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Equality of Opportunity

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Abstract

The term equality of opportunity means different things to different scholars, policy makers, and popular audiences. This article explores the concept equality of opportunity with a focus on how it is used by students of stratification and social mobility, particularly in sociology. I suggest that a narrow definition of the concept equality of opportunity is the most fruitful one to adopt. Such a definition will lead students of inequality the opportunity to focus their analyses on inequality of results and conditions, rather than debating the conditions under which inequality can be legitimated. After all, equality of opportunity is partly determined by equality of conditions, whereas equality of results is much more visible and less elusive than equality of opportunity in its many interpretations.

The term equality of opportunity has philosophical, normative, political, ideological, and practical aspects, and it means different things to different scholars, policy makers, and popular audiences. At the philosophical normative end, the term is at the heart of a debate and discussion about just society. At the practical end, sociologists, and recently also economists, equate the term with social and economic mobility within a class or within other kinds of social structures. The two ends meet when students of social and economic mobility make inferences about fairness and social justice from studying social and economic mobility. There is neither an exclusive nor an agreed upon definition of the term social mobility. In fact, the term is elusive and difficult to operationalize and its critics argue that one of its main purposes is to mask and/or justify social and economic inequality of conditions. This article explores the term, or more accurately the concept, equality of opportunity, with a focus on how it is used by students of stratification and social mobility, particularly in sociology.

Equality of Opportunity and Stratification

Social stratification and mobility processes can be depicted as a race, with winners and losers obviously. Thus, social stratification and mobility processes are associated with inequality of results (of the race) and conditions. How one defines the concept equality of opportunity is important in assessing whether or not social inequality is fair and justifiable. A very wide array of definitions for the concept equality of opportunity exists in the literature, providing many – nearly all possible – justifications for the existence of inequality in society.

A thin definition of the concept equality of opportunity postulates that opportunities are equal as long as no overt discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, and the like prevents anyone from entering a race. This minimal definition is also known as formal equality of opportunity, and is concerned with equality of the access to available opportunity. Examples for the lack of equal access to opportunity used to be very common in the past. For example, for many years women did not have access to the political spheres and were denied access to higher education. This formal definition of the concept is apparent in the legislation.

Entering the race does not necessarily mean winning it, and thus the concept equality of opportunity can be extended to include also the rules governing the competition and how the winner is selected, that is, equality in the selection processes, once access is granted. At the formal level, an extension of the concept to include also selection processes would require, in the context of the labor market for example, the adaptation of race, age, gender, etc., blind procedures for job hiring and firing. Under such a policy, equality of opportunity does not necessarily mean that social background is not associated with the winners of the race. This is so simply because of the advantages and disadvantages that social background entails. Accordingly, a child of educated professional parents is better equipped to take advantage of the educational system than a child of uneducated working class parents. Defining equality of opportunity with reference to equal chances for access and advancement is akin to Sorokin’s characterization of modern democratic societies, as societies in which “there are no judicial or religious obstacles to climbing or going down” (Sorokin, 1959: p. 153).

Equality of Opportunity and Mobility

A requirement that social background not be associated with the results of the race perhaps represents the broadest definition of the term equality of opportunity. This definition of the concept is very common in sociology, and also in economics, particularly among students of social stratification and mobility. Accordingly, intergenerational social and economic mobility is equated with equality of opportunity, such that the by now standard concept of relative mobility is taken as a measure of equality of opportunity.

Relative mobility can be explored by a transition matrix showing movements in, for example, a class hierarchy across generations. Relative rates are then treated as a set of (odds) ratios that measure the chances of having one origin rather than another for persons of one class relative to the comparable chances for persons in other classes. In the simplest case of
a 2 × 2 mobility table, the one odds ratio calculable would be given by the following equation:

\[
\frac{f_{11}f_{22}}{f_{12}f_{21}}
\]

where, \(f_{11}\) is the number of cases immobile in category 1, \(f_{12}\) the number mobile from category 1 origins to category 2 destinations, and so on. An odds ratio of 1 in this example implies complete statistical independence of the origin and the destination categories involved, or complete equality of opportunity. In mobility tables with more than two categories, it is possible, of course, to calculate more than one odds ratio, and other statistical techniques, such as log-linear analysis, are available to assess statistical independence.

Thus, if the odds of working class kids to end up later on in their lives in the upper class equals the odds of those born into the upper class to retain their privileged positions, then relative mobility – or social fluidity – is high and equality of opportunity exists within this society’s class structure. This depiction of the term is best illustrated with references to the consequences of industrialization processes for stratification and mobility regimes. Accordingly, rapid economic development – a key element in the industrialization process – has resulted in the upgrading of the occupational structure of societies such that many new opportunities were created at the top of the occupational hierarchy. If these new opportunities are then taken equally by members of different social backgrounds, then equality of opportunity prevails. This interpretation equally applies to other social processes, most notably the educational attainment process. Here, the expansion of tertiary educational systems of most Western societies has created new opportunities at the top of the educational hierarchy. Equality of educational opportunity requires that these opportunities be shared by members of all social backgrounds equally.

