The Status Games They Play

Unpacking the dynamics of organisational status competition in higher education

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Abstract

The article uses the concept of organisational status to explore how universities respond to intensifying competition. Although status is not a novel phenomenon in higher education, recent insights show that the concerns with vertical positioning, both nationally and internationally, are gaining prominence with a growing number of universities worldwide. As global competition becomes as fierce as ever, universities' efforts to maintain or advance their position vis-à-vis each other are becoming more salient. The paper draws from extant literature to identify three mechanisms of organisational status construction – *categories, intermediaries* and *affiliations* – and offers a set of propositions as to how universities of different status rank are expected to act when seeking to maintain or advance their status. Such activities, it is argued, shape status hierarchies, which, in turn, affect the scope of organisational action. The article contributes to the discussions on competition in higher education literature and, more broadly, to the theory of organisational action in the tradition of sociological institutionalism.

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, scholars have increasingly invoked the concept of status to explain both organisational behaviour and the dynamics of organisational fields (Jensen et al. 2011; Piazza and Castellucci 2014; Sauder et al. 2012). A key insight from the sociological literature on status is that the importance organisations and their audiences assign to status positively correlates with the level of uncertainty with regards to the quality of organisations' products or services (Podolny 1994; Sauder et al. 2012). In other words, the more contested the quality is, the more attention audiences, but also organisations, pay to status signals.

Concerns about status have always been ubiquitous in higher education fields (Bleiklie 2003; Clark 1983). However, in recent years, organisational status has received an ever-increasing attention from universities, policy makers and general public. The proliferation of university rankings over the past decade, and not least the scholarly work addressing them, only attests to this phenomenon. Yet the position in rankings is not the only way to tell status of a university. Accreditations, ratings, alliances, awards, and even some processes specific to higher education such as "academic drift", are inextricably linked with status dynamics. Not only do these trends cut across national boundaries and mobilise unprecedented levels of attention and resources, but they increasingly influence the way policy makers, students, media and even universities themselves talk and think of higher education.

As a phenomenon in organisational studies, status is usually researched in the context of competition and markets (Fligstein 1996; Podolny 1993; Washington and Zajac 2005). And while market and competition are often addressed concepts in higher education journals and edited volumes (e.g. Geiger 2004; Marginson 2015; Teixeira et al. 2004), status – as a property of organisations and as a concept in its own right – is, save for few exceptions (e.g. Henderson and Kane 1991; Marginson 2006, 2013), rarely addressed in this literature. Although markets and competition in higher education are considered specific, thus not lending themselves easily to comparison with other empirical settings (Hasse and Krücken 2013; Marginson 2013; Musselin 2010), I argue that such comparisons are much needed, both for advancing theory on the phenomena of interest and for rendering the dynamics specific to higher education more transparent.

The aim here is to take the discussion on organisational status in higher education fields a step forward by offering a synthesised overview of status processes in general and their implications for universities' responses to the said processes in particular. In doing so, I wish to bring closer together the insights on status dynamics offered by higher education scholars, on one hand, with the related discussions at a more general level of theorising, on the other. The article draws on sociological institutionalism which emphasises embeddedness of social actors in a broader cultural environment and argues that, rather than being primarily rational and goal-oriented entities, actors are, above all, carriers of social structure and enactors of global cultural scripts (Meyer et al. 1987; Meyer 2008). This implies an ontology in which status, much like markets, competition and hierarchies, is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). I build on this by making use of insights from organisational sociology (Podolny 2010; Sauder et al. 2012) and social psychology (Abrams et al. 2004) to propose a more nuanced understanding of how universities respond to status processes, themselves propelled by intensifying competition. Such understanding, as the article argues, should enable us to better capture the way contemporary universities respond to institutional pressures. I start by taking a closer look at the focal concept itself.

What is organisational status?

