

*Degree Program in*  
Economics and Business

*Course of*  
Marketing

**CLASS AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION  
IN HIRING**

**A field experiment on an Italian élite job market**

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“Equality is the public recognition, effectively expressed in institutions and manners, of the principle that an equal degree of attention is due to the needs of all human beings.”

**Simone Weil**

French philosopher and World War 2 female activist

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## Introduction

The social and economic ladder is generally thought to be climbable through merit, virtue, and worthiness. While in some cases this has been shown to be true, this dissertation is based on the need to analyze what it truly means to “escape” from a pre-determined social class without the help of a strong economic and cultural background.

For many employers, potential candidates’ social capital and economic background, as well as gender, are very important markers which determine their future career expectations, which are created and established since the first day of school. This mechanism is at the base of the reproduction of social class advantages, as explained by Bourdieu, whose theory represents the theoretical foundation of this dissertation.

As part of our field experiment, we decided to test how different class and gender indicators present in four fictitious résumés practically influence the decisions and processes undertaken by human resources recruiters and employers. We decided to analyze both the gender effect and the class effect, as well as the interception between these two very common biases. We started our research by studying which indicators best expressed class adherence through the use of an online survey, aimed at the creation of credible and reliable profiles, followed by the submission of 794 job applications to all legal offices, law firms and legal department present in the city of Rome and Milan. Each of our four candidates was randomly selected to send his or her application to each employer, and from our experiment we were able to construct concrete results which we found to be perfectly coherent with the results of Lauren Rivera in her Sociological Review of the same phenomena of status and gender intercepted discrimination in the same U.S. élite job market.

Said results showed how, overall, the male applicant with indicators of high social class received the majority of the positive callbacks, at the expenses of the three other candidates. Moreover, we found that the high-class female did not benefit in the same way from the upper-class indicators present in her résumé, which eventually indicates a gender-status paradox which benefits men and disadvantages women.

## CHAPTER 1

### The myth of merit and Bourdieu's three axioms

The prevailing belief held by most individuals is that success is attained through hard work rather than through privileged lineage. Textbooks, newspapers, and novels abound with stories of individuals who ascend to the pinnacle of achievement through personal determination and unwavering perseverance. Implicit within these narratives is the notion that economic and social positions are earned rather than inherited from one's parents. The individuals occupying the highest echelons of society are believed to have reached their positions due to their own intellectual capabilities, tireless dedication, and admirable character traits. Conversely, those situated at the lower rungs of the social ladder are often attributed their circumstances to their own personal shortcomings. Despite the implementation of merit-based admissions in education and equal opportunity regulations in employment, there remains a concern about the persistence of elite reproduction. How is it that this process continues to unfold?

Notwithstanding the prevalent belief in the correlation between hard work and financial rewards, and the persistence of myths surrounding a society without social classes, Italy currently experiences higher levels of economic inequality compared to many other developed nations. Contrary to popular notions, the likelihood of individuals from humble origins achieving affluence or descending into poverty is relatively low. Children born into families belonging to either the top or bottom fifths of the income distribution tend to remain in their respective positions as adults. Those from privileged backgrounds dominate access to quality educational institutions, prestigious universities, and lucrative employment opportunities (Jewel, 2008).

According to Bourdieu, the analysis of class goes beyond merely categorizing individuals into predefined groups like the working class, the middle class, and the upper class. Instead, it revolves around assessing an individual's class based on the amount and nature of their capital, as well as the duration for which they have possessed that specific capital. Consequently, the concept of "class" can be understood as an individual's unique position within a social sphere or domain, determined by the value, composition, and evolution of their capital assets (Jewel, 2008). From a Bourdieusian perspective, the notion of merit perpetuates a habitus among law students, leading them to adopt internalized expectations and aspirations that align with the established hierarchy within the legal profession. Additionally, this myth of merit instills a belief among privileged law students that their success is solely attributed to their individual merit, enabling them to conveniently overlook their inherent privileges. The peril of maintaining silence in this context lies in its reinforcement of the habitus, thereby rendering the institution an effective instrument for reproducing prevailing inequalities within the legal profession and society at large (Jewel, 2008).

