Understanding the Effects of Standardized Testing Scores for College Admissions Through Sociological Theory and Research

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Introduction

With the cost of living increasing and job opportunities being scarce, many individuals are struggling to make ends meet in our competitive and capitalistic society. This situation creates the mindset that a college degree is a necessity to earn a stable income, rather than the degree being a leverage in the workforce. In theory, going to college seems simple and easy, especially because the degree can open up so many career opportunities. However, aside from how expensive attending these academic institutions are, whether it be a public university or a private college, there is also a very important hurdle that every college applicant has to overcome: the standardized testing/college entrance exams.

Standardized testing, such as the ACT and SAT, is "required or recommended for admission to nearly all of the nation's 4-year colleges and universities" (Klasik 2013). Usually, the higher the score on these entrance exams, the higher the chance of acceptance into the different schools. While the topics addressed in the personal statements and the number of leadership positions a high school student holds may vary, the SAT/ACT score is ideally a metric that can be used to measure the academic ability of all students consistently, regardless of their socioeconomic and racial background. The issue is not whether standardized testing is corrupt; rather, it is more of how the performance on these exams seems to correlate to an individuals' socioeconomic and racial background. A metric that was supposed to be the least biased in terms of these factors seems to be the most biased, continuing and strengthening the trend that the elite are able to find their way into elite institutions and vice versa.

One of the reasons why this gap between the elitist and non-elitist emerges even in standardized testing conditions is due to the way the ACT and SAT are implemented and conducted in our communities. These standardized tests are quite expensive (usually around $60)

and test prep materials can at least cost a couple thousand dollars. Though there are fee-waivers made available in certain situations, there is also the issue of access to these exams. Statistics show that about fifty-percent of all high school students do not take either one of these standardized entrance exams; in areas of lower socioeconomic status, students have less access to these exams. In fact, high schools that are testing centers for SATs have students enrolled to take these exams by seventy-percent more than campuses that are not. High schools that are testing centers, on average, also have 5.7 percent fewer students that qualify for free/reduced lunch, revealing the socioeconomic status of the students attending those high schools (Bulman 2015). In other words, the students that are privileged enough to attend certain high schools also have easier access to testing center/materials that can affect their college admissions process. This unequal distribution of opportunities and access to information also causes urban students (who usually have more access to testing centers and information) to become overrepresented among high achievers in both the standardized testing and applications (Mountford-Zimdars 2013).

When thinking of the ACT/SAT as merely an exam, it may not seem that significant. However, when we consider the life-changing impact these exams may have on these aspiring students, the SAT/ACT becomes more than just a three-hour exam. This paper hopes to reveal and analyze the structural flaws with the standardized testing procedure for college admissions as well as the conflict that exist between the elite becoming even more elitist through access to these resources. Using two different sociological theory perspectives, we are able to have a better understanding of how young adults in our society are impacted by the college entrance exams; these theories offer insights beyond research data and statistics. Ultimately, this paper hopes to address the question of whether standardized testing such as the SAT/ACT really makes the

college application process fairer for all individuals or whether it actually widens the gaps between the proletariats and the bourgeoisie even more.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism is a sociological theory that views society as "a system of interrelated parts," emphasizing "how the different parts work together for the good of the system." In fact, structural functionalists argue that though each component in the societal system can be studied individually and separately, they also need to be examined as a whole because all the components work together in our society (Appelrouth 2016). There are two key structural functionalists' theories that we will examine to gain a better understanding of how different components in our society influence high school students to not only decide to take the ACT/SAT but why they feel the need to score exceptionally well on these exams. Under structural functionalism, standardized testing can also be understood as a tool that is used to "filter out" or designate certain people to the different systems in our society.

Talcott C. Parsons (1902-1979)

Talcott C. Parsons argues that our actions can be categorized into three different systems – social systems, cultural systems, and personal systems – that are all intertwined and influenced by each other. When we consider the value of standardizing testing for college admissions, it can be assumed that the ultimate goal for these high school students is to get into their dream college. This can be potentially be achieved by scoring a high standardized testing score. We can then analyze the relationship between these systems to understand why the score for an ACT/SAT matters so much. Under the personality system, a student may want to score a high ACT/SAT score because they have this dream school that they want to attend. The cultural system is tied into this personality system because the particular school may be a dream school for this

individual due to the high value placed on the school from society. For example, for many students, Harvard University is a dream school because it is consistently ranked as the number one university in the world, and thus the school name carries prestige and honor. The social system in this situation may be that if peers are scoring very high on their standardized tests, an individual may feel like they would have to score even higher to become a strong candidate amongst others who have very good stats and are all applying to the same dream school.

Robert K. Merton (1910-2003)

Robert K. Merton defines manifest functions as the intended objective consequences for a specified unit that contribute to its adjustment or adaptation while the latent function refers to the unintended consequences of the same unit. He uses these two concepts to analyze social patterns, such as superstitions and traditions, which persist even though their manifest function does not seem to be achieved successfully. In terms of standardized testing, the manifest function is to predict a student's performance in college; universities often argue that the SAT/ACT are better predictors of the student's academic ability than is a grade point average (GPA) due to how these standardized exams test on a common set of topics for all the users taking it (Sackett 2012). However, there are multiple latent functions for SAT/ACT, both from the administrative side and the prospective-student side.

