

create a feeling of inequality that goes beyond ground-level reality. I have called this ‘the illusion of decline’ (Sato 2003). When a long-term trend toward decreasing inequality comes to an end, that in itself is enough to give people the impression that inequality is increasing. People are particularly prone to such an illusion since inequality of opportunity is something that is supposed in principle to have no place in modern society.

This illusion is itself the long-term product of long-term change, an effect of the kind of changes that have occurred in real life. The content of change in social mechanisms, what exactly has changed – these things are replete with meaning. We may assume that the illusion of decline interplays with these real-life changes to affect the way people feel about things.

Looking at change in the actual content of society, we discover another interesting fact about inequality. As I mentioned earlier, the end of the 1990s saw an explosion in consciousness of inequality in Japan. In other words, people felt that inequality was widening more sharply than it really was; until then most people had thought of Japan as a relatively equal society.

In this previous orthodoxy too, we can discern a disjunction between reality and perception. As Hiroshi Ishida (1993) and Kazuo Seiyama (1994) have pointed out, even in the days when Japan was thought of as an equal society, Japanese levels of intergenerational occupational mobility were low enough to make Japanese society look not particularly equal when compared with those of other industrialized countries such as Britain and Germany. In other words, during from 1970s to early 1980s Japan felt more equal than it really was. There was, if you like, an ‘erasure of inequality consciousness’ in those days.

Why did such a thing happen? To a sociologist, this is just as important a puzzle to solve as that of the more recent explosion of inequality consciousness. The first linguistic evidence of the erasure of inequality consciousness can be traced to the early 1970s, when the term *sōchūryū* (general middle class) started to come into vogue. In the Social Stratification and Mobility (SSM) Survey of 1975, we can clearly observe what Tōru Yoshikawa calls ‘floating status consciousness’ (Kikkawa 2006). That lost

awareness of inequality appears to have lasted for roughly thirty years, from the late 1960s to the early 1990s.

In that case, we have to consider the possibility that there was some mechanism at work in the society created by postwar Japan that made people feel inequalities of opportunity relatively lightly.

My own view is that along with demographic and macroeconomic factors such as the flow of population from country to city and the structure of an economy increasingly centered on secondary industry and its blue-collar labor force, the emergence of the post-war Japanese family and subsequent changes to its structure are also closely linked to that exaggerated sense of equality. I would argue that the post-war family was a mechanism that worked to lessen feelings of inequality, and that when that post-war family started to break up, the anesthetic effect on people's status awareness started to wear off. Population shifts and economic structural change also played a part, no doubt about that, but the family – a system directly involved with human reproduction – also was a major factor in the growing sense of inequality. Inequality of opportunity is inextricably interlinked with the family, and is therefore particularly likely to be influenced by changes in the family.

In that sense, the two great changes observed since the mid-1990s – the change in family life and population profile seen in the declining birth rate and graying society, and the change in resource acquisition and distribution so keenly studied under the rubric of 'widening inequality' – are intimately related.

4. The Family as a Threat to Equality of Opportunity

The connection between the family and inequality of opportunity is one that may be generally observed, far beyond the case of postwar Japan. As the worldwide cases of aristocracies and hereditary status and wealth clearly show, the special connection between family ties and social inequality is at least as old as recorded history and has become particularly significant since the establishment of modern society.

Modern society proclaims equality of opportunity as its fundamental

organizing principle – or to be precise, many modern societies have made that proclamation (Sato 1995, 2001). In reality, however, the family has always been an obstruction to attaining that ideal.

The first people to fully experience the depth of that contradiction were the protestant settlers who arrived in America to establish colonies in New England in the 17th century. Most of them belonged to Puritan sects that rejected the Catholic doctrines of confession, forgiveness and papal indulgence; instead they insisted that each individual would be judged by God according to the good or evil of the deeds done during his or her lifetime. Their doctrine was the principle of self-responsibility taken to extremes, but it ran up against the problem of how to theorize the discipline and education provided by parents to their children. If one believed that children grew up good or bad according to the influence exerted on them by their parents, one could hardly hope to judge good and evil at the individual level. Clearly if bad parenting set a child on the road to bad deeds, those deeds could not be viewed as the responsibility of the child alone.