When referring to the job-market, one word that comes to mind, with reference to the high competitiveness among candidates, is "pedigree". The term "pedigree" was employed by employers in prestigious firms to succinctly refer to a job candidate's track record of achievements. "Pedigree" was

commonly perceived as an immensely desirable, if not indispensable, attribute sought in applicants. Its original definition, still widely employed today, signifies a connection to inherited privileges rather than personal effort, literally denoting an "ancestral line." In this context, the term encapsulates the central argument of this thesis, asserting that hiring decisions, which may initially appear solely based on individual merit, are subtly but significantly influenced by the socioeconomic backgrounds of applicants (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

There are three main categories that can define the likelihood a candidate has of possessing the so-called "pedigree": economic advantages, social connections, and cultural resources.

Income, wealth, and various forms of economic capital represent the prominent resources that privileged parents can leverage to secure educational advantages for their children. Put simply, affluent parents possess greater financial means to invest in their children's educational development and, as a result, allocate more resources towards it. These trends collectively contribute to the increased probability that children from well-off families will attend primary and secondary schools characterized by higher per-student expenditures, superior-quality educators, and access to modern and abundant learning materials and resources. In contrast, students from less affluent families are often at a disadvantage in terms of educational opportunities due to limited financial resources. In a recent study conducted by sociologist Alexandra Walton Radford on high school students, it is revealed that many exceptional students from lower-income backgrounds opt not to apply to prestigious private four-year universities due to the exorbitant costs associated with these institutions. This highlights the intricate interplay between financial resources and cultural knowledge. Some students who would have qualified for substantial financial aid packages from these universities were unaware of such opportunities, leading them to forgo applying. Additionally, others faced challenges in obtaining the extensive documentation required for financial aid applications (Jewel, 2008).

In contrast, the affluent students in Radford's study based their college decisions on factors unrelated to finances, such as the academic or extracurricular offerings of the universities or their personal sense of compatibility with the institution or its student body.

While money plays a significant role, it is important to recognize that social capital also contributes to the equation. The size, status, and extent of an individual's social networks hold significance as well. Parents' social connections can offer their children valuable access to crucial opportunities, information, and resources. A well-placed contact can potentially influence the acceptance of private school admissions, college applications, or internship opportunities in a favorable direction.

Lastly, cultural resources encompass the frameworks of knowledge, perception, interpretation, and behavior that guide our interactions within the social sphere, and they play a significant role in perpetuating elite reproduction. These resources often go unnoticed as contributors to inequality because they remain invisible, and individuals may mistakenly attribute them to individual capabilities. However, cultural resources exert substantial influence on social stratification, particularly in accessing the upper echelons of society. Culture plays a crucial role in perpetuating privilege (as well as underprivilege) by shaping individuals'

aspirations and worldviews, influencing how they assess and are assessed by others in everyday social exchanges, and determining their ability to navigate society's gatekeeping institutions (Jewel, 2008).

### **1.1: Economic advantages**

As previously stated, economic wellbeing, social connections and cultural resources are the main indicators of a person's social status. Such concepts are vital to the examination of potential discrimination in the job market, as they are laid out by society itself.

The volume of capital a person possesses is the key determining factor. It establishes the class level at which an individual resides. Capital comes in various forms, including economic capital (money and property), cultural capital (education, consumer practices, and tastes), social capital (family or political connections), and symbolic capital (authority and prestige). Different types of capital hold value in assessing one's class status, and it is possible for an individual to possess multiple forms of capital simultaneously. Although economic redemption is possible through hard work and passion, it is not quite the same as being born into richness. Such concept is a crucial factor, as it revolves around the fluctuations in both the volume and composition of capital over time, as demonstrated by the historical and potential trajectory within the social domain. For instance, the distinction between being "old money" or "nouveau riche" pertains to this concept and determines the specific position within the upper-class realm that an individual occupies (Jewel, 2008). A response aligned with Bourdieu's perspective towards rational choice theory would emphasize that not every individual has equal access to the same opportunities for engaging in market transactions. The presence of choices, the capacity to make a "rational" decision, and the subsequent outcomes resulting from those choices are shaped by the accumulation and inheritance of capital in its economic, social, cultural, and symbolic manifestations.

