

# Are We Really Free to Choose Our Own Career Path?

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**Abstract:** This essay aims to discuss whether citizens are really free to choose their own career paths. In this essay, the word 'free' will be elaborated and further explored. This essay focuses more on the sociological exploration of free choice of career, and this essay places the emphasis on working class people, black people, and women. The conclusion is that the above-mentioned people are not truly free to choose their careers.

**Keywords:** Free, Career path.

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## 1. Introduction

The freedom of job choice has become a heated topic in the 21st century. This essay aims to discuss if we are free to choose our career path[1]. Before the discussion, we need to firstly interpret the meaning of this question and the correlation between the term 'free' and people in the modern society. First of all, the meaning of 'free' can be a broad concept, but in this question the 'free' represents people can choose any careers that they want. 'We' in this question can be explained as the individuals in the modern society especially for those people who are in the career decision-making period. The reason that the topic is so important is that different scholars pose different attitudes towards the freedom of job choices, and this essay will specifically evaluate this question and draw the conclusion. This essay begins to explain the term neoliberalism which is the political ideology used by most of capital countries in the world(Adams,2014). Then, there are three perspectives for this question, namely working class people, black and minority ethnic groups people and women. After that, the correlation between the Great Recession caused by neoliberal policies and unemployment issue will be explained(Furlong, 2015). Subsequently, the conclusion part will summarize the entire essay and give the response to the question[2].

## 2. Neoliberalism

In the modern society, most of societies in the world are capital societies and the mainstreaming ideology of capital society is the neoliberalism. The neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices which advocates the freedom for individual entrepreneurs, free markets and free trade, since in this way human well-being can best be advanced(Harvey,2005,p.2). In the perspective neoliberals, what the state needs to do is to supply subjects that private sectors do not have, such as land, water, health care. Meanwhile, the state also requires to guarantee the safety of citizens, the legal structure and the security of private properties[3]. The state intervention towards the market ought to be minimum, because the market has the mechanism to finely operate itself, and also some people may distort state intervention in order to achieve their own benefits(Harvey,2005,p.2). In this context, people are supposed to have the liberty to choose any careers, while many social issues trigger them to choose less satisfied jobs and careers, and they cannot make any changes. Some

scholars have the optimistic attitudes towards neoliberalism. The truth is that the neoliberalism also brings many difficulties and obstacles to individuals(Adams,2014). In the environment within neoliberalism, the high competition exists in the market. The high quality goods are scarce which means that the supply is limited but the demand is unlimited.

Therefore, high quality goods and resources tend to set high price to customers. In this case, individuals who have no money cannot choose high quality goods, while rich individuals have the privilege to choose high quality goods. This phenomenon in the society can be named social inequality. The social inequality is the main problem of neoliberalism, since the market does not consider about least-advantaged people who are unequally treated[4].

## 3. Achievement Ideology

According to McLeod(2018)'s evidence, the achievement ideology represents that individuals with open and fair opportunity can succeed through their own efforts and endeavors in American society which is the nation that strongly advocates neoliberalism. In neoliberals' perspectives, the success is based on merits. Meanwhile, the ambition and ability can determine whether or not this individual can gain the success. The education creates the equal opportunity for everyone in the society, thus everyone has the chance to achieve upward mobility that means the transition from lower class to middle or upper class, and working class children will not inherit the social inequality and social status from their parents if they work diligently and put much efforts on study and career. Therefore, some scholars reckon that people in the neoliberal society are free to choose the career path[5].

However, other scholars criticize the optimism attitude of some scholars towards neoliberalism. Lamont(2019) states that the phenomenon of growing inequality is ubiquitous in American society. The American dream that everyone can obtain the success seems to be a lie to working class citizens. The American dream was useful in Post-World War 2, since the economy of America grew rapidly and the significant number of job occupations were created for individuals, thus individuals have the opportunity to achieve upward mobility and get rid of poverty. Whereas, in the 21st century, the gap between the rich and the poor enlarges and the social inequality is increasingly severe(Lamont,2019,p.664).

