University non-admittance and anomie: Reconsidering the promise of an egalitarian society

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Abstract

The core theme of this article is the emerging tension between the egalitarian discourse that increases the general aspiration of people to become more educated and actual admission constraints. A desire to attend a university and not being allowed to (i.e. non-admittance) is a loss that can potentially result in an anomic condition. Anomie theory gives a sociological explanation for a painful situation in which there is a cultural overemphasis on success combined with structurally limited opportunities. In this study, the focus is on the experiences of prospective students who have been applying to a selective university in Finland without gaining admission. The data consists of 50 personal online narratives. The analysis is presented in accordance with a conceptual typology of individual responses to the conditions of non-admittance. The findings yield important insights regarding university choice, meritocratic selection and formulation of equitable admission policies.

Keywords

Higher education choice; selective university; *non-admittance; anomie theory; egalitarian education system; 'myth of meritocracy'*

INTRODUCTION

In egalitarian societies, a widely shared cultural norm is that everyone shall attain a good education and the best possible credentials. The opportunity to enter higher education is made as equitable as possible so that every citizen may take advantage of their educational potential. However, the most sought-after universities have meritocratic selection and quotas on available study places, and therefore not everyone that is eligible will be allowed to start studying toward a degree. Increasing demand results in lower acceptance rates and an increasing number of individuals who do not gain admission to their preferred university. Especially applicants from minority ethnic and low social backgrounds (Boliver 2013), from rural areas and with mature age (Nori & Mäkinen-Strengh 2017) are less likely to receive offers of admission. Thus, even though people in egalitarian education systems have better access to (some sort of) higher education in absolute terms, they may feel as though they do not have as many opportunities as they deserve. This tension between the egalitarian ideals and admission constraints is the core theme of this article.

Educational choices emerge in an interplay of life course agency, relationships and institutional structures (Tarabini & Ingram 2018). This is evidenced by large and geographically spread literature on the subject. Authors have analysed how social differences, such as class, gender and ethnicity, condition the individual choice-making in selective systems of higher education, in countries including the US (Mullen 2012; Liu 2011; McDonough 1997), the UK (Boliver 2013; Burke 2012; Reay et al. 2005; Ball et al. 2002), the Nordic countries (Börjesson and Broady 2016; Thomsen et al. 2013; Nori & Mäkinen-Streng 2017), as well as across Europe more widely (Tarabini & Ingram 2018). This well-established research has applied Bourdieu's conceptual tools to offer explanations on how 'habitus' and the accompanied economic, cultural and social capitals make university choice highly expected for students with privileged background and increase the likelihood to apply to a highly selective university.

While previous research has considered the various aspects that affect whether prospective students set the objective of attending the most prestigious university possible (e.g., Mullen, 2012; Reay et al. 2005), we know relatively little about what happen when applicants do not get what they have chosen. A purpose of this study then is to better understand the experiences of non-admittance: What are the responses to the loss of opportunity in selective university admissions? There are many different aspects to this issue. For example, how does the non-admittance condition further the educational choices? Does it motivate applicants to try harder to gain access, or alternatively,

does it lower their educational aspirations? Is there a risk that non-admittance will lead to socially deviant behaviour (Merton 1968)? This study proposes that a desire to attend a selective university and not being allowed to is a loss that can potentially result in an anomic condition.

Anomie theory explains a social condition in which the values and norms, previously common to a society, weaken and disintegrate (Durkheim 1897/2006; Merton 1968). Suddenly all venues are open to pursuit; there is no limit of what one can desire and no moral direction regarding what one shall *not* do. However, unlimited aspirations grow beyond the possibility of satisfaction and result in a sense of frustration, anxiety, purposelessness and non-belonging. Thus, in accordance with Émile Durkheim's (1897/2006) original sociological theory, anomie can be defined as the suffering caused by unrestrained desire. Durkheim discovered that anomie occurs during periods of sudden transformations in the economic, social and political structures, when a changing society can no longer provide proper norms in regulating and directing individual conduct. Due to that aspect, anomie is usually translated as a state of 'normlessness'. However, anomie is not referring to the lack of norms but rather to the mismatch between idealised social goals and what is actually possible to achieve in practice (Durkheim's 1897/2006). Moreover, an important aspect of anomie theory is the realisation that the painful situation in which there is a cultural overemphasis on success combined with structurally limited opportunities can cause deviant behaviour (Merton 1968; Passas 1997; Reinarmann et al. 2000).

