The Power of Professors and Professionals: How Professions Shape Organizational Systems in Elite University Admissions

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Abstract

Elite university admissions are administered by a range of organizational actors depending on national and institutional contexts. While the outcomes of high-stakes elite university admissions have been studied extensively, the opaque admissions selection process remains undertheorized and understood. Using theories of professions and systems theory to examine unique qualitative interview data from admissions selectors in both the U.S. and England, this paper sheds light on the opaque decision-making of elite university admissions shaped by professional contexts and organizational dynamics. We find that the self-regulated profession of professors and the less autonomous professional staff selectors influence the decision-making processes of elite university admissions. Understanding elite university admissions based on the macro/meso-context of professions and their organizational system structure offers a theoretically original approach for future research and the potential to create more equitable admissions processes through new change strategies.

Keywords

Systems theory, academic profession, widening participation, college access, elite, admissions, higher education

Introduction

Admission to elite universities is the key route for education-based social mobility (Britton et al., 2019; Chetty et al., 2017) and societal leadership (Chetty et al., 2023). Elite university admissions have been rife with dynamic struggles over the inclusion and exclusion of different social groups, based on identity such as religion, gender, and race (Aisch et al., 2017; Anderson & Svrluga, 2019; Karabel, 2005; Stacpoole, 1986; Wood, 2018). In the current political context where the US has federally banned the use of race in admissions processes, income inequality is widening in both England and the U.S., and there are increasing numbers of students entering postsecondary education worldwide (Altbach et al., 2019), the issue of skewed access advantaging privileged young people has never been more important.

Admissions research has explored different areas of contextual backgrounds of students using theoretical tools and traditions such as Bourdieusian cultural capital theory (Bourdieu 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), social reproduction (Lucas, 2001), rational action theories (Goldthorpe, 1998), human capability theory (Nussbaum, 2011), and psychological theories (Harrison, 2018). What is less explored are the organizational and sociopolitical contexts that shape how admissions selectors make decisions in selecting students for elite universities.

Across the higher education sector, but also in the elite Ivy League institutions in the US, professionalized admissions staff recruit, admit, and enrol undergraduate students (Jones et al., 2019; Stevens, 2007). In contrast, at the elite universities of England, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue their long-standing tradition of self-governing power to have their own academic faculty, using their academic judgement, admitting undergraduate students (Jones et al., 2019; Stevens, 2007). Based on these distinct differences in admissions practices we are left to wonder, how do these differences in professional and organizational contexts matter to elite undergraduate admissions?

Despite this well ploughed area of scholarly inquiry, there is very little prior analytical work interrogating the connections between theories of professions and organizational social systems. In the present article, we wish to follow Sherer's (2019) advice to link currently "seemingly unrelated pieces" together and explore the phenomenon of elite undergraduate admissions "while remaining true to both theory building and testing" (p. 91). Thus, we seek to contribute to the theory and scholarship of professions and organizational social systems through examining elite university admissions by asking: What can we learn from the professional and system theories about university admissions? Specifically, *how does the professional background of university admissions selectors shape organizational social systems that*

influence elite university admissions decisions? By understanding how professional background and profession shape decision making we can better understand how the two professions in the present article—professional selectors in the US and academic faculty in England—shape organizational social systems.

We draw on the sociology of professions and organizational systems theory to answer these questions to contribute to both theoretical knowledge as well as providing applied perspectives for those working in the sociology of inequality, widening participation of university admissions, and other stakeholders seeking to affect change towards greater inclusion in both university systems and social stratification.

Literature review

University professions

English and US elite universities have different organizational structures and approaches to the task of admitting new students. One key source of these different social structuration processes lies in the location and characteristics of those making admissions decisions (Giddens, 1979). At the English Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge)[1], academic faculty create processes and have ultimate responsibility to admit students to their college and degree of study as part of their larger portfolio of professional tasks. In the US, at the elite Ivy League institutions, there is an organizational labour force of professionalized staff with the sole focus of recruiting, admitting, and yielding undergraduate students.