Bourdieu also examined how individual class identities are shaped through the consumption of goods. This process involves the establishment of hierarchies and the categorization of lifestyle choices based on taste, which assigns distinct hierarchical values to these choices. The privileged class often relies on a "sense of distinction" and signifies their status through an "ostentatious discretion, sobriety, and understatement." The display of "legitimate manners" holds particular significance as manners serve to demonstrate the exceptional conditions of acquisition, namely possessing items from the past, which is tacitly acknowledged as the epitome of excellence. An example of this is when one adopts body language that conveys self-assurance, ease, and authority, giving the impression that they possess the authorization to do so. However, this display is only effective if those occupying higher positions in the social structure genuinely believe that a distinguished demeanor genuinely reflects the person's elevated social standing (Jewel, 2008).

On one side, we have what he referred to as the "pure" aesthetic, which is characterized by the modernist emphasis on the primacy of form over function and a strong inclination towards abstraction. This aesthetic is championed by intellectuals and artists of the modernist avant-garde who strive for the purity of

abstraction. In contrast, affluent "industrialists" reject the mundane aspects of everyday life but do so by indulging in leisurely and luxurious pursuits. They are drawn towards a hedonistic aesthetic that prioritizes ease and opulence, symbolized by activities like attending boulevard theatre or appreciating Impressionist painting. This represents the aesthetic of "conspicuous consumption," where lavish displays are prominent. It is worth noting that while some argue that Bourdieu considered cultural capital as a form of "snob" culture, it is important to recognize that he did not employ this specific term. Additionally, he was highly attuned to the various manifestations that a rejection of practicality can assume (Jewel, 2008).

Social class, which refers to an individual's relative socioeconomic position within society, exerts a significant influence on educational and economic trajectories. The possession of wealth plays a significant role in shaping the well-being and living standards of individuals and households as it influences their present and future consumption and earning potential. However, the implications of wealth ownership extend far beyond its direct impact on consumption opportunities. The overall level, composition, and distribution of wealth have broader effects on the functioning of the economy and the structure of society as a whole. In Italy, economic inequality has reached its highest level since the Gilded Age, and rates of intergenerational mobility are lower compared to many other Western industrialized nations. During the early 1990s, Italy experienced a rapid increase in income inequality and poverty, transitioning from levels close to the OECD averages to levels akin to those observed in other Southern European countries. Since then, inequality has remained at a relatively high level. Currently, Italy ranks 6th among all 30 OECD countries in terms of the gap between the rich and the poor (Acciari et al, 2017). Over the past decade, inequality in Italy has intensified, resulting in wider disparities between the wealthy and the impoverished, with an increase in the number of individuals living in extreme poverty. Unfortunately, lower-income groups have not significantly benefited from the sluggish economic recovery of recent years. Nationally, the proportion of families living in extreme poverty has near In the Centre-North region of Italy, inequality remained relatively stable until 2006 but experienced growth in the subsequent decade. This shift in the central and northern areas was partly influenced by the increase in the foreign-born population, which, within this region, tends to have lower incomes and higher levels of inequality. Between 2006 and 2016, the Gini index for households with a reference person born in Italy did not change in the Centre-North, while it increased in the South, similar to the index calculated for the overall population. When considering the mean logarithmic deviation, we still observe a slight rise in inequality in the Centre-North, albeit smaller than the trends that include the foreign-born population. ly doubled, reaching 6.9% in 2017, with southern Italy reporting the highest figures at 10.3% (Acciari et al, 2017).

Extensive research demonstrates that an individual's social class of origin, whether measured by parental income or education, has a profound impact on various aspects of their lives, including their educational, occupational, and economic achievements, as well as their mental and physical well-being. In Italy, the social class of origin plays a particularly significant role in shaping stratification patterns, particularly at the extremes of the economic and educational hierarchies. Over the past three decades, sociologists have made notable progress in both theoretical frameworks and empirical investigations to better understand the



mechanisms that perpetuate social class inequalities in Italy, particularly those that grant advantages to the economically privileged.

## **1.2: Social Capital**

Bourdieu resisted the notion of providing a singular and definitive definition for cultural capital, acknowledging its capacity to assume diverse forms. To challenge dominant social structures, those within the educational system who possess insider knowledge must confront two paradoxes: the liar's paradox and the paradox arising from the clash between an individual's subjective self-perception and oppressive class structures. This paradox emerges because educational institutions inherently contribute to the perpetuation of existing systems of domination, which inherently diminishes the authority of anyone seeking to critique the system from within. The dilemma lies in the fact that oppositional academics are essentially "attempting to dismantle and reconstruct an activity even as they engage in it." Consequently, educators must be willing to critically examine their own culture. However, when conflicts arise, the simplistic dichotomy that portrays submission as inherently negative and resistance as invariably positive may not align with social realities. In certain instances, resistance can lead to isolation, especially when one must overtly proclaim the very traits that signify their subjugation. Conversely, submission can hold elements of empowerment. This inherent contradiction between submission and domination, according to Bourdieu, represents an "unresolvable contradiction" embedded in the very logic of symbolic domination (Jewel, 2008).

