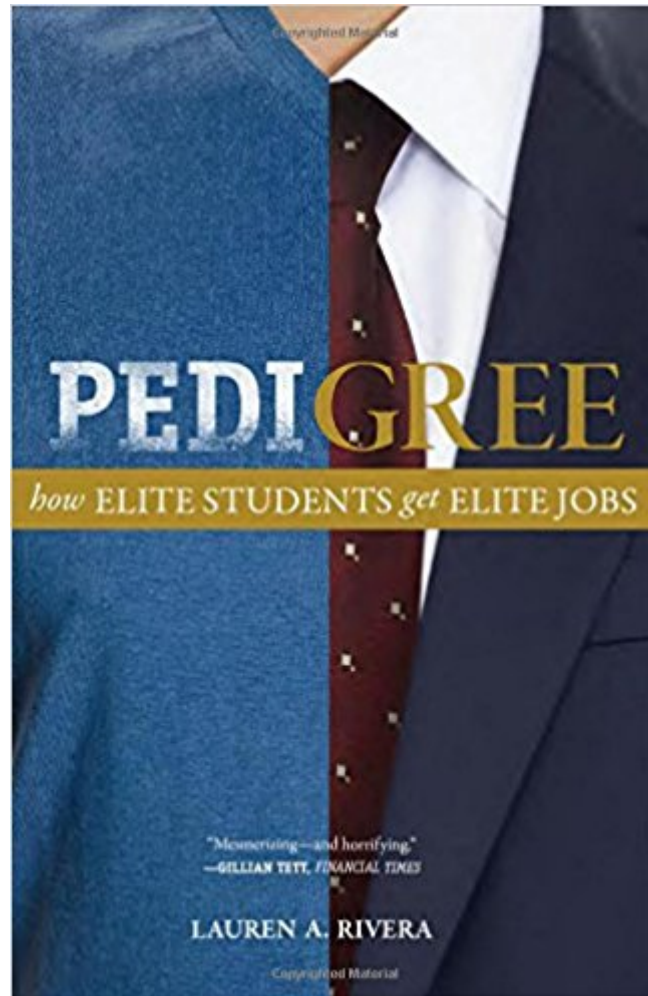




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# Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs



## Synopsis

Americans are taught to believe that upward mobility is possible for anyone who is willing to work hard, regardless of their social status, yet it is often those from affluent backgrounds who land the best jobs. Pedigree takes readers behind the closed doors of top-tier investment banks, consulting firms, and law firms to reveal the truth about who really gets hired for the nation's highest-paying entry-level jobs, who doesn't, and why. Drawing on scores of in-depth interviews as well as firsthand observation of hiring practices at some of America's most prestigious firms, Lauren Rivera shows how, at every step of the hiring process, the ways that employers define and evaluate merit are strongly skewed to favor job applicants from economically privileged backgrounds. She reveals how decision makers draw from ideas about talent—what it is, what best signals it, and who does (and does not) have it—that are deeply rooted in social class. Displaying the "right stuff" that elite employers are looking for entails considerable amounts of economic, social, and cultural resources on the part of the applicants and their parents. Challenging our most cherished beliefs about college as a great equalizer and the job market as a level playing field, Pedigree exposes the class biases built into American notions about the best and the brightest, and shows how social status plays a significant role in determining who reaches the top of the economic ladder.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2016 Max Weber Book Award, Organizations, Occupations, and Work Section of the American Sociological Association  
Winner of the 2016 Mary Douglas Prize for Best Book, Sociology

of Culture Section of the American Sociological Association Co-Winner of the 2016 Distinguished Book Award, Sociology of Law Section of the American Sociological Association Co-Winner of the 2016 Silver Medal in Career (Job Search, Career Advancement), Axiom Business Book Awards One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2015 "Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs is an academic book with the requisite references to gender theory and Marxist concepts of inequality. But read it carefully and it becomes something far more useful--a guide on how to join the global elite."--Economist "[Rivera's] richly described account is mesmerising--and horrifying."--Gillian Tett, Financial Times "[Pedigree] provides an insider look at how top-notch places hire, and explores how their processes serve those with the most privileged and affluent backgrounds."--Bouree Lam, The Atlantic "Forget Hollywood. Forget the American Dream. In Pedigree, Lauren Rivera discloses the harsh reality of landing a job on Wall Street. . . . In this valuable book, [she] sheds light on [the] selection process, homing in on how employers contribute to elite reproduction. The outcome is a highly informed analysis of class and cultural capital."--Angelia Wilson, Times Higher Education "By demonstrating how leaders of firms select upon educational status, traits they already find in their midst, and prefer applicants that mirror their own pasts, trajectories, and skills, Rivera has provided important evidence for mechanisms of the (re)production of inequality. Those interested in the sociology of culture, in labor markets, and in elites and stratification will find Rivera's book necessary reading."--Shamus Khan, American Journal of Sociology "A rich and yet remarkably clear book."--Bruno Cousin, European Journal of Sociology