Status is hereby defined as a position in a hierarchical order, or more fully, "a socially constructed, intersubjectively agreed-upon and accepted ordering or ranking of individuals, groups, organizations, or activities in a social system" (Podolny 2010; Washington and Zajac 2005, p. 284). A status hierarchy, therefore, emerges around a shared understanding of what is considered more or less worthy, whereby the most worthy is located at its apex (Sauder et al. 2012). Status can, of course, be used in reference to individuals and other entities, yet here the focus is on *organisational status*. Albeit sometimes used interchangeably with concepts like reputation, prestige, social esteem and even legitimacy, status is essentially a distinct construct (see e.g. Bitektine 2011; or Washington and Zajac 2005). It is also not the same as quality, although these tend to correlate, which is why status has also been defined as a signal of quality (Podolny 1994). However, status is a meaningful construct only to the degree that the correlation between status and quality is not perfect: the fact that status may be a poor signal of "real" quality does not render it useless, on the contrary. It is precisely this imperfection which makes it a powerful construct in the face of great uncertainty about the said quality (Sauder et al. 2012; Washington and Zajac 2005).

It is generally acknowledged that status benefits more those at the top. First, compared to lower-status organisations, higher-status ones enjoy more legitimacy and therefore higher resource stability. Second, higher-status organisations are more likely to influence and even set the rules of the game for themselves and others (Podolny 2010). Third, higher-status organisations feel less pressure to conform to dominant norms and can thus afford more risk (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001). This, argue Phillips and Zuckerman (2001), is because the identity of the higher-status ones is fixed in the eyes of their audiences and their actions alone are not likely to jeopardise it (unless they violate ethical or loyalty norms (Phillips, Turco, & Zuckerman, 2013)). Fourth, higher-status organisations directly benefit from the mechanisms of cumulative advantage, i.e. the "Matthew effect" (Merton 1968). This means that they extract greater rewards than those of lower status for doing identical things and even for producing outputs of the same quality (Podolny 1993; Rao 1994).

Phillips and Zuckerman (2001) observed that, when compared to middle-status actors, the actors occupying opposite ends of the status scale are less likely to suffer consequences if they deviate from norms: those at the apex, as suggested, feel more confident about their identity and "role incumbency", while those at the bottom are less scrutinised by audiences. Therefore, everything else remaining the same, a change in role prescriptions – that is, the field's shared understanding of what it means to be a "worthy" organisation – or an act of disloyalty or betrayal, may reshuffle the hierarchy. It is thus unsurprising that the highest-ranked organisations have the greatest interest in preserving the values and social order which grant them incumbency (Fligstein 1996; Podolny 2010).

Because not all status systems are the same, how much the elite or the top benefits is going to depend on the structure of the status system which ranges from the "winner-take-all" systems to more evenly distributed ones (Frank and Cook 1995). Yet, once established, hierarchies tend to be self-sustaining (Chen et al. 2011; Magee and Galinsky 2008). Chen et al. (2011) list a number of ideological beliefs that contribute to this, such as the shared belief that hierarchies are sources of stability and order and that they are essentially meritocratic. These beliefs are not only held by those at the top, but they also tend to be internalised by those of lower status, which often show deference to those "above" them (Podolny 2010). Yet this does not mean that they will do nothing about it, for hierarchies can also be

seen as dynamic systems in which any of the occupants may always move up or down. Their mobility prospects will, however, be affected by how rigid and institutionalised the hierarchy is (Malter 2014; Phillips and Zuckerman 2001; Sauder 2006).

That organisational action is both constrained and enabled by the institutional environment in which it is embedded is not a novel idea (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). The pervasiveness of the global cultural system in which competition features as an ideological imperative shapes the institutional conditions for organisational behaviour (Bromley and Meyer 2015). Competition for status, as well as other symbolic goods, such as prestige and reputation, is not a new concern among universities, yet now, with the advent of rankings and competitive funding schemes, it is gaining a new momentum. Such conditions urge universities around the world to perceive each other as competitors for the favour of third parties, such as funding agencies and rankings, and increasingly think of their social position as a slot on an imaginary vertical scale. Thus constructed hierarchies can vary in terms of how stable they are perceived to be, whereby, in ideal terms, the less stable they appear, the more competitive the environment is perceived to be. We could therefore expect that the scope for organisational action directed towards maintaining or challenging the hierarchies in place would be contingent upon the degree of their settlement, but also, as it will be argued in the remainder of this article, on the positions those organisations occupy.