ANOMIE AS A RESPONSE TO UNIVERSITY NON-ADMITTANCE

Non-admittance is hereinafter defined as a *condition* where one who strives for and applies to a selective university is not allowed to start studying towards a particular degree, at that specific university to which he or she applied, and needs to reconsider higher education choice. In practice, non-admittance can occur as a result of many different procedures and practices at different levels in different university systems. In this study, the focus will be on Finnish universities in which admission has been based on discipline-specific entrance examinations. Alternatively, in other systems, admission can be based on general examinations, such as national matriculation exams or standardised aptitude tests (SAT), which may have nothing to do with the targeted university or study programme. Thus, non-admittance based on such exam results can be seen as both transparent and unfair. Subject-specific entry examinations rely on the student's own efforts at the time of admission and make the candidate more directly responsible for the results. Failure is thus more

understandable. However, if the competition is so high that even candidates with very good exam results are rejected, non-admittance can feel especially frustrating.

The perceived unfairness of non-admittance can lead to anomic condition. In his theorisation of the anomie, American sociologist Robert Merton, influenced by Durkheim's writings, identified culturally defined goals, purposes and interests that are held out as legitimate objectives for all members of the society (Merton 1968, 132–134)[i]. Monetary success is one such idealised cultural goal (the 'American dream'). Striving for good educational credentials can also be seen as an example of such goals, which act as a frame of aspirational reference for individuals. Cultural goals are ordered hierarchically, allowing individuals to strive for bigger and better achievements. Merton (1968) recognised the governing structure that defines and controls the acceptable modes of reaching for cultural success goals. This structure is rooted in different institutions that regulate the allowable procedures for moving toward the desired objectives. For example, institutionalised norms produce culturally standardised practices of student admission.

Furthermore, for analytical purposes, Merton (1968) separated the governing values and norms from the social (class/status) structure. Social structure makes actions in accordance with cultural mandates readily available to people occupying certain statuses within society but impossible for others (162–163). Family background affects the overall landscape of choice and for students with academic parents the decision to go to university is embedded and effortless 'non-choice' (Ball et al. 2002). Moreover, social class can be seen as a cause for anomie in the sense that it constitutes structural barriers for the realisation of valued goals (Passas 1997). The goals of accessing higher education are imposed on everyone, although people are able to respond to such demands differently depending on their social position. There is a persistent opportunity gap in accessing the highly competitive sector of higher education, even within egalitarian education systems (Börjesson and Broady 2016; Thomsen et al. 2013). However, it is important to realise that anomic tendencies are widespread across social classes/statuses—the pressures and tensions conducive to anomie and the potential for departure from established norms may just require different realisations in practice (Passas, 1997). Furthermore, if we approach social structures as context-specific and historically evolving, both as restraining and creating social dispositions (cf., creating 'habitus' in a Bourdieuan sense), we can consider the usefulness of anomie theory in the research on educational choice.

Merton (1968) identified five types of individual responses to contradictions in the attainment of socially defined goals within structurally limited opportunities. According to Merton's typology, (1)

CONFORMITY is the 'ideal' and the most common response to prevailing culture, where both the cultural goals and the institutionalised means are accepted and acted upon; (2) INNOVATION is a response that occurs when the individual has accepted the cultural success goals without internationalising the institutional norms governing the ways and means of their attainment (i.e. producing deviance from culturally expected behaviour); (3) RITUALISM is a response that involves the abandoning or scaling down of the lofty cultural goals of great success and getting ahead in the world while still continuing to abide by institutional norms; (4) RETREATISM is the most uncommon mode of adaptation, as it assumes the rejection of both the cultural goals and institutionalised means; and finally, (5) REBELLLION is a mode, clearly different from all the others, that involves efforts to change the existing cultural and social structure by establishing new institutionalised goals and means (Merton 1968, 140).

Merton's typology of individual responses can be applied to study non-admittance experiences. When not admitted to a preferred university, a person following the CONFORMITY type of adaptation would continue to strive for the best possible credentials, keep following the institutionalised means and therefore be committed to re-applying for a selective university. The RITUALISTIC mode would involve the scaling down of educational aspirations, including abandoning the dream of going to a selective university altogether. One would still continue to abide by institutional norms and continue re-applying (without really thinking of getting in). An opposite way to deviate from cultural expectations is to INNOVATE. After non-admittance, a person who still wants to get into a selective university may abandon the institutionalised methods of gaining access through competitive entry examinations and use different kinds of 'second chance' entrance gateways instead. As within the framework of anomie theory 'innovation' is understood as the abandonment of legitimate means, the conditions of non-admittance could lead to deviant behaviour and unmoral, even illegal, actions. Potentially, some prospective students could cheat on the entrance examination, pay someone to prepare their application documents, fabricate curriculum vitae, falsify grades or diplomas, use corruption and so on[ii]. Finally, RETREATISM assumes a rejection of both the goal of striving for educational credentials and the institutionalised means of gaining admission. The individual remains outside of higher education and is at risk of being restricted to low-paid jobs or unemployment[iii].