Hallmarks of professions are a shared knowledge base, formal entrance requirements, an agreed code of ethics (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933), self-regulation (Freidson, 2001), and for high status professions—abstract knowledge and task autonomy (Abbott, 1988). Professions have jurisdiction over a certain area of work as well as the expertise to undertake core tasks and "internal and external networks to accumulate and distribute resources" (Liu, 2018, p. 46). The academic profession has been described as a "pure profession" (Abbott, 1988), a "calling" (Weber, 1917/1946), or "key profession" (Perkin, 1969) because of the sophisticated character of a profession's knowledge and the amount of internal control it has over professional tasks.

Professional expertise is a combination of academic and situational experiences with the former usually acquired in formal education and the latter in the workplace through peer interactions (Freidson, 2001). Specifically, academics' professional expertise "comprises an amalgam of scientific and normative elements" (Halliday cited in Suddaby et al., 2019, p. 107). Suddaby et al. (2019) describe this as a syncretic epistemological foundation because "syn-

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[1] There are other universities in England and the UK where admissions is also undertaken by professional service staff with minimal academic involvement.

cretic professions must generate their own knowledge standards often on a relatively localized basis. What, for example, are decision standards for determining an outstanding poem, novel, or a film?" (Suddaby et al., 2019, p. 107). Professional standards, such as judging a poem, are derived more fluidly, depending on localized orders of worth (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). As a result, standards "are typically achieved by processes of argumentation, negotiation and eventual agreement" (Suddaby et al., 2019, p. 108). Values penetrate professional standards of decision-making, making it more difficult to adjudicate.

The main control processes of academic labour, as with some other professions (Larson, 2017), is not within the market, but within peer review from self-regulated academic and scientific communities (Merton, 1957; Musselin, 2009). Academic self-regulation occurs through professional self-governing associations of formal colleagues and social networks (Liu, 2018; Parry & Parry, 1976). Internal professional networks facilitate resource exchanges and everyday work and developing expertise (Helgadóttir, 2016), they form and consolidate identity and values (Henkel, 2000), and symbolic forms of distinction are constructed and manifested (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). For academics, economic resources and prestige (e.g., research grants, fellowships, election to learned societies) are awarded through peer panels evaluations and review.

Saks (2016) observed that "certain occupations have been able to regulate market conditions in their favour, despite competition" (p. 176); specific organizational contexts also impact professional identities and roles (Henkel, 2000). Musselin (2009) describes the impenetrability of market forces to academic work where "expanding institutional or market forces are added and combine in turn, with the professional forces" (p. 16). Oxbridge academics are particularly protected from a new "market logic" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Unlike academics elsewhere nationally or internationally (e.g., Enders & de Weert, 2009), Oxbridge faculty have successfully resisted transformation into a more formal corporatized organization and maintained their self-regulation (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Musselin, 2006). Overall, Oxbridge academics are close to the ideal-typical description that "members of the academic profession are seen as belonging to a largely independent and guild-like community, invoking powerful doctrines such as academic freedom and autonomy, community of scholars, collegial authority and a strong emphasis on the determination of goals, and on the management and administration of their institutions" (Enders & de Weert, 2009, p. 2).

Reviewing theories of professions highlights the entanglement of professions in organizational and broader societal contexts (Adams, 2015). As Brock et al. (2014) argue, this connection means professions can become important actors in spheres other than their original one. University admissions then is not only an organizational process affecting universities but a larger reflection of broader social contexts about who is "desired" for selection for elite postsecondary education (Bowen & Bok 1998; Charles et al., 2009; Chetty et al., 2017; Massey et al., 2003). Scholarship on social desirability have previously resulted in systematic exclusions of people with minoritized identities (e.g., women, people of colour, religious minorities; Basit

& Tomlinson, 2012). Presently, socioeconomically privileged, able-bodied, young people, and those without caring responsibility disproportionately attend elite universities in both England and the US (Reay et al., 2005; Slaughter & Taylor, 2016; Ulriksen, 2009).

