

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Gendered processes of recruitment to elite higher educational institutions in mid-twentieth century Britain

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Abstract

This article uses rare and detailed data on matriculants to the University of Oxford during the middle decades of the twentieth century as a prism through which to consider gendered processes of recruitment to elite institutions. The article makes four key claims. First, the broader shifts in middle-class women's labour market participation in the mid-century are reflected in patterns of maternal occupation among matriculants, shifting from being predominantly housewives to professionals across the period. Related to this, the fathers of matriculants had similar professions whether their child was male or female, but mothers' professions varied much more between male and female students. There was much more variation between mothers and fathers of students who attended what we term 'elite' schools. Finally, across the mid-twentieth century, the number of male students from elite schools declined significantly, whereas the number of women students who had attended an 'elite' school was much steadier. Given the centrality of Oxford for processes of elite recruitment, these trends in their matriculants will have far wider implications for who gets access to elite positions in the decades after these shifts were occurring, revealing in some ways the continuity of class privilege and the increasingly salient role of mother's occupation in processes of elite reproduction.

This article uses rare and detailed data on matriculants to the University of Oxford during the middle decades of the twentieth century as a prism through which to consider gendered processes of recruitment to elite institutions. We explore these questions through sociological and historical lenses and by combining both quantitative and qualitative data. Our primary set of source material is matriculant

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data collected during the 1990s for the *Twentieth Century* volume of the highly significant Oxford University Press series on the History of the University of Oxford.¹ This rich data source has barely been used before and so we revisit and reanalyse these data, paying particular attention to the role of mothers and the experience of women matriculants, both of which were given far less attention in earlier work.²

The mid-twentieth century was a moment of historical flux both in terms of class structure and gendered social norms. During the 1930s, Britain was still feeling the aftereffects of the First World War and was in the grip of a deep economic depression. There was no universal secondary education, and despite the fact rates of attendance at university had risen significantly since 1900, they still remained low compared with wider European standards.³ The independent school sector suffered financially during the 1930s and many were unsettled by the experience of the Second World War.⁴ The 1944 Education Act widened access to and expectations for secondary education but attending university remained an elite pursuit until at least the Robbins Report of 1963, with the number of students at higher education institutions almost doubling in the fifteen years after his report was published.⁵ The labour market was much stronger in the post-war decades, owing in large part to the occupational transition that had led to a rise in white-collar and professional roles. The 1950s and 1960s are often considered the 'golden age' of social mobility, although historians have recently begun to challenge how fluid society actually was during this period.⁶

Oxford remained a gender segregated university until the 1970s when a wave of colleges became co-educational. Before this, the experience of men and women was very different. Until 1969, the university was in loco parentis for all students because the age of majority was twenty-one, but for women, this led to far more restrictions on women students. Competition for places at the small number of women's colleges was intense, leading Janet Howarth to contend that the women's colleges should be considered much more 'meritocratic' than the men's colleges until at least the 1960s.⁷ Howarth has also argued that Oxford was 'l'un des bastions du phallocratisme' during this period – it remained dominated by men and defined by their expectations and experiences.⁸ The career opportunities available even to women graduates of elite universities remained narrow until the 1970s, not only confined to a range of feminised jobs (primarily teaching) but also in the ways it was conceptualised as a short-term career which would be secondary to their role in the family.⁹ The average age of marriage was lower in the post-war decades than during the interwar years, and this meant that many women at Oxford married their fellow students.

What is less clear, however, is the social and educational background of women students at Oxford in the early-to-mid twentieth century. For the case of Cambridge, Pat Thane has found that because elite families were very cautious about sending their daughters to read for degrees, the women were more likely to hail from families stratified across the middle class than the upper class.¹⁰ Daniel Greenstein has suggested that at Oxford the school and social class background of women undergraduates during this period was more 'erratic' than for male students.¹¹ Although, notably, no systematic analysis of which schools sent their female students to Oxford in this period has been undertaken by historians.

This article engages with historiographical debates about the role of the mother in shaping and influencing their daughter's educational (and occupational) decisions in twentieth-century Britain. Carol Dyhouse has argued that mothers' ambitions for their daughters were highly significant during the interwar years and are vital in understanding daughter's university attendance.¹² In her survey of people who had attended university during the 1930s, she found that 72 *per cent* of women 'mentioned strong parental encouragement to go on to further study after leaving school' compared with only 46 *per cent* of men.¹³ Dyhouse suggested that because higher education was more unusual for girls than boys in this period, parental encouragement was less taken for granted and more of a decisive factor. Dyhouse's research drew on the work of sociologists Robert Miller and Bernadette Hayes, who emphasised that the mother's educational and occupational attainment has important effects on the attainment of their children, particularly on their daughters, independent of the father.¹⁴ They also highlighted that the role of the mother in models of class and mobility is particularly under researched

in Britain. More recently, Christina de Bellaigue et al. have argued that analysing educational (and occupational) patterns down the matrilineal line within families across the twentieth century shows that mother's educational qualifications often facilitated the pursuit of further education by her daughter.¹⁵ However, much of the research on the role of the mother has been done in relation to social mobility rather than the impact on the entrance to elite educational spaces. Moreover, there is a lacuna in our understanding of how the father's occupation affects the daughter's choice to enter higher education – are there particular professions which create an attitude amongst fathers which values the pursuit of female higher education in the mid-twentieth century?

The article makes four key claims. First, the broader shifts in middle-class women's labour market participation in the mid-century are reflected in patterns of maternal occupation among matriculants, shifting from being predominantly housewives to professionals across the period. Related to this, the fathers of matriculants had similar professions whether their child was male or female, but mothers' professions varied much more between male and female students. There was much more variation between mothers and fathers of students who attended what we term 'elite' schools. Mothers of male students were much more likely to be housewives and mothers of female students were more likely to be employed – especially in education. Finally, across the mid-twentieth century, the number of male students from elite schools declined significantly, whereas the number of women students who had attended an 'elite' school was much steadier. The centrality of Oxford for processes of elite recruitment means that these trends in their matriculants will have far wider implications for who gets access to elite positions in the decades after these shifts were occurring, revealing in some ways the continuity of class privilege and the increasingly salient role of mother's occupation in processes of elite reproduction.

APPROACH TO THE SOURCES

The matriculants data consist of three different samples. The largest are basic matriculation data on all of Oxford's male matriculants between 1900 and 1970, and all of Oxford's female matriculants between 1920 and 1970. These data were largely taken from the *Oxford Gazette*. Oxford formally allowed women to matriculate from 7 October 1920 (hence this start date). Before this date, there are data on non-matriculated members of women's societies (many of whom were taking classes and eventually examinations); we also incorporate these data for some parts of our analysis. In addition to these matriculant data, comprehensive social origins data were collected for a 9 per cent stratified (on Cohort, College and Subject) sample of the Oxford members between 1900 and 1967 (both men and women). For a few cohorts (1920, 1949 and 1970), comprehensive social origins data were collected for the entire group of incoming students (men and women).