Table 1: Alternative responses to confusing conditions of non-admittance (cf. a typology of modes of individual adaptation; Merton 1968, 140)

		CULTURALLY VALUED GOAL: ADMISSION TO A SELECTIVE UNIVERSITY	
INSTITUTIONALISED PRACTICE: STANDARD APPLICATION PROCESS (E.G. COMPETITIVE ENTRY EXAMS)		Committing to the goal	Rejecting the goal
	Acting upon institutional means	**CONFORMITY** maintaining high aspirations and a goal of attaining a selective university; re-applying to the same or equivalent university	**RITUALISM** scaling down educational aspirations, yet continuing to re-apply (without believing in chances of being admitted)
	Rejecting institutional means	**INNOVATION** eager to gain credentials of high value; however, does not follow normative means but seeks out 'second chance' entry routes to university	**RETREATISM** withdrawing from credentialing values altogether; remaining outside of higher education

RESEARCH CONTEXT, DATA AND METHODS

In this study, the focus is on the experiences of prospective degree students who have been applying to highly selective research universities in Finland without gaining admission. The aim is to analyse the variety of responses to the condition of non-admittance and the ways in which potential degree students perceive their further options. There are current theoretical attempts to expand anomie theory with individual-level contexts involving individual perceptions and agency (Reinarman et al. 2000). The type of adaptation changes according to individual perceptions and, in the case of non-admittance, the level of dissociation he or she experiences with higher education. The subjective aspect of educational choice, i.e., how aware the person is of available options and how achievable they appear to be, can reduce the range of options even if objectively more options are available (Voigt 2007). Furthermore, an important question in considering anomie theory is why some social

structures that 'invite' socially conforming behaviour may also exert pressure upon certain persons in society to engage in non-conforming conduct (Merton 1968; Passas 1997).

Finnish universities and student admission

The system of Finnish higher education is composed of 14 research universities and 25 universities of applied sciences (established in 1990s). In less than three decades, the number of students has tripled from 100 000 up to nearly 300 000 (Author 2019). At present, Finnish higher education enjoys one of leading attainment levels in Europe. In the whole population, the number of young adults (25-34-year olds) with higher education is 41.3 per cent (OECD 2019a). Most recently, higher education institutions have been involved with merger processes, and the substantial growth in the number of students and degree programmes has stagnated.

The Finnish system is largely funded by the state and there are no tuition fees. Schools do not select students and everyone who has successfully completed upper secondary schooling meets the requirements for admission and has the opportunity to apply for and potentially gain access to higher education (Author 2019). The selection criteria for university admission are usually based on the matriculation examination score, success on the entrance examination or a combination of these two[iv]. Entrance examinations usually test knowledge on material selected by the institution, but in some programmes (e.g. teacher education) there may also be interviews, group discussions or other tasks to evaluate the applicants' suitability for a programme.

At the same time, the Finnish system is one of the most selective higher-education systems in the Organization for Cooperation and Development (OECD). Over 67 per cent of applicants are rejected each year, compared with an OECD average of 30 per cent (OECD 2019b). Only 25 per cent of upper secondary graduates manage to transfer immediately to higher education (OECD 2019b). All higher education institutions and all study fields are selective with a fixed limited number of study places (*numerus clausus*). As a result, it is common to apply several times and the students enter higher education in average over the age of 20 (Author 2019). Research universities are the preferred choice of most general upper-secondary school graduates and institutional stratification is signalled by the prestige attached to the different degrees delivered by the research universities and universities of applied sciences (Author 2017). High-prestige professions, like law and medicine, which have the most selective admissions, offer degree programmes only at research universities.

Personal online narratives

Social media has become a medium for sharing information among prospective degree students and students who are already admitted to university. Students share their practical knowledge about what is important and what works. They write about, for example, how they prepare for the selective entrance examinations and how to maintain good study motivation. Moreover, there are various discussions among potential students about individual results and what to do if you are not granted admission. In addition, some prospective students maintain personal blogs, a sort of interactive online diary in which they share information about their university application and admission processes in 'real time' or retrospectively.

The research data consist of 50 online narratives, written in 2014–2018, by prospective degree students who had applied to selective Finnish universities. These narratives were not sampled in any systematic way, but the first 50 cases were obtained based on convenience and availability. The narratives were published on Finnish blogging sites (n=15) and public discussion forums (n=35). The shortest ones were only half-page anecdotes, serving different narrative functions (Riessman 2008) in the on-going online discussion (sharing similarities and supporting the non-admittance experiences of the prior writer, giving advice or questioning and mocking others' experiences and educational choices). The most elaborated and reflexive narratives were up to four pages long.

