
Lauren RIVERA, *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015)

If the US labor market is supposedly increasingly credentialist, how is it that the hiring process for well-paid entry-level jobs in the advanced tertiary sector is strongly biased in favor of applicants from socially privileged backgrounds? This is the key question Lauren A. Rivera answers in a rich and yet remarkably clear book, based on her 2006–2008 qualitative research on the hiring practices of the East Coast’s most prestigious investment banks, management consulting firms, and law firms: companies, collectively referred to as EPS firms (for “elite professional service”), that are peer organizations which regularly collaborate with each other, and where an entry-level job often allows direct access to the top decile of household incomes in the United States. The work performed by their employees is also similar in many aspects, since it is a combination of individual research and analytical tasks, teamwork, and interactions with clients (mainly large corporations).

Moreover, as Rivera shows us, these companies also share the same hiring practices to recruit graduating students as employees, as well as less advanced ones as summer interns (they increasingly draw new hires from former interns who received job offers in advance of graduation). Indeed, even if it is possible for some candidates to apply (and obtain support during the procedure) through personal or family ties, the large majority of applicants to these firms are reached via on-campus recruitment programs operated only at elite universities. Recruitment processes therefore generally follow a similar series of standard steps: (1) the selection by the firm of a short list of schools; (2) the organization at the most prestigious among these universities of events designed to attract candidates; (3) the screening of résumés collected to select the applicants who will be interviewed; (4) two rounds of multiple (usually two) face-to-face interviews with revenue-generating professional employees; and (5) meetings between interviewers and/or hiring committee members to deliberate and make a decision at the end of each round (about the candidates to call back after the first round, and about hires and office placement after the second and final round).

550

Bruno COUSIN, Sciences Po, Paris [bruno.cousin@sciencespo.fr]

European Journal of Sociology, 57, 3 (2016), pp. 550–556—0003-9756/16/0000-000\$07.50per art + \$0.10 per page
©*European Journal of Sociology* 2016. doi: 10.1017/S0003975616000357

Rivera analyzes each of these steps successively and meticulously, drawing upon 120 semistructured interviews with consulting, banking and law professionals involved in undergraduate and graduate hiring, on 32 additional interviews with job seekers recently involved successfully or unsuccessfully in the hiring process, and on participant observation. Over a period of six months, she systematically observed almost every recruitment event organized by EPS firms on the university campuses of a major northeastern city. She then joined the recruitment team of a consulting firm (“Holt”) operating at a specific elite business school (“Eastmore”) as an HR intern, for a period of nine months. The only steps of the hiring process she was not able to directly observe were the interviews during which applicants face their potential future colleagues and superiors. However, she largely compensated this deficiency by collecting detailed accounts during her own interviews. Therefore, Rivera’s research has the methodological peculiarity of being largely based on (sociological) interviews about (evaluative) interviews.

This combination of different qualitative methods allows her to rely on rich narratives about evaluative criteria and metrics on the one hand, and ethnographic data about collective moments of the hiring process on the other. Taking the reader chronologically through this process, the book thus makes the central argument that the way in which US elite professionals define and evaluate individual worth while selecting new hires—among a pool of students sharing the same excellent education credentials—stacks the deck in favor of the sons and daughters of the upper and upper-middle classes. Moreover, and this is what makes her research truly original and a substantial contribution to the sociology of elite labor markets, inequality, evaluation, and social reproduction, Rivera explains precisely, step by step, *how* the game is rigged (which, as all trick debunkers know, is what really matters).

Her description of the process starts with a reminder of how narrowly EPS firms conceive their US pool of potential candidates. All organize their recruitment to draw the bulk of their new hires from three to five “super-elite” universities defined as their “core” target, which generally includes Harvard, Yale, Stanford and Princeton for the hiring of college graduates, HBS and Wharton among business schools, and HLS and YLS among law schools. There is always an additional list of five to fifteen universities, defined as mere “target,” where each firm also accepts applications and interviews candidates, but on a much smaller scale. Moreover, not only do core schools