Of course one could deny that influence in theological terms, but in that case there would be no reason to maintain the family – that ‘secret garden’ hidden from broader society – at all. In that case the logical thing would be to construct communal child-rearing institutions all over the colonies. It is possible to view families as subdivisions of such institutions, but at any rate there would be no need to recognize any special relationship there.

No reliable records remain, but it seems that in the 16th to 17th centuries, some of the most hard-line protestants, such as anabaptists and antinomians, did in fact try to break up the family. The Puritans who arrived in New England shared their concerns, but were too conservative to actually condemn the family system outright. Instead they were left to live with the contradiction between the principle of self-responsibility and the family system.

One approach that was tried was to include the behavior of children in the good and bad deeds of their parents. Since the good and bad deeds of children were entered in the ledger of their parents, it would follow that parents had the right and the duty to

educate their own children. This did not last long, however: for the parents it was indeed a way of reconciling self-responsibility with the family system, but for the children it flatly denied the whole principle of self-responsibility. That might seem fairly obvious to us today, but the fact that the settlers were driven into such logical contortions gives us some idea of the seriousness with which they viewed the problem.

Incidentally, the descendents of those Puritans who inhabit the present day United States have of course been just as incapable as their ancestors of solving this conundrum. The modern American ‘solution’ to this problem has been much less forgivable than the logical contortions of the founding fathers: it has been a simple matter of ignoring this glaring philosophical contradiction altogether. The Puritans could not overlook the contradiction between the principle of personal responsibility and the family – such refusal to compromise is characteristic of a true fundamentalist. Americans today, however, turn their eyes away from the contradiction, blandly state that both the family and self-responsibility are ordained by God, and [in some cases] still have the nerve to call themselves ‘fundamentalists.’ One may laugh – indeed, one can but laugh – at this classic piece of doublethink, but that is how serious the matter has become in the United States.

The system we call the family demands continuity of character between its members – for example between parents and children. That destroys the principle of self-responsibility and poses a threat to the principle of equality of opportunity.

5. How the Family Makes People Forget Inequality of Opportunity

However, my main argument lies elsewhere: for the family can also be a powerful tool for *realizing* equality of opportunity.

While it is true that the family poses a threat from the outside to the principle of equality of opportunity, that principle also contains an extremely awkward internal problem: the fact that inequality of opportunity cannot easily be *measured* with any exactitude. Since the very concept of ‘opportunity’ includes an element of uncertainty, we have to conclude that there is no certain way of ascertaining how present-day factors

such as occupation or income may affect future outcomes.

It follows that in order to accurately measure inequality of opportunity, we have to wait until the game is over and all the outcomes are known – which strictly speaking means waiting until the people we are studying, and all other members of their generation, have died. The trouble there, of course, is that even if we were able to identify some serious inequality, it would be a bit late to do anything about it.

Accurately measuring inequality of opportunity means waiting until the share of wealth possessed by each of the subjects of our study has been clearly established – which means waiting until they are dead, or until for some other reason we can be certain that there will be no further change to the resources in their possession. But waiting that long makes it impossible to correct inequalities of opportunity. That is the paradox at the heart of the principle of opportunity equality.

Conversely, if we wish to correct inequalities of opportunity, we have to intervene at a point when outcomes are not yet fully known. Policy-makers must act on the basis of an estimate that ‘there is probably some inequality here,’ and policies based on such inexact estimates will inevitably attract suspicion of injustice. Indeed, the more significant inequality is – or to put it another way, the more it affects people’s life opportunities – the more opposition will be aroused by attempts to correct it. That is because members of society who lose out when new policies are instituted will inevitably feel that something important is being taken from them on the basis of logic that rests on infirm foundations.

