal opportunity" varies. The relationship between educational innovations and economic growth has become a popular topic in development economics, especially for developing countries seeking effective ways to increase economic growth by developing human capital. This research aims to understand the perspectives of different social groups on equal opportunity and the impact of socio-economic factors on it. This research primarily focuses on socio-economic factors and their impact on the perceptions of equal opportunity. The researcher used Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, and other academic search engines to locate relevant materials. Considering multiple studies, we focused on research that explored the illusion of equality, educational opportunities, and the socio-economic impact of equal educational opportunities. After setting these parameters and collecting relevant materials, the researcher used narrative strategies to synthesize them and clarify the findings. The more positive opportunities people have, the more likely they are to have higher income, education, employment level, and cultural/social capital. Members of disenfranchised/marginalized communities, and their socio-structural barriers, are a review documenting the gap between policy and practice, which is persistent, as the practice of legally protecting people from discrimination does little to prevent the social, personal, and discrimination dysfunction it causes. The most obvious example of inequality is education, and within it, the multidimensional barriers of poverty, geographical remoteness, language, caste, disability, and social exclusion are prevalent. To assess the potential for equal

opportunity, one must look beyond legally mandated non-discrimination policies to see whether the socio-economic and structural barriers that limit equal opportunity have been adequately addressed. All human beings are inherently valuable. Furthermore, equal opportunity depends on the social configuration and the people in it, and is therefore relative. This paper attempts to bring to the fore the complexities surrounding the notion of equality of opportunity in today's world, which are shaped by the concerns highlighted.

Keywords: *Equality, Opportunity, Social class, Perception, and Socio-economic status.*

Introduction

Equal opportunity is the basis of all democracies, but it's a hotly debated issue. Equal opportunity means that every person has an equal chance to access the same opportunities, regardless of their social status. However, social status, perceptions, and experiences influence a person's view of equal opportunity (Romers, 1998). There are two main components of life: the biological (or sociological), which is transmitted through food and reproduction, and the cultural (or sociological), which is transmitted through education. It is education that increases a person's intelligence and knowledge, which the person can use to influence the world for good or ill. Singh and Choudhary (2015) describe education as one of the major "life processes" of human beings, just as many life processes are important in the biological sense.

The complexities of defining and rationalizing equality and equal opportunity, as well as the discussions surrounding them, raise many questions. In the context of the debate on equality and discrimination, there is a clear lack of clarity about the multiple levels of definitions and methodology used. For example, much of the philosophical debate around equality of opportunity has been directed at the question of "why" people strive for greater equality (Young, 2001).

Research has shown how various factors shape educational inequality. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds perform poorly in all three basic areas of education: math, reading, and science. Furthermore, students with learning disabilities are less likely to pursue higher education preparatory courses than their peers (Cook et al., 2023). Voting, education, economics, and women's and racial policies enable governments and other authorities to justify individual and group evaluations of equal opportunity and equality. In short, for equality to exist, individuals must be treated equally, and as a result of all this research, it clearly points out that individuals should be treated equally and fairly. Deontological ethics, in its simplest form, states that "people are equal and should be treated equally" (Scanlon, 1996).

The above framework raises two questions, such as providing people with equal opportunities. First, there is the question of whether people value equal opportunities. People who hold such a view will argue for equal education, equal public benefits, equal resource distribution, etc. All of these have profound implications for the labor market, democratic citizenship preparation, and overall well-being. Second, there is the question of whether, in a democracy, people should have equal life chances regardless of their social groupings—class,

race, ethnicity, etc. The ideal of equal educational opportunity is also often ambiguous and subject to criticism (Jenks, 1988). Broader conceptual constructs, such as status, self-efficacy, and the ability to explain performance gaps, are important in shaping the set of beliefs that students rely on to navigate unequal structures (Widerkehr, 2015).

In another case, a unique neighborhood, shared or neighbourly relationships, or a unique worldview about the opportunity structures of a peer group can serve to maintain and perpetuate a particular socioeconomic status (Chetty et al., 2014). Empirical studies of self-perception reveal systematic differences by gender, ethnicity, and class that are associated with the likelihood of obtaining higher education, highlighting the importance of subjective indicators in predicting actual educational achievement (Braman & Destin, 2016).

