

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The Power and Habitus of Professors and Professionals: Using the Theory of Professions and Systems Theory for Identifying Intervention Points for Change to Elite Universities' Admissions Processes

Jeffrey K. Grim<sup>1</sup>, Anna Mountford-Zimdars<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Michigan, Michigan, The United States of America <sup>2</sup>University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom

**Research Domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

**Abstract:**

Gatekeepers to access to elite universities, across the world, have historically and contemporarily been drawn from academic faculty as well as professional services. While the *outcomes* of high stakes elite university admissions have been studied extensively, the opaque admissions selection *process* remains undertheorized and benefits from a fresh, interdisciplinary approach. Using theories of professions and system theory, we examine previous qualitative interview data from admissions selectors in both the U.S. and the U.K. to understand organizational mechanisms for admissions decision-making. Through the comparative lens, we find that the professional background and habitus (academics in the UK and professional services staff in the US) of the admissions selector shapes the level of openness to the decision-making system. Our contribution to knowledge is that academics as a self-regulated profession and professional service staff as a less autonomous are influenced through different channels. Communities of practice are key for academics and organizational objectives are key to professional service staff. Understanding elite university admissions based on the macro and meso context of professions and their structure thus offers a novel theoretically informed avenue for developing change strategies for stakeholders seeking to increase fairness in admissions.

**Paper:**

### Introduction

Admission to elite universities is one route for education-based social mobility (Britton et al. 2019; Chetty et al. 2017). Elite university admissions, have been rife with dynamic struggles over the inclusion and exclusion of different social groups, based on religion, gender, and race (see e.g. Karabel 2006, Stacpoole 1986, Anderson and Syrluga 2019, Wood 2018; Aisch et al., 2017). In a current context where income inequality are widening in both the UK and the US (Major & Machin 2019) and increasing numbers of students entering postsecondary education worldwide (Altbach et al., 2019), the issue of skewed access advantaging privileged young people has, if anything, increased in importance.

However, to our surprise, we could not find prior work using a theoretical lens rooted in the theories of professions and organisations. We seek to contribute to the scholarly and policy conversations on elite admissions by asking: *How are organizational structures and heuristics shaped and influenced by*

*admissions selectors from differing professional backgrounds?* In the United States, higher educational professional service staff undertake the decision making. In contrast, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue their long-standing tradition of power over entry in the self-governing universities residing with their own academic faculty and their academic judgement. *Do these differences in professional and organizational contexts matter and how?* We draw on the theory and sociology of professions and systems theory to answer these questions.

## **METHODS**

### **Research setting**

This paper draws on interview data come from conversations with professionals and academics in charge of undergraduate admissions decisions.

Respondents presented either the big three “Ivy League” institutions in the US (i.e., Harvard, Yale, and Princeton), or Oxbridge in the UK; thus highly selective, financially well-endowed, and social capital-rich institutions. These institutions are extreme case studies and closest to the ideal types (REF) of elite higher education and appropriately bound our case study (Yin, 2018) while also allowing for comparison (Seawright, 2016).

There are noteworthy similarities and differences for undergraduate admissions. The starkest contrast,- and the one on which we have chosen to focus on in this paper – concerns the decision makers in admissions decisions. At Oxbridge, academic faculty members not only conduct the admissions interviews but also make the ultimate admissions decisions, with some mechanisms to ensure consistency for the same subject across different colleges. This practice is in contrast to admissions to Ivy League institutions, where professionalized full-time admissions staff undertake an individual reading of each application, and then meet in committee to offer individual admissions decisions based on the class to which the student is admitted; there is thus less autonomy in decision making (Stevens, 2007; Jones, et al., 2019).

### **Data collection and analysis**

Drawing on historical data (Sherer 2019), we reanalyze qualitative data for developing new theoretical and epistemological perspectives (Borzillo & Deschaux-Dutard, 2020). Thus, while the data - 12 qualitative interviews with admissions decisions makers in the two country collected between 2006-2009 - has been used and published to contribute to knowledge regarding social stratification (REF ANONYMISED), it has not been looked at through the theoretical angle of professions and systems theory. Moreover, re-analysing historical data allows easy access to difficult-to-collect elite interview data. However, our interviewees are clearly not reflecting to recent policy changes in their considerations and we also do not analyze or observe actual admissions decisions in the present paper; we also rely on self-reports.

### **Findings Section**

From qualitative interviews

## Discussion

Following Abbott's (1988) work on the sociology of professions we categorize academic faculty as a high-status profession employing task autonomy that is able to create system structures that are more self-regulated and contained from external forces. This resembles closely the description of a "cybernetic" system as described in organizational theory (Boulding, 1956). Professional service staff have significantly less autonomy and their role is often directly client-centered and outward-facing.

By connecting systems theory and sociology of professions we are able to better explain the black box of elite university admissions in US and UK contexts. 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 fierce Oxbridge loyalty to spotting talent for specific academic fields without regard for other extracurricular factors. By pioneering this theoretical linkage of organizational theories we may be of use to other organizational and comparative scholars seeking to understand similar processes in other organizational contexts.

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