

STUDIES

GO AHEAD – A Complex Approach to Status Attainment and Inequality of Opportunity –

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Abstract: Almost eighty years have passed since the book *Social and Cultural Mobility* by Pitirim Sorokin was published in 1927. It gave in many respects a new direction to scientific thinking about social structure. The central thesis of the work was that a society is primarily characterised not by the extent of social inequality or by the distribution of social positions, but by a measure of how open it is, what the chances for different people are of filling any position regardless of their origin.

Although people around the world continued to initiate political movements, fight revolutions and even kill under the banner of equality for a further fifty years, a new paradigm was then born: the idea of equality that curtailed performance and effectively made progress impossible was replaced by the notion of equality of opportunity.

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SOCIAL MOBILITY

A new school of thought was born in the scientific research of society as well: the study of social mobility became the central subject of the newly evolving discipline of sociology. In philosophical and literary thinking the question had repeatedly emerged before, whether one can overstep the social limits posed by his birth, and if so, in what way this can be achieved. Minor empirical studies even endeavoured to measure the effects of the parents' position on the social status of respondents and, for the first time in the world macro-statistical methods were used in the 1930 Hungarian census, where the questions included the father's occupation. The need for the systematic scientific investigation of the subject, however, was only voiced when in the late forties and early fifties, the Research Committee on Social Stratification of the newly organized International Sociological Association (ISA) laid the foundations of research on social mobility.

A great number of surveys have since been carried out in several countries to investigate social mobility. Researchers today classify these studies into three generations of mobility research. The Hungarian surveys – primarily owing to the activities of Rudolf Andorka – were completed every ten years from 1963 to 1992 in accordance with the above mentioned ISA paradigm and represented a significant contribution to international research by providing the mobility patterns of a so-called socialist country. Over these fifty years, the tools and methodology of research showed considerable advancement. Complex mathematical models were developed and it was perhaps this process of research that had the greatest role in enabling sociology to make the move from the essayistic approach of an art subject to becoming a discipline of science.

The exceptionally rich research methodology covered the investigation of a great number of problems. (These were summarized excellently at the beginning of the new century by Michael Hout, the president of the research committee at the time, 2003.) From a theoretical perspective two key problem areas can be highlighted in the sea of studies.

One of these is the openness of society, which Sorokin, too, considered to be the most important characterising feature of societies. The authors of the ISA paradigm defined this as follows: given a mobility table (where the rows, for instance, represent the father's occupational group and the columns represent the son's occupational group), the greater the number of cases in cells outside the main diagonal of the table (i.e., in cells where the occupational groups of the father and the son differ) and the smaller the number of cases along the diagonal, the more open a society is. The principal lesson learnt from first generation research is summarized by Lipset and Bendix (1959), who conclude that the patterns of social mobility are very similar in the industrialized societies of various Western countries.

A methodological problem had already been noted by this time, however. Namely, the proportion of cases along the diagonal and outside it is greatly influenced by the nature of the difference between the marginals of the mobility table, that is, by the ways in which the occupational structures of the two generations differ from each other. With the help of ever newer databases and ever more sophisticated methodological apparatus and mathematical models, the original thesis was subsequently modified first by Featherman, Hauser and Jones (1975), then by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) and the methodology was extended to vertical models of mobility by Ganzeboom, Luikx and Treiman (1989), as well as by Hout and Hauser (1992).

As a result, it can now be stated with great confidence that the openness, pure mobility or, with Erikson and Goldthorpe's phrase, "social fluidity" of modern industrialised societies is quite similar. Variation in mobility between individual periods, generations or countries is almost exclusively dependent on the rate and extent of changes in occupational structure.

The second issue bearing with theoretical consequences concerns the factors influencing an individual's move to various occupational and social positions, or, using the terminology of the previous discussion, the factors that determine who will

stay within the main diagonal (continuing the social-occupational position of the parents) and who will move away from it, in a downward or upward direction?

