

Moris Triventi

Lauren Rivera, "Pedigree: How Élite Students Get Élite Jobs." Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, 400 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/85820)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2016

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book review. Social Inequalities in the XXI Century

**Lauren Rivera, “Pedigree: How Élite Students Get Élite Jobs.”  
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, 400 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/85820

In the definition of the “American Dream” by James Truslow Adams in 1931, “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.<sup>1</sup> The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States. One of its key ideals is the notion that all individuals must be treated similarly and should have equal opportunities: individuals’ achievements in life (e.g. occupational attainment) should only be due to personal motivation, effort and ability and not to their ascribed characteristics (e.g. gender, race) or the resources of their family of origin.

Despite these widespread and acclaimed ideals, empirical research has shown that economic inequality increased in the United States in the last decade and the rates of (relative) social mobility are lower than in many other industrialized countries. Despite the existence of merit-based admission procedures in the educational system and equal opportunity regulations in the labour market, existing research also found that children from socio-economically advantaged families are disproportionately more likely to enter the top prestigious colleges and the more rewarding occupations.

In her award-winning book *Pedigree: How Élite Students Get Élite Jobs* [2015], Rivera aims to shed light on the processes and mechanisms that can explain social inequalities in access to the better paid jobs and high-career potential occupations in the United States. The book basically asks: how does the process of elite reproduction occur? The author aims to answer this question by focusing on the “gatekeepers” who govern access to elite and high-earnings jobs in the United States, and investigating in depth the hiring decision processes that employers implement to select, evaluate and recruit new employees.

The main thesis of the book, nicely summarized in the introduction is as follows:

At each stage of the hiring process – from the decision about where to post job advertisements and hold recruitment events to the final selections made by hiring committees – employers use an array of sorting criteria (“screens”) and ways of measuring candidates’ potential (“evaluative metrics”) that are highly correlated with parental income and education. Taken together, these seemingly economically neutral decisions result in a hiring process that filters students based on their parents’ socioeconomic status [p. 2].

The title of the book perfectly fits with Rivera’s main argument, since “pedigree” refers to the term employers in elite firms use as shorthand for a job candidate’s record of accomplishments, such as having attended an Ivy League university or having internship experience in a prestigious firm. The author shows that while, on the surface, many of the traits and achievements that are considered by the employers as the genuine result

<sup>1</sup> From [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Dream](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream).

of individual motivation and merit, are instead strongly conditioned by applicants' socioeconomic background. The book is organized in this way. In the first chapter "*Entering the Élite*", the author presents the general aim of the book and the conceptual framework adopted. Social inequalities in access to elite colleges and more advantageous educational options are discussed, with an emphasis on the various mechanisms that lie behind the advantages of students from high social backgrounds. These include factors directly related to the family of origin (e.g. economic, social, and cultural resources), individual characteristics that may be affected by social origin (e.g. individual aspirations and attitudes) and environmental factors that can interact with students' background (e.g. interpersonal evaluations, criteria for admissions at college, experiences during colleges). This part, even if brief, is important, since it sets the broader context of the study, explaining to the less expert readers how many characteristics that are considered by employers as crucial "signals" of applicants' intellectual ability and dispositions, are strongly affected by their social origins.

Afterwards, the methodology used in the research is presented. The findings discussed in the book stem from a qualitative research conducted during the author's doctoral studies. It is constituted by a large number of long semi-structured interviews (n=120) with professionals involved in the recruiting procedures, supplemented by an in-depth participant observation of recruitment activities (9 months). The focus of the research is the so-called "Holy Trinity of Jobs" [p. 16], which includes investment banks, consulting firms, and law firms. They have been chosen because these three types of companies are peer organizations collectively referred to as elite professional service (EPS) firms by insiders. EPS employees and job applicants consider EPS companies a consistent category of prestigious employment. Moreover, these firms often work together and depend on one another for survival. Finally, all three types of firms draw from similar applicant pools for entry-level jobs and the tasks required by jobs in these organizations involve both analytical and interpersonal skills.

In Chapter 2, which analyses the "*Playing Field*", Rivera shows how institutionalized and individual social capital set the bounds of competition among potential candidates to jobs in EPS companies. Two specific criteria are essential: students needed either to attend a top-level university with pre-existing ties to a firm or have an insider contact within a firm who might support the candidate's application. After discussing how firms promote themselves to top-universities students and advertise jobs during on-campus recruiting [Chapter 3], Chapter 4 focuses on how employers screen résumés and select first-round interview pools. This chapter is particularly informative, since it discusses how evaluators use the status of applicants' educational credentials and leisure activities, particularly super-élite university affiliations and participation in prestigious extracurricular activities, to judge applicants' social, intellectual, and moral worth. Chapters from 5 to 8 discuss how firms and evaluators move from the judgement of the résumé to an assessment of the person in job interviews: this part includes detailed descriptions of who is conducting job interviews, when and where interviews take place, how evaluators are trained, and how they judge interviewees' hard and soft skills, and how they conceptualize and assess merit more generally. Chapter 9 concentrates on the group deliberations and hiring committee meetings, on how consensus is reached and on how the final hiring decisions are made. Finally, in the last substantive chapter, Rivera

explores some “exceptional cases”: on one side, candidates coming from a low social background who have managed to obtain jobs in EPS firms; on the other, candidates from elite backgrounds who have not been selected.