Our analysis focuses on a few key variables contained in these data sources. First, we looked at the gender of the matriculant. Second, very unusually, we have data on the occupations of matriculants' fathers (1900–1970) and mothers (1940–67). The crucial way we extend Greenstein's analysis is by adding detailed analysis of mother's as well as father's occupation. In terms of the analysis itself, we use a similar method to Greenstein in that we apply a 'dictionary method' to identify occupations. The intuition here is that we can map the words used by people to describe their occupation onto class positions (e.g., doctor can be classified as a professional). Here, we make a primary distinction between professionals (accountants, doctors, business professionals and lawyers) and non-professionals (routine manual).¹⁶ We use this distinction because tracing a large number of categories over time would make the analysis overly complex but also because we wanted to create categories that were broad enough to capture any subtle variations over time in the prestige of any specific occupation.

There are three ways in which we depart from this more general classification. We pull out 'education' as its own category, in part because the number of matriculants whose parents worked in education is strikingly high (and so we have a sufficiently large sample size to reliably document

C. YOUR SCHOOLING

5. Please indicate your schooling up to age 11 by ticking the relevant box:
 private or preparatory state or voluntary aided
6. Please indicate the names of the last two schools you attended between ages 11 and 18, with dates, and give details by filling out the appropriate box(es):

name and location of school	dates attended	did you board?	was school mixed?	SOURCE(S) OF FUNDING			
				parents, relatives, friends	state or LEA	school scholarship	other - please specify

B. YOUR PARENTS' OCCUPATIONS WHEN YOU CAME TO OXFORD

What were your parents' occupations when you came to Oxford? In the status column please enter E if the job-holder was an employee, S if self-employed without employees, M if an employer, and V for voluntary or unpaid work. If either parent had died or retired before you came to Oxford please also indicate their last job:

	job title and position held	part/full time	status	where applicable, name of firm or employer and nature of its activities	job location (town, country)
example:	Manager, Marketing Division	F	E	Cola UK, Soft Drinks Manufacturer	Southampton, UK
father's job					
mother's job					

FIGURE 1 Part of the questionnaire sent to the sample of matriculants.

trends in this category). The education sector was particularly key to women's professionalisation during this period, and we wanted to draw out its significance specifically.¹⁷ The second way we depart from the professional/non-professional split is by putting those in the 'armed forces' in their own category. We do this because the position of the armed forces in relation to the status hierarchy is far more ambiguous given that members of the aristocracy often had senior positions within the military and that the ranks of the armed forces entail both very professionalised positions as well as far less professionalised positions. The third way we depart from this more general division is by adding the category of 'housewife' to our analysis of mother's occupation. This is because very few women were employed in the Armed Forces and because a large number were described as terms which we can identify as 'housewife' (see Figures 1 and 2). We therefore replaced Armed Forces with Housewife for women but kept the other three occupational groups. Including the category 'housewife' gave us a much fuller picture of the parents of matriculants' relationship to the labour market that we do not already have.

In addition to our dictionary methods, we also applied a machine learning algorithm to classify any residual occupations that were not captured by our dictionary methods. The algorithm we used is called LabourR and it can map multilingual free text of occupations to a broad range of standardised occupational classifications. In this article, we use the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification and then collapse these categories in the four groups mentioned above.¹⁸ Crucially, this occupational classifier (LabourR) does not have a code for 'housewife', in part because previous research has not conceptualised this as an occupation despite the significant

Mother
Housewife & mother
Clergyman's wife
Wife & mother
Looking after her family
Married woman
Farmers wife & mother
Looking after family
Full time mother

FIGURE 2 Illustrative terms and phrases that are used to classify 'housewives'.

amount of labour that it involves. We draw on the work of women's historians such as Thane to define this as an 'occupation' in this article.¹⁹ We used dictionary methods to classify these texts. In effect, we created a list of terms (e.g., housewife, mother, homemaker) that were commonly used to describe matriculant's mothers. These included allusions to 'mother' as their occupation, or the wife of a husband in a particular profession which often carried some form of social status and labour (see Figure 2). We then coded these as housewives and then used LabourR to classify the remaining women.

Beyond the gender of the matriculant and the occupation of the parents, we also have information on the type of school and name of the school that matriculants attended before coming to Oxford. In order to build on our previous research into elite educational pathways, we have also undertaken specific analysis of the most elite set of boys' and girls' schools and analysed the proportion of matriculants from these schools. For the boys' schools, we look at the Clarendon Schools (Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Merchant Taylors', Rugby, Shrewsbury, St Paul's, Westminster, Winchester). There is no equivalent list of Girls' schools; however, our recent work has identified a similar set of schools that appear to have the most durable link with the British elite.²⁰ These are: Cheltenham Ladies College, North London Collegiate School, St Paul's School for Girls, Oxford High School for Girls, Queen's College on Harley Street, St Leonard's in St Andrews, Clifton High School for Girls, King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham, Roedean, Godolphin & Laytmer Girls' School, Wycombe Abbey, and the Benenden School, which was famously attended by Princess Anne (the daughter of Queen Elizabeth II).²¹ The reason we alight on twelve is that our aim is to create a group of girls schools that educate a similar number of students to the nine male Clarendon Schools – approximately 6000 pupils.²²

Alongside the data on matriculants, we also draw on a range of oral history interviews to develop a richer understanding of the transition to Oxford. Here, we use two sets of life history interviews. The first are interviews we have conducted as part of our project documenting changes in the process of elite formation. In the first phase, we conducted seventy-two interviews with men and women who had an entry in the prestigious national biography *Who's Who*.²³ The second set of oral history interviews were conducted as part of the British Libraries National Life Stories (NLS) project.²⁴ We have collected and analysed seventy interviews from this collection which were conducted with people who also have an entry in *Who's Who* but were born in the early and mid-twentieth century. The interviewees from both collections primarily attended elite schools and prestigious universities during the mid-twentieth century, including the University of Oxford. This allowed us to explore this particular type of trajectory through elite educational institutions and to consider whether their parental background varied from the wider Oxford matriculant intake during this period.