The classic study on this subject is the work of Peter Blau and Otis Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (1967). Blau and Duncan's model and all subsequent theoretical and empirical studies conclude that school performance and the level of education are the main factors in the process of status attainment; they are responsible both for mobility and for reproduction. The simplified version of Blau and Duncan's original five-variable model shows these results as follows:

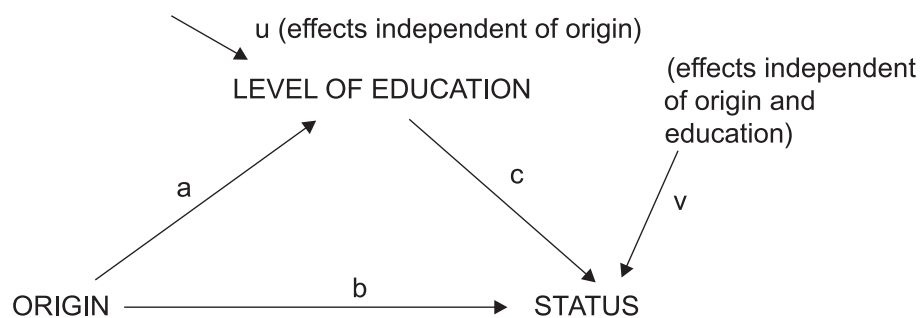


Figure 1. Simple Model of Status Attainment

Using this model, it was unambiguously shown that in modern societies the effect mediated by education (ac) is substantially stronger than the direct effect of origin (b). In the nineties, the main concern for mobility research was to identify the means by which various realizations and components of the school system could reduce the effect of origin (Shavit and Müller 1997) and to find a way of verifying or falsifying Raftery and Hout's (1993) hypothesis that the education system sought to uphold inequalities (Maximally Maintained Inequality, the MMI model).

These studies measured social status either by social-occupational group and class position (the most widely known example is Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero's (1979) class model) or on the basis of the internationally standardized occupational prestige scale and the socio-economic index of occupations (Treiman 1977; Blau and Duncan 1967; Treiman and Ganzeboom 1990). Mainstream research on mobility drew the attention from a different class of experiments, which approached income mobility by studying changes of lifestyle over generations (Hradil 1982; Beck 1982) or endeavoured to carry out multi-dimensional measurements of social status (Machonin 1968; Kolosi 1985, 1993; Imada 1982) or related these multi-dimensional status models to the process of status attainment. Within the latter category, the work of Péter Róbert (1986, 2000) stands out, whose complex models perfected the effect of origin on present status to over thirty per cent as opposed to the 20–25 per cent captured by simpler models (a + b in the *Figure* above).

In the past 50 years, then, the two main theoretical paradigms of mobility research in modern industrialised societies have been the similarity of mobility regimes and the decisive role of education in the process of status attainment. Ganzeboom, Treiman and Ultee (1991) predicts that the central concern for fourth generation mobility research in the 21st century will be the nature of the process by which the stratificational position of the individual affects his or her surroundings. Hout, on the other hand, sees the effects of family structure, neighbourhood, education system, labour market and the welfare state on the process of status attainment as the crucial questions for the future.

In actual fact, however, there is another problem area, which had an important role in early path models but was later neglected in mainstream mobility research.

MERITOCRACY AND CLASS STRUCTURE

Not long after becoming Prime Minister, Tony Blair said in one of his speeches: “The new Britain is a meritocracy where we break down the barriers of class, religion, race and culture” (*Daily Telegraph* 25 October 1997). It is of course not the verity of a politician’s statement or the feasibility of the programme that is of interest here, but the fact that Tony Blair crossed a significant boundary. In the past hundred years, a statement of this kind would have provoked immediate condemnation on the part of the – broadly interpreted – political left. But now the political left have added the term “meritocracy” to their vocabulary. (The expression was coined by Michael Young (1958) in the fifties, according to some interpretations as the anti-utopia of capitalist society.)