Those who preach equality of opportunity will always be taking a risk, and here we find one of the reasons for that. When people call for improvement or correction of society on the basis of this principle, they can easily sound as though they are speaking of something that by its nature cannot be measured, just as if it really *could* be measured. I suppose that all attempts to intervene in the workings of society are attended by uncertainty, but when it comes to correcting inequality of opportunity, the issue is so deeply entwined in every person’s life that the policy-maker has a particularly heavy responsibility to present evidence of the justness of his cause. In contrast to other spheres of policy-making, such as public works or environmental

protection, it is difficult to get away with a fuzzy compromise based on a rough idea of how the public interest might best be served. Solid evidence will be demanded, and when policy-makers respond to those demands they must do their best to at least give the impression that they know what they are talking about.¹ Just like their opponents who insist on imposing the principle of self responsibility, those who demand the correction of inequality will always be playing a rough game with logic: treating something that cannot be measured as if it could be (Satō 2005).

The Puritans were not troubled about questions of how to measure or correct inequality. For them, God was an infallible observer and recorder, who would judge the deeds of men in this world when they arrived in the next world. Society today is different. Nowadays we have to judge the deeds of men in this world while they are still in this world – which leads to the serious contradiction I have been discussing.

However, if there is someone whose personhood is linked to that of the person who is being judged; someone who can serve as a proxy of the individual or as his avatar or mini-me or ‘sub-self’; then any unfairness caused by deeds of the individual being judged can be cancelled out by measures affecting the sub-self. In truth it would probably be better to say that the *possibility* emerges of canceling out the deeds of the person being judged; but even so, as a logical grounding to a system, this approach has quite a lot of validity, I would argue.

In modern society, the notion of the individual as the basic unit of society is so well established that the notion of a sub-self is not widely accepted. However, there is a possible exception to that way of thinking. The special connection between family members, and especially between parents and children, offers a possible compromise solution to the paradox I have been discussing.

6. Fairness Derived from the Parent-Child Bond

Correcting inequalities through measures affecting a person’s children rather than the

¹ Hence the use of terms like ‘cultural capital,’ which carry the implicit assumption that something as ineffable as culture can in fact be counted like cash.

person himself: this may seem like an outrageous proposition at first glance, but in fact it is quite a realistic solution.

First of all, since inequalities do not have to be corrected via the original individual, it becomes feasible to measure inequalities after the distribution of resources to that individual has become fairly well established. This will make corrective measures more acceptable to those who have to accept negative economic consequences from them. Secondly, even if inequalities are not corrected directly on the original individual, if they are corrected through the person of his proxy, or 'sub-self,' they will carry a degree of legitimacy as measures applied to his/her descendent. In other words, if we accept the notion of a 'sub-self,' we can both measure inequality accurately and take meaningful measures to correct it.

If we treat the parent-child dyad as our unit for redistribution policy, and seek to correct imbalances of opportunity among individuals via their offspring, we can accurately measure the degree of inequality and correct it through their (sub-)selves. Admittedly, I do not envisage systems of compensation at the level of individual people, so much as reducing unequal elements in the overall game of status pursuit, thereby turning it into a fairer game. However, since the principle of opportunity equality itself evades precise definition, this imperfect approach to correcting inequality may actually be a solution that matches the nature of the problem quite well. It will never be possible to precisely compute the degree of inequality experienced by an individual. Even after death, we could hardly hope to compile a comprehensive inventory of all the different factors involved in his life – a degree of uncertainty would always remain. Rather than getting bogged down in futile debate on just how much influence that uncertainty might have on our calculations, it would be more rational to try and eradicate known sources of inequality in a new game.

Actually, people calling for equality of opportunity have always tended to show a mysteriously powerful orientation to the future, though it is hard to guess how conscious they may have been of the fact. For example, people demonstrate how unequal society has been in the past, and use that to argue about the present-day education system. While it is not exactly wrong to make that argument, strictly speaking

the case for fiddling with the school system is rather weak if one proposes to correct inequality among those for whom it has been demonstrated, since they have already left school. It would surely make better sense to take measures directly impacting on the individual, such as income redistribution etc. However, one rarely hears that argument made: instead we just hear ever more passionate debate about the school system.

This does not just apply to schools. It is impossible to make any data-based argument about opportunity inequality except regarding the period from the past to the present; yet somehow the conversation tends to drift into the zone from the present to the future. That is of course partly due to the fact that there is nothing we can do to change things that have already happened; and yet, if there were not some tacit agreement that some kind of compensation could be arranged between the present and the future, I do not suppose we would see that narrative shift into the future tense.