Throughout the book, the author convincingly shows how the types of credentials favoured in résumé screening, coupled with the types of activities, experiences and answers expected by interviewers and recruiters are deeply entrenched in class-based definitions of self, success, and personal style. This provides overall significant advantages to students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds in obtaining a first-round interview, to be called for a second-round interview and finally to be hired by the EPS companies.

Overall, I think this book addresses a very interesting topic, as it lies at the intersection of various strands of research, namely social stratification research on social inequalities in occupational attainment, sociological literature on the élites, and research in the field of economic sociology, as well as sociology of professions. I think the book contributes in several respects to existing knowledge in these fields. It contributes to quantitative social stratification research by moving the attention from the “demand side” (graduates’ characteristics) to the “supply side” (employers’ practices) and shading light on various micro-level mechanisms by which social inequalities in access to high-rewarding job are reproduced. It contributes to sociology of élites and economic sociology by stressing the important role of “gatekeepers” and highlighting commonalities and differences in the recruitment practices and criteria used in companies belonging to different, but interrelated, sectors.

One important aspect emerging from Rivera’s interviews is that a non-negligible part of the social inequalities in access to highly paid job at labour market entry in EPS companies is due to efficiency reasoning from the firm side. Indeed, restricting competition to students at listed campuses – which are often super-élite or élite universities – is generally viewed by employees as an efficient way to narrow the size of the applicant pool. Recruiters admit that by this way they could lose some very talented potential candidates from other less selective colleges, but they mainly justify their practice in terms of time constraints, costs and efficiency reasons. By restricting their attention to a narrow set of Ivy League colleges, they rely in part on the first screening made by such selective universities, which leads EPS firms to expect an average higher quality of the applicants pool from these colleges. Interestingly, the research shows that some of the taken for granted assumptions of economic sociology and economists’ human capital theory are challenged when looking at the concrete practices used in the selection and recruitment procedures of the ESP firms in the United States. In contrast to the arguments at the core of the traditional human capital approach, interviewers appear to be only partially concerned with the candidates’ skills *per se*. They often explicitly declare they do not look for the candidate with the highest marks, but with good marks, from a top university and with good personality traits. Interviewers are highly prone to search among the good candidates those who are similar to themselves in lifestyle, personal attitudes, and cultural capital. Building on these considerations, Rivera develops the useful concept of “cultural fit”, which could be seen an interpretative tool in her qualitative research, but could serve as a basis for further theory development. Quantitative scholars could also think to establish ways to operationalize and measure this concept in surveys, in order to

test its explanatory power in a broader setting, as it happened in the case of Bourdieu's cultural capital concept.

It is worth to note that, given that the "cultural fit" between the candidate and the prevailing firm culture is a fundamental criterion of selection, elite companies do not rely on Human Resources staff to conduct the interviews; conversely, the interviewers are directly chosen by the EPS firms among their employees, who receive some basic training and tips on the different aspects they should search for in prospective applicants. However, despite this formal training, much is left to each interviewer's subjective perception and judgements. Given that most evaluators in these firms were white, upper- and upper-middle class Ivy League graduates, merit is often defined and measured from their specific perspective. Since people tend to be more favourable in recruiting people similar to them, and given that employees in EPS firms disproportionately come from privileged socio-economic background, this would induce an indirect bias in their assessment. A common belief among the interviewers is that the types of educational, social, and occupational accomplishments they positively evaluate in candidates can be easily achieved by the brightest, motivated, and successful young people. This overlooks that in reality the acquisition of such traits and credentials require long-term investment and intensive economic, social, and cultural resources on the part of both job candidates and their parents.

The book is excellently written and well organized. I noted, however, some variations in the stylistic approach of the different chapters. Indeed, some sections seem to be written more following academic standards, while others more in a narrative way. To my perception, the last ones are too long and report an excessive number of details about the organization of the job interviews, which are not linked much to the main thesis and arguments of the book. From a European perspective, I would have loved a more extensive discussion on the role of degree programs and fields of study along the discussion on the role of university attended. Are fields of study not important at all? In which respect do they matter?

Another comment refers to the discussion of fake curricula elicited by Rivera to some of the interviewed EPS staff. I think that – given the large amount of interviews conducted – the author could have tried to go further in this part of the research implementing a factorial design for the evaluation of fictitious candidates' profile. Randomly changing specific characteristics of applicants in the made-up résumés, she could have gained more solid knowledge on the causal effects of the single applicants' features and credentials.

In sum, despite some minor remarks I have briefly discussed, I think *Pedigree* is a very valuable and intriguing sociological contribution into the fields of social inequalities and access to elite positions in contemporary United States. The book not only provides interesting qualitative empirical evidence on social inequalities in access to the elite in a specific context, but it also offers a lot of stimulating ideas that would be interesting to study in other contexts and with other methodologies as well.

Moris Triventi  
University of Trento