Systems theory

We utilize the typology of systems theory as an analytical tool to better understand how professors and professionals are influenced by external and organizational structure, practices, and processes. Social systems theory (SST) derives organizational behaviour from individual interaction (i.e., idiographic dimension) with organizational context (i.e., nomothetic dimension; Bess & Dee, 2008). SST is adapted from the biological sciences and general systems theories which describe the interconnections between internal organizational actors, processes, and structures to the external environment (Scott & Davis. 2007). To understand university admissions processes, we use two types of social systems based on their gradience of external influence—open and cybernetic organizational systems (Boulding, 1956).

Open systems

Open systems theory recognizes the importance of environmental context and the pressure to influence organizational structures, processes, and behaviours (Pondy & Mitroff, 1979; Scott & Davis. 2007). In open-system organizations, boundaries are often spanned and redefined to flex with environmental and market pressure (Berrien, 1968). In a highly market-driven profession like hospitality, if consumers and the market call for healthier food options, the field of individual restaurants will respond to meet market force demands. In open-system organizations, the environment provides a context where organizational actors regularly interact with, take direction from, and match environmental pressures (Berrien, 1968). The open-system organization can respond more quickly to external change but may do so by focusing less on internal mission.

Cybernetic systems

Cybernetic systems are still open to external influence but are more goal-oriented and self-regulated from internal feedback loops which allows the organization and organizational actors to limit and control interactions with the external environment (DeYoung & Krueger, 2018). A cybernetic organizational system comprises of sub-systems within organizations where professionalized areas of expertise (i.e., university admissions) are connected through information flow and defined processes designed for self-regulation (Birnbaum, 1988; Scott & Davis, 2007). Using the theoretical lenses of theories of professions and SST we now freshly interrogate previous interview records with selectors for elite universities in England and the US.

Societal context

Providing some context to our research and methods aids with understanding the knowledge claims that could be derived from this type of research. There are obvious limitations to internationally comparative research that tries to isolate a single dimension for comparison (i.e., professionals and professors in admission) when these professions are situated in the complex social web of wider societies. There are key similarities and differences between the two countries. The two countries have similar overall rates of participation in higher education (just over 50%; Mountford-Zimdars, 2016) and feature stratified systems of higher education with elite and non-elite institutions (Raffe & Croxford 2015). However, the US system is more marketised than the English system with one in four providers being private compared to approximately 2% in the UK (Hunt & Boliver 2019). There are striking similarities regarding the dynamic between social background and the stratified higher education systems in both countries: In the US, a select 38 colleges—including five Ivy League universities—educate more students from the top 1% of income than the bottom 60%. This reproduction of inequality from elite education has, if anything, worsened since 2002 (Aisch et al., 2017). Similarly, a group of eight secondary schools, mostly private, send more students to Oxbridge than over 75% of all schools and colleges in the UK taken together (Coughlan, 2018). In addition, students from the top 20% of English advantaged neighbourhoods are almost six times more likely to attend a selective UK university than the most disadvantaged young people (UCAS, 2018).

While there is significant research from the "demand side" of higher education, looking at students' characteristics and their educational journeys, less focus has paid attention to the role of organizational actors and their role in social reproduction, along with their opportunity for changing admissions processes and outcomes. While often neglected, admissions selectors in the US have been influenced by external pressures as was the case in 1922 with the Princeton University director of admissions Radlciff Heermance. In the historic account of this deanship, a key challenge evidenced in correspondence from the endowment fund manager and other admissions staff was to reduce the number of Jewish students admitted, a challenge also accepted by other Ivy League selectors (Karabel, 2005). While not part of our new empirical analysis, this is a strong indication that early admissions staff at Ivy League were already required to quickly respond to sociopolitical pressures of their core constituents in "creating a class" (Stevens, 2007) of admitted students that was acceptable.