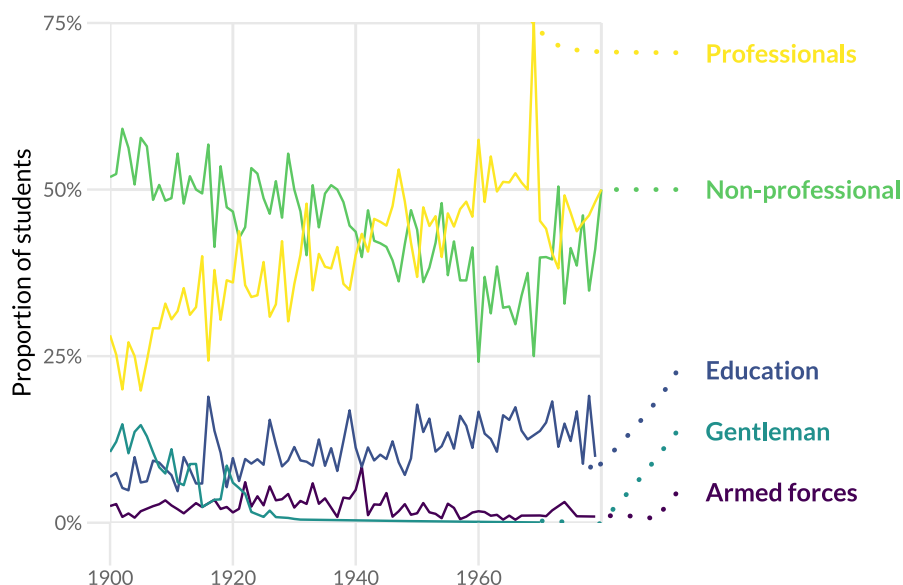


FIGURE 3 Occupation of the fathers of matriculants. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

PARENTAL OCCUPATION

While we know that social class advantage increases the likelihood of attending elite universities, we know much less about how this has changed over time or differed for male and female students during the twentieth century.²⁵ Research has primarily focused almost exclusively on the social class (or occupation) of the father and not the mother (and this has been a wider trend within social mobility studies).²⁶ We cannot therefore understand broader changes in whether elite universities have become more or less open over time without uncovering the class composition of their intake. We start, therefore, by tracking fathers over time before moving on to mothers too. Finally, we reflect on occupational homogamy between fathers and mothers.

The proportion of fathers of all matriculants with a professional occupation increased dramatically over this period (Figure 3). Around 25–35 *per cent* of the earliest cohorts had fathers in professional occupations. This had risen to around 50 *per cent* among those cohorts arriving at Oxford in the 1960s. There was a similar, albeit smaller, rise in the proportion of fathers who were employed in education. In part, this reflects shifts in the economy as a whole. Statistics from the census and other labour market statistics suggest that the percentage of the workforce classed as ‘professional’ rises from around 5 *per cent* in 1911, to around 25 *per cent* by 1971.²⁷ People from the professions in 1911 were over-represented at Oxford (an odds ratio of ~8) but this advantage declines as the size of the professions grew within the population in general.²⁸ It also may be the case that there is a shift in convention, with students identifying their fathers by their profession rather than calling them ‘gentleman’. By 1971, the odds ratio had fallen to 2, suggesting the odds of attending Oxford were twice as high if your father was occupied in a profession. This decline does not change the fact that matriculants with fathers from a professional occupation remain overrepresented.

The results for mothers are unsurprisingly quite different (Figure 4). Among the earliest cohorts over 70 *per cent* of mothers were a housewife or homemaker, but this declined rapidly until less than half of the mothers of matriculants were in this occupational position. Similarly, we see a rise in all of the other occupational categories, with particularly strong growth in education and in non-professional occupations. While the norm for upper-class women in the interwar years was to give up paid employment upon marriage, this was often a decision taken out of the hands of individual

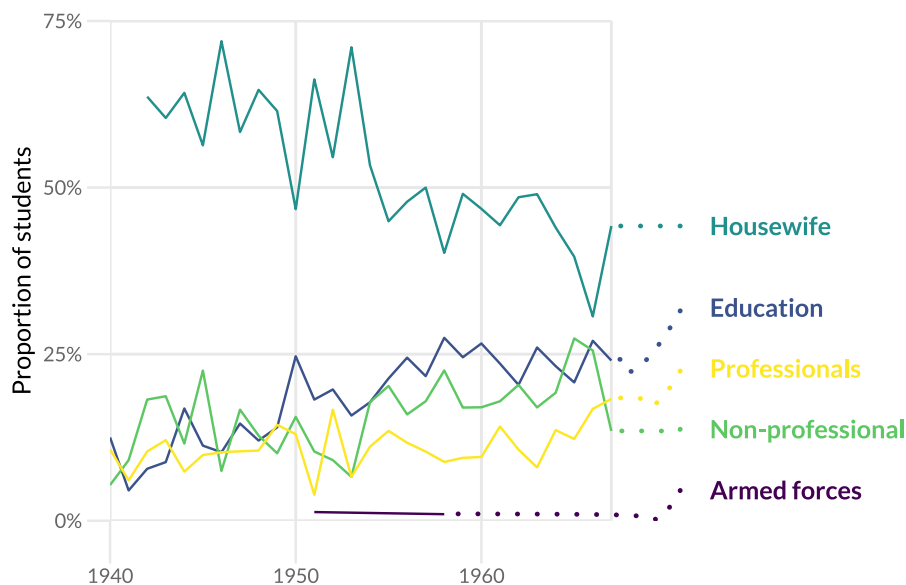


FIGURE 4 Occupation of the mothers of matriculants. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

women as marriage bars were in operation in many, especially public sector, professions during these decades.²⁹ The economic depression of the late 1920s and 1930s was the high point of marriage bars as much of the population believed that married women should not be taking one of the scarce jobs away from single women and unemployed men, and that promotion routes should be reserved for men. The Second World War was an inflection point, and the rise of married women's paid employment during the 1950s and 1960s is considered one of the metanarratives of post-war British history.³⁰ It is clear from the matriculant data that this was a cross-class phenomenon. The mothers of those attending one of the most elite universities in Britain also shifted from housewives into the labour market in some capacity.

The trends for parental occupation are different if we separate out the parents of male and female matriculants (see Figures 5 and 6). The data are very similar for father's occupation, suggesting that father's occupation did not vary much by the gender of the matriculant. Figure 5 looks at mothers. Here, there are two big differences. Men are far more likely than women to have a mother who is a housewife at the beginning of the period. Approximately 75 per cent of male matriculants had a mother who was a housewife among those who went to Oxford in 1940. For women, this was around 50 per cent. Instead, these women were more likely to be employed in a range of occupations. Over time, this has changed. Housewives have become far less common, and all occupations have risen. This reflects the transformational shift in middle-class women entering paid employment in the immediate post-war decades.³¹ But here again there are some important differences. The rise in employment in education has been larger among the mothers of women matriculants than men. A quarter of male matriculants had a mother in education while around 30–35 per cent of female matriculants had a mother in education (a theme we will return to in the next section).