The opportunity visibility paradox affects social fragmentation, political engagement, and support for (or against) social welfare policies (Alesina et al., 2018). Researchers argue that, in the United States, people misperceive the level of intergenerational income stability and, to a large and almost unfair extent, assume that economic opportunity and the potential for economic mobility are unique to children of different social classes and unequal economic circumstances. Furthermore, a person's social class affects the amount of information they access, including television and other media, and, to varying degrees, their perceptions of social mobility and social networks (David, 2018).

Perceived inequality and the overall economic state of society are factors that policymakers, educators, and social advocates aiming for more equitable systems should consider. Nearly 80 percent of survey respondents in 27 OECD member countries believed that action was needed to reduce inequality and secure equal opportunities, indicating that respondents were concerned about prevailing opportunity systems (OECD, 2022).

Those who analyze patterns of social status often refer to income, level of education, occupation, and jobs held. These metrics also express the material resources available and the position within social relations, culture, and organizational systems (Bourdieu, 1986). A recent phenomenon is the perception of opportunity in terms of the different ways and constraints experienced by people at different levels of the social hierarchy. People at higher levels of the social hierarchy report a sense of opportunity as if there were almost no constraints. In contrast, people at lower levels of the social hierarchy experience significantly higher levels of real constraints on available opportunities (Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2025). The multiplicity of socio-economic elements that define opportunity perceptions in relation to mechanisms is complex. On the one hand, there is a considerable literature to support the claim that an individual's degree of social mobility, or conversely, social mobility, significantly determines the level of trust in the propositions of a just and equitable social system (Gugushvili et al., 2021).

Having different types of capital (cultural, economic, or social) helps in the creation or maintenance of social hierarchies, and high culture interests can be used to build social ties with larger social groups or institutions that are a means of generating significant or supportive social mobility or professional advancement (Meulemann, 2021). Such support networks negatively offset social structures that restrict social mobility (or social advancement). This phenomenon can be explained by the resource paradox: the higher the social capital, the higher the social

resources (in this case, social resources), which leads to an unequal distribution of social resources (Hanibuchi et al., 2023).

National and regional attitudinal studies show that while there is a consistent belief that education is a valuable resource, there is also a belief that this resource is not universally accessible, and these perceptions are dependent on the individual's socio-economic status and minority status (Kurt & Arastaman, 2024). Deservingness perceptions are, to a certain extent, knee-jerk responses that, for some, justify the degree of justice that the existing social order provides and the degree of inequality that the social order mediates (Tejero-Peregrina et al., 2025).

These important questions will help identify key socio-economic predictors of perceived equity, how the socio-economic institutional climate interacts with individual background factors, and most importantly, guide policies and practices designed to reduce conceptual and physical barriers to participation. Institutional cues of inclusion have been documented to have a positive impact on academic perceptions and motivation, underscoring the value of access-oriented, perception-focused research (Alsaleh et al., 2025).

The combination of social, economic, and cultural capital can give people a sense of inequality because it affects how social resources are processed, that is, how they are generated, used, and created. To date, most empirical research has focused on single regions of the world, limiting it to one social group or one social class. The perception of inequality is at the root of social inequality, and systems designed to reduce it, particularly in social welfare and education, have minimal impact on the changing dynamics within the system. Most empirical socio-economic research has failed to provide a framework for understanding inequality through the lens of social opportunity.

This research examines the understanding and definitional constraints of the concept of equal opportunity. It questions the acceptance of equal treatment and seeks to justify the obsession with improving the plight of the most disadvantaged. The research focuses on a deontological approach that demands equal treatment for all individuals. The research acknowledges that something can indeed be valued and asks why certain individuals or groups are given preference. The research aims to address the lack of sophistication experienced by most equal opportunity analysts and to address the conditions necessary to achieve meaningful equal opportunity. The current divide between research focused on socioeconomic status and the notion of equal opportunity is that it is free from the construction of multidimensional socioeconomic status (cultural capital, social networks, etc.); it focuses almost exclusively on Western contexts; and it ignores temporal perception gaps.

Research Objectives

This study aims to address these gaps through the following objectives.

1. To examine the multidimensional impact of socioeconomic factors on perceptions of equal opportunities across diverse demographic groups.
2. To explain how socio-economic conditions shape perceptions of whether opportunities are genuinely equal.

3. To investigate how the relationship between socioeconomic factors and opportunity perception varies across different social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Research Questions

1. How do major theoretical traditions conceptualize equality of opportunity?
2. In what ways do socio-economic factors shape people's perceptions of equal opportunity, particularly in education?
3. Why can equal opportunity appear present in policy while remaining unequal in practice?