Methods

Like other research in the field of professional and organizational studies, we utilize data collected, analyzed, and published for earlier purposes in educational policy research (Mountford-Zimdars, 2016), but are revisiting these data to specifically theorize about the phenomenon of elite university admissions and contribute to the evolution of theory of professions (Sherer, 2019). Reanalyzing data is useful for extending or developing theoretical and epistemological perspectives (Borzillo & Deschaux-Dutard, 2020). In particular, qualitative

data and inquiry is uniquely positioned to understand mechanisms and processes from policy-related phenomena (Maxwell, 2020).

Data

The original study had ethical approval and consisted of 16 in-depth qualitative interviews with admissions selectors from Ivy League universities (i.e., admissions professionals) and Oxbridge universities (i.e., academic professors). The sensemaking of those who undertake tasks is useful because organizational knowledge is embedded in organizational actors' cognitive recollection and descriptions of enactment of processes (Lipsky, 1983).

A sampling frame of eligible study participants was compiled through professional networks, contact information on institutional websites, and snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The sample size mirrors other research on elite higher education (e.g., Reay et al., 2009). Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one to two hours (Patton, 2015). At the beginning of the interview, participants were invited to describe the admissions process and the considerations within that process in an unguided manner to obtain their own account of the process and values without prompting from the interviewer. Sometimes, the starter question of "Could you please tell me about your involvement in the admissions process and what you do?" followed by "why is it that you do things this way? What are you trying to achieve?" elicited ample information without significantly further prompting. Where necessary, the interview script used episodic (i.e., scenario) questions to elicit multi-informational perspectives (Flick, 2000; 2018).

Analysis

We used a horizontal comparative case study approach for analysis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This is useful to shed light on underlying mechanisms that are not so easily decipherable when analyzing each context in isolation (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This allowed us to utilize qualitative data to elucidate policy mechanisms in contextual and nuanced ways (Maxwell, 2020). After coding each interview transcript line-by-line, we then combined codes into larger themes through an axial coding process (Charmaz, 2014). Using organizational system themes, we then analyzed the decision-making mechanisms with particular attention to how admissions selectors were influenced (or not) by environmental or internal organizational factors. For example, we coded data when an Ivy League admissions selector mentioned they adhered to a specific gender ratio because of on-campus accommodations restrictions. Organizational social systems theory typology provides an analytical tool for categorizing and describing the larger themes that emerged from comparative contextual analysis. We used larger themes to create the resulting theoretical implications.

We used other forms of data to triangulate understanding to increase trustworthiness, including previous ethnographic observations from Oxbridge admissions decision meetings, Ivy League recruiting campus tours, and field-level admissions selector conferences. These additional experiences and data provided further ways to challenge and confirm general empirical

results. For more information on ways complementary data were gathered and utilized to triangulate results, please see (Mountford-Zimdars, 2016).

Findings

Our results show how the professional background of admissions selectors shape their decision-making heuristics and systems-orientation of organizations. While interaction between system and individual is reciprocal to some degree our study focuses on how systems influence individual behaviour. The independent professional orientation of the academic profession influences how faculty navigate the complexity of admissions decisions differently from the more constrained and less autonomous approach of the professional admissions staff. The approaches and contexts of the two different professions profoundly impact the way admissions selection micro-processes are executed and explain differences in the values and expectations the systems serve. The professionalization background of admissions selector and organizational system-orientation are integral to admissions selection but is undertheorized in educational research and unexplored in organizational research.

Ivy League institutions: Professionalized staff working in open systems

One of the major differences in how English and US admissions selectors viewed their criteria for selection was the variability with which extracurricular activities and experiences influenced selectors' perspectives on candidates. The Ivy League selectors mentioned a "holistic review" process that took into account non-academic characteristics such as talents, experiences, identities, and organizational needs. One Ivy League selector described their institution's approach as: "We try to look for people who would bring us diverse talents and interests—all, we hope, with energy and ambition." This complex, opaque, and amorphous set of admissions criteria means that US admissions selectors are selecting a class (Stevens, 2007). Admissions staff are not only admitting the most academically talented individual students, but they also must meet the needs of other intra-institutional units and actors that require a diverse set of talents and interests.