We found that the general rise in women's labour participations, especially as it pertains to Oxford matriculants, points to a rise in dual-career couples. Husbands may work in very different sectors from their wives and when they are employed in the same sector, they may have quite different jobs (e.g., headmaster compared with a teacher) which reflects gendered hierarchies in the labour market. We use detailed occupational codes (third level of the ISCO framework) to capture occupational similarity. This would differentiate between a medical doctor (code 221) and a nurse (code 222) but would treat as the same a GP (code 2211) and a specialist medical practitioner (code 2212). A large number of

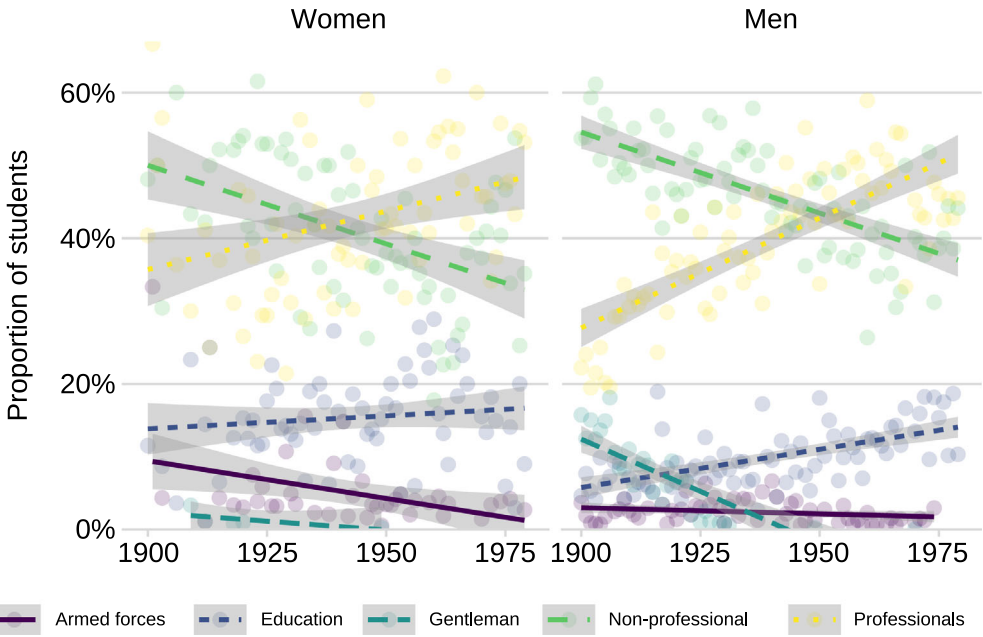


FIGURE 5 Father's occupation of male and female matriculants. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

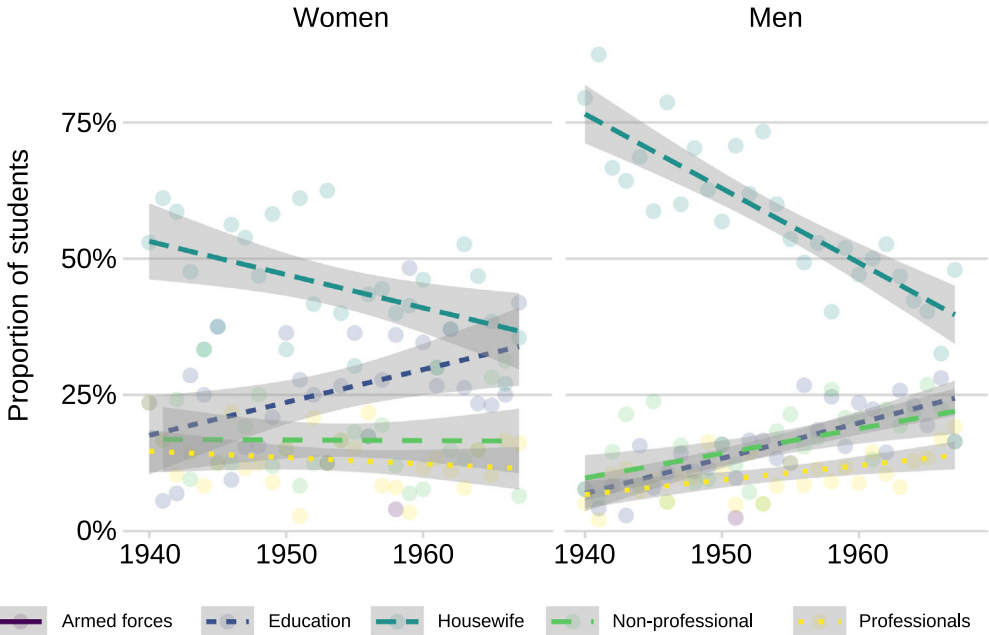


FIGURE 6 Mother's occupation of male and female matriculants. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

these couples could not be in the same occupation because one of them was not in work (usually the mother, who was a housewife). Notwithstanding this, we do see a relatively large number of mothers and fathers in the same occupations. In the early 1940s, around 13 *per cent* of women and 6.4 *per cent* of men matriculants had parents in the same occupation. By late 1960s, this had risen to 16 *per cent* for women and 14 *per cent* for men. Occupational homogamy was far higher for women matriculants at the beginning of our period than it was for men, but it has risen considerably to the point that there is very little difference between them. This demonstrates not just that women were entering the labour market but that the mothers of Oxford matriculants were increasingly entering the same types of occupations as their husbands. Indeed, it may be the case that these middle-class women were meeting their husbands in these occupations.

It is a highly significant finding that male students are so much more likely to have a mother that is a housewife during the earlier part of our period. On the one hand, this may offer an insight into the different ways that sons and daughters perceive their mother's relationship to the labour market. On the matriculation forms, it is the student who states the occupation of their mother and father. The nature of the female life cycle, particularly in the wake of the Second World War, was for women to work at least until marriage and then often until the birth of the first child. Some middle-class women undertook degrees and training for prestigious careers which they then spent a period of time working in after graduation.³² Moreover, more women took up part-time work after their children had started primary school. An interesting question, therefore, is when filling out the matriculation forms whether female students were more likely than male students to conceptualise their mother as someone with an occupation outside the home even if it was only for a part-time number of hours. It is possible that sons were more inclined to flatten out their mother's engagement with the labour market and view them primarily in a maternal role.

