

To: Institute for Social Inventions 24 Abercorn Place, London NWS 9XP

Proposed Social Invention: Random Selection

Category (1) Ideas

A method of ensuring a fair distribution of jobs, council housing, places in education and in many other situations where individuals are selected for benefits. The Problem: Bias and discrimination are all too evident in many situations:- In council house allocation, - in the awarding of local authority jobs at all levels, - in admissions to University. The results show that being white, male, of a certain age improves your chances of selection. There are many other dimensions of discrimination besides race, sex and age. Sexual preference, disability, even being physically less than perfect - too fat, too short, left handed are recognised as disadvantages, which can blight your chances.

The present response:

Negative discrimination - laws and rules which excluded women, catholics, blacks - are by now mostly eliminated (some minor exceptions remain e.g. male, Anglicans as monarch). This in theory means that everyone can aspire any job, house or other benefit without fear of exclusion. It has long been recognised that the result is still far from fair - women, blacks, religious minority groups are still excluded from a fair share.

Various forms of positive discrimination have been implemented.

- Commissions like the CEE EOC have been set up and funded.
- Local authorities establish committees and sections to deal with women, blacks, gays,
- Racism and sexism awareness training is imposed on employees.
- Contract compliance is used.
- 'Race Inspectors' are appointed.
- Compensatory training schemes for women, for failed police recruits and others are set up.

This list is far from exhaustive and is sometimes derisively referred to as the 'race relations industry'.

Another tack which is tried is to rely solely on objective criteria. Council Houses are allocated on a points system. Personnel text books lay great emphasis on the check lists of points to be satisfied by suitable candidates.

Difficulties with the present responses

The present responses are having some effect in ensuring black policemen, bus inspectors, gay tenants and so on. But there are two major problems with positive discrimination.

- the policy is not popular. Many from the majority feel outraged that their children should be 'indoctrinated' by 'perverts'. Many do not feel that they have to answer for their behaviour. There is a strong possibility that the current equality movement could be swept away by a tide of populism.

- at present, only gender, race and, to a lesser degree, sexual preference are covered by equality movements. There remains many more dimensions of unfair treatment to be 'discovered'.
- age discrimination has always existed and been acknowledged.
- ugliness, especially fatness makes it more difficult to be selected.
- short stature can also be a disadvantage.
- being left handed certainly has linguistic discriminatory overtones.

Even well-meaning liberals feel uneasy about current policies of positive discrimination. There is something which does not feel right about the whole 'industry' that violates the cherished principle of equality.

The difficulty with objective criteria are several

- purely objective criteria which cover all significant aspects are impossible.

Bureaucratic discretion is still necessary

- arbitrary cut off points mean minute differences of circumstances can lead to huge differences in outcome.
- cheating, bribery, lying are encouraged.

There is a residual belief in rationality - given enough information a precise check list or points count can be contrived. It has to be accepted that there are severe limits to such rationality and that checklist points are subject to wide bands of error.

Neither positive discrimination nor objective criteria can be an adequate or satisfactory response to unfairness in selection procedures.

Proposed Invention : RANDOM SELECTION

Statisticians will tell you that only one 'fair' method exists of selection a single item from a population - random selection. Randomly selecting a single playing card from a deck of 52 is widely understood. Selecting 1 job applicant from a field of 52 could similarly be contrived.

Two modifications to a pure random selection method could be used

1. - minimum criterion; the absolute minimum qualifications, age, experience or whatever could be laid down in advance and published to the candidates.

These criteria should ideally be objective and verifiable. To avoid unreasonably high criteria an "in-practice minimum" standard could be set - entrance criteria to be no higher than the least well qualified current post holder, tenant etc.

2. - weighted chance according to rank.

Candidates or applicants could be interviewed or awarded points as with present schemes. Instead of awarding the post to the "best" candidate, each would be given a 'rank' 1st, 2nd, 3rd Tied ranks would be possible. This could form the basis for a weighted random selection e.g. 1 = 10 chances, 2 = 5 chances, 3=3 chances, 4 and on chance.

The modifications could operate singly or together in any selection procedure.

Discussion on Random Selection

- Novelty : the idea is not such a new one. Juries are chosen in a somewhat random manner. Many European countries select young men for compulsory military service using a 'ballot' - random selection. Promotion by strict seniority, primogeniture (inheritance by the first born) are chance-driven, accidents of birth.
- Random selection is very simple and speedy. The actual drawing out could become a form of ceremonial, replacing the largely ritualistic nature of today's selection by interview.
- Bribery of officials is impossible so long as true randomness is ensured. No-one can predict the next fall of true dice.
- The upsets and morale lowering effect of failure will be alleviated, the spurious superiority felt by the winners toned down. Educational psychologists have long noted the 'halo-effect' and its damaging obverse. - the "industry" set up to promote equality can be scrapped, their objectives having been achieved by other means.

The main problems are presentational: 'Random' has overtones of unfairness, even wickedness. A terrorist bomb is described as 'random terror'. "Its nothing better than a lottery" is meant to describe an ultimate unfairness. People wish to be treated "on their merits" which is a covert way of saying that they wish their merits to be given special treatment.

There is only one method which can ensure a fair outcome which treats people as equally as their measurable merits deserve - that demonstrably fair method is Random Selection.

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(note this text has been scanned, with improved word-processing, but not altered textually)