Ever since its conception, the idea of meritocracy has been part of the intellectual milieu which sought to distinguish modern consumer societies from capitalist societies and thinkers from Theodor Geiger through Raymond Aron to the ideologists of post-industrial societies have dreamt of the death of class society. Young’s central thesis was that in modern societies ability and effort (that is, merit) replace origin as the determinants of the distribution of individuals in society. Although some studies (for instance, Treiman 1970) suggest that as a result of modernization the role of origin decreases and selection based on meritocratic principles increases, up to now there has been no convincing empirical evidence for the putative decline of the role of origin.

The most important work in this context is the more than forty year-old series of studies which started in 1957 as the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study with a survey of more than ten thousand secondary school children, some of whose lives have been followed ever since, using various techniques. Perhaps the most important finding of the Wisconsin Model is that the abilities measured by the survey have a decisive effect on achievement at school, while origin first and foremost affects aspirations regarding education. At the same time, mental abilities only have a secondary role in occupational career and successfulness, and it is the level of education which has a primary bearing on people’s life course (Sewell et al. 2003; Hauser et al. 2000). In addition to the wide-ranging examination of educational mobility, the research was later extended to include occupation, incomes, gender, religious environment and

several other factors and was followed by a fair number of studies based on the Wisconsin Model. The models were criticised for their individualistic nature, however, by researchers preferring to stretch the ISA paradigm towards class analysis.

The approach to mobility based on the ISA paradigm in turn was challenged by psychology. On the basis of research into IQ, the view that mental abilities have a substantially stronger effect on an individual's life course than origin does has gained fairly wide acceptance. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) came to this conclusion after the analysis of a large collection of data and studies on status attainment in the seventies (Jencks et al 1972; Sewell and Hauser 1975) also tried to include abilities and aspirations in their models.

These results were greeted with a flow of negative reactions. The critique of intelligence test studies, which had heavy ideological motivation, consisted partly in questioning the reliability of any studies of this nature and partly in pointing out that not even early IQ tests could be free from the distinct effects of family background, which is determined by class position. The critics also rightly pointed out that the data suggesting the growth of the role of meritocratic selection were not at all convincing. It could easily be the case that the increasing weight of education level in the context of social status simply means that the mediating role of school has strengthened in the transmission of advantages and disadvantages.

The debate was revived at the end of the 20th century. This was when new publications on the subject appeared built around the empirical results of a significant series of English surveys. Researchers working for the National Child Development Study (NCDS) collected various data on every child born in a given week of 1958 and their parents up to 1991, when the studied population reached the age of 33. With the help of the unusually extensive database Peter Saunders (1995, 1997, 1999) endeavoured to settle the question whether it is abilities and achievements or social advantages and disadvantages that have greater contribution to social success or failure. Saunders concluded that abilities and motivation have a significantly greater effect on status at the age of 33 than origin does. In his final model, the standardized regression coefficient of the test score of ability was 0.25; that of motivation was 0.13; class position of parents was assigned a coefficient of 0.08; mother's educational level 0.06; and father's educational level 0.05. Saunders himself acknowledges, however, that it is a baffling property of his results that the complete model accounts for only 22 per cent of the variance of the Hope-Goldthorpe social status score.

Saunders' results sparked a flow of critical reactions. The criticism concerned both methodological and ideological components. It remains a fact, however, that less effort has been put into the scientific exploitation of this unique database, the thorough control and analysis of the data; and more into ideologically motivated and prestige-oriented criticism as mainstream mobility research has distanced itself.

Researchers working on the issue of mobility should distinguish two problem areas. Firstly, there is the question of their stance on the ideological debate of class structure versus meritocracy. Secondly, there is the recognition and unprejudiced examination of the actual bearings of origin, abilities and effort in the process of status attainment.

THE AOLE MODEL

No one could reasonably deny that innate abilities have a role in the realization of certain achievements. Outstanding talent is highly likely to be genetically encoded and although an underprivileged family background can most probably hinder the unfolding of these abilities, it will not necessarily prevent it. Conversely, a privileged origin in itself has never reared a Mozart, Leonardo, Einstein or Nurmi and Pele.

Unfortunately, certain disadvantages are also genetically encoded even though modern medicine is striving to prevent these from surfacing and a favourable family environment may be able to alleviate hardship deriving from congenital disorders. It can also be assumed with great confidence that innate endowment on the one hand and effects deriving from origin and the familial-social environment on the other interact with each other and it is this interaction whose effects surface in the process of status attainment.