The fact that male matriculants are so much more likely to have a mother who falls under the category of 'housewife' also tells us something important about how decision making about the future is transferred down the patrilineal and matrilineal lines. We see the archetype of a professional father with a high degree of influence on their son and housewife mother strongly emerging in oral history interviews conducted with men who attended Oxford during the early part of our period. Edward Du Cann, b.1924, was interviewed for the National Life Stories project conducted by the British Library during the late twentieth century owing to his illustrious career and prestigious position as Chairman of the Conservative Party.³³ He read Law at Oxford and matriculated in 1940 after attending Woodbridge independent school in Suffolk. The occupations of his parents illustrate the roles of mothers and fathers for Oxford matriculants in this period. He stated that during his time at Oxford:

my mother wasn't working when I was there, but they had met because she worked in a chemist shop, she had a pharmaceutical qualification from Nottingham University. And father came in for prescription and there we were. No, he was the barrister, so he was full-time working. Mother was not full-time working'.³⁴

Many middle-class women at this time had some form of post-secondary education that they did not use after marriage.³⁵ Edward's decision to study Law at Oxford was heavily influenced by his father's occupation as a barrister. He said that he was 'very interested in my father's work, I used to accompany him to court on a daily basis really, during the school holidays, taking a note for him and that sort of thing'.³⁶ This mini apprenticeship with his father led him to 'make up my mind that I would go to the bar, I thought it the most honourable profession'.³⁷ The role of the father is strong in their son's choice of attending Oxford which is related to their desire to follow in their father's educational and occupational footsteps. It is discussed as natural, and not worthy of much elaboration in the interviews. Their mothers are not really discussed as part of the trajectories that the men are taking. They are not mimicking or even really considering their mother's life choices. Born in 1923, Oxford matriculant Ferrier Charlton tellingly described his father as a 'Scottish chartered accountant' and his mother as 'from a Salisbury, Wiltshire family'.³⁸ Later in his interview for the National Life Stories project, he

states: 'I suppose I should say a bit about my mother' and starts describing *her* father, and then a little about her talents in music and art.³⁹ When discussing his parents role in his university decision he explained that he did discuss it with his teachers 'but my father had a very big interest because he decided quite early on that I would make a good lawyer. I suppose I owe him a great deal for having that perception. And he wanted me therefore to go to university'.⁴⁰

With the interviews we conducted with men who attended Oxford after the Second World War, this dynamic softens a little with more discussion of the mother. But the father does remain central in explaining early life choices. Robert (b.1942) exemplifies this trend.⁴¹ When asked about his background he stated:

Okay, well my parents were colonial civil servants. My father was, well both of them were, trained teachers and my father's father was a teacher and educator in East Africa for the whole of his career. I was born in Kenya in fact, and I suppose I'm an irrevocable member of the middle class. I went to school at Winchester College which was where my father and grandfather had gone. I was a scholar and then I went on to an Oxford College.⁴²

John is following an established patrilineal educational pathway. It is also noticeable here that his parents both have a professional occupation. Similarly, in his interview the journalist William (b.1951) described his mother and father 'both belong[ing] to what you would loosely call the professional classes. My father was a university teacher for most of his adult life ... my mother when she worked was a schoolteacher'.⁴³ This reflects a key finding from the matriculant data that the proportion of female matriculants with a professional mother has not increased but there has been a slight rise in the proportion of male matriculants with a professional mother. This represents the rise in marital occupational homogamy across the mid-century decades.

The increased likelihood of female matriculants having mothers employed outside the home compared with male matriculants even in the earlier part of the period, supports recent findings by historians who have incorporated women into their analysis, particularly in relation to intergenerational transmission of life goals.⁴⁴ We find that the mother is a particularly important influence on their daughter. The mother is a much stronger figure in women's oral history interviews across the mid-century, although it is notable that it tends to be about the value of obtaining an education in of itself rather than specifically career oriented as it is with the male interviewees. Jean Graham Hall was born in 1917 and matriculated to an elite university in the 1930s. Her father was an executive in a business, and earlier in his career his wife – Jean's mother – had been his secretary. Although her mother had only been educated till the age of fourteen years, she was known for being able to 'write a beautiful letter'.⁴⁵ Jean explained that her parents had to negotiate her 'ambitions' which she described as 'like everyone else, to be Prime Minister and run the world. I daresay I was a bit bossy'. It was her mother who had to persuade her father to give the same educational opportunities to Jean as to her younger brother. For university, for example, her mother convinced her father to take the baby step of 'paying for one term' to see how it went, 'saying "the girl deserves as much as chance in life as the boys. And she works hard and she's quite clever"'.⁴⁶ Notably, in her autobiography, Katherine Whitehorn (b.1928), who had attended Roedean and Cambridge, discussed her supportive parents, stating that: 'it never occurred to my parents – and I know much of this was my mother's doing – to give me a worse education than my brother'.⁴⁷

Mothers having an important influence on girls' education along with the father, continues, and even intensifies, in the post-war period. Elise (b.1942) states that she was sent to an elite girls' school because her parents were 'aiming high for me'.⁴⁸ She described both her parents as 'supportive' of her education, although she explained that because her mother was an artist she was not as focused on academia as her father. His mother had been one of the first women to attend Oxford, so he thought that lineage of female education was important. Grandmothers occur often in discussion of education in women's interviews. Georgina (b.1943) noted that her grandmother had wanted to go to Oxford like

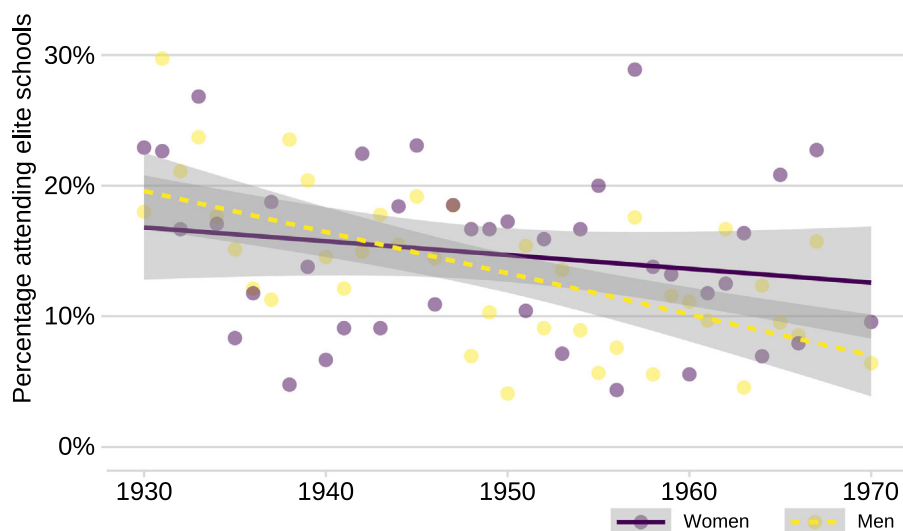


FIGURE 7 Attendance at elite schools. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

her brothers but could not go because she had to look after their parents, even though she was ‘one of the more intelligent of [her siblings]’.⁴⁹ Alexandra (b.1945), who attended an elite school followed by Oxford, described her parents’ role in her education as ‘absolutely, straightforwardly helpful. Never pushy, just helpful and gorgeous’.⁵⁰ She emphasises in particular the longer-term influence of her mother who kept working as a Biochemist after having her children. Alexandra described her as ‘very much her own woman – I didn’t use the word role model [when I was younger] – but it made it seem completely natural for me that my mum was a busy scientist, but she had lot of time for us, and she was also everything else’.⁵¹