Selectors in the US had to meet the unique wants and needs of academic and extracurricular organizational units external to their admissions office. One example mentioned by all of the Ivy League selectors was the need music departments had for specific instrumentalists. For example, one Ivy League selector said:

> If the music department does come to us and say, "you know, we really need a harpist this year," or whatever it is, we'll keep an eye out for one […] there are things that need to keep, sort of going at the university for it to be what it is, and so those are considerations that we have to bring in to the [admissions] committee room.

Selecting for instrumental talent served as a generalizable metaphor participants used to explain the complexity, sensitivity, and contextualization of undergraduate admissions meeting the needs of multiple intra-institutional units and actors.

While musical talent is an organizational need that straddles both academic and extracurricular needs, athletic talent is purely for extracurricular purposes. Admissions professionals had to negotiate recruiting student athletes that met academic standards, while at the same time, met athletic department desires. The importance of intercollegiate athletics in US higher education is largely created from perceived external influence from major donors and organizational field image competition (Baumer & Zimbalist, 2019). To manage this external influence, an Ivy League selector described why the negotiation between athletic departments and admissions professionals was necessary because "[…] the coaches go out and select these kids, and usually the academic credentials are much lower than the rest of the class."

Individual talents and experiences are not the only organizational priorities considered in admissions in the Ivy League context. Admissions selectors also have pressure to consider "legacy" students (i.e., prospective students who have a familial connection to the institution) and those who have the capacity for major financial donations. An Ivy League selector describes the influence of legacy students and the development (i.e., fundraising) office by stating:

> I mean, we do consider the fact that students might be legacies […] they [prospective students] still have to meet the, kind of, the [student demographic] profile of students that we're looking for. […] but it is something that we do consider. And then, of course, yes, we do have a development office, as do all institutions, and that's also a consideration.

Another Ivy League selector from a different institution described legacy students, and those with office of development connections, differently:

> […] their parents are being cultivated and are in the position to give a, you know, a monstrous amount of money […] that's really going to matter to the school in some way. And those kids, there's very few of them, but I think the standards are lowest for those students.

Admissions selectors in Ivy League universities must consider non-academic and extracurricular characteristics of students to meet the needs of intra-organizational constituents. The influence on status and economic power can be rationalized as the private (i.e., independent) governance structure of the Ivy League institutions compared to their public university peers, and the need for non-governmental subsidies to finance the institution (Baumer & Zimbalist, 2019).

Linking admissions decisions with potential donations is an illegitimate practice in Oxbridge because academic selectors are not accountable to environmental/intra-institutional influences as the admissions professionals in the US.

Admissions professionals were also accountable to non-academically related, on-campus housing capacity. One Ivy League admissions selector mentioned the need for specific gender ratios in a new first-year class due to the current on-campus housing capacity. Considering most university housing in England operates with single-occupancy rooms and could accommodate any gender, Oxbridge universities are not bound by gender capacity issues like their Ivy League counterparts that have mostly double-occupancy, gendered housing accommodations. An Ivy League selector indicated the importance of this gender requirement in the admissions context, and said, "the only number that really matters in the process is the number of beds we have in the freshman class." This intra-organizational environmental influence seemed frivolous to the Oxbridge selectors. For example, when asked about gender balance in admissions, two different Oxbridge selectors replied, "of course not" and "No, no, no. No— we can't do that, I mean yah […] we don't have a gender balance or ethnic balance or anything of that kind."

 Ivy League admissions selection is described as holistic; but from an organizational perspective, contextualizing admissions processes and selection is operationalized as having to satisfy numerous intra-organizational, environmental priorities and constituents, such as housing allotment, musical/athletic talent, and fundraising opportunities. While holistic review allows institutions to admit historically marginalized students (e.g., Black and Latinx students, women in STEM, low-income students; Bastedo, 2021) it also allows environmental actors including alumni, policy makers and the media to influence admissions decisions to reproduce inequality through legacy admissions which privileges wealthy and connected prospective students.