The status games they play: categories, intermediaries and affiliations

To take a closer look at how organisations in general, and universities in particular, respond to status dynamics, I start by asking: "How do we know the status of an organisation?" The literature hereby reviewed has led to three ways of telling status of an organisation in a hierarchy – *categories, intermediaries* and *affiliations*. Each of the three leads to a different image of the status order whereby the distinction is commonly made between the high-, middle- and low-status positions on the scale we imagine the hierarchy to be. However, such – or any other way of – segmenting the scale is often arbitrary and thus potentially problematic, for questions like "Where do we draw the line between high- and middle- status?" are ultimately empirical. In order to avoid this pitfall, I propose thinking of status of an organisation (or a group of organisations) as *relative* to the status of another organisation (or group) in the same field. A field can be a national, regional, or global community of universities in which its members think of each other as competitors for status, to loosely apply Scott's often-cited definition of an organisational field (2001, p. 56). Yet much like the segmenting of a hierarchy, determining the boundaries of such a field is primarily also an empirical question.

Categories

Categories represent institutional classifications or socially legitimated groupings of perceived similar entities (Hannan et al. 2007; Sharkey 2014). They are heuristics used by audiences which shape organisation's identity, inform the organisation on the kind of action expected of it and helps it identify rivals and potential partners (Negro et al. 2010; Stryker and Burke 2000). Therefore, categories matter to how audiences' evaluate the organisation, its action and products, as well as to how the organisation sees itself in relation to others (Baum and Lant 2003; Zuckerman 1999).

Categories are an essential medium for creating and maintaining social boundaries and status distinctions (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Zhao and Zhou 2010). Like organisations, categories can also

have status, whereby status of the category affects status of its members (Jensen et al. 2011; Kovács and Hannan 2010). For example, Sharkey (2014) notes that audiences' evaluations of firm's actions may also depend on the status of the category to which the firm belongs. In their study of American community colleges, Brint and Karabel (1991) show how the "status deprivation problem" of the two-year colleges was solved by transforming them from transfer-oriented institutions into vocationally-oriented ones offering access to direct employment.

Insights from social psychology may be valuable in highlighting the link between categorical boundaries and status (Abrams et al. 2004; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Tajfel 1982). This literature is consensual in arguing that individuals claim membership to social groups in order to differentiate from one another. Abrams, Hogg and Marques note that "the simple act of partitioning people into different social categories necessarily involves over inclusion and exclusion of members in terms of the assumed sharedness of their characteristics with others of the same category" (2004, p. 19). Thus, hierarchically arranged categories "may be constructed to associate power and legitimacy with social categories like 'race', caste, ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion, or any other group distinction that human interaction is capable of constructing" (Sidanius and Pratto 2011, p. 419). Analogously, legitimacy and power may be associated with different categories and sub-categories of organisations, such as firms, non-profits, charities, or universities.

Because the boundaries between these (sub-)categories are not always clear, we can think of them as crisp or fuzzy sets (Hannan 2010; Negro et al. 2010). From this perspective, organisations are not always either *in* or *out* of a category, but they can have partial membership, i.e. their belonging in a category is seen in degrees. Thus, the status of an entity pertaining to a fuzzy category could be determined on the basis of the extent to which the entity possesses qualities considered to be essential or the most valuable for the said category. For instance, a woman may be considered "less of" a member of a male-dominated profession and thus more likely to occupy a lower-status position in the hierarchy of that profession (Epstein 1970; Kellogg 2011). Therefore, within each category, one may find a hierarchy based on the differences in organisational forms or activities, as defined by relevant audiences, and the degrees of appropriateness thereof (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Negro et al. 2010).