SCHOOLING

The advantage of class origins in applying to Oxford was always partially mediated by attending an elite school. For boys, the relationships between school and Oxford were sometimes incredibly tight. Eton has famously had a strong relationship with Christ Church college and Winchester was the feeder school for New College.⁵² While these formal ties have waned over time, the links remain strong. For girls, these relationships are far less well established although our recent work has shown that a set of schools have been consistently and disproportionately successful at sending their alumni to Oxford. We focus therefore on the elite Clarendon schools for boys and the set twelve elite girls’ schools that we identified in our recent research (Cheltenham Ladies’ College, North London Collegiate School, St Paul’s Girls’ School, Oxford High School for Girls, Queen’s College on Harley Street, St Leonards in St Andrews, Clifton High School for Girls, King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham, Roedean, Godolphin & Laytmer Girls’ School, Wycombe Abbey, and the Benenden School).⁵³

When we look at the matriculants who attended these elite school clusters we find striking differences in the patterns of attendance across this period. In Figure 7, we show the proportion of matriculants split by gender and here we can see two different trends. There has been a steady decline in the proportion of male matriculants getting into Oxford from the nine Clarendon schools over this period. At the beginning of the twentieth century, over 25 per cent of male students came from just these nine schools. Among the 1960s intake, this had dropped to around 10 per cent. Although this is lower, it still represents a vastly disproportionate number of male students from these institutions. This finding that the percentage of students from the Clarendon schools drops across the century

supports the argument proposed by Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman that there was a simultaneous ‘decline and persistence’ of the old boys’ network and their route through a set of elite institutions – of which the Clarendon schools and Oxbridge are at the heart.⁵⁴ One explanation for this decline was the intentional process by which Oxford tried to become more meritocratic in terms of intake. Driven by the sciences division, many of the faculty lobbied to have Oxford’s entrance exam changed so that irrelevant subjects (e.g., Latin and Greek) were removed.⁵⁵ The worry was that Oxford was missing out on the best students because they were not necessarily good at or been training in these ancient languages. Alongside this, there may have been a shift in the composition of those children going to state schools.

One interviewee (b.1941) pointed to the changes in the way admissions to Oxbridge changed in the post-war period. He explained that after he finished at Eton, he went to the Oxbridge College he attended because:

my father had been there, and his father had been there. But – this may amuse you – when I went there were scholarship exams but there was no entrance exam for people who didn’t take the scholarship exam. They were accepted on the recommendation of house master say, and my year there were 47 Old Etonians in the entry out of 250 undergraduates. Then in the next year or the year after – I can’t remember – when my brother came up. They’d introduced an entrance exam and there were seven Etonians [laughs], probably all of whom had got scholarships or exhibitions, so the thing was narrowed down. The gauge was narrowed. They were a much wider variety of people from a background point of view.⁵⁶

Another interviewee, born in the late 1940s, noted that when he attended Rugby, one of the Clarendon Schools, they developed what he termed a ‘bit like Russian five-year plans’ to react to the league tables showing they had dropped down in terms of number of students gaining places at Oxbridge.⁵⁷ He noted that he was identified as a potential Oxford candidate and so he was ‘groomed’ for a place in a way that was ‘grossly unfair in socio-economic terms’.⁵⁸ Following the Second World War, there was a general cultural shift which reduced the degree of deference towards the privileged and the institutions associated with privilege.⁵⁹ As a result, many middle-class families stopped sending their children to elite private schools and instead focussed on grammar schools and eventually comprehensive schools. These trends may have led to more of the best prepared students attending schools outside of the private sector in general and the Clarendon schools specifically.

The trend for female students from elite’ schools is highly significant for how we understand women’s elite educational pathways. The set of twelve elite girls’ schools that we have identified were not as likely compared with boys’ schools to get their alumni into elite universities and eventually elite occupational positions. More generally, comparing these elite girls’ schools to the Clarendon schools for boys suggest these girls’ schools were less influential than their male counterparts (alumni of elite girls’ schools were twenty times more likely to reach elite than other women while the alumni of the Clarendon schools for boys were thirty-five times more likely to reach the elite than other men).⁶⁰ Despite this, and contrary to the Clarendon schools, the number of matriculants from the girls’ schools was much steadier across our period. These schools consistently achieved 10–15 *per cent* of the female intake to Oxford during this period. This suggests that because of the reduced number of places for women at the colleges (they could still only attend women’s colleges until the 1970s), the currency of one of these elite schools remained high for women throughout the mid-century decades. Howarth has argued that Oxford was more meritocratic for women in the twentieth century because there were less places.⁶¹ But it is interesting to raise the counterpoint, that it is possible that by the post-war period it was less meritocratic because an elite school background increased chances of getting a limited place.

It is important to note that these elite schools for girls had a history of being able to adapt quickly and respond to the changing contexts of what parents wanted for their daughters and what students and society expected for their futures. Since their foundation in the late nineteenth century, these

girls' schools had multiple competing demands, demands which altered across the twentieth century.⁶² During the mid-twentieth century, these elite girls' schools had a laser-like focus on getting a high percentage of their students a place at Oxbridge. Throughout the mid-century, attending either Oxford or Cambridge institutions was particularly highly valued as they were perceived as the only universities it was worth matriculating at for the daughters of higher professional and elite families.⁶³ This is not to say that all female students at these schools were directed to apply to university during this period, in fact we have found that there was a sharp divide in these spaces between girls who were considered 'university material' and those who were directed into secretarial or teacher training.⁶⁴ The schools had a process for identifying girls they thought could and *should* apply for Oxbridge which was often led by the headmistress. One interviewee, born in 1952, refers to Oxford High School for Girls as a 'machine for getting girls into Oxbridge' during the 1960s.⁶⁵ She wanted to go to university to study drama, but she was surprised that she got rejected from five out of the six degree courses that she applied to. When her parents went to discuss it with the headmistress, she said that she had written on the student's application that she was 'Oxbridge material, she would be wasted going to these universities. She can stay on and do Oxbridge next term'.⁶⁶ Notably the interviewee did apply for Oxbridge and gain a place there, despite stating:

I think it's the most extraordinary arrogant behaviour and I mean, the thing is, she *justified* it in all sorts of ways, she said 'look at Oxbridge, there are drama societies, there are, you know, Footlights and so on. People go on into the media, onto the stage, from Oxbridge. She can have her acting career and get a good degree'. You know, and she was very persuasive. But she was persuasive *after* doing that. And I mean, I think it is just reprehensible.⁶⁷

Similarly, Elise stated that she had decided that she wanted to read for science at university, but it was her school which specifically 'encouraged' her to apply to Oxford.⁶⁸ Alexandra recalled that when she wanted to leave school at the end of her A-Levels, the school staff were shocked and told her that she was a 'classicist' and therefore she was 'supposed to' stay on for the extra term to take the Oxford and Cambridge entrance exams (which she eventually did and gained a place).⁶⁹ Despite the ambiguities about the aim of occupational success, these elite girls' schools had a mission to get the best of their academic pupils to Oxbridge.