Psychologists have been investigating this interaction for a long time. White (1982), for instance, finds that the correlation between IQ and socio-economic status (SES) is around 0.33. Jencks (1979) contends that IQ scores account for a quarter of the variance of social status and differences in income explain a sixth.

The American Psychological Association asked an independent workgroup to evaluate and summarise studies related to intelligence. This workgroup also emphasises the interaction mentioned above and clearly demarcates known and as yet unknown effects. In the context of our discussion, two of their findings are to be highlighted.

“1. Differences in genetic endowment contribute substantially to individual differences in (psychometric) intelligence, but the pathway by which genes produce their effects is still unknown. The impact of genetic differences appears to increase with age, but we do not know why.

2. Environmental factors also contribute substantially to the development of intelligence, but we do not clearly understand what those factors are or how they work. Attendance at school is certainly important, for example, but we do not know what aspects of schooling are critical.” (Neissen et al. 1995)

It seems justified to assume that the distribution of abilities in a given population is normal (the IQ test undoubtedly simulates this characteristic appropriately). The nature of the distribution of the advantages and disadvantages of origin, however, is open to debate. Those who subscribe to class theory believe in a discrete distribution, while other approaches attempt to measure social status, including origin, with a variable of normal distribution. In either case, it is an essential objective for the future of mobility research that the place of futile ideological debates is taken by research intent on revealing the actual course of influence of abilities and origin on social status.

It is known even in the absence of the precise characterization of the workings of the influences that the combination of abilities and origin still cannot account for more than half of the variance of social status. The remaining fifty per cent is presumed to be found in the individual's life experiences. Theories of meritocracy aggregate life experience factors with the strongest effects on the process of status attainment in the notion of effort. Following Hauser and Faetherman, mobility research holds that the most important element of this effort is school achievement and level of education. There can be no doubt that on the macro level schooling is indeed the most important institution of

status attainment in modern societies (just as in traditional societies this institution was represented by the military and the Church). At the same time, we know that there are effects which are independent of schooling and are nevertheless significant in the micro-structure of mobility. Within a given social stratum, school accomplishments can by no means predict who will be successful, unsuccessful or in between in “life”. Motivational and value choice factors presumably play an appreciable role here – factors which receive substantially more attention from psychology and labour economics than from sociology or traditional mobility research.

Finally, the process of status attainment is non-negligibly influenced by factors that could be grouped under the concept of Luck. This does not simply refer to the residuals of the variance of status, in other words, what is left unexplained by other factors. Unknown random effects should be distinguished from those factors which are known but are not measured or are difficult to measure: factors that are unavoidably part of people’s lives and have a noticeable bearing on the individual’s life course independently of ability, origin and effort.

Some of these influences surface at the macro-level but could nevertheless have dissimilar effects on individual life courses. A war or a historical cataclysm can shatter a carefully built career for some but at the same time open up a channel to success for others. While the regime change in East Europe meant an opportunity for capitalist enterprise for some of the population, it had little effect on the life course of the general public. The opportunities created by the emergence of a new economic sector – e.g., informatics – will not be the same for the generation starting out in the “lucky” period as for generations to follow.

The whims of luck may also have a direct say in an individual’s life. A serious illness, the breaking up of a family, a chance encounter, etc., can carry lifelong consequences. If only these components of life course, which apparently require intensive research methods to investigate, could be incorporated into the data banks of mobility research, new dimensions would open up in the field.