Online narratives can be considered 'authentic' data in the sense that the researcher has not initiated their production. Social media is a medium for sharing and communicating user-generated content; people are able to read, download, publish, and share anything that they find interesting and important. The online discussions are an example of what an Anthropologist Patricia G. Lange (2007) has called 'privately public' communication: People can share sensitive, private experiences publicly using anonymous name tags and revealing only very limited information about their identity[v]. It is acknowledged that people who publish online narratives is a self-selecting group, not able to represent all the variety and detail of experiences that the prospective students with non-admittance condition have. Young women wrote a majority of these narratives (as far as gender and age were revealed)[vi]. The family background was mentioned directly in three narratives. In general, two-third of applicants have middle-class background and academically educated parents in Finland (Nori & Mäkinen-Streng 2017). The anonymity of online narratives means that there is no way to gain any further information about the context of non-admittance experiences or the writers'

background characteristics. Moreover, the anonymity can influence the content of the online narratives (Marx, 1999). People may share certain experiences and state specific opinions in a way that they would not in direct face-to-face interviews. Concerning non-admittance experiences, it might be easier for an individual to reveal failure, disappointment and hardship anonymously.

In practice, the extraction of non-admittance narratives from social media proceeded through the following steps. First, I selected key words and phrases ('I wasn't accepted to study'; 'I didn't get access to university'; 'entry examinations'; 'university admission'), entered them into an Internet search engine and identified discussions and blogs related to student admissions[vii]. Second, I browsed through the content of these sites to find more discussions about the topic. Third, I selected the non-admittance narratives from the overall mass of online discussions according to pre-defined criteria; only first-person stories sharing a specific non-admittance experience were included. As a minimum, narratives needed to have a sequence of events (temporality), some evaluative elements (stating the point of a story) and some (speculative) consequences (Riessman 2008). The online narratives were originally published in Finnish and I translated the quotations used in this article by using both linguistic and sociocultural translation. Furthermore, translation served an ethical function, as it made it impossible to place the verbatim quotations on an Internet search engine and find the person/anonymous nametag behind the narrative.

Narrative data were analysed according to a theoretically informed thematic analysis (cf., Riessman 2018). At the first stage of the data analysis, I was carefully reading the online narratives and conducted an initial data-driven thematic analysis. At the following stage, I used the typology of individual responses to non-admittance (See Table 1) as a heuristic tool, and mapped the themes onto the theoretical constructs. As the anomie theory (Merton 1968) suggests, the conformist response was the most common, and a majority of the non-admittance narratives could be categorised as such. The retrieval mode was expressed only in a few online narratives. Deviations in terms of innovation or ritualism occurred with similar frequency, but they were clearly less common than conformist narratives. In my two-stage analytical approach, I did not simply place individual narratives to one of the categories, but acknowledged that some narrative themes overlapped between theoretical constructs. Moreover, some prospective students reacted in more ways than one to the frustrations of non-admittance. Especially if narratives were written retrospectively, temporal volatility applied, and individuals changed their responses over time. Finally, I elaborated recurrent types of responses to non-admittance by looking at indicators of

social positioning, (accounts of family background, economic situation, gender, and age), and how they influenced the individual adaptation.

RESULTS

As noted earlier, non-admittance forces a prospective degree student to re-consider his or her educational choice. In what follows, the analysis of morally confusing, unfavourable and somewhat unfair non-admittance experiences is presented in accordance with the theoretical framing of the article (see Table 1).

Conformity – the decision to try one more time

Conformity requires that an individual remains within a culturally set frame of reference (Merton 1968), in which admission to a selective university is normatively taken as the highest goal and a proper course of action. In Finland, it is not unusual to apply several times (OECD 2019b). However, after a painful non-admittance experience, the decision of whether or not to re-apply to a selective university requires contemplation, and an individual undergoes difficult emotional stages. In the following excerpt, a young woman who intended to apply to one of the most competitive fields, although she had already experienced non-admittance more than once, illustrated her struggle:

At that moment (when I got the message that I was rejected), it felt like the whole world collapsed. The following twelve hours I was crying, I felt angry and disappointed (…). I immediately told my close ones that I would re-apply, but actually, I was not that sure at all. (…) Then again, I reflected on different options and concluded that there's nothing else than to study (at a selective university) that I want to do in this world right now. I didn't want to apply for the university of applied sciences or in any other domain. I decided to re-apply one more time, and to put in (preparation for the entry exams) such a huge effort that it's kind of crazy! In life, you shall not give up when you fall. You need to stand up and try again. (Blog 2)