Bourdieu's analysis of cultural distinction highlights the significant role played by the middle classes. They are not only the primary beneficiaries but also the key agents in the reproduction of social and cultural dominance. However, over the past 50 years, the landscape of class relations has undergone significant changes due to the remarkable expansion of the middle classes (Acciari et al, 2017). As a result, the working class has increasingly been marginalized, stigmatized, and undervalued in the eyes of many. This transformation has been accompanied by heightened income inequalities, as a prosperous middle class reaps the benefits of neoliberal governance. Consequently, a more precarious working class and intermediate class have been left behind. In this context, the middle classes seem to engage in a form of self-exclusion. They reside in exclusive areas, partake in distinctive patterns of consumption, and, above all, prioritize their own self-interest. This exacerbates social divisions and reinforces the perception of an ever-widening gap between the middle classes and other social strata. The emerging field of cultural studies introduced the idea that class formation and resistance can stem from various foundations. Notably, it shed light on working-class youth subcultures through vivid examinations, revealing how these subcultures utilized commercially produced culture, music, scooters, and leisure activities to articulate a shared identity. This collective identity was shaped both by their own class position and by a deliberate opposition to the cultural norms of their parents' social class (Jewel, 2008).

Democratic educational systems play a role in perpetuating existing class structures by endowing schools with the authority to convey meanings that serve to replicate the arbitrary organization of social groups. Firstly, educators teach in a manner that mirrors the dominant culture, employing methods endorsed by the dominant culture, thereby instilling in students a habitus that perceives the existing organizational structure as the natural order of things. Secondly, schools reinforce the notion that individual achievement or innate talent, rather than inherited capital or symbolic resources, determines success. Lastly, by assigning economic value to socially approved validations, the educational system adheres to a framework that tends to reproduce social hierarchies rooted in economic disparities. Performance-based evaluations, such as oral examinations, tend to exhibit class bias due to the examiner's authority to make judgments based on "unconscious criteria" influenced by social perception (Rivera, 2012). These judgments assess individuals holistically, considering minute aspects such as style, manners, accent, elocution, posture, mimicry, and even appearance-related factors like clothing or cosmetics. Moreover, degrees and diplomas obtained from different tiers within the educational system hold varying economic values, corresponding to their position in the hierarchical structure. Consequently, the economic worth assigned to academic credentials can also function as a mechanism for closing off social statuses. As a result, the type of employment and salary accessible to a graduate is contingent upon the extent to which their academic qualifications have been endorsed by the educational institutions they attended. In terms of middle-class privilege, the growing intricacy of household structures and evolving dynamics of domestic labor complicate the notion of viewing the household as an automatic unit of reproduction, as Bourdieu assumes (Jewel, 2008). Moreover, it is no longer appropriate to presume the father as the unequivocal head of the household. These changes make it more challenging to rely on traditional assumptions about household dynamics when analyzing middle-class advantage. One of Bourdieu's assertions highlighted the significance of reproduction and inheritance. His renowned and contentious theory of habitus shed light on the process through which we become accustomed to certain routines and consequently perpetuate established practices. This phenomenon occurs not only within our individual lives but also spans across generations. This is the reproduction circuit associated with schooling and formal education (Jewel, 2008).

### **1.3: Culture Capital**

Cultural capital operates in a manner akin to property, enabling those who possess it to gain advantages at the expense of those without it. Similar to financial capital, Bourdieu recognized a process of circulation and accumulation associated with cultural capital. However, cultural capital differs from property in that it is embodied, and individuals belonging to the educated middle classes are socialized both intellectually and physically to appreciate "legitimate" culture. This legitimacy is established through its institutionalization within the educational system and cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries (Jewel, 2008).