Many schools conduct the highest-score policy, which "utilizes only the highest of all submitted scores," because raising the SAT scores to report to ranking groups such as U.S. News can also potentially boost its overall ranking (Vigdor 2003). Furthermore, the highest-score policy encourages students to retake the exam, for the better or worse, which can indicate how motivated these students are about their higher education. It can also reveal how financially capable they are to spend on academics since college is a significant investment. In other words,

the standardized testing can serve as a filter for dedicated leaners from the administration's perspective. Schools can also "purchase student contact information from the ACT and College Board in order to build their recruitment mailing list," being able to increase the number of applicants to their schools (Klasik 2013).

On the other hand, for prospective students, the exam scores provide information about the schools they plan to apply to, such as how they may place academically compared to the other students at that school. Therefore, depending on how well they score on the SAT/ACT, it may encourage them to apply to schools that they would have never considered applying to otherwise. The exam scores can also open up opportunities for students to be eligible for merit-based scholarships, which can significantly alleviate the costs of college (Klasik 2013). Though the process of taking standardized exams can be tedious and costly, in the long run, it can help the student find the best school that meets both their academic and financial needs.

Conflict Theory

On the other hand, we can also approach this issue from a conflict theory perspective to shed light on the different conflicts that exists within not just the educational system, but other systems within our society. Conflict theory is the belief that capitalism can create conflicting interests in our society in the form of class conflict, and thus reshape the social structure (Savur 1975). Through analyzing the theories of C. Wright Mills and Randall Collins, we will be able to have a better understanding of how the standardized testing procedure for college admissions can actually be ineffective because the opportunities for a "good" education will tend to be concentrated in the elite sector of our society. In fact, standardized testing may even widen the gap between the two social classes, contributing to the belief that academic ability is no longer

enough to become admitted to the prestigious institutions, a gateway to multiple opportunities in society.

C. Wright Mills (1916-1962)

C. Wright Mills argues in his work, *The Power Elit*e, that there are only three institutions that are dominant in our society and also have ultimate power over others. These institutions are the economic order, the political order, and the military order. When just looking at these three institutions as it is, it may be difficult to find a connection between standardized testing and them. However, these elite institutions, particularly the economic order (which are the mega-corporations) and the political order (governments and anybody involved in the legal system) are composed of individuals with a prestigious educational degree. In order to obtain that degree, the individual would have had to be enrolled in an elite university, which usually requires a very high standardized testing score. Though it may be ideal that testing scores are measuring the educational ability of a student, there are many other factors that play a role in how a student performs. One of these factors is money; the more a family spends on expensive test-prep materials and even being able to create opportunities for a student to retake it multiple times, the better the score is usually. This then implies that money can buy high test scores and thus acceptances into elite schools. The elite schools make it easier for individuals to make their way into the elite institutions such as the economic order and the political order. In other words, the elite has a leverage into the elite institutions starting at even as young as school-age, while others struggle to find their way into these institutions after they graduate from non-Ivy League universities. Unfortunately, as Mills points out, many of these elite individuals are oblivious to their status and the benefits they gain through being in that caste. Non-elite individuals also seem to think that they can make their way into that society through entering those academic societies,

so they try to achieve a high score on the standardized tests. However, these elite societies are so established that it makes it very difficult for those not in these societies to step foot in any of it.

Randall Collins (1941-present)

Randall Collins is interested in the concept of cultural capital and how it can transform into power in different situations. In fact, cultural capital can even help an individual navigate through different classes and social worlds, acting as a leverage in certain settings. Furthermore, Collins argues that shared experiences can bring individuals closer together but can also be used "to impose a hierarchy of status prestige in which some groups dominate others by providing an ideal to emulate under inferior conditions." In his book *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science,* he highlights in multiple chapters how cultural capital can affect social mobility, "since they shape the organizational channels within which careers can take place, and the different kinds of positions which determine what success means in a particular society" (Collins 1975). Cultural capital can be defined as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (Wildhagen 2009).

Cultural capital is powerful because since it is the knowledge and familiarity of the dominant class, the more cultural capital an individual has, the more successful they tend to be (Wildhagen 2009). When a student has more access to knowledge and resources, such as test prep courses and target scores for certain schools, they are at a higher advantage than those who do not have that same information. It is typically the case that cultural capital is strongly associated with money, thus the more money you are able to spend on this cultural capital, the more knowledge you will have compared to others, serving as an advantage. This creates a gap between the students who are already privileged to have an advantage in getting into elite

universities and students who do not have much cultural capital and are disadvantaged when fighting for the same spot. A high standardized testing score was the "easiest" way for many of these disadvantaged students to break into the elite system. However, with schools emphasizing the highest-score on the exams, the elite students attempt to use as much cultural capital as they can to achieve this highest-score, in turn becoming more of a cultural capital competition than an academic competition. Thus, the privileged are able to become more privileged and makes it more difficult for the disadvantaged to enter into their exclusive society.