Oxbridge: Autonomous professors working in cybernetic systems

Unlike Ivy League institutions, the admissions selectors at Oxbridge were all academic faculty who seek to admit students based on academic ability and potential. While administrative staff organize admissions processes, the authority for admittance relies within agreement between the academic faculty by discipline (e.g., engineering, psychology, chemistry) and the college (e.g., Brasenose, Christ Church, Downing, Magdalen). Because undergraduate admission decisions are executed by faculty members and is only determined by discipline, the process of admissions selection at Oxbridge is not susceptible to as much intra-organizational environmental influence as Ivy League admissions processes and decisions. However, when a narrowly defined model of an "academically successful-minded" student is reproduced, often there are implicit measures of race, class, and gender that are not addressed in the present image of an implied student (Star-Glass, 2020).

Academic ability is the primary desire for Oxbridge admission selection, but it is defined quite differently in different disciplines. The admissions process for prospective students often relies on an individual interview that has significant weight on the applicant's future admission. Oxbridge selectors had various ways of evaluating prospective students for academic ability,

but there were consistent underlying themes that expressed values, expectations, and logics. Selectors from Oxbridge chose applicants for admission based on academic ability and predicted success within the unique pedagogical approach of the Oxbridge tutorial system.

Even though all candidates submit their current and teacher-predicted grades in their school-leaving examinations, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades, and personal statements, faculty members conduct individual interviews with applicants in order to better evaluate students' academic capabilities. One Mathematics professor discussed how the interview is structured:

> We ask some about Maths. We don't ask them anything personal except for some space-fillers to start off, especially when it is the candidate's first interview. Something just to set them at ease and start them off.

The Mathematics Oxbridge selector went on to describe the types of Mathematics problems and questions they asked prospective students. Unlike Ivy League selectors, the Oxbridge admissions selector was not concerned about non-academic information about the student such as extracurriculars, their propensity for community service, or their family connections. Similarly, another Oxbridge selector described the individual interview as:

> […] to be honest, I haven't considered at all a person's wider contribution to [Oxbridge] in a wider sense. I mean, we read the personal statement, but, yeah, but to be on the safe side, you only think academically.

In contrast, an Ivy League Selector mentioned how they measured student merit as potential accomplishments students have in their personal and professional lives decades after they graduate. They use institutional record-keeping publications (e.g., yearbooks) to remind new professional admissions staff of the type of student they are trying to recruit and admit. When this Ivy League selector hires new admissions staff, they give them a yearbook and tell them, "[…] this is the first marker of whether we've done a good job; not how they do in the classroom."

The type of leadership qualities the Ivy League selector looked for in undergraduate students was exactly the opposite of what Oxbridge selectors were interested in having as a student. When reflecting on the type of student that exemplifies leadership qualities in their interview, one Oxbridge selector said:

> […] that person would run everything, socialize and everything and probably get a 2:2 *[low academic grade]*. Because they would just have a ball. And you could see them fitting in. And you could see them love being in [Oxbridge institution]. But, actually, the college did not want that either. And being a great member of the JCR [Junior Common Room; community for undergraduates], I think, is a euphemism for being a great socialite, but not actually that serious about your academic work.

This Oxbridge selector went on to explain how this type of student did not gain admission in the academic-led assessment process.

A social scientist Oxbridge professor described a student who did not gain admission because he lacked the critical reasoning skills necessary to pass the admissions interview. They described the interview by saying: "We asked him, 'Why do we celebrate weddings?' and he talked about two people being in love and everyone is happy. So, you rephrase it—but it was very much one or two sentence answers that you got." This type of critical reasoning, being tested in the admissions interview, exemplifies the type of intellectual expectations Oxbridge admissions selectors have of the young adults in question, along with the social capital understandings that must be conveyed. The academic ability needed for successful admittance is not reliant on scores, grades, and content knowledge alone, but also on the ability to communicate sophisticated academic and social knowledge; or, as an Oxbridge selector said, "you want to put someone through the paces at the interview and I think that is fair enough, actually."