Yet, cultural capital's distinction lies in its dependence on individuals' dispositions and perceptions, as it is inseparable from their embodied experiences. Consequently, its role is consistently and inevitably misunderstood by social participants. We cannot easily distance ourselves from our cultural frameworks to objectively evaluate them. Therefore, alongside cultural capital's capacity to perpetuate systematic inequality, its significance is frequently misconstrued. Bourdieu maintained a resistance against providing a simplistic and singular definition for cultural capital, recognizing its ability to manifest in various forms (Jewel, 2008). Moreover, he emphasized the existence of two distinct and contrasting visions that compete with each other. In another one of his assertion, Bourdieu put forth the concept of homology across fields. He argued that each cultural field, whether it be literature, visual arts, journalism, or any other domain, possesses its own autonomy and can only be comprehended by examining the internal relationships within it. Understanding the positioning of an artist, for instance, in relation to other artists becomes crucial. Bourdieu contended that there are homologies that traverse different fields, allowing for the identification of similar underlying principles across various realms and revealing general principles of classification and distinction (Jewel, 2008).

Parents who possess cultural capital have the ability to instill in their children the cultural knowledge and skills that predispose them to succeed within the educational system. By equipping their children with a command of "abstract" and "formal" concepts, these parents enable them to effectively convert their cultural capital into credentials, which in turn open doors to privileged positions. Thus, a cycle of cultural reproduction, which is also a form of social reproduction, takes place. Bourdieu argues that even in seemingly dynamic and rapidly evolving cultural fields, one can discern the perpetuation of the "same old" patterns. The dominant social classes have the capacity to perpetually reshape themselves and ensure the continuity of advantage for their offspring (Rivera, 2012).

However, Bourdieu acknowledges that this phenomenon extends beyond social classes. In his later work, he emphasizes the importance of broadening our perspective to understand how similar processes operate within gendered and ethnic social divisions. It becomes essential to explore the interplay between these mechanisms and those responsible for reproducing class divisions. Bourdieu's emphasis on the tensions between high and low culture has proven to be a valuable asset within the field of cultural studies. It has stimulated a shift in focus from the traditional concentration on classical music, drama, poetry, and the visual arts towards the exploration of more "popular" forms of culture (Jewel, 2008). This renewed attention to popular culture serves as a counterbalance, broadening the scope of analysis and enriching our understanding of cultural phenomena.

Cultural studies, in contrast to cultural sociologists, displayed a heightened enthusiasm for Bourdieu's theoretical and epistemological framework when examining questions pertaining to culture, value, and hierarchy. Bourdieu's perspective emphasized the culture/power relationship, primarily conceptualizing culture as a form of possession, a resource that certain individuals possess at the expense of others. This cultural capital is then strategically employed to gain a competitive edge in power struggles occurring within various fields. The interconnections among these fields are shaped by the dominance of the economic and political realms over the cultural domain (Jewel, 2008).

Bourdieu's contribution holds historical significance in advancing a relational approach to the study of social and cultural practices. This approach emphasizes the understanding that the meaning and impacts of these practices are contingent upon the complex, dynamic, and evolving systems of relationships in which they are embedded, rather than being inherent or intrinsic in nature. However, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, along with its connection to the habitus as the mechanism for intergenerational transmission, sometimes blurs the boundaries between distinct aspects that are better analyzed separately. For instance, it conflates the examination of educational resources that middle-class parents are capable of mobilizing for their children, such as school choices, with the values they impart through the cultural environment and ethos of middle-class family life (Jewel, 2008). It is important to maintain a clear distinction between these components in order to comprehensively understand the mechanisms at play.

In one of his essays, Bourdieu distinguished three subtypes of cultural capital, namely institutionalized, embodied, and objective, although their precise origins and content are challenging to pinpoint (Bourdieu, 1986). Institutionalized cultural capital involves the recognition and honor derived primarily from possessing educational qualifications. The credentials obtained and the institutions granting them contribute to differential value for individuals and social groups. Objective cultural capital relates to possessions and the associated judgments of taste tied to their acquisition or involvement in relevant domains. It encompasses the cultural value attributed to material belongings and the cultural practices surrounding their acquisition (Jewel, 2008). Embodied cultural capital manifests through one's demeanor, accent, dress, and overall bodily comportment. It encompasses the ways in which individuals embody and display cultural norms, which can influence their social standing and opportunities. The advantages that can be gained from qualities like physical attractiveness, slimness, or an appropriate accent are widely acknowledged, although the specific criteria used to recognize, for instance, beauty, are often subject to contentious debates. Bourdieu began his analysis of the system of oppositions within the field of cultural consumption by considering the "aristocracy of culture" (Jewel, 2008). This referred to the disinterested aesthetic associated with high bourgeois forms of consumption. He used this starting point to explore the hierarchical relationships between various positions within the cultural field.