Universities are also a category of higher education institutions/organisations. While, on the one hand, there are other types of higher education institutions, on the other, different types of universities are often treated as distinct categories. And so we have colleges, polytechnics, universities of applied sciences, state, national, public, private (with for-profit and non-for-profit as sub-categories), flagship, regional, federal, faith-based, land-grant, and so on. This differentiation varies across contexts with some types being context-specific. For instance, in Japan, the distinction is made among state, national and private universities. Many countries have the so-called binary systems, comprising universities and polytechnics (Kyvik 2004). In both cases, the distinction is a formal one, set by the authorities. On the other hand, some categories are not formal, yet there is a high level of intensional semantic consensus among the key audiences about their boundaries (Hannan et al. 2007). An example of such non-formal yet taken-for-granted categorisation would be the one of the sandstone universities in Australia.

Regardless of the level of formality, categories in higher education are often associated with a particular status. Generally speaking, universities, for example, have higher status than polytechnics (Clark 1983), while in some contexts public may have higher status than private (Brankovic 2014). The phenomenon commonly referred to as "academic drift" – a tendency of vocationally oriented

academic institutions to emulate universities and thus come closer to "true" or "proper" academic institutions (Morphew and Huisman 2002; Pratt and Burgess 1974) – speaks of the status dynamic driven by such difference. This can be very much consequential for organisation's identity and its internal functioning. Henderson and Kane (1991) aptly illustrate this by showing how the attempts of US state-related comprehensive universities to emulate high-status research universities led to low faculty satisfaction and further loss of self-esteem in the former.

Such behaviour can also be thought of as an effort to vertically extend the status of the category (cf. Delmestri and Greenwood 2016). A more recent phenomenon of a similar kind would be a growing number of universities around the world which are being identified as "world-class" or "global research universities" (Altbach and Salmi 2011; Ma 2008; Mohrman et al. 2008; Robertson 2012; Rodriguez-Pomeda and Casani 2016). Many higher-status universities identify themselves as "leading research-intensive universities", and even form associations with exclusive membership and advocacy agendas to promote mutual interests. While being "leading" and "research-intensive" may not seem as something categorically different from simply being a university, the fact that some universities establish exclusive clubs based on these shared characteristics may be interpreted as a concerted effort at forging and claiming a new higher-status (sub-)category or strengthening the boundaries of an existing one. That membership in a club can be taken as a prerequisite for membership in a category has been identified also in other settings: "Being a member of the Swedish House of Nobility was the only way for a family to be regarded as a member of Swedish nobility" (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008, p. 72). Membership, Ahrne and Brunsson argue, is what in this case defines nobility, and *vice versa*.

Therefore:

> Proposition 1a: *As the competition intensifies, members of a higher-status category are more likely to work towards reinforcing its boundaries, whereas non-members are more likely to seek membership in a higher-status category.*

> Proposition 1b: *As the competition intensifies, members of a lower-status category are more likely to work towards vertically extending the status of their category.*

> Proposition 1c: *As the competition within a category intensifies, higher-status members of the category are more likely to work towards creating a higher-status sub-category.*

Intermediaries

Status can also be influenced by intermediaries, or arbiters, such as critics, funding agencies, rankings, ratings, awards, contests or credential authorities. Intermediaries are third parties that "mediate between the competitors and their audiences by observing the competitors and communicating their observations to an audience" (Werron 2015, p. 199). More importantly, they posture as authorised agents of higher principles, such as "human rights" or "excellence", often translated into standards and routinely deployed across different contexts as universal measures of appropriateness (Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

Today more than ever before, countries and organisations, as well as individuals, are being subjected to various forms of external and often publicised evaluations conducted by various intermediaries. We may distinguish among them by the type of evaluation they do, their authority and audience outreach.