Our interviewees noted how focused these institutions were on their own role in the development of female education and the connections that had existed since the late nineteenth century between these schools and the Oxbridge women's colleges; many of which were founded at the same time and emerged from the same movement for female education.⁷⁰ Born in the mid-1940s, Celia explained that her elite school transmitted to the students that 'the school had been started by somebody called Frances Mary Buss and it was very very proud of its history of women's education, so that was drummed into us'. Celia explained that this emphasis was 'continued at Lady Margaret Hall, my Oxford college. It was part of the background that women's education was something to be very very proud of and that it was an achievement'.⁷¹ The connections between the elite girls' schools and women's colleges were often informal, especially by the mid-century, but it remained a small and fairly tight knit community of women's elite education with significant shared understanding and cross-pollination between the institutions. It is no coincidence, for example, that, Mary Warnock, the formidable headmistress of Oxford High School in the 1960s, went on to hold research positions at two Oxford women's colleges before being appointed mistress of Girton College, Cambridge.

We also analysed the occupations of the parents of those students hailing from the most elite schools (Figures 8 and 9). These patterns diverged from the whole group in significant ways. The occupational trends of their parents did not match that of the wider matriculant population. Whilst we found that for the wider matriculant population father's occupation was similar for male and female students, this was not the case for the parents of elite students. For female students who had been educated at the elite schools, there was less of a rise in professional fathers and more of a rise in those specifically working

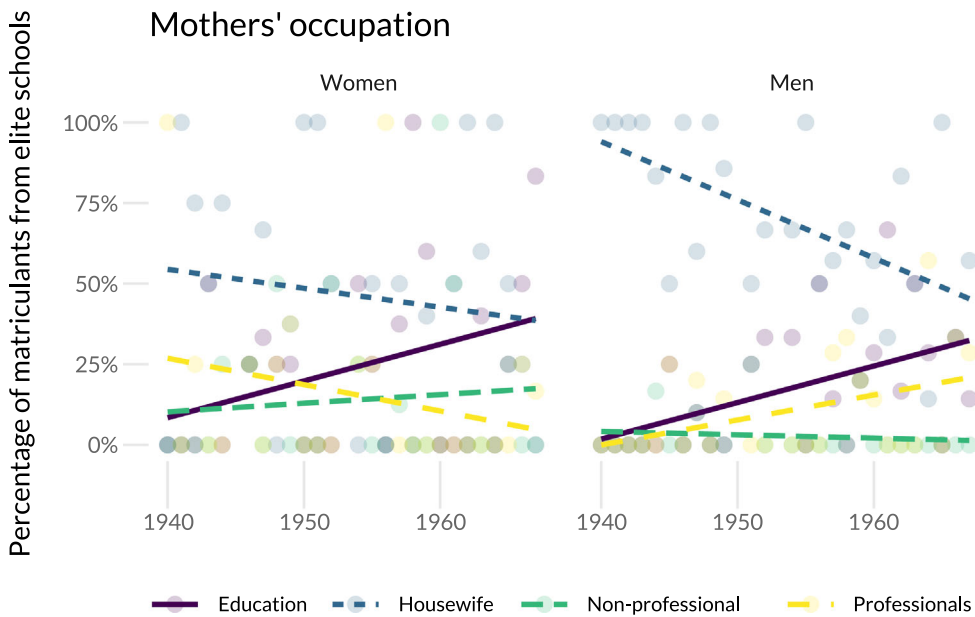


FIGURE 8 Maternal occupations of matriculants who attended elite schools. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

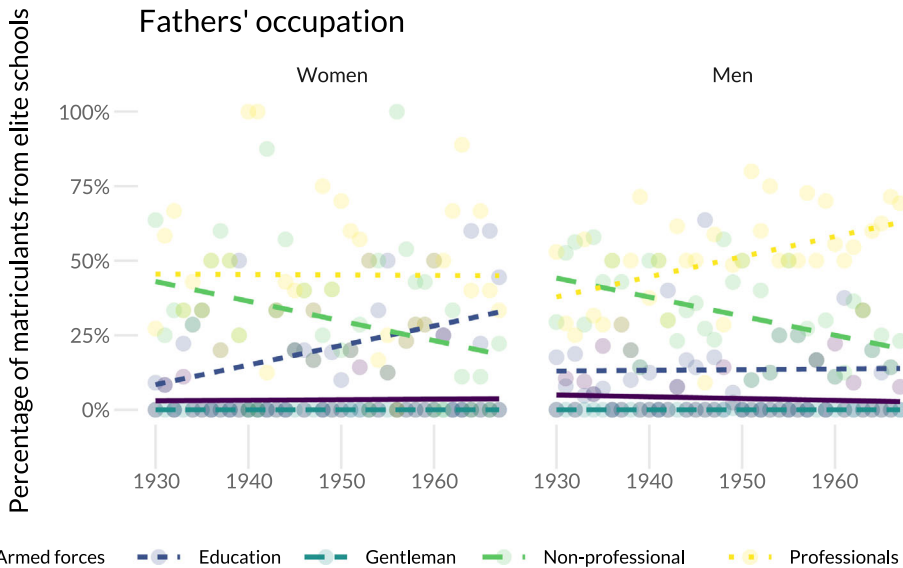


FIGURE 9 Paternal occupations of matriculants who attended elite schools. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

in education across the period. This likely reflects the fact that there was an educational expansion in this period in some respects, but certainly not solely – especially as there is not so much of a rise for the fathers of male students with a Clarendon education. This is notable in light of the fact that in the school histories of the girls' schools, we have identified there was an emphasis placed on the location of the schools within proximity to major educational institutions and that it was 'university children' that were a key clientele for the schools.⁷² A history of Oxford High School for Girls produced by the

Girls' Public Day School Trust, states that 'a majority of the school's earliest pupils' were 'university children'.⁷³ An interviewee who attended Oxford High School in the 1950s stated that 'the girls were coming from, a lot of them, from academic households where they learn to argue at home, maybe. We did argue, we used to argue all the time'.⁷⁴ Similarly, another interviewee who attended Clifton High School in the 1950s noted that a lot of the pupils, including herself, were the daughters of academics.⁷⁵

The particular interrelationship between parents working in education and sending their daughters to one of these elite academic schools also arises in qualitative interviews. Mothers working in education has always been a higher proportion of parents of female matriculants than male (as noted in the above section) but for girls who attended elite schools (and were thus more likely to get to Oxbridge in the mid-century), it was the father's employment in education which is clearly an important influence. It seems to be fathers working in this field that are especially likely to be supportive and encouraging of their daughter's academic education. Celia attended an elite girls' school then read Classics at Oxford during the early 1960s, a subject choice which led her to encounter a lot of 'posh public schoolboys, and I realised how the world really worked'.⁷⁶ This was a continuation of the lineage of her family's educational tradition: her father had attended Cambridge to study Classics, as had his own father. She described it as a 'great family tradition'.⁷⁷ Her father had been a schoolteacher for much of her childhood.