Bourdieu identified significant correlations between distinct cultural practices and specific class positions. He characterized working-class culture as being influenced by a preference for necessity and a tendency towards conformity. According to Bourdieu, the cultural limitations experienced by the working class are an extension of the broader alienation associated with their social and economic conditions.

Bourdieu primarily attributed this condition to the role of schooling, particularly primary education, and the misperception of its consequences among individuals who have derived limited advantages or qualifications from their formal schooling. Within the educational system, they internalize the notion that educational success serves as a validation for privilege, thus accepting their own cultural deprivation. Additionally, they learn to defer to the authority of experts and professionals, further reinforcing their sense of cultural dispossession (Jewel, 2008).

## CHAPTER 2

### **The impact of class status on the educational system and labor market**

The purpose of education in schools is to offer every individual an equitable chance for success. Nonetheless, it has been abundantly demonstrated that achieving the highest levels of core competencies in OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries is significantly impacted by factors unrelated to the dedication of individual students, over which they have no control. Bourdieu's theory suggests, as seen in the previous chapter, that modern educational institutions play a pivotal role in perpetuating a society's class divisions by facilitating the process of objectification (Acciari et al, 2017). Within most democratic educational systems present in the Western hemisphere, schools wield the authority to convey meanings that essentially reinforce the arbitrary, and often systematic, grouping of individuals. This occurs through three primary mechanisms, which we need to analyze in order to better understand how they influence the overall education system. Firstly, as explained by Bourdieu, educators often choose to employ teaching methods that closely mirror the dominant culture, shaping students' perspectives to perceive the existing organizational structure as inherently natural. Such event is not to be seen as voluntary; rather, it can be viewed as the expected and “natural” evolution of the main societal structural problems thoroughly analyzed by Bourdieu. The second mechanism provides that schools emphasize the idea that success results from individual merit or “innate talent”, rather than considering it as inherited capital, whether it may be economic or symbolic. This process is the direct result of the first factor, as most educators would firmly uphold that there exists an “innate talent” which will separate gifted students from “normal” students.

The last factor relevant to this analysis is the issue of attaching economic value to socially approved sanctions, through which the educational system effectively perpetuates hierarchies rooted in economic components. This form of teaching leads students to intrinsically acknowledge the legitimacy of the dominant culture while simultaneously perceiving their own subordinated culture as illegitimate or “not enough”. Consequently, students tend to regard upper-class speech as “proper” and consider more figurative or expressive language as “vulgar.” Importantly, as a consequence, students often fail to recognize the arbitrary nature of these distinctions throughout their educational journey. Additionally, schools downplay the significance of inherited cultural assets, such as linguistic proficiency, by framing “aptitude” in terms of individual merit and grades and general motivation towards schoolwork, rather than as a product of “socially endorsed teaching and learning.” Furthermore, individuals from dominant backgrounds frequently undervalue the performance of students lacking substantial educational or cultural capital. As we will analyze during the course of this dissertation, such students “simply do not have ‘the gift’” (Jewel, 2008), which we will discuss from now going forward as a specific form of “pedigree”.

Students who excel in exams throughout their educational journey find themselves admitted to “élite” and “prestigious” secondary schools, while those who perform less successfully on these tests often end up in marginalized institutions that emphasize technical skills rather than preparing students for higher education.

This stark and frequent division perpetuates a system where low-status students, excluded from elite institutions and unaware of the arbitrary nature of the selection process in which they find themselves, internalize the notion of merit and come to believe they deserve exclusion as a matter of course.

Furthermore, within most Western educational systems, degrees and diplomas are assigned varying economic values based on their position within the hierarchy of each country, which is most likely common in all economically advanced countries. These differing economic values can also be seen as a mechanism for "status closure". Consequently, the type of job and salary available to a graduate is contingent on the extent to which their academic qualifications have been endorsed by the educational institutions they attended, starting from the first grade and all throughout the last grade. By concealing the self-preservation motives underlying these mechanisms of status "closure" and attributing a graduate's position in the hierarchy solely hinged to individual merit, the educational system perpetuates most of the current social hierarchies already strongly featured in most countries, while simultaneously masking the unjust advantages enjoyed by the privileged within the system itself (Jewel, 2008).

