Power and diversity among civil society leaders: Elites in civil society? Elites of civil society?

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present a framework for how a civil society elite may be identified and investigated. This, we argue, can support an investigation into leadership diversity and the concentration of power within civil society today. The concept of elite has been widely used with the social sciences. Although elite scholars have investigated different elite types (business, political) the scarcity of studies that explore the elites within civil society is striking. One reason may be the normative connotation of 'elite' as it signifies superiority and rather than equality: elites can be seen as antithetical to the ideals of civil society. The paper offers an overview of elite theories and identifies perspectives useful for an exploration of diversity and power within civil society. Based on preliminary analyses of public data on civil society organizations and their leaders we are inviting readers to engage in discussions concerning theoretical and methodological approaches that can further our understanding of elites in civil society.

Introduction

In recent years the spotlight on diversity, inequality and power within civil society has intensified. In a recent report published by Green Park (2018) the authors conclude that 'Power still resides within structures that are largely defined by class, colour and gender. Those with power are demonstrably reluctant to let it go' (p. 3). In the report it is argued that 'there is a clear correlation between those qualities, the diversity of the team, and its ability to protect the future relevance and impact of the organisation' (p. 3). Furthermore, in the Civil Society

Futures-inquiry it is insisted that the sector needs to reconsider 'how we organise' in order to address the problem of increasing inequality in society at large and the risk that the way civil society is structured mirrors and even reinforces divisions of power (Civil Society Futures 2018). ACEVO, the national charity leaders' network, has for some time tracked diversity among senior leadership and board level in charities. Figures suggest that although there is a slight rise in number of senior leaders of black, Asian and minority ethnic background ACEVO emphasise the 'unacceptably low numbers of CEOs' of such ethnic background (https://www.acevo.org.uk/policy-research/diversity).

Lack of diversity among leaders is seen as indicative of inequality in terms of opportunities for individual careers. Furthermore, it is assumed that loyalties and preferences are primarily fostered with like-minded individuals, resulting in groups closing ranks on who can access power. Writing on the effect of the characteristics of elite recruitment Hartmann (2010: 319) argues that 'the more closed the social recruitment of elites is, the more strongly their actions will be oriented at their own advantage, the more they will ignore the interests of the average people' resulting in ever more profound differences between the haves and the have-not. Translating this to the diversity and leadership-debate we can see how there is concern that organizational management and agendas are based on the perspective of a small and cohesive elite group rather than values that forward interests, ideas, and needs of a diverse constituency of clients, employees, volunteers and members. If the formation of groups within organizations are based on hierarchical structures that hold a preference for characteristics exclusive to a particular group of individuals, goals that involve the challenging of power asymmetries in society at large are at risk.

This project is set within a larger research programme entitled 'Civil society elites? Comparing elite composition, reproduction, integration and contestation in European civil societies' (https://www.civilsocietyelites.lu.se/). The programme involves a comparative perspective between Sweden, Italy, Poland, England and the EU-level. The concept of elite has proven versatile as it is used to distinguish between different groups of elites (old and new, global and local) that are dominating different societal fields such as cultural, political, economic and academic elites. The scarcity of studies that explore the concentration of power in elites within the field of *civil society* is, however, striking: should we not assume a concentration of power also in this societal sphere? Elite scholars appear not to consider civil society actors to be powerful enough to merit attention. Civil society scholars, on the other hand, have neglected

the idea of 'civil society elites', possibly as an elite per se is antithetical to the ideals of civil society as representing a community of equals outside the ruling classes.

