

BROOKINGS

SOCIAL MOBILITY
— MEMOS —

SERIES: Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity | Number 3 of 10

Joseph Fishkin | April 30, 2014 12:28pm

From Bottlenecks to Opportunity Pluralism



Note: Part of a two-week series devoted to exploring what we can learn about social mobility from Joseph Fishkin's new book, Bottlenecks.

I suggested earlier that we can't make opportunities equal—and that some things might not be so great even if we could. So what can we do?

We can help people live more flourishing lives by helping them *through* and *around* the bottlenecks that constrain what they can do and become.

This means we need to focus on how opportunities are *structured*. Think about the “big test” I introduced Monday. Instead of asking only whether the test is fair, we should ask: Why does so much depend on that one test? Why must everyone's career and life trajectory be set permanently at age eighteen?

When we loosen a bottleneck like the test—for instance, by creating a community college system—we make the opportunity structure more *pluralistic*. We offer people a greater range of different opportunities, throughout life, to pursue paths that lead to different kinds of flourishing lives.

Or consider a different type of example. What if growing up in a certain neighborhood greatly constrains what a person can pursue in life? Or what if gender is a bottleneck, because society steers men one way and women another, and it helps to be the “right” gender if you want to be a physicist or a nurse?

Opportunity pluralism requires loosening these bottlenecks too. But what does this mean?

Loosening Bottlenecks

Take a simple example: suppose that in our society, speaking English is a serious bottleneck. To ameliorate it, we *both* (a) help people through the bottleneck by providing more and better opportunities to learn English *and* (b) help people around the bottleneck by restructuring workplaces so that not every job requires English.

Sometimes only one of these strategies makes sense. When race discrimination creates a bottleneck, we don’t try to help people pass as a different race. We just try to reduce the amount of discrimination.

But often we can do both. We can both restructure college financing so that more people can complete college degrees *and* change employer practices so that not every good job requires one.

Part of the point is to change the incentives people face, so they don’t have to focus all available resources on squeezing themselves (or their children) through bottlenecks. Instead they’ll be able to pursue the things they actually decide they value.

What’s the end goal?

As Yuval Levin noted yesterday in response to my first post, loosening bottlenecks is a direction of effort more than an end goal (as “equal opportunity” sometimes is too).

But we can still say something about what the goal looks like. In *Bottlenecks* I describe it this way:

Instead of a pyramid, with a series of zero-sum contests to reach higher and narrower stages toward the top, the opportunity structure begins to look more like a city, with many different structures and various roads and paths among them, so that wherever a person may be situated, she has a range of choices regarding where to go next and what goals to pursue. (17-18)

Tomorrow: Part 1 of a response from William Galston.

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