In this excerpt, she is using a metaphor of 'rising strong after falling down'. The implicit cultural storyline that organises conformist narration, has the following pattern: if you are smart, honest and hardworking, you will eventually succeed (the myth of the meritocratic 'American dream'). Even though you are (temporarily) having a hard time, all you need to do is to work twice as hard and to

move on. The message is clear: one must maintain ambitious goals, must never quit and must not cease striving (Merton 1968). Non-admittance should not be taken as a terminal point; rather, people should move from feelings of desperation to a positive and productive study motivation. Lifestyle blogs of young women strongly enforced such conformist cultural storylines, as the following excerpts show:

Now (after non-admittance) you can feel displeased with the situation and grieve, but rather soon you shall turn that emotion to your advantage and motivation. (Blog 2)

I'm holding my head high again and going ahead to new disappointments. I may feel angry and frustrated to start again to study for the entrance examination next fall, but I feel ready to fight as well. This year's exam proved that I can surely make it (to be admitted). (Blog 10)

Such a persistent attitude to re-apply requires faith that admission to a selective university is still a realistic alternative and that one can achieve such a goal by following the normatively paved pathway. As Merton (1968) has defined, a condition for conformity is that continuing satisfaction must derive from the achievement of goals (or from the prospects of winning one's competitors) as well as simply from the participation in a competitive order. Conformist narratives expressed a willingness to fight for admission. Moreover, if one found a justification for non-admittance other than personal incompetence, it made it easier to manage the disappointment and to persuade oneself to try again to win the admissions game. The prospective students relied on their past exam results as indicators of their talent and future access probabilities (cf. Voigt 2007). They were eager to admit that the first time they applied they did not spend enough time preparing for the entry examinations, they did not use the proper study techniques or that they had applied to the wrong discipline and therefore could not find enough motivation. It should be noted that many of these 'back on track' narratives were retrospective; students shared them once they had been admitted to a selective university after re-application. The actual decision to re-apply was taken in uncertainty, even at risk of further setbacks.

Furthermore, the conformist effort of re-application required concrete methods to improve exam performance in the second round of applications. Hence, much of the online discussion was about how to spend the year off in self-improvement activities to improve the chances of admission: *Spend your time wisely. (…) Do not waste your year off* (Blog 3). A productive year off was spent, for example, in private preparatory training (Kosunen 2018), attaining university courses at the

Finnish open university[viii] (Haltia 2015), working as a trainee in the relevant domain or going abroad to study languages. At best, prospective students could minimise the disadvantage of delayed entry to university (Goldrick-Rab & Won Han 2011). Once admitted (after re-application), they could catch up with the students who started their studies a year earlier.

As long as the prospective degree students could find a clear way to better their application strategy and exam performance, they maintained a narrative of an active agents of their own educational choices, despite the constraints of non-admittance. This reasoning led to no blame for the applicants' abilities and did not diminish their perceived potential as university students, nor was it blaming the system for being unfair (cf., the myth of meritocracy; Liu 2011). However, all this required plenty of resources, and the prospective degree students were unequally situated after non-admittance depending on their social positions. Intensive periods of preparation for the re-application test required absences from work or reduced working hours and, thus, alternative sources of income (e.g. some received support from parents or a spouse). In addition, relocation in order to attend preparatory courses or having experiences abroad were more readily options for people without financial constraints or binding family obligations (cf., 'localism'; Reay et al. 2005). Moreover, the preparatory courses required a personal economic investment from couple of hundred up to several thousand euros and effectively provided advantages to wealthy students (Kosunen 2018). Open university courses also had an attendance fee, although they were more modestly priced.

Ritualist mode – not really believing in university admission anymore

The conformist act requires that a person can maintain faith in the system and in his or her own possibilities to gain admission to a selective university. Sometimes it is hard to know if that faith is well placed. People can act as if they still believe in their chances of being admitted, but in fact, they have abandoned such an achievement goal. It is difficult to observe ritualistic adaptation because the decision to permanently lower educational aspirations can be just an internal decision without any noticeable changes in behaviour (Merton 1968). Some continue re-applying just because of social pressure, as the woman in her mid-twenties, married with one child, conveyed in the following narrative:

I have applied three times in a row to a selective university without moving beyond the entry exams (…). Last year I was accepted (to a vocational institute… but according to my husband) vocational

qualification is not apparently a real degree, not worth starting studies, too expensive, too high financial risk (…He thinks that) I'm underachieving, the domain is not right, there's no employment, too high competition. In other words, I shall hit my head to the wall, again and again, and re-apply to the Business School and the School of Law, like for million of times. I may have academic potential but not enough interest to do that. (Discussion 19)

In her narrative, this young mother responds to non-admittance in a ritualistic way. She acts as a prospective degree student without really believing that she is going to obtain access to university. Over three years, she has already re-applied to a selective university and prepared for the competitive entry examinations. Meanwhile, she has applied to study elsewhere, worked at non-graduate jobs, looked after her family and basically lived her life. Moreover, through the opinion of the spouse she demonstrates many of the prevailing cultural values and norms of what one should do.