How the Different Theories can Shed Light on the Standardized Testing Issue

The two different theories, structural functionalism theory, and conflict theory, both offer insights into different aspects of the issues the SAT and ACT can cause in terms of college admissions, especially for prestigious and elite institutions. Structural functionalism can offer insight into why getting accepted into these institutions are so important for many individuals while the conflict theory explains why these institutions can be so difficult to be accepted into. These prestigious universities are often times sought after because of the connections and opportunities that are promised to the students there or, in other words, the access to cultural capital. There is a high value placed on cultural capital because of the cultural system that Parson describes. According to Collins' ideas, cultural capital can create access to even more cultural capital, since the privileged high school students who already have access to information and resources usually have the advantage to attend the elite universities which are full of even more cultural capital. Standardized testing should be the easiest way for students, especially those that are not as privileged, to step foot into the elite society because, in theory, test scores should be a measure of a student's academic ability. However, Mills' theories can reveal that the reality is not as simple, because these elite societies are already fully established and maintained by the

individuals in the social hierarchy. A high test score can measure other factors, such as the ability to financially be able to afford education, according to Merton's theories.

Both theories reveal the reality that exists within the academic system in our country, especially at the elite institutions. Universities are often the gate to opportunities and connections, whether it be in terms of alumni connections or job opportunities. The academic institutions are structured so rigidly that it is unfortunately difficult, as revealed through the application of different sociological theories, for a non-elite individual to break their way into the system. There are, however, exceptions and these theories do not explain how some individuals are able to make their way into the structured system. The theories deal with a majority population and opinion, which are very important, but when looking at a society as a whole, it is also crucial to understand the minorities in the system as well. By being able to understand all aspects and groups of the society, we will be able to improve different policies, especially access to education.

My personal belief is that though standardized testing, in theory, is very attractive since it helps standardize academic abilities of students, I agree with the different theorists that it also creates a wider gap between the elite and the disadvantaged. Upbringing significantly impacts individuals, especially regarding cultural capital. The more access to information and resources an individual has, the farther they will be able to advance in society. Unfortunately, all of these factors are usually obtained through money, strengthening the widely-held belief that "money solves everything." I believe that education should be a tool for individuals to leverage themselves in society, the educational degree serving as an opportunity for those who did not start off with the cultural capital that most elites are entitled to. The college application process has multiple qualitative components, such as the personal statement or leadership experiences.

These experiences are usually very dependent on the access to opportunities, such as volunteering opportunities usually offered in "good" communities. SAT and ACT scores are one of the most important components of the application, thus making it even more worthy for individuals to spend as much money and time as they can to get a high score.

Universities and schools are just like any other organization: reputations matter significantly, usually measured in the form of rankings. These rankings also add social value to the school, attracting higher-achieving students. As this cycle repeats, these schools become more and more selective, being able to only accept a small number of individuals. At this point, it becomes a cultural capital race – what can an aspiring candidate do to secure the limited number of spots available. Test prep schools, tutors, resources, all start becoming more expensive as the demand increases due to the increase in the value of them. As these materials become less available, in terms of financially and availability, only a small number of students will also be able to access them, through paying extra fees. For the top-tier academic institutions that are already composed of prestigious individuals, the demand for a high standardized test score maintains their elite society. The application process ultimately becomes a measure of each applicant's social capital and background.

The United States being a capitalistic society makes it difficult to change this academic structure, since everything can be viewed as a money-making mechanism. As in any other situation, the privileged bourgeoisie wants to preserve and maintain their social hierarchy, so practices to prevent proletariats from making their way up the hierarchical ladder will be implemented, subtly or not. Education will always be one of the most political platforms, because it is where social interactions occur, knowledge flourish, and opportunities are gained.

Therefore, if anything, it would be at educational institutions that practices to maintain the socioeconomic hierarchy would be established.

The reality is that the current situation is actually the best it could be. As we have seen through the structural functionalism theory, particularly Merton, the standardized testing does offer benefits to the non-elite students as well, such as in the form of eligibility for scholarships and knowledge of schools the student may have never heard of otherwise. For college admissions staff, the score on the standardized test makes it one less thing to spend an extensive amount of time pouring over, since it can act as a filter. The holistic approach taken by many universities when considering an applicant does also help address this issue of standardized testing benefiting only the privileged. Through the personal statements and other components of the application, individuals do have the opportunity to address any struggles they faced and hardships they overcame to apply.

All in all, the two different sociological theories help both reveal the issue that occurs through standardized testing but also offers insight into the benefits it may bring. To choose just one of the theories is a complicated decision since the two theories look at different aspects of the issue. However, while conflict theory can expose how the system can be flawed, structural functionalism ultimately shows the benefits that it can also bring, leading me to understand that the current admissions process and the standardized testing policies are not entirely corrupt. The current state is the best the admissions process can be, and though it does make it extremely difficult for the disadvantaged to make their way into the elite society, it is not entirely impossible. A high standardized testing score may still be the “easiest” way to join the elite and privileged communities, through being admitted to prestigious institutions, and potentially decreasing the gap between those who started out being privileged and those that are not.

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