Ratings are not the same as rankings, for instance. Many restaurants can have three Michelin stars, yet only one can come at the top of the *World's 50 Best Restaurants* list, which makes the latter a more precise signal of relative standing. For a business school it may be a legal requirement to be accredited by national authorities, but having the "triple-crown accreditation" (Kaplan 2014) is considered a matter of prestige. Winning the Best Director award at the *Evening Standard British Film Awards* may be an achievement, but counts less than winning an Oscar, both due to the authority of the party awarding it and due to the difference in the outreach. The bottom line is that winning a contest or topping a list is a matter of prestige, yet not all in the same way or to the same extent. We could, however, expect that organisations will pay more attention to those intermediaries which reach the widest audiences, have the highest authority with them (the audiences trust them the most) and offer the most precise information of relative standings. With regards to the last point, rankings represent an ideal-typical intermediary in this sense, given that they effectively transform comparisons between organisations into zero-sum comparisons (Werron and Ringel 2017).

Evidence that intermediaries have an effect on how organisations behave is abundant. For instance, Cotter and Snyder (1998) (Snyder and Cotter 1998) looked into how French restaurants responded to being promoted by the Michelin Guide and noted that their increased Michelin rating was primarily reflected in their prices. Similarly, Colman (2008) and Hay (2010) reported on how wine-makers respond to critics. Hay specifically focuses on the American wine critic Robert Parker and concludes that Parker plays a key role in both price and status formation. Chatterji and Toffel (2010) examined how corporate environmental ratings, issued by a prominent independent social rating agency, influence firms' subsequent performance. They show that firms which were initially rated as poor improved more their environmental performance than the firms which were rated as mixed or good. Analysing the American auto industry, Rao (1994) argues that certification contests are credential mechanisms which extend the life chances of winning organisations.

University rankings are a prime example of how responsive universities can be to third-party evaluations. Monks and Ehrenberg (1999), Meredith (2004) and Bowman and Bastedo (2009) offered evidence on the effects of change in rank in the *US News* ranking on universities' and colleges' admission and pricing policies. Martins (2005) found that business schools' top managers were more likely to initiate organisational change when the rankings (*Business Week*) were not aligned with their own perceptions of their school's relative standing. Sauder and Espeland (2009) convincingly show how rankings change the way education is perceived. The volume edited by Shin and colleagues (2011) as well as the works of Wedlin (2006) and Hazelkorn (2015) offer valuable insights on how universities around the globe respond to rankings. Most recently, Espeland and Sauder (2016) delve deeper into the mechanisms of how law school rankings permeate various aspects of legal education in the US, from admissions to graduate careers.

Intermediaries in higher education are many and their goals, focus and method of evaluation vary. Given that universities also vary in terms of mission, structure or disciplinary mix, it should not surprise that they have preferences when it comes to which of their intermediaries to endorse and which to criticise. The refusal of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) to participate in the *U-Multirank* (Grove 2013), a ranking scheme stressing horizontal, as opposed to vertical differentiation, or, more recently, some of England's elite universities' considerations to opt out of the *Teaching Excellence Framework* (Havergal 2016), would serve as cases in point. Taking into account that variously positioned universities are differently affected by different intermediaries, we could expect that their responses would reflect these variances. At the same time, different intermediaries

may assign different values to different activities and by, for instance, giving primacy to teaching over research, offer an opportunity to those who perform well in teaching to advance their position.

> Proposition 2a: *As the competition intensifies, both higher-status and lower-status universities are more likely to respond to those intermediaries who reach the widest audiences, which have the highest authority with the audiences and whose judgement gives more precise information of their relative position.*

> Proposition 2b: *As the competition intensifies, higher-status universities are more likely to approve of those intermediaries whose judgement confirms their incumbency, whereas lower-status universities are more likely to approve of those intermediaries whose judgement may help them advance their status.*

Affiliations

Apart from being assigned by means of category membership or third-party judgements, status is also known as a property of an organisation which leaks through exchange relations, whereby "status is a direct function of the average status of the actor's affiliates" (Podolny and Phillips 1996, p. 453). A higher-status organisation entering an exchange relation with a lower-status one is always running the risk of diluting its own status (Blau 1964; Frank 1986; Podolny 2010). By extension, lower-status organisations would welcome higher-status partners for the benefit such exchange may bring, while the latter would refrain from exchanges with those they deem to be of lower status.