benefit from substantially higher interview (and future hire) quotas, they are also tapped much more intensely by the firms. Companies allocate to each of the “core” campuses a team of employees, some of whom work full-time on site, in charge of their local campaign. This campaign includes several large informative and brand-building sessions to explain to students that EPS is the most prestigious, exciting, coveted, career-strategic and lucrative professional option they have; lavish events aimed at giving them a glimpse of the lifestyle supposed to come with the job; training sessions and personal advisory meetings to help prospective applicants to prepare for the formal steps of the selection process. This very strong presence on campus helps to explain why today more than 30% of the graduates of a college like Harvard join EPS firms (figure was approximately 50% just before the subprime crisis) and why 80% of Harvard law graduates do the same. Additionally, Rivera’s interviewees are very clear about why the firms show such a strong preference for the graduates of “core” schools. They see it as the best and most efficient way of finding candidates whose intellectual skills have already been assessed by an extremely tough screening process (e.g., super-elite university *admission*). It also allows them to access future networks of alumni, and to obtain prestigious educational brands that will contribute to reassuring their clients about the quality of the service they are offered. Thus, because upper-class students are particularly over-represented at these schools, the hiring focus on the latter participates directly in elite reproduction.

Furthermore, a bias also exists among students of the same institution. Indeed, on-campus events allow firms to start screening students according to the degree to which their body hexis is properly “groomed”, according to the similarity of their interactional repertoires and styles with their own, and/or to their ability to socialize and build a connection with a recruiter: all qualities that are much more common among students from privileged backgrounds. Likewise, while evaluating and sorting résumés, EPS professionals involved in the process draw on expectations of individual achievement that are rooted in their own—generally white upper or upper-middle class—personal history and socialization. Therefore, they place the most emphasis on experiences strongly correlated with socio-economic origin, like high-status formalized extracurricular activities (which are their overall second criterion of selection, immediately after school prestige, and before grades, standardized test scores and prior work experience). Musical achievements, leadership positions in leisure

activities, and even more the involvement in varsity sport, are seen as signs of social and moral virtues, consistently with the US educational tradition praising “well-roundedness.” Moreover, firms also use these activities as a proxy for estimating how one will (or will not) “fit” culturally and socially. Additionally, early unpaid internships (during freshman or sophomore summers) at prestigious companies, which depend heavily on family connections, are also very much appreciated—while low or middle-status money-earning jobs are valued very little, if at all.

Later, during the rounds of interviews, the systematic and explicit assessment of “fit”—as leisure interests, reported play style, and innate self-presentation style—is even more prevalent. At Holt, the company Rivera joined to conduct participant observation, the majority of interviewers regarded fit as the most important criterion, despite the fact that it was mainly evaluated during the brief ice-breaking chitchat at the beginning of the interview. Therefore, since the hiring decision in EPS firms is largely based on these informal and yet official tests of (class-based) cultural similarity with the professionals and managers of the company, unsurprisingly the process leads year after year—even if not totally intentionally—to class cooptation and social reproduction.

Besides, if fit is supposed to select candidates that will be pleasant team members and fun colleagues for their coworkers, and enjoy working at the firm, another of the criteria systematically assessed—“polish”—aims at probing their ease, confidence, and command of conversational and communication skills seen as necessary in an elite client-facing profession. Finally, “drive”—a third quality supposedly combining ambition, self-reliance and determination—is in fact tested through the adequacy of the telling of their life story and projects to meet precise narrative criteria. Candidates with drive are supposed to present their personal trajectory as freely chosen, shaped by individual passion (and not necessity), and organized to attain long-term goals. Even better—because perceived as more genuine—is the case when their passion and desire to join the business stems from family or friend discussions about EPS activities, or some role model that inspired them while growing up.

Of course, all this interactional cultural capital and these formats of self-presentation are largely the product of privileged upbringing, while upwardly mobile students (or students coming from families with no ties to the world of corporate managers and professionals) have a much harder time learning about and mastering them.