With all this in mind, the simple Blau-Duncan model of status attainment could be modified to get a four-component model, where the attained status is the derivative of ability, origin, luck and effort. Let us call this model the AOLE model of status attainment:

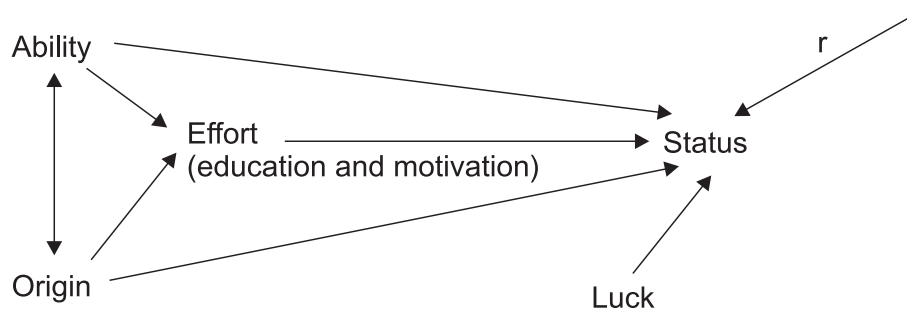


Figure 2. The AOLE Model of Status Attainment

This approach calls for a change of paradigms in mobility research in a number of respects. Firstly, retrospective data collection needs to be exchanged for panel studies where the development of abilities and the turns of life course may be traced starting from a relatively young age. Secondly, interdisciplinary co-operation is needed – especially with psychologists and geneticists – in developing standardized measurement techniques (e.g., for ability and motivation). Thirdly, efforts should be made to standardize qualitative information on life course and to integrate this information into traditional quantitative mobility data banks. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must abandon all ideological prejudices that have been attached to the mobility research of the past eighty years. For this to happen, it is crucial that the notion of equality of opportunity be reconsidered.

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND THE EFFECTS OF STATE INTERVENTION

In political history the civic demand for equality of opportunity contrasts with the communistic demand for equality. By the turn of the twenty-first century not only liberal but also left-wing social thinkers had recognized that the endeavour to realize the ideal of equality in practice would necessarily bring with it limitations on other fundamental values, such as efficiency, liberty and equity. At the same time, the substantiation of equal opportunity suited the objectives of right wing conservative social thinking as well.

It follows that Sorokin's idea – perhaps with different focuses in time and space – has become widely accepted: the extent to which a society can assure that its members will have equal opportunity to attain various social positions carrying equality with them is an important determinant in characterizing that society. The political need for equality of opportunity, however, is in contrast with the actual reality of unequal opportunity in every known society. Traditional mobility research shows that the effect of origin on an individual's life course is essentially constant in modern industrial societies (constant fluidity). The extended model of status attainment adds the a priori unequal distribution of ability, the differences in individual aspirations and achievements and the whims of luck to the reality of inequality of opportunity.

In general terms, the realization of equality of opportunity is theoretically impossible in human societies abundant in inequalities since

- a) Those in more favourable positions will do everything in their power to retain the advantages for themselves and for their descendants and
- b) equalizing opportunities would mean eliminating inequalities themselves, which is now agreed not to be desirable with respect to the progress of society either. The meritocratic dream merely envisages a world where the barriers of inequality of origin may be broken but does not wish to sacrifice the selection principles of ability and achievement. The ideas of limiting the role of ability and negatively rewarding achievement only appear in phalanstery-like visions.

It must be conceded, then, that the ideal of equality of opportunity has become a desideratum in the past decades not because it is feasible but despite the fact that it is

infeasible. What is it that follows from these conclusions for social policy? Firstly, that it is not the ensuring of an abstract – and impossible – equality of opportunity but the minimization of actual inequalities of opportunity that should become a central concern. Secondly, that it is not possible to reduce inequality of opportunity without reducing inequalities. It is a delusive attitude to consider inequalities a necessity and at the same time refuse to tolerate inequality of opportunity. What needs to be resolved is which kind of inequalities are considered desirable, or perhaps tolerable, and which kinds are not. (See Tóth 2005 on this subject.) Thirdly, our policy regarding the reduction of inequality of opportunity need to be stated unambiguously: we want to limit or reduce those types of inequality of opportunity which hinder the expression of individuals' abilities and the growth of social wellbeing.

Finally, what is it that follows from these conclusions for the new generation of mobility research? Primarily, that our task today is no longer the recognition of the existence of inequality of opportunity but the elucidation of the factors which regulate people's distribution in society and which are the basic determinants of success and failure.

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