In a discourse much heard in postwar Japan, a person will say how the poverty of his parents when he was a child, or the large number of siblings in his family, obliged him to give up hopes of advancing to higher levels of education and obliged him to take a job that did not really appeal to him. In the future, however, opportunities will probably open up for him to make better use of his abilities, and as for his children, they will probably enjoy even greater opportunities. When one thinks in this way, it is just like believing that one is going to be compensated for inequalities suffered by one's self. It is almost like believing that one will have another chance to play the game – only this time the rules will be fairer and one will play the game through one's 'sub-self' – one's children.

7. Gender: Representing a Blank

Looking a little closer at the matter, we find that gender differences are also involved. Male or female adults may have male or female children to be their 'sub-selves,' but the way in which children represent their parents is strongly gendered.

For fathers, the 'sub-self' has usually been a son; or, where that has not been possible, a father has sometimes asked a daughter to play that role. Mothers, by contrast,

have tended to expect their sons and daughters to serve as sub-selves in rather different ways. In the postwar nuclear family, women have suffered from opportunity inequality related to gender, as well as to parental occupation, educational background etc. Consequently they expect their sons to achieve on their behalf the social status that they believe they should really have been able to attain themselves. That far they are the same as fathers, but mothers also look to their daughters to confirm the rightness of their own present situation.

In short, the meaning of a child representing its parents as a sub-self falls into two patterns divided by gender. For both fathers and mothers, boys have been the proxies of their parents in a future status attainment game that they have expected to offer greater equality of opportunity. As for girls, they have been a substitute for boys for fathers who have no sons or have not had been able to place enough hope in their sons. For mothers, girls have not only been proxies in a future game, but also a presence that offers affirmation of the mother's present role by being there to succeed to it. To a mother, in her doubly excluded role, a daughter is an ambiguous thing: the mother wants her to break out of the role, but she also wants her to choose to stay in it and thereby affirm the mother's own value (Satō 2003).

On that point, it seems plausible to argue that ways of gauging intergenerational mobility from father to son have actually been applied to generational shifts with the entire family as its unit of analysis. If so, it follows that the status of 'housewife' has naturally tended to become an external item, impossible to gauge. It is well known that the status affiliation consciousness of a married woman is influenced by the income, educational credentials etc. of her husband (see for instance Shirahase 2005, chapter 2), but I would argue that the position of a housewife bringing up her children is not only impossible to measure in terms of income or occupation, but has been a 'blank' in a much more fundamental sense. It has been taken for granted that her status is inscribed by proxy: initially her husband's status, and later the status acquired by her offspring – mainly her male offspring.

The concept of housewife status as a 'blank' is not the only thing that the logic of the sub-self brings to status theory. Consider for instance the starting point for

inter-generational mobility. Parental occupational status is often used to define that starting point. This is the base line from which the next generation's status achievements are measured. As has already been pointed out several times, this 'intergenerational mobility' is not strictly speaking between generations. It is a form of mobility within the individual's own generation, and should be thought of as measuring the shift in status from before getting a job to after.² It is just that before the individual gets a job, his status is calculated using his father's occupational status as a proxy.³

The logic of parent-child continuity crops up not just in policy-making, but also within sociology – in status research, social mobility research etc. Since sociology is modern society's way of conducting internal observation, that is hardly surprising.

8. The Postwar-type Equal Society

I hope I have now shown how social inequality is closely related to the family and to the birth and upbringing of children.

Looking at the matter historically, it is generally held that the concept of 'middle class' and 'working class' only emerged from the 1920s. Before that, there were quite a few families, mostly in the urban underclass, that could not afford to have children (see figure 1). In other words, the emergence of continuity from parent to child as an issue was itself an outcome of 'basic equalitization' (Hara and Seiyama, 1999), and the 1920s were a turning point for the Japanese family.

The population statistics tell the tale. Starting with the 1925-34 marriage cohort (couples married in that period), we see a drastic decline in the number of children born. The 1915-24 cohort averaged 5.2 children, but the 1925-34 cohort averaged only 4.6 children, and the 1935-44 cohort, just 3.2 (Saitō 1996). 'Have fewer children and bring them up properly.' This was the prevailing ethos that brought the advent of the

² It follows that in considering inequality of opportunity, the starting point of parental occupational status and the end point of child's occupational status do not need to have the same number of categories.