"In this riveting account of how the nation's top investment banks, consultancies, and law firms choose employees, Lauren Rivera goes inside the recruitment process, interviewing the interviewers and sitting in on their decision meetings. This eye-opening book exposes how the American elite keep the best jobs for themselves."--Frank Dobbin, author of *Inventing Equal Opportunity* "Pedigree provides a rare behind-the-scenes look at the hiring processes for elite jobs. Rivera's thoughtful ethnographic observations illuminate exactly how social class matters, and how the display of cultural skills can be crucial for job seekers to gain access to elite positions. It is an eye-opening book."--Annette Lareau, University of Pennsylvania "Rivera identifies the myriad ways that class influences every stage of the hiring process at top-tier firms, showing how it is that individuals from affluent backgrounds have come to dominate the most elite segments of the American labor market. She pulls back the curtain time and time again, revealing how processes that are apparently class, race, and gender neutral are anything but."--Elizabeth A. Armstrong, coauthor of *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality* "Pedigree sets a new standard of

rigor for qualitative social-science research. Rivera shows how educational stratification in the United States is particularly pronounced and caste-like at the gateway to elite professions, and how the boundary between elite colleges and the elite firms that recruit from them is so fuzzy as to be only ceremonial."--Mitchell L. Stevens, author of *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*

A thought-provoking, well-researched analysis of the entry-level hiring process at the most elite employers in finance, law and business consulting -- one might even call them "the gatekeepers of the 1%." My husband and I are both part of the world described here (he in consulting and me in law), as we both managed to gate-crash our way in from non-elite family backgrounds. Having done our share of hiring committee work, we can vouch for a lot of the picture painted here.\* However, the book's value derives not from the care taken in accurately describing the hiring process, but from the new light the author throws on the subject, even for those already familiar with this world. Rivera has done society a service by illuminating the unspoken norms against which all applicants to these top employers are judged. These norms, like the need to show participation in a team sport (or similar significant time commitment in a familiar group activity), or the ability to seize and hold the floor in a conversation about serious subjects, are unremarkable features of upper class life. However, they are not the natural outcomes of being raised in a poor family, and outside of attending a boarding school on a scholarship, there is nowhere you can go to learn them. So, although none of these norms overtly discriminate against applicants who are not rich, white Anglo-Saxons (though there are incidents of blatantly illegal discriminatory acts in the book too), their net effect is to largely screen out people whose lives do not resemble those of the wealthy. The book is worth reading in order to see this process in action, or for would-be applicants, even to structure your college years and take other non-obvious steps in preparation.\* In terms of the particulars, in my experience, the picture for applicants from non-elite law schools is not as dire as described here. At both of the white-shoe firms where I worked, new associates were from a range of law schools in the top 50, plus local ones (though you still had to be in the top of your class outside of the elite schools). Of course, this was in Atlanta, not in NYC, so it is possible that the top dog firms in NYC only look at a few law schools.

Pedigree is a thought provoking case study into hiring practices of what the author terms Elite Professional Services firms (EPS). From the viewpoint of someone interested in inequality, Rivera explains how choices in target campuses, interview structure (fit, polish), and choice to use

revenue-generating staff to interview (vs HR) stack the deck against non traditional candidates. Alternatively, for a jobseeker, Pedigree is an amazing insight because it informs about systemic biases and specific techniques to overcome them. Despite having prepared extensively for a summer internship interview at an EPS, this guide provided much deeper understanding about the interview evaluation and hiring committee process. Finally, I was impressed with the quality of the research methodology (hands-on research, inductive coding, accounting for author's own background). I highly recommend Pedigree for people interested in equitable and effective hiring practices and MBA/law school students seeking EPS jobs.

I'm not sure what to make of "Pedigree"'s marketing campaign. The book certainly has received a lot of hype, most provocatively in the Economist (headline: "How to join the 1%"). I'm baffled, however, that it is promoting "Pedigree" as "vocational guidance." "Pedigree" is not a "how-to" guide for joining elite firms. (Again, I'm not exactly sure why it's being promoted as such.) Rather, the book is an easy-to-read text that details/gives an overview of Rivera's research on hiring practices at a few investment banking, consulting and law firms. The insight the book offers is certainly not new for anyone familiar with these industries, but Rivera (heavily influenced by Bourdieu) offers a succinct, beautifully written sociological analysis of a world that is foreign to many -- and one that has not received much attention from academics. I found the book a pleasure to read, though I found Rivera's analysis slightly repetitive and her presentation of nontraditional candidates who succeeded in accepting offers (chapter 10) lacking. I do look forward, however, to following her work in the future, and I am impressed by her life story (from a single-parent home in L.A. to Yale to Northwestern's Kellogg). Overall, this is a great read for scholars/professionals/laypeople who are interested in exploring the state of our "meritocracy" and are excited by the growing publication of "popular" books about American educational inequality ("Our Kids;" "Privilege;" etc).

Reasonably accurate assessment of the industries covered. Does not take into account the huge amount of nepotism in these industries. If your parent might be of potential benefit to a firm or employee of a firm, your chances of being hired are exponentially better. If this were happening abroad the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act might be at play in some of these instances (see JP Morgan in HK and China). Given that so much of this nepotism goes on in the finance arena, we should all be concerned and not surprised by the causes of the 2008 crash.

Really just okay. More like stories but nothing much is insightful and useful.

Great read. I love the time Lauren A Rivera dictated to in developing hands on experience before writing the book. ESP companies were a great choice to focus on.

The author shows through extensive and detailed study the impact of class (socioeconomic status) on hiring at elite firms. She shows the impact and results of this process and offers suggestions for firms interested in changing their recruiting class. A great quantification of underlying societal forces.

Interesting take on the job recruitment process. I would definitely recommend to any college students interested in pursuing careers in consulting/banking/law

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