Eventually, the ritualistic response causes people to lower their expectations regarding university access. Higher education systems offer stratified opportunities. Non-admittance forecloses access to high-prestige universities and downscales the status range of universities available for further admission. People may choose to apply for non-university higher education, an adult education institution or upper-secondary vocational institutions to gain diploma, vocational qualifications or non-degreed professional competences instead of a university degree, as illustrated in the following retrospective narrative of a woman in her late thirties:

I was smart and able to draw a conclusion (after non-admittance): if I can't get a study place (at a selective university), I may not have been able to succeed while working in that professional domain either. Well, I had good grades in the general upper-secondary school and at the matriculation test, so I wasn't bad at school. Anyway, I studied for another diploma, and I've been working in non-permanent jobs ever since. Always. (…) Life didn't go as I dreamed and planned. But, that's what happens to many people. (Discussion 3)

The ritualistic mode leads prospective degree students to abandon the cultural meta-narrative of 'believe in your dreams' and 'fight hard for your destiny'. Many prospective students experienced non-admittance as disillusionment, as now they were aware of the possibility of failure. Those who followed the ritualistic response no longer believed that working hard at school would necessarily be rewarded by university admission as promised by the meritocratic system (Liu 2011). Thus, the

scaling down of aspirations becomes a pragmatic and realistic alternative; this is a rational common to working-class educational choice (Thomsen et al. 2013). As one recent upper-secondary graduate, whose parents did not provide extensive monetary support, expressed in the following excerpt, the decision not to rely on the re-application opportunity could simply be a result of financial and societal realities.

I was offered a place at university of applied sciences (UAS); my last option. My primary choice was a selective university, but I only got onto the waiting list. (…) Now I should decide (do I accept the admission to UAS) although I don't feel necessarily that it's the right kind of institution for me. (…Nevertheless,) I don't have an objective to spend many years in the re-application processes. I don't really know how I could finance several years off in a clever way. I mean that how could I earn money and still have enough energy to fully study for the entrance examinations? I got too exhausted (last year) when I was working on weekends while simultaneously reading study books and counting math exercises for more than six hours per day. Perhaps my worst anxiety is that I'll get stuck selling burgers at McDonalds for the rest of my life, and that I'll never have enough energy and resources to invest in studying for the entry exams in order to gain admission. Most of all, I would like to attain a good degree, good enough to enter the labour market and to build my own life. Therefore, I'm ready to consider abandoning my educational dream (of going to a selective university). (Discussion 18)

Paradoxically, the egalitarian values that encourage young people's aspirations and pursuit of admission to a selective university reinforce the idea that other forms of education are less valuable (Burke 2012). Nevertheless, life chances and social privileges should not depend on the chance to be admitted to a high-status university. Social stability entails that 'the distribution of statuses through competition must be so organized that positive incentives for adherence to status obligations are provided *for every position* within the distributive order' (Merton 1968, 134). Therefore, there is a need to question the assumption that higher education is the gold standard for those with 'high levels of potential and ability' (Burke 2012, 34; see also Liu 2011).

Innovation – finding another way

Some prospective students became innovative after the non-admittance experience. They wanted to achieve admission to a selective university but by finding an alternative to the selective entry exams. In some cases, prospective students compared the options available within global higher

education market, at universities abroad and at foreign-based, private institutions in Finland (Author, 2019). Some took advantage of 'second chance' admission gateways, such as the young person in the following narrative, who had experienced some learning difficulties:

I applied last year to the Business School, for the first time. (…) Right after the entry examinations, I realised that I wouldn't probably ever gain admission that way. I wouldn't have enough capacity to concentrate as intensively as needed, or simply no motivation to study during several months for one exam (…). Therefore, right after the entry exam, I made a new plan. I decided to apply via the open university gateway. (Discussion 25)

In Finland, the main alternative access route is the so-called 'open university gateway', i.e., admission granted based on successfully completing a certain number of open university courses (Haltia 2015). By definition, alternative routes provide admission opportunities for those who are unable to gain access via the main entrance track. Therefore, such routes are integral to the idea of widening participation. Applicants diverging from the typical social background, such as mature students and students with vocational qualifications, are steered towards specific entry routes. Their avenues available for moving toward a culturally valued goal are largely limited to those of deviant behaviour (Merton 1968).

