

family

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Abstract

This brief article doesn't attach much importance to the use of empty service jargon, but it argues that "equal" is very different - though carelessly used, it stands for very important ideas. The article discusses our use and misuse of the notion of "equal". **Keyword: Attitudes**

Behind the word ~ 'Equal'

Steve Dowson this time looks - rather nervously - behind the word 'equal'.

Empty service jargon doesn't deserve to be treated with much respect. 'Equal' is very different. Though carelessly used, it stands for very important ideas. This dash through or skirt around - more than two thousand years of philosophical and political debate is likely to tread on every reader's most precious beliefs. Regard it a working document!

The idea of equality between people crops up in services for people with learning difficulties - and in many other areas of life - as an ideal to work for, though it does not yet exist. We also hear people proclaiming the neat but almost empty slogan, "Everybody is equal" - as if by saying the words, the wish would come true. But what do they think they mean by it?

Do they mean that everybody is equal in *ability*? Consider any skill or talent, and it is plain that we are not all equal. Certainly, we can challenge the connection built into our society's values between personal ability and personal value, but that's a different argument (see below): or we can point out that people who are labelled as disabled still have abilities - sometimes to a much higher level than the average. We can also try to broaden the range of assets by which people are commonly measured, so that a person's ability to bring wisdom or joy to others, for example, would count as much as their talent for earning loads-a-money. But none of these arguments shows that people are equal in ability. Although VIA supporters are sometimes accused of denying "the reality of the handicapped", it has never been VIA policy to pretend that people with learning difficulties don't have impairments.

Do they mean that everybody is equal in *power*? That seems to be the claim of some non-disabled people who consider themselves as 'equal' members of self-advocacy groups for people with learning difficulties. Almost certainly the people with learning difficulties have less power: They are disadvantaged not only by their disability, but also by their devaluation, and by the lifetime's experience of being powerless. All of us learn strategies for getting our own way: Those used by people with learning difficulties are sometimes termed 'challenging behaviours'. Non-disabled people are likely to have a wider range of strategies - more forceful arguments, more subtle manipulations - and these very easily tip the balance of power yet further.

They may mean that everyone is equal in *value*. Ultimately this is a matter of faith, not fact. The theory of Social Role Valorisation (SRV) doesn't offer proof. SRV explains the process of social devaluation by which some people come to be judged as less valuable than others, but it does not positively demonstrate that people have equal value. Base your claim, if you will, on a faith that says that all people are equal in the eyes of God; or - if you can - on humanistic beliefs.

Ironically, the blithe assertion that we are all equal can get in the way of making it true. SRV tells us that we need to take positive action if devalued people are to be accepted as equal citizens. Equality between disabled and non-disabled people in self-advocacy groups would more likely be achieved if the non-disabled people kept themselves in check, or if the group had rules which checked them. None of these things can happen until people face up to the reality of inequality.

Of all the practical strategies for achieving equality, '*Equal Opportunities*' is the most fashionable and elaborate. The logic is that, in a competitive society - which, like it or not, is the sort we live in - there is justice in trying to make sure that people are able to compete on equal footing. If life is a race to the winning post, then equal opportunities means that everyone starts from the same point.

That's fine for people equally able to run the race once it has started; not so good for people who will always be at a disadvantage. Equal Opps. has been so much promoted in the last few years that it could be taken as the only kind of equality worth striving for. And notice that, in the Thatcherite '80s, we were all signed up to a concept of equality which accepts society as a competition in which

the most talented deserve to take the winnings.

But there are alternatives. and *equality of outcome* is a front-runner. Here the focus is not on how things start, but on how they turn out. If people are to be equal in the right to such basics as housing, education, and employment, some people will need extra help: Positive discrimination.

Although - as recent debate in the US has shown - equality of outcome has difficult implications, it provides a challenging but reasonable judge of policy. Does policy ensure that in education, housing and employment, the overall pattern for disabled people follows the pattern for the rest of the population? As we know only too well, UK policies aren't even attempting to make people equal in that sense.