That having the right connections can predict organisation's survival prospects, sometimes even better than performance, has been supported with insights from different empirical settings. Studying child care service organisations in Canada, Baum and Oliver (1991) found that as the competition intensifies, so do the survival prospects of organisations with ties to government and community institutions in their environment. Stuart, Hoang and Hybels (1999) found that biotechnology firms with more prominent partners are more highly valued by third parties at initial public offerings. Evidence from the wine industry suggests that firm's affiliates and status strongly influence the perception of the firm's quality in the market (Benjamin and Podolny 1999). Rao, Davis and Ward (2000) studied organisations which migrated from one group to another and found that when membership in one group is seen as threatening for their social identity, they defect to other groups.

Referring to product markets, Podolny (1993) identifies three types of ties which affect how a producer's status is perceived: those with consumers, with third parties and between producers. These ties can be characterised by various forms, but also varying degree of commitment and of public visibility. For example, an ad-hoc exchange between two organisations and a strategic long-term alliance would, thus, have different implications for their respective status positions, simply because they signal different levels of commitment the organisation has to the said affiliate. An association would be an example of a more committed relationship, given that it can be ideologically driven, is often established as "strategic" and with the idea to last and, finally, may affect organisational identity (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Rao et al. 2000). Moreover, a tie between two organisations which is not disclosed to the public is not expected to do much for how that public perceives either of them. Conversely, the same agreement visibly displayed on the organisation's website is more likely to affect the said perception. Thus, regardless of the "depth" of commitment an affiliation carries, we could expect that the higher the status of the affiliate, the more prominence will be given to the tie.

Although the idea of connectedness among scholars and their institutions is certainly not a new one, with the advent of internationalisation and globalisation, universities have become as networked as ever and not only through short-term exchanges. Memoranda of understanding or international research networks would be such examples, but also national and international university associations which have become an increasingly more common form of affiliation (Chan 2004; Gunn and Mintrom 2013; Teather 2004). Some of these associations are explicitly status-driven, given that they are exclusive, are made up of high-status members and have an image of elite clubs (Abramo and D'Angelo 2014; Boliver 2015; Rodriguez-Pomeda and Casani 2016). Examples of these are the Russell Group in the UK, Group of Eight in Australia, LERU and Japanese RU11, to name a few. They typically describe themselves as associations of "leading" or "top" universities in their respective countries or regions. Although their member universities are among the oldest institutions in their respective countries or, in the case of LERU, in Europe, the said associations are of relatively recent origin: the Russell Group was established in 1994, Group of Eight in 1999 and LERU in 2002.

> Proposition 3a: *As the competition intensifies, higher-status universities are more likely to affiliate with other higher-status organisations, whereas lower-status universities are more likely to pursue affiliations with higher-status organisations.*

> Proposition 3b: *As the competition intensifies, universities are expected to give more visibility to those affiliations which positively affect their status, compared to the affiliations which dilute their status.*

In taking this discussion forward, a number of caveats should be taken into consideration. First, the condition integral to each of the seven propositions – "as the competition intensifies" – is not necessarily independent of categories, intermediaries and affiliations in place. Competition and the intensity thereof may both affect and be affected by these mechanisms of status construction. To illustrate, one of the most important effect of rankings is that they transform comparative fields into competitive fields (Werron 2015). Because here status of one university is presented as coming at the expense of another university's status, relatively stable status orders defined by broad formal or informal categorisations (such as elite/non-elite, public/private, etc.) are effectively transformed into dynamic competitive fields, in which only one university can occupy the first place. We could therefore think of such categories as having a stabilising effect on hierarchies, thus restraining competition, while rankings – as ideal-typical zero-sum games – would have the opposite effect. A growing number of affiliations, on the other hand, as well as the aforementioned efforts of universities to forge new (sub-)categories themselves, may, as suggested by the propositions, come as responses to the said intensification of competition, but also as its drivers. Be that as it may, these processes seem to be interrelated, and further research could address these relationships in more depth.