## 4. Factors Impede Free Choice of Career

### 4.1. Social class

Even though achievement ideology seems to bring the hope to individuals, working class people in reality still suffer the severe social inequality especially the inequality in education. The education inequality is the biggest obstacle for working class people to freely choose their career path[6]. The consequence of the education inequality is the social immobility and social reproduction. In this context, working class people are less likely to achieve social mobility which can be briefly explained as the transition from working class to middle or upper class, whereas the social immobility is in the opposite side, which embodies working class people hardly have the opportunity to transfer to middle or upper class(McLeod,2018). In recent years, the societal structure to some extents is constrained, and the social reproduction is ubiquitous in the modern society. The social reproduction represents that the status of the society is the passing on of social inequality across generations(Collins,2009). In particular, children tend to stay the same social status to their parents' and experience the same social inequality that their parents have. The main cause of this circumstance is the inequality in education(Lynch, & Baker,2005). The education is supposed to be public goods without profitable aims, whereas the privatization of schools change the entire education system(Adams,2014). In the market, schools are considered as commercial goods, and schools need to compete with other schools through the quality and academic achievements, which to some extents enhances the quality of education due to the fierce competition among schools(Adams,2014). However, within the competition, the high-ranking schools are recognized as the best goods and students who are customers want to choose the best goods(Lynch, & Baker,2005). Therefore, the top schools have the scarcity. With the combination of theoretical definition and realistic value, I interpret the term scarcity in this context represents that the occupations of the school are limited, but the demand of consumers are unlimited[7]. In this context, elite schools raise the entry requirement through escalating tuition fee and higher scores in entry examinations(Angus,2015). The top educational resources are merely given to affordable customers with high scores in entry examinations, which is the inequality in education(Lynch, & Baker,2005). Apart from economic reason, working class students perform poorly in entry examinations. Poor background students have subordinate educational resources. They have very limited options of schools. They can only choose schools with less tuition and requirements. The schools that are open to poor students tend to have low quality in teaching and management. The low quality teaching strategies and inappropriate learning environment result in low scores in examinations(Lynch, & Baker,2005). The unequal educational resources mainly cause individuals in this society to lose the freedom to choose high status universities[8]. According to the research from Clegg(2017), few working class students can access Russell group universities which are 24 universities in the UK with top academic and educational resources. The graduates of Russell group universities are more likely to gain well-paid jobs(Clegg,2017). Generally speaking, in this society, the qualification from higher education is considered as one of the most essential factors to determine whether individuals

can acquire adequately-paid jobs. The neoliberalism is supposed to make individuals to choose schools freely, whereas the high tuition and high entry requirements of top universities trigger working class people not to choose higher education. Without the qualification of university, the options of well-paid jobs seem not to be prepared for working class people. A large number of low-paid jobs are their only options(Furlong,2015). Therefore, these young people can merely stay in the working class that their parents are in, and rich children can acquire the similar social status to their parents', since they are born with rich resources from their parents, which is the social reproduction. In the modern society, poor individuals cannot change their social status, which represents the society with the issue of social immobility. Both social reproduction and social immobility make working class people to be disappointed towards the structure of the society, since they are given less freedom in this society compared to rich people[9].

### 4.2. Race

Similar to the situation of working class people, the black and minority ethnic group (BME) people also suffer the inequality in the society. In general, the main three obstacles prevent BME people to get rid of social immobility, namely education inequality, lack of social networks, job market discriminations. Primarily, the education inequality for BME people is similar to the situation of working class people, since a large number of BME people are economically inactive(Bhopal,2018,p.122). These BME people are mostly from poor backgrounds, and they can be considered as working class people[10]. They stay in less developed communities and have subordinate educational resources. Compared with majority number of white people, BME people have much larger difficulty to enter the higher education. Due to the subordinate educational resources, the number of BME people in Russell group universities is much lower than white people. Meanwhile, even though they successfully enter the university, BME people are less likely to have 2:1 or first class degree, which is also an important factor of competitiveness in the job market. Few BME people obtain undergraduates and postgraduates qualifications, whereas these qualifications determine whether they can acquire highly paid jobs in the job market. Besides, these qualifications can directly impact the result if they can achieve social mobility. Within highly paid jobs, these BME people can at least have the opportunity to access middle class level, while this chance is rare to catch for BME people. The second obstacle is the lack of social networks. Mostly, BME people's parents do not have strong backgrounds and social networks compared to white parents. The social network is the important factor for employees to gain lucrative jobs(Bhopal,2018,p.131). White parents from middle or upper class can provide not only financial support, but also the opportunity of high quality internship for their children in order to make these children to be more competitive in the job market. In this case, the social network represents that these rich white parents have the social connection to some professional people who can assist their children to successfully embark on the career that they are interested in, while BME people hardly have this opportunity, since BME parents do not have social networks. Thirdly, when BME people can finally graduate from the university and successfully gain the job opportunity, they still have the obstacle in the promotion[11]. BME people are less likely to

be hired as managers, directors and senior decision-making roles compared to their white colleagues (Bhopal,2018,p.128). According to these evidences, the discrimination does exist in the job market, and it negatively impact BME people's career. For most of BME people, they require to spend much more time to get promoted in comparison to their white peers. If an individual desires to have a well paid job, this individual needs to have higher education qualifications, social networks from parents, and no discrimination in the workplace, which directly shows that BME people can never become the people with lucrative jobs. Bhopal(2018) also states that BME people seem to embark on low paid job in accordance with the research by Officer for National Statistics(ONS). In 2014, 75% white people have the highest level of employment, while 54% Black African men and 59% Pakistani backgrounds men embark on low skilled jobs, and 59% BME women work in low-skilled occupations. Therefore, BME men and women do not have the freedom to choose their career paths. They are obliged to embark on low skilled and low paid jobs[12].