³ As such, it may be somewhat of an overstatement to posit parental occupational status as the status for children until they get occupations of their own. In reality the status of a person before they acquire an occupation is probably much more nebulous than that, and parental status is used as a makeshift proxy for want of anything better.

education-centered family. It was an ethos that spread widely across Japan in the postwar period. Parents worked hard to send their children to ‘good schools’ and then into jobs at ‘good companies.’ This combination of hard-working parents and hard-studying children became the de facto standard for the Japanese family.

<Figure 1 about here>

This was all made possible by the steady narrowing of differentials that continued through the postwar period. ‘Opportunity’ – that name we give to the game of acquiring and distributing resources – became gradually more equal. It consequently became possible to believe that there would be a further increase in equality in the future. It was possible to believe that one’s children would be playing in a fairer game than one had played in oneself, and would be accurately judged by society according to their own abilities.

The influence was felt not just among general members of society, but also within the academy. Sociologists developed a powerful interest in trends – that is, in how things would develop in future. As I mentioned earlier, if one is seriously interested in correcting unfairness in the person of the individual himself, then talk about the period from present to future becomes of strictly secondary importance – since it is virtually impossible to send a grown adult back to school and rewrite his educational credentials.

The fact that sociologists started showing an interest in the present-to-future time zone was not due just to sociology’s natural interest in forecasting and verification, but also because this is a crucial policy issue, of pressing importance to all members of Japanese society. How things are going to go from now on may have no direct connection with one’s self, but it is the most important issue by far to one’s ‘sub-self’ – one’s child.

By the same token, if differentials do not narrow in future, people will no longer be able to look to their children to function as proxies. Not only will unfairness arise in the child’s generation, but the parent will no longer be able to resolve unfairness

in his own generation by seeing it compensated in the one that follows. When differentials stop narrowing, not only does that generate the ‘illusion of decline,’ but it also creates serious concrete problems at these two levels.

But that is not all. At an even more fundamental level, the very nature of the family is undergoing change. It is already evident that parents can no longer take it for granted that their children will compensate for their unfulfilled aspirations through proxy attainment as ‘sub-selves.’ In this respect, too, the principle of equality of opportunity is running into some serious difficulties.

9. The end of the Postwar-type Family

There is quite a bit of data to back up my assertion that the mindset which sees children as proxies for their adults is crumbling – or, to be more precise, is becoming harder to apply.

Of the various indices, the easiest to understand is of course the dwindling birthrate. If a child is to serve as proxy to a parent, then the most natural approach to procreation is for everyone to get married and have two children, preferably one boy and one girl. Producing boys and girls to order still poses some challenges to reproductive technology, but it is now fairly easy to plan one’s family at least in terms of numbers of offspring.

Japan has always had a high marriage rate, but if we look at the age cohort born before 1900, nearly 10% of married women had no children. For the 1926-32 birth cohort, i.e. the generation that started families shortly after the war, the zero-child percentage dips below 4%, while nearly half of all married women give birth to two children. There are various factors influencing the number of children people have, but we may observe that the style of family composition emerging in this period was relatively well matched to the project of proxy attainment I have been discussing.

Recently there has been no great change in the number of children of each married couple, but the marriage rate has been falling and we have seen more people in their thirties and forties without children.

Some more telling data comes from a regular survey on 'Japanese Consciousness' conducted by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute. In the 1973 survey, only 20% agreed to 'Even if a child is born, it is better to carry on working.', but in 2003 that figure had risen to 49%. This NHK survey also found the percentage of people thinking girls should be educated to university level more than doubled, from 22% in 1973 to 48% in 2003. Meanwhile the percentage thinking that boys should be educated to university level climbed from 64% in 1973 to 72% in 1988 but fell back to 68% in 2003, thus remaining fairly even over this thirty year span, and there was only a tiny increase in those calling for boys to go to graduate school. It would appear that the rise in educational expectations for girls was not just part of a general increase, but did in fact represent a substantial narrowing of the gender gap in status attainment expectations – while doubtless leaving intact discrimination at the concrete level.