This paper drafts the very initial stage of research in the English context. As is clear from the question mark in the title, the overarching question concerns whether civil society elites exist at all. And if so, is this elite considerably different from those within the spheres of business and politics? Is there an elite *of* civil society, or are elite individuals in civil society elites from other groups that have moved into civil society from other institutional fields? In the following text we explore how the concept of elite can support an investigation into diversity and the structures of power within civil society. The empirical focus is on leaders of what we define as resource rich, peak civil society organizations in England. We begin the text by discussing elite theories, including how definitions and methods of elite identification can support methods to identify presumptive civil society elites. Furthermore, we discuss how studies on elite integration can advance our understanding of 'diversity' and hence forward an analytical framework that goes beyond the identification of individual background characteristics such as age, ethnicity and gender. Following this we explore an approach towards identifying a presumptive civil society elite. Based on publicly available data on organizations and their leaders we draft a methodological and analytical framework for identifying and exploring structures of power. As there are few studies conducted on so called civil society elites in England, the questions guiding this initial work are basic in nature:

1. How can we identify a civil society elite?
2. How can we explore the characteristics of a civil society elite?
3. How does a civil society elite compare to other elites in society, such as business and political elites?

While the results presented are to be seen as sketchy, they offer a basis from which to develop further questions, for example concerning the third question that refers to a conceptual discussion about the use of the elite concept in the context of civil society: are we talking about an elite with traits particular of civil society? Or is it rather a matter of an existing, conventional elite (individuals dominating the social, political and business spheres in the UK) taking leading roles in civil society organizations into position?

Elite definitions: an overview

The social sciences has since long shown a fascination with how power, status and domination structure societies. This interest is epitomized in a range of classical studies of elites of both late (Mills 1956) and recent date (Hartmann 2010). Elite studies focus on individuals or small, relatively cohesive, stable groups with disproportionate power (cf. Best & Higley 2017). Classic elite theory (Michels 1962, Mosca 1939; Pareto 1991) describes elites as an inevitable aspect of social life and emphasizes the personal qualities and superiority of elites. Theories expressed strong normative justifications for elite rule. The stratification of society into elites and non-elites was seen as natural and inevitable. According to Pareto (1935), within each societal sector those scoring the highest on various skills and qualifications made up the elite. From this perspective, it would be an honour to be depicted as belonging to the elite. The notion of an elite is also associated with unjust privileges and power that benefits a few at the cost of marginalizing the many. Although the symbolic value attached to elites changes over time and place, it is often charged with emotional and political power as it carries reference to differentiation based on class and worthiness, to inequality and injustice. Scholars have since long struggled to establish an objective view on class as opposed to judgmental, but classifications have often 'conflated class with respectability and morality' (Savage 2015: 32). Bourdieu used words such as shame, entitlement, and domination to describe deep seated and powerful symbolic meaning of the class system. The concept of elite epitomizes feelings related to this. This, in part, explains the emotional reaction we, as individuals and researchers, may attach to class and societal elites.

Mills (1956), one of the early scholars of elite theory, defined elites as individuals in key positions in the most powerful organizations. This suggests that resources and powers of elites are institutionally or organizationally embedded (Michels 1962). However, elites are also defined by their personal qualities that set them apart from 'the masses' by their capacity to exercise power (Hartmann 2010). Elites are furthermore described as 'social groups defined by hierarchies of power' (Scott 2015: 155). Elites must however not be confused with groups that are seen as generally privileged and advantaged, but are distinguished by 'the holding and exercising of power' (Scott 2008: 28). Questions remain though as to how we define and identify the 'exercise of power'. This is particularly challenging in increasingly complex societies where not only one but many 'independent bases of social power' exist in parallel (Khan 2012: 479). Scott (2008) forwards one model that covers different forms of power and domination – coercion, inducement, expertise, and command – and argues that power is not

(only) 'concentrated in sovereign organizations' but must also be understood as 'a collective property of systems of co-operating actors' (p. 30), that power is both exercised in direct interactions between individuals (commands) and is embedded in dominating systems albeit sometimes elusive.