For example, American legal education perpetuates existing class structures through a tiered system that categorizes law schools, ranks students within each school, and employs the bar examination as a barrier to entry into the legal profession. These methods of classification and entry create a cycle that favors individuals with pre-existing cultural or economic advantages while disadvantaging those without them.

In particular, individuals lacking significant cultural or economic capital are more likely to find themselves in lower-tier schools, achieve lower class rankings, or fail the bar exam, ultimately resulting in a lower economic return on their law degree or even the absence of one. Conversely, those with access to cultural capital, such as a high-quality secondary education and family support for educational pursuits, are better positioned to gain admission to higher-ranked institutions (Jewel, 2008).

## **2.1: Italian education system and labor market inequalities**

Although the general overview is applicable to most countries of the Western hemisphere, it is useful for this dissertation's purposes to focus on the Italian context, from the perspective of historical trends regarding indicators of expenditure, equity, effectiveness, and inclusive capacity. The Italian education system displays numerous contradictions, which have all been displayed over the past sixty years; our system has, in fact, unquestionably become more inclusive, underlying a trend shared by all education systems in Western countries. However, in light of the considerations just outlined, special attention should be given to the issue of internal inequalities within the Italian school system, both in terms of the influence of family background and regional disparities (Pastorelli and Stocchiero, 2020).

One of the most important effects of recent policies has been to divide Italian universities into two (or three) groups based on their "quality." This has involved creating a "Series A", "Series B", and "Series C" of universities. "Series A" consists exclusively of universities in the Northern part of Italy, Series B includes

universities from the peripheral North, Central, and continental South regions of Italy, while Series C encompasses universities in the major Islands (Sicily and Sardinia). It is important to note that many of the indicators used to make this distinction are independent of the universities' behavior and are rather primarily influenced by the conditions and geographical contexts in which they are located. For example, one of the criteria consisted in rewarding universities with a higher percentage of students participating in study-abroad programs like Erasmus. This award, presented as recognition of international capability, conceals a significant underlying rhetoric: it is perceived more as a recognition for universities with wealthier students. The opportunity to participate in exchange programs, in fact, depends not only on the availability of scholarships, but also on families' ability to cover the costs associated with an experience abroad. In fact, students from more affluent families are twice as likely to engage in Erasmus experiences abroad compared to those from less privileged backgrounds (Viesti, 2017).

Once again, it becomes clear how the central theme of this dissertation, which aims at the analysis of discrimination biases in the hiring process, is in fact strongly influenced by a “domino effect” as explained in Bourdieu’s theory; it is not easy to distance ourselves from such an intrinsic process, as we all are, or have been, unwillingly part of it.

The ongoing university policy in Italy, through a range of measures and indicators, has initiated a differentiation among these groups of universities, which is increasing more and more. “Series A”, to which significant additional resources are not allocated but are instead taken from the families of wealthier students. “Series B” is, on the other hand, destined, in the medium term, to focus primarily on providing basic education, with fewer master's and doctoral programs available and reduced research and development activities. Lastly, universities in “Series C” are expected to disappear due to the migration of recent graduates from the South to the North of Italy. Such “migration”, which has always characterized our country, has been strongly motivated by the economic crisis, which hit the southern regions particularly hard, leading to an increase in the cost of university education from a political point of view (Viesti, 2017).

The employment prospects for graduates, although still significantly better than those of high school graduates, have worsened in response to both the economic crisis and the subsequent costs cut. This has led to a more pronounced decrease in the transition rates of high school graduates to university in the South, starting from levels already below the Italian average and, by a significant margin, below the European average. The number of university students in the South has decreased significantly, and the mobility of Southern students towards the Center-North has become highly asymmetric: it is significant within the Center and the North but quite limited within the South itself. Although these migration patterns have always characterized the Italian reality, they have irretrievably increased in recent times, particularly in terms of their relative weight (Viesti, 2017).