Also significant is the changing pattern of responses to a question added from the 1993 edition of the NHK survey: 'Is it only natural to have children?' In the ten years from 1993 to 2003, the percentage of people answering 'Even if one gets married, one does not necessarily have to have children' rose from 40% to 50%, while those answering 'It is only natural for married couples to have children' fell from 54% to 44%. The majority has changed sides on this issue.

<Figure 2 about here>

10. The Vanishing Future Orientation

Another striking feature of the NHK consciousness surveys has been the decline of the future orientation in people's life objectives. This item is calculated from a question asking survey respondents to choose which one of the following four statements best describes their objective in life: (1) 'Live each day freely and enjoyably'; (2) 'Pass tranquil days with people close to me'; (3) 'Put together a good solid plan and construct an affluent future'; (4) 'Join forces with everyone to make the world a better place.'

Scores for the first and second choices are pooled and labeled 'present orientation,' and scores for the third and fourth are pooled and labeled 'future orientation.' As we can see from figure 2, present orientation has been steadily supplanting future orientation in recent years.

Looking at it in terms of age groups, the 1973 survey found a majority espousing the future orientation in the 30-50 age range. One would hardly expect the 10-20 group to be overly concerned with future social justice or affluence, since they still have so much life to look forward to does that necessarily follow, but the future orientation strengthens as people enter the child-rearing years. In sharp contrast to that picture, the 2003 survey finds the present orientation outweighing the future orientation in every single age group. Moreover, from the age of 20 to the age of 65, there is virtually no change in the values for the two orientations: for decade after decade, present orientation is in the 60-70% range while future orientation is in the 30-40% range. It seems that one's position in the life cycle no longer has any bearing on orientation to present or future.

The logic of proxy achievement, by children serving as sub-selves, seeks to offset past inequality via a more equal game to be played in the future. It therefore goes hand in hand with future orientation. Indeed, while the strengthening of the future orientation in the child-rearing years observable in the 1973 data does not conclusively prove the strength of 'proxy achievement logic,' the weakening of the connection between age-group and future/present orientation in the 2003 data does strongly suggest that this way of thinking is not working any more.

Looking at other past surveys, we find that 1988 is the first one in which present orientation outweighs future orientation for all age groups. However, at this point in time there is still a discernible spike in future-orientation for those in their forties, and a corresponding dip in present-orientation. By the time we get to the 1998 survey, the graph line is virtually flat from 20 to 65 (NHK Hōsō Bunka Kenkyūjo 2000: 194), so we can probably date the big change in mindset to the 1990s.

11. What the 'Sense of Inequality' Has to Tell Us

As I pointed out at the start of this chapter, equality of opportunity is a concept that is by its very nature impossible to measure accurately, yet correcting it requires intervention into the vital personal interests of each individual human being. It follows that eliminating inequality of opportunity is a tricky matter at the best of times, but intergenerational inequality involving families is particularly awkward to deal with. It is understood that we cannot attribute the various elements involved in inequality simply to each individual. However, since the family system acknowledges, tacitly perhaps, the continuity of personhood between family members, we cannot prevent parents from exerting influence on their children.

That is basically because, going beyond the issue of opportunity inequality, we have not been able to define the position of the family in modern society; that is to say, we have not been able to logically derive the role of the family from the fundamental principles of modern society. In modern society there is no positive logic to justify the family; consequently, when the family comes into direct confrontation with the principle of self-responsibility, we are also unable to put together a logic to mediate between the two.

Here I think the concept of correcting inequalities through the person of the child as ‘sub-self’ is quite a useful solution, or should I say ‘dissolution’ of the problem. It looks at parent-child continuity the other way round, and corrects the confirmed inequalities of the past in future time. It takes the two great problems afflicting inequality theory – the challenge of measuring what is indeterminate by nature, and the continuity between parent and child – and uses them to cancel each other out as if by magic.

Of course in postwar Japan, the people themselves were not entirely aware of how effectively this mechanism was working. There is no data we might use to establish directly how much effect it actually had on erasing consciousness of inequality. When all is said and done, this is just a hypothesis. However, we can at least say that with its long-term narrowing of status differentials, and its prevalence of nuclear families engaged in education, postwar Japan provided a good environment for that erasure of

inequality consciousness to take place.