There is a general agreement that elites can be defined as 'those with power and resources' (Khan 2012: 362) but there is also disagreement as to the source of power. A positional approach ascribes an individual power based on the position held. Power is from this perspective a fixed characteristic of a position, such as director of an organization, and is associated with resources and a formal mandate to make decisions. A relational approach, however, emphasises elites as those "who occupy a dominant position *within social relations*" (Khan 2012: 362, our italics). As power is contingent on relations, actors engage in struggles to gain control over resources considered essential to a particular field. The works of Bourdieu, widely used in elite studies, forward an interactive and context-specific definition of elites as he argues that an elite is defined by relations and interactions. Through the concepts of field, habitus and capital, Bourdieu elaborates on elite status, social relations and the different structures of fields (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). An elite is characterised by field-specific endorsement of different types of capital (political, economic, social, cultural, and knowledge capital). Hence, what defines an elite differs depending on field, as elites are shaped by the way different forms of capital are valued and dispersed among actors (Swartz 1997). Applying this perspective on civil society, we may assume that elites have different characteristics depending on whether they are placed within the field of environment, mental health, or family and children.

Exploring diversity through elite integration

Theories on elites concern a wide range of themes such as the reproduction, interlocking and circulation within and between elite groups, the challenging and counteraction of elite domination. A well-established theme within elite-studies concerns *elite integration.* Elite integration refers to group cohesion based on for example socio-economic background, education, work experiences and shared values. It is also related to the networking between and within elite groups, where frequent interaction is interpreted as groups being integrated. Studies explore elite integration based on objective indicators such as educational background, class background, professional training (Gulbrandsen 2012). This approach, with focus on a narrow

set of indicators, is similar to studies that explore diversity among leaders in civil society. Strong cohesion as in common denominators is assumed to imply shared values and norms among individuals as individuals are socialized in similar ways through shared background and education (Bourdieu 1998; Mangset 2017), and later on through joint experiences such as collaboration. For example, research illustrates how interaction between individuals that occupy multiple organizational memberships, so called 'interlocking directorates', facilitates shared experiences (Bühlman et al. 2012). Through interaction elite individuals develop shared values and perspectives (ibid.), leading to further interaction etcetera. Studies seek to trace how interaction between individuals 'helps foster a community of like-minded people' (Dolan & Moore n.a./2). Gulbrandsen (2012) explores linkages between background variables and ideological consensus within an elite group, using political behaviour (voting) as an indicator of integration. The results suggest a combination of shared background variables and active relations as contributing to the formation of common value-basis. Although not framed as an elite-study, the theme of value-congruence among leaders in different sectors is explored by Miller-Stevens and colleagues (2015; 2018). In their research, they explore value differences between public and non-profit managers (2015) and those of for-profit and non-profit social ventures (2018). Values are seen as key in influencing decision making in organizations, and the research departs from an assumption that for-profit, non-profit and public organizations represent different values. The results show that there are sector-specific values, and that value-congruence across sectors is more prevalent among individuals in leading positions than among employees. Drawing on elite-integration literature, one suggestion is that this is an illustration of horizontal integration, where leaders come to share values with other leaders rather than vertically, i.e. with colleagues within the same organization. However, as pointed out by Gulbrandsen (2018: 41), a problem in elite integration studies that explore value-cohesion is that several factors may be seen as both causes and effects of integration: social background indicators are considered manifestations of elite integration and as well as factors that promote integration.

Method and data

Based on the review above we can identify some useful tools to initiate the study on civil society elites in England. As an introductory way of identifying presumptive civil society elites we apply a positional approach meaning that we assume an elite can be identified among the leaders of so called peak civil society organizations. This should be seen as a pragmatic choice as it

offers a starting point from which to identify a likely elite, but it does not imply that an approach based on a relational perspective is dismissed. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the exercise of power as an essential characteristic of the elite. This supports an empirical focus on leaders, as in CEOs and Directors. While there is a range privileged positions within peak organizations, that can be seen as typical of an increasingly hierarchical sector associated with increased professionalization (senior management within HR, strategic development, evaluation and monitoring, fundraising and marketing, for example), they should not be defined as a presumptive civil society elite.