Discussion

Access to elite higher education is a common topic of sociological and educational research. However, it has not been previously interrogated how the professional background of admissions selectors shapes admissions decisions and thus shapes organizational social systems. In this paper we take a novel, comparative approach to this established line of inquiry using new and different theoretical orientations of professional and organizational systems theory. We used an internationally comparative approach, looking at two highly-stratified contexts of elite higher education with a particular focus on how professional status and organizational influences impact how professional service staff in the US and academic faculty at Oxbridge make admissions decisions. This in turn, provides insights into how professions shape organizational social systems, in this case through their selection choices.

Theoretical contribution

Self-regulation

Following Abbott's (1988) work on the sociology of professions academic faculty is characterized as a high-status profession employing task autonomy. Oxbridge academics are particularly close to the ideal-typical characterization (Weber, 1913/1988). With such high task autonomy, academic faculty can control expertise and cement their role in the information processing as an organizational sub-unit within a self-regulated cybernetic system (Birnbaum, 1988; Boulding, 1956; DeYoung & Krueger, 2018). Overall, independence and self-regulation allow academic selectors within the cybernetic system of Oxbridge to have significant oversight and autonomy over undergraduate admissions. Because academic selectors are protected from intra-organizational and external influences, they have the autonomy to admit students from their narrowly defined predictions of academic success. However, because

there is little organizational requirement for environmental adaptation, research continuously shows how the Oxbridge cybernetic admissions system has continued to reproduce social advantage when looking at the profile of admitted students (Coughlan, 2018). We propose that a contributing factor is likely the logic of the cybernetic admissions system as it is conducive to homophily and it depends on the willingness of academic peers to challenge each other's conceptions of merit.

External influence

Professional staff selectors in the US are illustrative of the professionalization and specialization of role function in complex modern organizations. Admissions officers have lower task autonomy within their institution and their role is aligned to meet the needs of their employing institution (Khurana, 2007). Professional selectors must negotiate with external influences (e.g., alumni relations officers, fundraisers, music directors, athletic coaches) to create a class that meets the various goals of many intra-organizational offices and actors. Because there is such a permeable boundary between admissions selection and other organizational actors due to professional selectors' lower task autonomous position, the system created is one that is "open" to environmental influence (Boulding, 1956).

Professions and systems

By connecting the sociology of professions and systems theory we are better able to explain how the organizational social systems are created and sustained through the profession of the admissions selectors in elite university contexts in the US and England. For example, we can account for the distinct US focus on alumni contributions, as a factor of an open system responding to a range of external influences. This contrasts with the Oxbridge narrow-defined understanding of individual academic qualifications without regard for extracurricular factors or other intra-organizational needs.

By pioneering this theoretical linkage of organizational theories, we may be of use to other organizational scholars seeking to understand the connection between professions and the gradience of openness and self-regulation in the accompanying organizational social systems. Understanding this connection could assist in understanding heuristic and decision-making in other organizational contexts such as healthcare, politics, law enforcement, etc. For example, some hospitals are led by medical professionals and others by professionalized healthcare management staff (Goodall, 2011). The same happens in national ministries or division where there are both politically appointed staff and career staff that often have overlapping function and responsibility (Pinto et al., 2018). Our research would suggest that professional background and level of task autonomy shapes the type of organizational social system that is created to influence decision making.

Caveats to knowledge claims

The social world is complex and when comparing across countries, there are always many contextual and systemic differences at play making policy borrowing a challenging endeavor.

It would be naive to consider academic attainment and credentials as occurring in a vacuum. For example, attainment in England is strongly related to social background (Strand 2021). Indeed, previous research has demonstrated how scoring high on a Bourdieusian inspired quiz on high culture increased admissions chances for applicants in Arts but not Science subjects (Zimdars et al., 2009). We also know that middle class parents provide opportunities to their children which will enhance their academic credentials and test scores, let it be tutoring, private schooling or participation in particular (selective) state schools. At the same time, we also know that middle class parents in the US play to the criteria of elite admissions systems. For example, a majority of athletic considerations in admissions benefit already privileged young people (Arcidiacono et al., 2019). Thus, we do not simply assume that academic credentials or non-academic criteria are intrinsically fairer for widening access to elite higher education as both systems can be played by upper and middle classes wishing to pass on their position to their children (Lareau, 2011).