By the same token, however, now that this erasure effect is itself being erased, it is becoming very difficult to solve the problem of opportunity inequality; or, to put it better, we can see no prospect of solving it, we cannot even see any possibility of solving it. You could say that we are now in a situation very similar to that faced by those 17th century New England Puritans I discussed earlier. Changes in the mechanisms of postwar society are deeply implicated in the explosion of inequality consciousness we have seen since the second half of the 1990s.

Thinking along these lines, we may say that it is quite natural for people to feel that widening inequality is a really massive sea-change, something going far beyond any measurable reality. This is not just about equality and inequality as patterns of resource acquisition: another grand system, the postwar family, is implicated in the erasure and subsequent explosion of inequality consciousness. It is because people sense the enormity of a change that is engulfing the whole of society that they feel a powerful reality in the word *fubyōdōka*... unequalization.

I refuse to dismiss out of hand the fears of people obsessed with widening inequality, and I do not believe they can be written off simply as instances of victim consciousness or media-incited hysteria. Neither, however, do I simply affirm those feelings as a true reflection of actual inequality. Those are two very different things. Feelings are themselves important social facts: they come from the acute intuitions of real people who feel social change through their skin. For that very reason, it is essential, when drafting policy responses or conducting sociological research, to analyze, as clearly and accurately as possible, where those intuitions come from; what sort of changes are involved in what sort of way with those feelings. On the basis of that kind of careful analysis, we then have to reconstruct those feelings. Because in all likelihood a lot of elements will be involved in a very complex system, we have to avoid over-simplification and map out that system in all its glorious complexity.

In that sense, I view it as erroneous either to affirm or deny the rationality of the explosion in inequality consciousness. Neither sociologists nor policy-makers are in any position to look down upon this phenomenon and pass judgment on it as a good or

bad thing. Rather we should view this topic as a challenge that we have to take on.

12. The Mechanism of Policy Failures

If I were to attempt a rough mapping of the unequalization problem, I think it would look something like what I have described above .

In present-day Japan, it is gradually becoming impossible to establish a ‘sub-self’ in the form of one’s offspring. We can no longer define parents with children who maintain continuity of the parents’ personhood as a *de facto* standard. On the other hand, each individual *does* without question have parents. That is to say, the living individual is always somebody’s child, and will inevitably be influenced by that fact. People continue to receive unequal inheritances from their parents, but many of them can no longer hope to restore a measure of equality through their children.

It follows that we are now faced with the challenge of correcting inequality of opportunity during the lifetime of each individual. People have become far more sensitive than they used to be to this problem, and the degree to which it can be solved will be bound up with trust in society at the level of its fundamental principles.

When thinking about this point, one is once again reminded of the importance of item (c) in my list of factors influencing the explosion of inequality consciousness: policy failures. At this juncture, when the old systems erasing inequality consciousness have largely ceased to work, one might expect the government to take some kind of countermeasures to ease public dissatisfaction. Instead, whether by accident or design, a series of policies have been adopted that have had precisely the opposite effect. Just at the time when opportunity inequality started to become very visible, the government responded with facile attempts to portray equality as a bad thing in the first place (*akubyōdō*, literally ‘bad equality’), or to stress the self-responsibility (*jiko sekinin*) of the individual. Apparently believing its own propaganda, the government developed policies that denied the very existence of the problem. The timing of these moves can only be described as terrible.

There was a perfectly good reason for that terrible timing. The government

started denying there was any inequality problem, not *in spite of* the failure of the old self-correcting system, but *because of* that failure. Once the traditional solution stopped working, the government went into a state of denial, turning its back upon the problem in the hope that it would go away. The anesthetic wore off and the doctor resorted to hypnotism, looking the patient in the eye and solemnly intoning ‘there is no pain.’

Ironically enough, the very same mechanism of denial that we can observe behind all the talk about bad equality and self-responsibility had also been at work in the series of blunders that plunged the Japanese economy into recession a few years earlier. Take the case of bad debt, for example. Until the bubble economy went pop, the banks had been able to get away with making rash loans, by waiting for asset prices to rise still higher so that the borrower had the leeway to reconstruct its finances and pay back the loan. After the bubble burst, although the old remedy had ceased to work – no, *because* it had ceased to work – the banks started pretending there was no bad debt problem, juggling the accounts by shifting bad debts onto the books of subsidiaries etc. in order to maintain the pretence. This is exactly the kind of self-delusion that we now see concerning the problem of inequality.