The open university gateway has been contested by Finnish universities that maintain academic discourse about rigorous student selection based on merit and procedural fairness (Haltia 2015). It requires that selection criteria be the same for everyone, and therefore many selective universities consider standard entry examinations to be the best way to measure the potential of prospective degree students. Students who obtain admission without passing such rigorous assessments may threaten the credibility of the meritocratic system and the moral order it represents. The innovative response causes people to resist such prejudice and defend their own academic talent and effort, as conveyed in the following narrative of a woman who had been offered an admission as a mature student:

I was so frustrated for the endless re-application processes that I decided to apply for university via the Open University gateway. So, I completed all the basic courses (in my major subject) at Finnish Open University, and I did some extra studies, too. I did it all in one year, very fast. (…) I got an excellent grade average. (…) After one year at (open university), I was admitted to five different universities! (…) It is because of my own merit that I gained admission to university. (Blog 9)

Retrieval – drifting away from the cultural mandates

At first, in a retrieval mode, where both educational goals and means are abandoned, there might be a sense of escape and release from the performance pressures of the credential society. Some individuals expressed how the year off sounded like a wonderful opportunity to do anything else besides studying: *I've been thinking that now (during the year off) it's the time to do everything that I can't necessarily do if I'm studying at university!* (Discussion 6) However, as explained earlier, according to the conformist cultural mandate, the year off eventually needs to be spent so that it betters one's chances of gaining access to university. The individuals who had been admitted to a selective university after re-application were able to retrospectively narrate stories about a 'happy' year off. On the contrary, when non-admittance repeated itself and the year off extended to several years, it was harder to maintain a positive narrative about being outside of higher education, as shown in the following quotation:

This year has been amazing, I was in a long trip abroad and had a nice job, but… life goes by and all others go ahead in life. (…) I feel depressed. I'm a loser, one hell of a burden for the whole society. (…) I should get a hold on my life and build my identity on stronger ground, but everything is so messed up, and I feel that the damn admission to university could save me, but that salvation is slipping further and further away; it's out of my reach. (Discussion 10)

People who were outside of education and employment, like the young woman who wrote the previous narrative, shared accounts of solitude, anxiety, shame and depression. After (several) non-admittance experiences these prospective students, who have had a goal of attaining university, expressed feelings of serious disappointment, lost energy and a lack of motivation to try again. They attributed their negative feelings to drifting in an uncertain condition of non-admittance. Consequently, anomie, the discrepancy between culturally valued goals and personal opportunities to reach them, became so painful that people withdraw from societal norms altogether. As the following anonymous excerpts suggest, some eventually lost the willingness to live:

(If not admitted after re-application) I'm anxious to have one more lonely year, life wasted indoors. I feel like I'm only a loser, and people have a reason to run me down and reject my company once again. I will not go out of home this summer anymore. I can't take it anymore, this continuous

shame and being a victim of bullying. I don't have a life, no friends, and no future. I'm just a useless remainder of a human being. (Discussion 20)

I've been thinking of a suicide for a long time. I've applied to different universities for five years now, and I can't get to the place that I want. It's only my family and friends that prevent me from committing suicide. But if I face non-admittance again this year… I can't stay one more year in (this low-paid job). Then, it's time to think of myself and to get out of here. (Discussion 5)

It is not accidental that Durkheim (1897/2006) named the book in which he elaborated the anomie theory *On Suicide*. For him, anomic suicide was the most dramatic example on the spectrum of the anomic condition:

Unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity. (…) To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness. Of course, man (sic) may hope contrary to all reason, and hope has its pleasures even when unreasonable. It may sustain him for a time; but it cannot survive the repeated disappointments of experience indefinitely. (Durkheim 1897/2006, 300)

Egalitarian societies can enhance anomie for two reasons (cf. Durkheim 1897/2006; Merton 1968): First, there are many educational opportunities to choose from and the choices are not normatively limited. The expansion of higher education sector and the widening participation polices has established a frame of reference in which society support individual desire to be admitted to a selective university. However, it is not possible for everyone due to structural limitations. In case of Finnish universities, a fixed number of places and high levels of competition make admission an unattainable goal for most people, especially if coming from a low social background (Nori & Mäkinen-Streng 2017). The pain of anomie results from the profound confusion of living in a society that (1) encourages individuals to live up to their dreams, (2) situates them unequally into the opportunity structures (Merton 1968), (3) and leaves them without proper moral constraints (Durkheim 1897/2006). Thus, when society does not provide clear limits on educational ambitions, individuals are doomed to the normlessness of not knowing what to do with their lives after non-admittance.

Discussion

Ideally, an egalitarian society shall not only provide equal changes to compete for educational opportunities, but also ensure that such opportunities are equally fulfilled for everyone. Meritocratic selection overrides such egalitarianism and justifies access inequalities based on talent (Liu 2011). Young people in Finland, after having enjoyed comprehensive elementary and secondary schooling, are faced with the most selective university admissions in the OECD (OECD 2019b). As a result, every year tens of thousands of prospective degree students receive a disappointing rejection letter.