The aim of the first sampling procedure is to identify peak charity organizations, i.e. resource-rich and prominent organizations, operating at national level in England. The sample population includes organizations defined as civil society organizations according to the ICNPO classification (Salamon & Anheier 1992) and the definition of charities according to the Charity Commission register (Charity Commission 2013). The sampling framework considers internal status as well as external status of the organization. Internal status refers to the organization's status comparative to other organizations within civil society. Indicators include resources (staff, members, budget) and positions (e.g. board-member of umbrella organization) that combined form the base for a comparatively powerful organization. External status is assessed based on, for example, indicators such as representation in consultation processes and state-civil society relations, public funding received, which is assumed indicative of recognition in other sectors than civil society. In the case of England there are a number of rankings of CSOs, listing organizations according to a number of standards. Such rankings appear to be a phenomena exclusive to the UK context (compared to the other countries included in the study i.e. Sweden, Italy, Poland), and possibly reveals something about an interest in hierarchical and status-based structures: rankings can be seen as both reporting and creating these structures. For the purpose of an initial, indicative sampling of peak organizations we have used seven different rankings to identify 10 peak organizations. The lists of rankings are produced by the Charity Commission, NCVO, the Guardian, the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), The Haysmacintyre/Charity Finance Charity 100 Index, and Green Vue (please see list of references below). The indicators used include different combinations of organizational income, donations, average income, and number of employees, brand value, popularity and overall size. It is important to note that the indicators represent particular types of resources and status-markers but do not include status based on e.g. organizational history or organizational role in contemporary political debates where expertise is the basis for power. Status that

involves the capacity to exercise power does not necessarily come from the most resource rich organizations. To compensate for this we have tentatively added two more organizations that in some way may represent organizations with such political, and historical, power. The choice to include two environmental organizations is also prompted by suggestions in elite studies that there are variations between elite groups depending on the field in which they are based. We recognize that there are more policy fields not yet represented in the list below, but as this is a tentative and very initial operation of the sampling framework, we refrain from expanding it further at this point.

Having identified a set of organizations the next step of the sampling procedure involves identifying leaders of these organizations. Again, for pragmatic reasons, we limit the number of individuals to CEOs and Director Generals, although it may be argued that also Chairs can be included.

Peak organizations	Leading individuals
Cancer Research UK	CEO
Save the Children International UK	CEO
British Heart Foundation	CEO
Oxfam UK	CEO
National Trust for places of historic interest or natural beauty	Director General
RNLI Lifeboats	CEO
Macmillan Cancer Support	CEO
British Red Cross Society	CEO
Wellcome Trust	Director General
Nuffield Health	CEO
Reference category – environmental organisations	
Greenpeace UK	CEO
Friends of the Earth UK	CEO

Leaders of peak organization: indicators

The data used for the analysis of CEOs and Director Generals of the twelve organizations consists of information presented at their respective organization's homepage and, when available, on LinkedIn. As the data used is publicly available information, we have identified the leaders by their real names.

In the columns in the table we find basic indicators such as *gender* and *BAME* (black, Asian and minority ethnic people), i.e. whether the individual is of *ethnic minority background*. In only one case is the individual's ethnic background referred to, hence this column remains incomplete although in most cases we can assume data would not indicate BAME. Indicators concerning *educational background* and *university attended* add further details to the diversity perspective. *Power reference* concerns information about the individual's professional background that refers to skills and capacity to exercise power. Presentations are based on selected information in part used to legitimise that the individual indeed has what it takes to enter a powerful position. The indicator called *value reference* aims to give a glimpse as to what values will inform the use of this power. The indicator as used here implies that the individual has (had) the means and capacity to exercise power. Value reference aims to capture what values are held in high esteem both concerning leadership style and organizational ideology. For the two latter indicators we draw insights from discussions on power in Scott (2015) and Khan (2012), and on values in Gulbrandsen (2012) and Miller-Stevens et al. (2018), all referred to in the literature review above. As is clear from the table, the information available to complete the tables is incomplete. Nevertheless, some of the examples here illustrate how we envisage that this set of indicators can illustrate similarities and variations among leaders regarding important orientations and that enrich a discussion about how we can understand diversity.