### 4.3. Gender

The traditional thinking of women was family-oriented and child-centered. The identification of women was someone's wife, mother or daughter, since at that time women were not allowed to attend in any societal activities, and they were excluded by the male dominant society. According to Chibnik(2021)'s research, women at that time mostly did unpaid work, namely housework and child-rearing. This process was recognized as zero economic value output by economists(Chibnik,2021,p. Be more specific, the unpaid work means individuals work with no exact monetary incomes. Therefore, housewife was seen as an unpaid job and housewives' work was defined as unpaid work. However, from my personal opinion, this research is not valid enough, since it only collects economic value data, but the economic value is not the only factor to examine the value of the work. Housewife needs to undertake a large social responsibility to raise children, manage the house and guarantee family members to have a harmonious and peaceful home. The large amount of time and energy are sacrificed for this family. The well educated children from good families can make lots of creations for this society, when they grow up, since these children are the future of this society. Thus, the contribution made by housewife is priceless towards the society[13].

Along with the development of economy, Britain has a large demand on service industry and high technology industry, In this case, the job market either prefers professional service workers or highly skilled workers, and also women are allowed to accept education and participate in workplace(McDowell,2009). In the pre-war society, working class men can easily acquire jobs that do not require higher education qualifications, while working class men without qualifications do not have the advantage in this period, and a majority of them can only embark on low paid jobs. By contrast, along with the increasing number of middle class women within higher education qualifications, a significant number of middle class women can acquire high status jobs, and they have much more options in their career compared to women in the past(McDowell,2009).

However, in the modern society, compared to men, women still have limited options in job choice(Francis,2002). This phenomenon is due to the fact that the job is sexualized, which is impacted by the traditional thinking[14]. Some kinds of jobs are considered as male work, and the some other ones are

seen as female work. For instance, engineers, scientists and architects are traditionally recognized as male work. These kinds of jobs are seen as not appropriate to women and the occupations of these jobs are not open to women. The sexualization of jobs is owing to the sexualization of academic subjects. Girls are considered as underachievement in mathematics and science subjects. Some stereotypical statement indicates that women are naturally not expert in mathematics and science learning, whereas the truth is that girls achieve higher scores than boys when girls and boys take the same subject. In accordance with(Samuelsson, & Samuelsson,2016), there are two main reasons that possibly result in girls' underachievement in mathematics. First of all, the classroom setting is not appropriate for girls to learn mathematics. The good classroom setting is that students are encouraged to cooperate with classmates and teachers assist students to understand the learning contents, whereas the classroom setting turns to the interaction between boys and teachers. In a classroom with boys and girls, teachers hardly draw much attention to girls, since boys are off-tasks learners and they tend to be disruptive and naughty in the class. In this case, teachers attach more importance to boys. According to the research, boys can gain have higher performance in mathematics learning this kind of environment. On the contrary, girls are on-task learners and they tend to be obedient to teachers. They need teachers' attention, but most of girls are not involved and ignored by teachers and classmates in the mathematics class(Samuelsson, & Samuelsson,2016, p.29). Hence, girls do not have much confidence and interest in mathematics learning, thus they gradually have low performance in the examinations. Secondly, girls do not expect to embark on jobs that require science and mathematics knowledge, so they do not pay attention to these subjects. Compared to girls, boys show large interest in engineer, architect and scientists, which demand mathematics and science knowledge. This phenomenon is not only from the individual interest but also from the traditional thinking of the entire society. The traditional thinking labels these jobs as male jobs, which encourages men to pursue these jobs, while women in traditional thinking need to pursue jobs with arts, literacy and education. In the traditional thinking, on the one hand, women are emotional, subjective and soft. On the other hand, men ought to be rational, objective and hard(Francis,2002,p.83). However, this stereotypical thinking directly impacts women's choice in subjects and their expectations on careers. Therefore, women's job choice is relatively not free in comparison to men. The classroom setting and the traditional thinking limit women's choice in career[15].

### 4.4. Uncertainty in the self-correcting market

The neoliberals advocate that the market itself can operate well within its own mechanism and the government intervention is unnecessary, whereas the self-correcting market has the uncertainty and makes job seekers and employees not to have the sense of security. For instance, the Great Recession in 2008 is the byproduct of neoliberal policies and self-correcting market(De Vogli, & Owusu, 2015). During the period of Great Recession, the job occupations are limited for people to choose. A large number of private sectors go bankrupt, and people are unemployed and also graduates cannot easily find adequately paid jobs. The labour market needs low-skilled workers and highly skilled workers under recession, which results in 'hollowing

out' in the labour market. The 'hollowing out' describes a circumstance that the job market demands either low-skilled workers or high technology skilled workers and the middle level jobs are not required due to the continuous recession in the economy(Furlong,2015,p.533). In this case, increasing number of young people who are not able to embark on high technology careers are less likely to attend in higher education, since the low-skilled workers that do not require qualifications are welcomed, while the low-skilled work provides low incomes to employees. Therefore, in the self-correcting market, young people have the larger risk to be unemployed than the generation of their parents.

## 5. Conclusion

From my personal perspective, though the achievement ideology and American dream motivate individuals to achieve upward mobility, the social inequality still exists and prevents working class people to freely choose their career path. Besides, black and minority ethnic groups(BME) people still encounter the inequality and discrimination in the study and workplace. Females also experience the unequal treatment from the society. Furthermore, the uncertainty of neoliberal economy triggers Great Recession, which results in high unemployment rate and narrows people's job options. Therefore, in the modern society, we are not free to choose career path.

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