Methods and Materials

Considering the existing literature instead of gathering new primary data, this study took a desk review/narrative review approach. This document details the literature search in the academic materials reviewed from Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest, and focuses on the literature with socio-economic factors, equitable opportunities, and educational attainments. The materials reviewed were also thematically synthesized with respect to some of the key conceptual literature frameworks about the materials (e.g., basic equality, social democracy, Marxian, structural-functionalist, and liberal theories of justice and opportunity, etc.) and others.

The researcher used Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest and other academic search engines to find relevant materials. Considering several studies, we narrowed our focus to research that explores the socio-economic impact on the illusion of equality and educational opportunities (and the equal educational opportunities). After the researcher set these parameters and collected the relevant materials, he/she/they employed narrative strategies to synthesize the materials and articulate the findings. This study is based on several key ideas to demonstrate the socio-economic impact on the feeling of opportunities. In the equality theories, these ideas center around the fundamental conditions required to achieve equal opportunity. From the democratic theory, it is justified that there has to be equal participation among the members of a community. In Marxist theory, the focus is on the economic configuration of the systems and the class struggle that produces and reproduces social systems of structural inequities. From a structural-functional theory, inequality is analyzed based on the inequitable distribution of opportunities in a social system.

We analyzed Marx's writings regarding the intersection of capitalism, class, and the inequitable distribution of access to education and healthcare resources. This is important to understand the gap in future expectations of people with low and high incomes. The Marxist literature that was used to analyze the socio-economic inequalities and resource deprivation, at least with regard to a given level of opportunity, helps bridge/access literature at different levels of socio-economic inequity and resource deprivation. The literature brings to light the socio-economic dimension of the inequalities that are hidden behind the so-called 'opportunity structures' that exist (or at least are proclaimed to exist by the systems and institutions in question). This portion of the literature is based on the hypothesis of the absence of a 'meritocracy' assumption. This portion discusses the research methodologies, the analytical frameworks, and the narrative structures used to capture the problem in its entirety.

Results and Discussion

In promoting social democracy, democracy advocates closing the wealth gap. However, this social democracy, closing the wealth gap, is not promoting economic inequity. In social democracy advocacy, social inequity is the divided structure of society, meaning that everyone should not be discriminated against, should not be denied an education, job, healthcare, housing, government assistance, etc. No discrimination or inequity should occur on the basis of one's sex/gender, race/ethnicity, or social class/wealth. Within social democracy, both advocacy and sustaining inequity is a way of life. Social democrats advocated for the ability of every member of the society to attend school, free of poverty. Education has always been, and continues to be, a most powerful social democracy advocate, and within education, democracy has always strongly advocated the principle of meritocracy, socially advocating the principle of not being tied to family, class, or social rank, decreasing society's inequitable conditions through skills and effort.

Marx saw social order and social hierarchies as something agreeable, as positive social relations. In his view, social control, exploitation (in the work economy), and subjugation do not exist in the social order. One of the inseparable components of his philosophy, economics, and politics is social inequality within classless systems in which everyone is in the same class. The social, economic, and class positional ties of people and the social production of a society without social and economic classes indicate the elimination of private property and the associated exploitation of people in class-structured societies. Under these circumstances, people should have the same opportunities to work and would be compensated based on their productivity, meaning that everyone would be on the same level of result. Consequently, in his analysis, the definition of working class/ social class and equal working opportunities denotes the position outside of the class-dominated societies. This is not, as liberal inclined constitutions imagine, an abstraction of the existing laws of society. From his standpoint, private property in the means of production is to be abolished.

Before defining educational opportunities, it is necessary to obtain some preliminary understanding of an opportunity. An opportunity is an attainable objective concerning an individual or group of individuals and some obstacles that can be removed through some effort (Westen, 1985). A Dalit student may experience some obstacles in being educated because of his/her/their residence in a rural setting, his/her/their family's poverty, or language difficulties. The realization of equal opportunities in education depends on three critical elements, namely, the right agents, the right objective, and the right obstacles. Suppose the objective is to secure a place in a highly competitive university and the school is the agent. In that case, it is expected that there will be only academic criteria for securing a place, namely, a school leaving examination, and a fee for the admission process. No one should be discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, religion, or because they are a woman. Equal opportunity exists the moment there is a level playing field for all applicants to contend only with relevant issues like an admission test as opposed to irrelevant issues like race or ethnicity.