The requirement that social background not be associated with the results of the competition represents a very wide definition of the term equality of opportunity, one that might require a compensatory mechanism for those underprivileged in society. A number of such mechanisms are discussed in the literature; the simplest one is a level playing field mechanism in which people are equalized before the race begins. Any inequality of results afterward is then justified. This mechanism, however, is at odds with normative ideas such as social justice and the notion of fairness. As Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics holds, if persons are not equal, they will not have nor be entitled to equal shares.

**Equality of Opportunity and Competence**

A more functional definition of the term equality of opportunity should therefore take into account people’s competencies to realize the available opportunities (Marshall et al., 1997). That is, people with similar competencies should have equal chances to take on the available opportunities. In the educational attainment field this definition of the term equality of opportunity requires that members of various social backgrounds, but with similar ability, have equal chances for advancement in the educational hierarchy. In the social mobility field this definition normally requires that members of various social backgrounds, but with similar education, have equal access to the new opportunities that are created as a result of industrialization processes at the top of the occupational hierarchy.

In the sociological literature this idea is very clearly made by advocates of the so-called liberal thesis of industrialization advanced by American social scientists such as Talcott Parsons, Clark Kerr, and Daniel Bell. Accordingly, as well as changes in the structure of opportunities itself, industrialization alters the processes by which individuals are allocated to particular positions within the division of labor. Central to this argument is the shift away from ascription toward achievement as the principle criterion for social selection (Treiman, 1970). It is at this point that the theme of meritocracy comes to the fore. As Daniel Bell puts it: “by the logic of a meritocracy, these high-scoring individuals, no matter where they are in society, should be brought to the top in order to make the best use of their talent” (1974: p. 414). Thus, as merit comes to dominate social selection, the association between individuals’ social origins and their destinations tends to weaken. As I have indicated earlier, when the association between social background and current social position is very weak, relative rates of mobility become equal and equality of opportunity is reached.

A major problem with this definition of the concept relates to the question: which competencies merit rewards? Put another way, can we justify unequal rewards on the basis of some heritable skills, IQ, or beauty? These questions can be linked to the issue of compensatory mechanisms earlier introduced, by focusing on those less privileged in society. Here we thus ask: the lack of which competencies should be compensated for?

The general consensus in the political philosophy literature is the idea that in striving for equality individuals should be held responsible for what happens to them (Roemer, 2002). That is, individuals should be held responsible for their preferences but not their resources (Dworkin, 1981). According to this line of reasoning, then, inequalities that arise from circumstances beyond our control should be considered illegitimate, while those that are the result of choice and preferences should be deemed legitimate (Philips, 2004). But can we really distinguish between preferences and circumstances? Are not preferences also the results of one’s position in the social hierarchy (circumstances)?

Examples for the intertwining of the two are numerous. For example, Hakim (2002) argues in her so-called preference theory that women select occupations that allow them to maintain the lifestyle they value. Most women, according to this argument, prefer a balanced work–family life and therefore select occupations that allow a better combination of the two roles. These ‘preferences’, however, do not necessarily reflect a choice free of constraint, as in the absence of public support many women are bound to adjust their occupational choices so that they meet their familial responsibilities. In a similar way, Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) explain the constancy of inequality in educational opportunity and, indeed, the existence of a stable class structure (cf. Goldthorpe, 2000) in most modern societies by class-based educational choice. That is, members of the different social classes make different educational choices, which then result in the reproduction of the class structure. Hence, one can argue that ascriptive forces (circumstances) might often find ways of expressing...
themselves as choice and preferences, as noted by Halsey (1977: pp. 173–186) in the context of social mobility in Britain.

Conclusion

To obviate these problems, I argue in favor of the narrowest possible definition of the concept equality of opportunity, one that requires the removal of all formal discrimination practices. Such a clear and lucid description of the term will lead students of inequality the opportunity to focus attention on studying inequality of results and conditions, rather than debating the conditions under which inequality can be legitimated. After all, equality of opportunity is partly determined by equality of conditions, while equality of results is much more visible and less elusive than equality of opportunity in its many interpretations.

See also: Income Inequality; Industrialization; Inequality Measurement; Inequality, Social; Meritocracy and Tokenism; Mobility, Social; Social Inequality and Schooling; Social Justice: Historical and Theoretical Considerations; Social Stratification.

Bibliography