The desire to attain a selective university placement but not being allowed to poses new kinds of questions regarding agency and structure in higher education choice (cf., Reay et al. 2005; Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997). Cultural overemphasis on educational success combined with structurally limited opportunities may result in anomic condition (Merton 1968). The loss of opportunity has various social and personal costs, some of which are quite high. In some cases, non-admittance forces one to consider whether it is time to temper educational aspirations—or even to renounce higher education and the related cultural mandates altogether. Moreover, as Liu (2011) has pointed out, a troubling effect of an uncritical view of meritocratic selection is that there may be a tendency to view students who do not reach attainment as having failed on their own terms. Even though, opportunities to obtain and develop merit are influenced by social dis/advantage.

This study has argued for a greater acknowledgement of the structural inequalities at play in the meritocratic selection and university non-admittance. In the conformist response (i.e. the decision to re-apply), the dissociation between educational goals and means is somehow managed at an acceptable level to avoid anomie (See: Table 1). Nevertheless, for whom is such a conformist response possible? Re-application to a selective university requires time (out of full-time employment) and money (e.g. to buy study books, attain preparatory training and take preparatory courses; see Kosunen 2018), and such resources are unequally distributed in society. People coming from a non-traditional background have higher probability to deviate from the cultural goals and institutionalised means (e.g. by finding a ‘second chance’ admission gateway of by applying to a less prestigious institution, cf. McDonough 1997; Reay et al. 2005).

The findings of this study yield important insights for the formulation of equitable admission policies and contribute to the debate on the ‘myth of meritocracy’ (Liu 2011; The Gardian, 14 Mar 2019). By using the Merton’s (1968) anomie theory as a framework in analysing non-admittance, this study has argued for the need to work on structural constraints and to reduce the mismatch between cultural goals and institutional means for attaining them. However, social values and

norms are not singular and fixed. We are living in a pluralistic society, in which a higher education degree is not a desired goal for everyone, although it is culturally valued. For the same reason, it is very unlikely that society could impose (or even suggest) a normative system to restrict educational aspirations and the desire to attain admission to a selective university for those individuals who have such a dream.

Further studies are needed to explore more thoroughly the relation between social background and responses to the non-admittance experience, as well as how the higher education system can compensate for the uneven opportunities after non-admittance to a selective university. Furthermore, this study has risen several questions concerning student counselling and preparation for university admissions: How do we support prospective students to navigate the 'normlessness' of the higher education choice? How can we support them to maintain or re-build hope and resilience after non-attainment? Finally, for the sake of the egalitarian promise, it is crucial to increase the available spectrum of options as well as the value of learning beyond the most cherished higher education options.

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End Notes

[i] Robert K. Merton published his anomie theory originally already in the 1930s in: Merton, R. 1938. “Social Structure and Anomie.” *American Sociological Review* 3 (5): 672–682.

[ii] See for example the current criminal admissions scandals in U.S. (The Gardian, 14 Mar 2019) and in Sweden (The Local, 17 Apr 2019).

[iii] It is difficult to distinguish between RETREATISM and REBELLION in cases of marginal lifestyles in which educational credentials have no meaningful role. The REBELLION mode is about a collective challenge of the existing overpowering faith in educational credentials. This fifth type will remain anecdotal in this study and is therefore not included in Table 1.

[iv] There is an on-going reform to change these admission criteria in 2020. The plan is to dramatically reduce the importance of the universities’ own entrance examinations and to increase the weight of the national matriculation examination and general upper-secondary school grades in the selection process.

[v] Blog writers usually reveal their gender, age and (first) name. However, bloggers’ identities can be considered pseudonyms since only a limited (and purposefully selected) amount of personal information is shared with the audience (e.g. Marx 1999).

[vi] Non-admittance concerns young women especially. Although over 60 per cent of university students in Finland are female, men seem to have relatively easier access. For example, according to Nori and Mäkinen-Streng (2017), in 2013, 24 per cent of female applicants and 27 per cent of male applicants were accepted to universities. The difference reflects higher acceptance rates in male-dominated fields (e.g. engineering, natural sciences) than in female-dominated ones (e.g. psychology, education, and arts).

[vii] As the original data were in Finnish, the keywords and phrases were as follows: ‘en saanut opiskelupaikkaa’; ‘en päässyt yliopistoon’; ‘pääsykoe’; ‘opiskelijavalinta’.

[viii] Finnish open university is an institution that offers basic university courses openly to everyone, but it cannot give credentials. Only when admitted to research university, those courses can be integrated as part of degree attainment (Haltia 2015).