What emerges particularly strongly in our oral history interviews is that it is also often a combination of parents, and often in tandem with strong sense that an 'educational lineage' is being created: just like the impetus of the elite schools themselves so it all becomes self-reinforcing. Janet (b.1948) had two parents who were academics (although she described them as on the 'periphery' of the profession).⁷⁸ She explained that there was a lineage of female education because her mother was Scottish. When Janet did not do especially well at the 11-plus exam, her parents paid for to go to one of our local elite day schools rather than send her to a grammar school which was not top tier in the city.⁷⁹ They both thought education was fundamentally important and when she was attending Oxbridge, they encouraged her to go onto graduate research. Patricia (b.1946) attended a prestigious girls' day school and then gained a place at Oxford. Her father was a university academic, and her mother was a teacher who continued to work after having her children.⁸⁰ Patricia explained her mother's 'motto' was 'if it's breathing, teach it something. So, she taught absolutely everything from in fact kindergarten to the point when she retired, she was a principal lecturer'.⁸¹ Her father is also an academic, and notably he had a much easier time of it: he had a smooth upward trajectory within a prestigious university, whereas her mother had a much more jagged experience through different types of educational institutions. Patricia explained that it was central to her biography that 'we are teachers in all directions. I am third generation female teacher. My mother was a teacher rather than a research academic. And I married another academic and our eldest child is an academic'.⁸² Here, we really see the significance for women of being from a family defined by education.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we draw on data from Oxford matriculants collected during the middle of the twentieth century and life history interviews to examine the social class and education origins of Oxford's intake. We show dramatic changes in the patterns of parental occupation among fathers and mothers, and how these differed by men and women matriculants. The number of professional fathers has risen over time, a trend observed for both men and women matriculants. There has also been a general decline in the number of housewives and a concomitant rise in the proportion of mothers who are employed and who are employed in the same occupations as their husbands, reflecting wider changes in women's position in the labour market. But these patterns differed between women and men matriculants. Women matriculants were always more likely to have had an employed mother (sometimes in exactly the same role as their father) and those mothers were likely to be employed in some educational setting. In contrast, men matriculants were more likely to have a mother who was a housewife,

although this has become less true over time, and there does not seem to be an especially strong link between mothers who work in education and men being admitted to Oxford. There have also been sharp rises in the number of men matriculants whose parents were in the same occupation, consistent with a rise that we have identified in marital homogamy among the middle classes. Alongside this, we also see important differences in terms of whether these matriculants attended elite schools or not. Men became much less likely to have attended a Clarendon school over this period but there was no change in the proportion of women who matriculated after attending an elite girls' school.

These results contribute to ongoing debates about the processes of elite formation and how these have differed for men and women. Oxford (and other elite universities) play a crucial role in processes of elite formation; indeed, it might be the most established link connecting elite origins with an elite destination.⁸³ This elite pathway operates in part by the provision of academic credentials, which are endowed with additional status by virtue of the position Oxford holds in the educational field, and by allowing individuals from elite schools to further cultivate networks and incubate particular world-views initially established at school.⁸⁴ But access to these elite universities is informed by different processes. For women, a mother in work (and particularly in education) has been a crucial background factor to women attending elite universities. This underscores the importance of considering the role of mothers as well as fathers – especially when we analyse daughter's educational and occupational trajectories. It is also clear that during the mid-twentieth century, father's working in education was also an important driver of girl's being sent to elite educational institutions. They play a particularly important role in producing a sense that the family is building educational lineage and legacy.

For men, a professional father has always been a key driver of access to elite universities, but a professional mother seems to have been less important. This does not mean, however, that mothers are always unimportant for their sons, and it is very likely that as processes of selection into elite universities have changed, shifting away from what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called the 'family-mediated' elite reproduction to 'school-mediated' reproduction. In other words, there was a time when family ties made a huge difference to admission to Oxford and Cambridge, but those days have largely vanished. By the end of the period we are studying here, entrance to elite universities was far more dependent on the acquisition of good grades, and this was far more connected with the educational qualifications and perhaps even professional experience of mothers. These changes in selection mechanisms at elite universities potentially then point towards the shifting importance of mothers, even for sons.

Beyond parental occupation, there is also the changing relationship between Oxford and its traditional feeder institutions – the Clarendon schools for boys and the set of twelve similarly elite girls' schools. It is striking to see the connection between the boys' Clarendon schools and Oxford decline over time even while the occupational of their parents become increasingly professional. What drove this change needs to be unpacked in future work, but a number of processes seem potentially relevant. First, the expansion of Oxford's intake may have been faster than the expansion of the Clarendon schools. We know that Oxford more than doubled the number of students between 1900 and 1979 while the number of Clarendon alumni barely changed over this same period. In short, Oxford was recruiting more students and seems to have struggled to cover this expansion with boys from these top schools. But, as noted above, Oxford's admissions process changed too and explicitly tried to move away from its link with these public schools. In this respect, it intentionally tried to position itself as a meritocratic rather than an aristocratic institution.

The trend for girls' schools is different with much more continuity during our period in the relationship between the set of elite girls' schools and Oxford. This insight challenges previous conceptualisations of the women's colleges as more meritocratic during the mid-twentieth century because of competition for the limited number of places. Instead, it may have been the case that these colleges were in fact *less* meritocratic than their male counterparts in the mid-century because the elite girls' schools had such an ongoing grip on the available places. Our data stop before many of the male colleges became co-educational, but this change may have been important in two directions. On the

one hand, expanding the number of places for women might have diminished the power of these elite girls' schools (just like it did for the boys' schools). On the other, expansion in places could increasingly happen by replacing boys. This may have exacerbated the decline of the Clarendon schools or indeed reversed it, depending on which boys were perceived to be less competitive compared with the new women applicants.

The schooling and occupational backgrounds (of both mothers and fathers) of Oxford matriculants reveals the changing nature of gender roles and elite recruitment in this period. These data uncover how women, both as mothers and matriculants, navigated societal changes (and continuities) that produced Britain's elite after the Second World War. Given Oxford's strong and enduring link with Britain's elite, it is the matriculants of the mid-century decades that went on to dominate Britain in the late twentieth century.

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