Name, position, organization	G	BAME	Education: university degree (s)	Education: university attended	Power reference	Value reference
Simon Gillespie Chief executive, British Heart Foundation	M		MPhil, International Relations MA, Philosophy and Politics MBA, Management	Cambridge University Henley Business School	CEO in health charity Director, public sector Board member, health charity	Expertise from the policy area; family connection with heart disease
Mike Adamson, Chief executive, British Red Cross	M		MPhil, Economics MBA	University of Oxford Kingston University	Leading positions within the organization Director, other charity NHS Economist, commercial management consultancy Human rights advisor Advisor NHS	Responsibility, accountability

Michelle Mitchell, Chief Executive Officer, Cancer Research UK	F		MSc in Politics and Public Administration, Executive Global Not For Profit Leaders Programme, Charities	Birkbeck University of London Harvard Business School	Leading positions including CEO, within same field DG and CEOs in other charities NHS	Purpose driven, able to deliver, collaboration and innovation, strengthening the team
Lynda Thomas, Chief executive, Macmillan Cancer Support	F		BA, Psychology	University of Warwick	Leading positions within the same organization Leading positions other charities	Supportive, creating trust
Hilary McGrady, Director-General, the National Trust	F		Unknown	Unknown	Leading positions within the same charity Director, charity Leading position, corporate marketing	Inspiring
Steve Gray, Chief Executive Officer, Nuffield Health	M		Unknown	Unknown	Leading positions, corporate pharmaceuticals Within sector expertise	Innovative
Dr Dhananjayan (Danny) Sriskandaraja, Chief Executive, Oxfam	M	X	PhD	Oxford University	Leading positions, international charities Advisor, panel member, UN	Passionate, committed

Mark Dowie, chief executive, RNLI	M		BA Hons, Modern History	University of East Anglia	CEO, corporate (banking) Naval officer	Strategic
Kevin Watkins, Chief Executive, Save the children	M		PhD	Oxford University	Leading position within the same charity Director, international charity Director, research institute	
Jeremy Farrar, Director, the Wellcome Trust	M		PhD	Oxford University	Leading positions, WHO Director, research institute International experience Chair, government advisory boards Listed world's 50 greatest leaders OBE Knighted in 2019 for services to Global Health	
John Sauven, Greenpeace UK	M		BSc in economics	University of Cardiff	Director of communications at Greenpeace; Campaigner;	Successfully led campaigns; instrumental
Craig Bennett, Friends of the Earth UK	M		MSc in Conservation	University College London	Executive positions at FoE; Executive, academic and educator positions at Manchester Business School, Cambridge University and The Prince of Wales's Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change	Accomplished

Analysis and discussion

The discussion is not aimed at communicating conclusive results. Rather, discussions concern the principles behind the idea of drawing on elite theories and studies for the purpose of enriching discussions concerning diversity among civil society leaders.

By mapping data regarding the first two indicators (gender, BAME) we notice a striking coherence: most are male, few (one) is of BAME background. Also, when we include data

regarding educational background the similarity in the profile of the leaders appear consistent and indicative of an exclusive group of individuals with university degrees, some Masters, even PhDs, and many from what is considered elite universities. The implication of this becomes interesting when exploring similarities with business and political elites in Britain. Hartmann (2010) concludes that what is significant of these elite groups is a background in public schools (although slightly less so today) and with university degrees from Oxbridge. Moving on to include *power reference* we notice that a common denominator is how individuals have moved across sectoral boundaries: several have had leading positions in the corporate sector, many have experience from the public sector in different capacities. This experience is often emphasised as essential, with references to what may be seen as generic leadership skills that concern management skills. In his comparative study of elites in England, France and Germany Hartmann (2010) notes that the English elite differs from the French in that it does not cross sectoral boundaries. Hence, while the leaders investigated here appear very similar to other, conventional elites (business, political), they appear to differ considerably when it comes to mobility. This raises questions regarding individual motivations and values driving their engagement in their respective careers. In other words: common objective denominators may mask very different leadership qualities that come from individual motivations and values. Exploring this further, through survey questionnaire or interviews, may reveal crucial differences in how individuals motivate a change of sector during their careers. This is important for future analysis of 'Elites in civil society? Elites of civil society?' that refer to questions about an elite particular to civil society, i.e. different (more inclusive?) from that of an established elite.