Second, the distinction between categories, intermediaries and affiliations is primarily conceptual, while it is acknowledged that status positions inferred from category membership, intermediary judgement and affiliations may overlap empirically. For instance, in all likelihood, the highest ranked university is going to be a member of the highest-status category and will have the highest-status affiliates. Also, membership in categories and affiliations may overlap, as it is the case when universities form exclusive clubs. They may as well drive one another. A top position in rankings may attract the best students and scholars, but also deference and partnerships. By extension, playing the status game for a university may mean anything from joining an association, obtaining a highly valued

accreditation, or emulating the higher-status ones, to all of these and beyond. Conceptual distinction on the side, if their dynamics were to be empirically investigated, then their inter-relatedness should be controlled for.

Third, like in the case of individuals, where wealth, education, occupation, looks or skills, can signal status (Fiske 2010), our judgements on organisations could as well be based on their attributes such as structure, assets, age, activities, performance or any other characteristic, and independently of affiliations, intermediaries or the category they belong to. However, unlike affiliations, intermediaries and categories, attributes in themselves do not necessarily presuppose a hierarchical macrostructure, which is essential to the definition of status hereby used.

Lastly, it should be stressed once again that, much like the rest of social reality, hierarchies are socially constructed. That said, we could easily imagine a higher education field featuring multiple or, hypothetically, even an infinite number of hierarchies, each constructed along a distinct set of ideas or value systems. In this sense, this article has tried to unveil how some hierarchies are constructed and transformed, but also the kind of real consequences they may have for organisations and their environments.

Conclusion

Referring to the trends in the global competitive sport of the twentieth century, Ahrne and Brunsson noted that "being world champion in cricket, baseball, or floorball does not have the same clout as being world champion in football", for "the status of a world champion is greater, the greater the proportion of the world that plays that sport" (2008, p. 156). Analogously, as the attention given to the relative standing of universities around the world grows, so does the importance of being part of "the game".

In this article, I have argued that status processes – in which universities have become increasingly engaged in recent decades – go beyond rankings and span organisational affiliations, various intermediaries and categories. Based on insights from diverse empirical settings, including higher education, I have put forward a number of propositions with regards to higher-status and lower-status universities' respective responses to status dynamics, which are chiefly inspired by the status-based model of market competition in which the organisations' room for manoeuvre is very much contingent upon their position in the hierarchy (Podolny 1993).

This article makes two contributions. First, it adds to our understanding of organisational expansion in the tradition of sociological institutionalism which stresses the importance of the global culture of actorhood and empowerment (Bromley and Meyer 2015) and which has also been noted to be increasingly the case with universities (Krücken and Meier 2006). The global cultural system dictates that "being competitive" is the way to go, creating expectations from universities to become more "complete" and "proper" organisational actors: rational, efficient and with coherent identities (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000; Krücken and Meier 2006). And while we expect this to create an isomorphic effect on models of action, the status-based model suggests that this will eventually be mediated by organisational status. In other words, because higher-status and lower-status organisations face different constraints and opportunities, their responses to expectations of being "proper" organisational actors may entail different ways of rationalising and decoupling. While this article has

been, for the most part, about universities, this conclusion may as well apply to organisations in general.

Second, by specifically focusing on the concept of status, the article contributes to the growing body of higher education literature which focuses on global competition (e.g. Horta 2009; Marginson 2006; Shin et al. 2011). While status is increasingly invoked, directly or indirectly, in the higher education literature, university responses to these processes have been neither addressed in a systematic fashion, nor compared to evidence from other empirical settings. A broader conceptual approach to understanding status dynamics in higher education fields would, arguably, allow us to identify what is it that higher education scholars could learn from other empirical settings to better explain the phenomena observed in higher education, but also to explore how insights from higher education could contribute to broader sociological theorising. In this sense, this article joins other scholars in the field (e.g. Musselin 2014) in advocating for a more active dialogue between higher education as a field of study and broader disciplines. Finally and perhaps crucially, such an approach could help highlight aspects of the institutional dynamics specific to higher education fields and potentially reinforce the long-held argument that higher education institutions require special scholarly treatment and that – despite the pervasive pressures from broader cultural and political domains over the recent decades – they have retained their specificities.

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