To illustrate, consider a child from the Dalit caste and a child from a rich family. Assume they've both the same chances for acceptance to a college, and the only requirement is a test. The Dalit child, however, is subjected to discrimination, and therefore there is no equity. The Education Act and Equal Opportunity. (Gilleard, C. 2020).

Mail equality of opportunity, or a person's opportunity to achieve a goal, regardless of their race, background, etc., should be protected. Most people consider this to relate to discrimination and the accessibility of education. It is not enough to consider discrimination, societal norms, the informal rule of the game, and the result of these factors on the quality of education. The prevailing view in Nepal that schools are a reflection of society, and that society's norms and ethnic division are a dominant problem in education, is only partially correct. If we are to achieve our objectives, we must be concerned about the educational opportunities we offer to people.

Meritocratic beliefs hold that means of education should be allocated based on a person's merit, which is defined by acceptance criteria or achievement (aptitude) testing. This way of thinking is fundamentally harmful when it comes to children's ability to develop and practice social skills and interact with their peers. It does not consider the notion that knowledge in and of itself is enough to make one worthy of a social position. Even more troubling is that this social theory is applied to young children. They need to acquire mastery of the skills in this sphere, and reading is not about a person's social worth.

Within the liberal principle of equality of opportunity, Rawls has a particular formulation of it, which he calls fair equality of opportunity. It means that social arrangements should be so that all roles are structurally open, and individuals who are equally qualified and motivated are to be given more or less the same chances to fill those roles, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy (Rawls, J. 1971). It means that all members of the society are treated as equally important and that the social arrangements and roles are the objectives, and the diminishing factor is the social class origin of the people.

The main objective of potential gap closers is to assist children in recognizing the existence of an achievement gap. Children of lesser economic status were just as competent as their economically privileged counterparts. The Rawlins principle of equitable fairness in opportunity aims to eliminate the economic and social class/background obstacles to educational success. Thus, for the first time, equitable fairness in opportunity radically introduced the idea of educational opportunity equality. The contention surrounding the definition of educational opportunity stems from two fundamental aspects. One is the divergence in the objective, and the second is the manner in which the concept of educational opportunity describes the situation whereby, with a similar endowment, different individuals should attain the same outcome. Regarding goal formulation, the first concern is the different variables that define the individual, which include class, religion, geography, and social and economic status. The state prioritizes these in instituting order to people's needs and progress (Heath & Ridge, 1983).

A consideration of norms is pertinent here. For Rawls (2009) regarding power being absent in a measure of well-being, and thus, inequality, is strong, but the combination of welfare and

equality via primary goods is weak. He, therefore, proposed as a substitute “normative” focus, “equality of opportunity for welfare.” In saying this, he speaks of opportunity in terms of the capability of a person to go beyond welfare/its distribution and realize fully. He aligns with those who advocate for a focus on guiding the chances of the self-motivated. Sen extends beyond Rawls who justified equality of opportunity concerning welfare, and even beyond Mill, who addressed individual enjoyment.

Family and diversity caring values may merge and create problems in these kinds of philosophical debates. In the quest for equal opportunity, how far do parental rights extend? Such arguments, from a Marxist perspective, have no standing because in the end, there is no way to equalize the outcome of such a process (Katál, 2013). Family income, parents' schooling, and residential region have been linked to differences of students' perception of the degree of educational opportunity which indicates multiple channel of social origin affecting the perception of equity (Avcı & Özbaş, 2013). The core of this meta-analysis is that the notion of equality serves the dominant social classes to keep the order. It does not address the needs of all; it only ensures that, irrespective of the social class one is in, one can access the different social classes and means of social production, and have the rights to operate on the potential of the society. As such, the concept of equal opportunity is a mirage.

Conclusion

The new argument simply state that to see if there is equal opportunity, one cannot simply determine if there are no discriminatory rules. One has to see if the socio-economic and structural frameworks are strong enough to support equal opportunity. The synthesis in this research is supportive of the argument that the notion of “equal opportunity” shall still be seen as an unfinished and enduring social construct in the context of unequal educational systems. Policies should be recommended to improve access, and to socio-economically remove the barriers that are obstructing opportunity and are likely forming people's perceptions of justice and equity.

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