Apart from using the data to map diversity, we can further the analysis by sketching ideal-typical images. By using ideal-types we can illustrate research insights that pick up on variations in the data including typical career trajectories (Lewis 2008). It may be used to reveal how leadership profiles draw on different sets of power and value references. These ideal-types may also support a longitudinal understanding of what underpins a concentration of power to some groups. This is essential not only for an understanding of what forms civil society elites but also for organizations to build successful diversity and inclusion measures. Drawing on the indicators capturing knowledge base, power base and value base, we suggest three ideal-types:

1. **The corporate leader**: Educational background from elite university; corporate background, successful business leader within a field that may be significantly different from the field in which the CSO is based (banking for example) suggesting the skills

valued are transferrable; this is also evident in the value reference which emphasise performance-focused, management of high volumes of staff and budgets, monetary management in focus.

2. **The expert leader**: University education, research experience, emphasis on strong leadership skills regarding excellence in research. Emphasis is placed on expertise knowledge and extensive experience within a field, such as specific health area or the environmental area. This expertise is valuable for the organization to build a strong political voice.

3. **The civil society leader**: recruited from within the sector, or even within the same organization; emphasis on empathy for and understanding of vulnerable clients; experience from situations, either personally or professionally, that place an important role in how the leader can connect with people in vulnerable positions; characteristics such as inspiring, passionate, committed feature as values associated with this leader.

These different ideal-typical leaders show that while we may conclude there is lack of diversity based on one set of indicators, when we look at indicators that take career trajectory into account, we see some variation. However, can we say that the ideal-type illustrations show diversity? What type of knowledge base, power base, and value base would be expected to be represented by a diverse set of leaders? And, is it possible to relate different ideal-types to different policy fields? An analysis aimed at capturing ideal-types prompt a number of questions regarding the meaning of diversity.

Concluding remarks

The initial research questions posed in this project concern how we can identify a presumptive civil society elite, and how can we explore and understand the qualities and nature of such an elite. One challenging question regarding theoretical and methodological approach is, if civil society is a sector considerably different in nature compared to that of business and politics, does this mean an approach to the research questions need to be markedly different? Drawing on elite theories that assume that power is linked to positions in organizations and society that grants individuals a mandate to take decisions and the resources to implement change may preclude the study from finding other, civil society specific, sources and structures of power. A reputational and relational approach may be more appropriate. Similarly, drawing conclusions concerning diversity based on indicators only, may mask an understanding of variation in how leaders have reached positions of power. Based on a wider set of peak organizations we can furthermore explore questions the address issues of sub-field variation,

such as the one suggested in the very limited data used here, where power and value bases in the environmental sector appear quite different from that in health foundations. Based on these very preliminary results we look forward to discussing a range of questions including:

- What are the benefits and limitations of using a positional approach? Does this approach preclude the identification of an elite characterised by civil society values that place emphasis on different sources of power?
- How can we incorporate a relational or reputational approach to complement a positional approach?
- How can our discussions concerning diversity and leadership within civil society benefit from elite theories?
- Elites in civil society? Elites of civil society? What is meant by this distinction and how can it throw light on the characteristics of structures of power within the sector?
- From analysing structures based on indicators to drawing on data for qualitative analysis by way of creating ideal-types: what can we learn?

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