Perhaps this kind of behavior is only human. Certainly I do not demand god-like perfection of judgment from fallible humans with limited knowledge. However, once we are aware of the problem there can be no going back to the old ways. Today we live in a society that is growing increasingly conscious of inequality. We have no option but to honestly face that fact and look for new solutions to the problem of opportunity inequality.

13. Five Strategies Toward a New Solution

So – what kind of new solution might there be? I do not have a concrete vision for the future, but I do think the lines along which we need to think can be fairly clearly laid out. Broadly speaking, I see five strategic issues on which we need to focus.

I. Securing the survival and participatory ability of the individual

If we are to correct inequality at the level of the individual, as opposed to his/her children, we first have to secure for each individual the possibility of living a long life lit: surviving and participating in the game of status attainment. To put it simply, we need to concentrate on guaranteeing ‘the future of the individual’ rather than ‘the future of the individual’s children.’ It follows that social security systems, particularly those concerned with maintaining health, will be of great importance.

Hiroshi Ishida’s analysis in chapter 5 of the present volume suggests that happily, there does not seem to be a very noticeable level of inequality on this point in Japan today – life expectancy and standard of health do not show big variations related to income, social status etc., unlike in the United States, Britain etc., where very concrete instances of inequality have been demonstrated. Japan’s medical and health insurance systems have often been described as ‘socialistic’ by admirers and critics alike; if they are going to have to be reformed, there is every possibility that we may see a shift toward the Anglo-Saxon model here as in so many other aspects of society.

Guaranteeing the individual the chance of a long life and continued participation in society is an essential precondition to the other four strategies I will outline here. In general inequality of opportunity is something that we can only grasp after the event (Satō 2000a), meaning that by the time we discover inequality it is often too late to do anything about it, and this applies in spades to inequality in life span and physical health. It follows that this issue requires sensitive and continuous monitoring.

Further, if we are to make it consistently possible for the individual to have a second chance at acquiring higher status, abolition of age discrimination in employment and academia is absolutely essential.

II. Switching to a balance-sheet strictly based on the individual

In a system where children substitute for their parents in the pursuit of status, it is inevitable that the parents will be quite old by the time the children have reached a measurable status. Quite often the parents will already have died by then. It follows that

the key issue is not so much whether or not the children really can attain status as proxies of their parents as whether or not the parents can reasonably *expect* them to do that. Indeed, this issue of reasonable expectation has been accorded much weight in Japan.

For instance, the endless meandering series of reforms of selection systems, especially university entrance examinations, may be seen as a sacrifice to this necessity to maintain future expectations of inequality redress. Constant tinkering with the entrance exam system sends out the message that ‘there are inappropriate elements in the system we have had up to now, and in future these should be put right.’ Thus, irrespective of any changes that actually happen to selection outcomes in future, the expectation of greater equality of opportunity has been constantly renewed. Borrowing a coinage of Yo Takeuchi, it has been possible to ‘re-heat’ (*sai-kanetsu*) the status-attainment game across the generations (Takeuchi 1995).

The demise of ways of thinking based on the ‘sub-self’ makes it much harder to erase consciousness of present inequality through vague hopes for the future. What is called for, then, is a thoroughgoing correction of inequality through a social security system in which the hypothetical unit of account is the individual rather than the family.

I am not saying that we have to maintain strict balance between payments and receipts for each individual. What I am saying, though, is that the profit and loss has to be made clear for each individual and we have to promote adjustment between generations and within generations on the basis of some clear agreement.

III. Aiming for redistribution that takes account of uncertainty

I will have more to say about this in item V below, but it is of course impossible to eliminate every single element of opportunity inequality, nor could I say that we should do such a thing in the first place. In the real world, correcting inequality carries quite a heavy social cost. A series of policy compromises will be needed, but in order to judge where to make compromises we first need to establish a clear understanding of the character of the inequality-correction enterprise.