Notwithstanding, they are much more crucial and weigh more on the results of the hiring process than the cognitive and analytical skills displayed by the candidates. And there is more: in the part of her research about the post-interviews “calibration” meetings between pairs of evaluators and the final deliberations and hiring decisions, Rivera shows that many candidates are also victims of stereotypes in relation to gender, gender-conformity and ethnicity, ending up potentially caught in a crossfire of classism and various other prejudices. Indeed, at the very last stage of the recruitment procedure, Holt’s partners ultimately in charge of the hiring decision motivate the latter in an even more emotional and idiosyncratic way. During the final deliberation Rivera observed, applicants were rejected simply for being considered “painfully awkward” or “too high energy” by one of the partners, and another met strong opposition from a member of the committee because he supported the wrong baseball team. At several moments during her fieldwork, she also saw Holt’s personnel falsify evaluation and deliberation records to avoid potential lawsuits for discrimination.

The richness of its descriptions and the clarity of its analysis therefore make *Pedigree* a must read for anybody who is interested in the cultural sociology of American elites. In a way, it offers a sequel to Shamus Khan’s *Privilege*, Mitchell Stevens’ *Creating a Class*, and Michel Anteby’s *Manufacturing Morals*. Some firms might use it to improve the design of their recruitment procedures, following the advice developed at the end of the book about how to make EPS hiring more efficient, effective, and equitable. Current and future candidates are probably already reading it as an advanced playbook to master the game, and it may help some of them to compensate for some of their social disadvantages. Because of the precise focus of her research, there are however a series of collateral questions that Rivera implicitly raises but does not address.

The first and most obvious one concerns the degree to which what she describes is distinctively American or could be more or less generalized to all the most prestigious business schools and EPS firms around the world. Certainly, as Rivera herself underlines, the valorization of many of the extracurricular achievements, self-presentation narratives and interactional repertoires she analyzes is specific to the US upper and/or upper-middle class culture. This is particularly clear when she shows how foreign candidates (even white European ones) from an upper-class background, but who were socialized and educated mainly outside the US, are often considered inadequate.

However, on the other hand, large consulting and financial services companies are global corporations, and several of the Holt consultants that appear in the book are neither American nor based in the US. They nevertheless seem to rely spontaneously on the exact same evaluation norms and criteria as their local colleagues.

In addition, the book unveils certain social representations, common among EPS professionals, without investigating further their underlying rationales and possible justifications. For instance, their insistence on sport practice and competition as signs of multiple valuable individual qualities could have been more fully dissected and analyzed a little more—since evidently running the New York Marathon or obtaining scuba certification in Thailand can play a major role in recruitment. The general lack of interest of evaluators in intellectual virtuosity (sometimes leaning towards anti-intellectualism) is also quite intriguing and could have been probed further, especially since it is often explicitly motivated by the affirmation—in contradiction with the official self-presentation strategies of the firms—that EPS entry-level jobs are dull, not very intellectually challenging or stimulating. Incidentally, Rivera does not specify whether the fact that this disregard is most pronounced among major law firms is a result of the obligation to pass the bar examination that young associates face in any case shortly after having been hired. The assessment of their technical knowledge and analytical skills might not have been overlooked, but simply postponed.

More importantly, and this is probably the only real weakness of the book, the question remains open of how much the evaluators are themselves conscious that they are mainly basing their selection of new hires on homophily and class-related criteria. Rivera's comments and analysis of her data tell us repeatedly that, because they try to assess *merit* through a largely subjective and diversity-blind approach, they end up organizing social reproduction. However, it is not at all evident that they even try. If merit is related to effort and the capacity to seize opportunities, it does not really seem—from the ethnographic data and the interviews quoted in the book—that this is what EPS recruiters are looking for. In fact, the word "merit" does not appear at all to be part of their usual vocabulary. What they are looking for are particular abilities (talent), absolute social worth, and markers of belonging to the world of the business elite: they do not particularly value upward social mobility and the overcoming of obstacles (except when they make for a spectacular and moving story), and are quite open about it. Their approach to recruiting seems almost as much

BRUNO COUSIN

merit-blind as it is diversity-blind, or—if that is not the case—it relies implicitly on an “elite” conceptualization and acceptance of merit that still needs further investigation. There is no doubt that Lauren Rivera, who is now an associate professor at Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management (one of the very best US business schools according to the rankings), might soon provide us with more insights relative to this issue.

BRUNO COUSIN