Finally, the field of social stratification research is a well-ploughed and rigorous field with many knowledge claims based on large-scale data analyses. Plenty of focus is rightly on the "outcomes" of the organisational and other processes that occur in countries that tend to result in social reproduction. Indeed, we have reviewed the empirical work in the present paper showing that the outcomes of the different selection systems tend to reproduce social inequality in both the professional-led Ivy League system and in the academic-led Oxbridge system. However, we believe that there is merit in seeking to understand *how* different systems create these results which can be uniquely understood using qualitative methodological traditions. We aim to contribute to knowledge that the closer alignment to the open organisational system in the US and the closer alignment to the cybernetic organisational system in England allow practitioners and policy makers to think about the different channels in each system to influence practice.

Implications for practice

The cybernetic structures within which the Oxbridge selectors operate are heavily influenced by the environment to the extent that they can retain autonomy in decision making. This means media investigations and changing public opinion on demographic realities could catalyze change in admissions processes so long as the system could be returned thereafter to self-regulation by internal actors. Therefore, it is important to engage the professional communities of practice that academic selectors engage with through their discipline.

Academic faculty have intense loyalty to their academic disciplines, so it makes more sense to influence faculty through their own academic organizations or learned societies. Some prestigious learned societies in England are already putting broadening access on the agenda of the professional project. The UK Professional Standard Framework, a framework all newer academics encounter as part of developing their teaching practice, also features a value to "Promote participation in higher education and equality of opportunity for learners"

(AdvanceHE, 2019, professional value 2). As long as these associations are able to represent and influence their internal audience of academic faculty from their respective disciplines, there is opportunity for value systems change leading to policy and practice change within elite university admissions decisions made from faculty.

Another opportunity for change comes from learning from other professional projects. Here, through a process Liu calls "diagnostic coproduction" (Liu, 2018). Professionals have come to recognize that "clients and patients, devices and instruments, concepts, and institutional and spatial arrangements" are additional legitimate sources of expertise (Eyal, 2013, p. 873). Thus, networks have emerged connecting professionals and laypersons. This is the case in healthcare (e.g., patient committees) and earlier stages of schooling (e.g., parent-teacher committees). While many modern universities often have some structure of involving students in committees, it is perhaps surprising that there have been no demands for societal and student stakeholders to be part of the admissions project. Here we see potential to learn from other professional projects that have democratized and co-created expertise. Widening the expertise of admissions selection to include more than just academic faculty could introduce fissures of perspective that could provide diverse and varied definitions of academic knowledge and predictive academic success.

Conclusion

Elite universities in both England and the US have contributed to socially stratified and unequal societies (Britton et al., 2019; Chetty et al. 2017; Chetty et al., 2023). Alternatively, elite university education could catalyze social mobility if they were to admit and graduate a more equitable and diverse student population (Britton et al. 2019; Chetty et al. 2017). One way to begin addressing social inequality in elite university admissions is to look at the admissions processes and the socially embedded organizational systems and actors that they operate within.

The present article sheds light on the detailed mechanisms of how admissions decisions are reached within the cybernetic Oxbridge system through academic selectors and within the open systems of US elite admissions managed by professional service staff. The two admissions processes operate within two different organizational social systems shaped by the professional background of the admissions selectors themselves. In the US, professional admissions selectors respond to external pressure and intra-organizational needs within an open organizational system, while in England the academic faculty function within a cybernetic system designed to self-regulate and shield selectors from responding to external stimuli. The analysis thus offers a potential springboard for further theoretical applications of our linkage of professions, organizational theory and decision making as well as provides opportunity for different intervention points for policy makers wishing to create more equitable change in elite university admissions in either system.

Article history

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