As some studies have highlighted (Ballarino and Panichella, 2014), it is quite evident in Italy that a strong effect is still attributed to family background when it comes to the likelihood of attaining a university degree. In contrast, the net effect of family background, while still significantly important, is less pronounced concerning high school diploma attainment (due to the increasing presence of high school graduates in various

cohorts, as previously illustrated). This data can be interpreted as a substantial limitation of the education system in bridging, beyond a certain threshold, the opportunity gap stemming from students' social backgrounds (in terms of their initial cultural and economic capital). First and foremost, the social background of students significantly and strongly influences the choice of their secondary school track. This process leads to two outcomes: a high level of social segregation among different educational tracks and, concurrently, considerable variability in the social composition among individual institutions (Viesti, 2017).

In a subsequent stage, the type of school attended and the socio-economic composition at the institutional level, significantly impact students' academic performance (or, at the very least, their performance on standardized tests). Lastly, the blend of social background, chosen educational track, and the average socio-economic characteristics of the school all affect the outcomes, and the cumulative and combined effect of all these variables shapes students' educational expectations (Ciarini and Giancola, 2016).

In this sense, the differentiation within the educational system is "utilized" by families and students as a tool for reaffirming their social status. Another distinctive aspect in Italy relates to profound regional disparities. As mentioned earlier, in Italy, there is significant variability among schools, with considerable processes of school segregation based on social background, primarily attributable to enrollment in different educational tracks. This phenomenon becomes more pronounced when considering contextual factors at both the individual institution level and regional disparities (Fornari and Giancola, 2011). These analyses underscore the significance of students' social backgrounds, particularly when aggregated within the school setting (through "peer effects"), and their strong association with the type of school attended.

As for the post-secondary school education, in the past decade, various policy interventions in Italian universities have been enacted. Unfortunately, these measures have collectively led to a reduction in tertiary education opportunities, especially in Southern Italy. They have also constrained and altered the academic offerings while diminishing the demand for education, driven by significant political decisions. These choices have had detrimental effects on both social mobility and the broader developmental prospects of this region, as well as the nation as a whole. This is concerning, considering the crucial role that universities and human capital play in the present and future economy, as can be reasonably anticipated.

It's important to specify that the conditions in the job markets across Italian regions are profoundly different. There are higher probabilities and opportunities for employment as well as higher salary levels for recent graduates in the northern regions. In recent years, employment opportunities in the public sector, which used to be more evenly distributed across regions, have significantly decreased due to workforce freezes and general resource cuts in the PA (Public Administration) (Viesti, 2017). The situation in Italy presents a particularly intriguing case in this context. The influence of economic, social, and cultural backgrounds on the creation of disadvantages for students is noteworthy. There exists a system of opportunities and constraints, largely beyond the control of students, that significantly contributes to the inequities within the education system, and this system is rooted within the school itself. Surprisingly, the school environment seems to wield



more influence than family background. A relatively lower economic, social, and cultural status of the school is sufficient to generate a substantial disparity in the future academic achievements of its students.

The demand for jobs in the private sector plays a significant role, and it is much stronger where the business system is more robust. For instance, in recent years, university enrollments from southern Italy students have been directed more towards Piedmont and Lombardy, and less towards Lazio and Tuscany (Viesti, 2017).

## **2.2: The concept of “Pedigree”. An Italian and US analysis**

In an era characterized by merit-based admissions in education and equal opportunity regulations in employment, we observe a phenomenon known as the perpetuation of elite status. But how is such culture replicated in society over time?

Cultural reproduction frequently leads to social reproduction, which entails the intergenerational transfer of societal elements like social class. Such reproduction has been studied and explained by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in their 1977 book “Reproduction”; they posited that the diminished academic performance of working-class children cannot be attributed to their lower abilities but rather to institutional biases. Their argument proposed that schools assess students according to their familiarity with the cultural norms of the dominant class, thereby putting lower-class students at a disadvantage. This leads lower-class students to internalize self-blame for their academic setbacks, subsequently increasing the likelihood of them disengaging from the educational system or opting for lower-prestige educational pathways. What looks like a simplification of the “social reproduction” is, in fact, the pillar of the distinction between pedigree students and normal students (Rivera, 2012).

According to Bourdieu's “Distinction” published in the mid-eighty’s, the concept of class struggle extends to the domains of taste and lifestyle, highlighting that symbolic categorization plays a pivotal role in perpetuating class privileges. Dominant groups assert the superiority of their own culture in this context, effectively exerting “symbolic violence.” In essence, they impose a particular meaning as the norm while obscuring the power dynamics that underpin its influence.

On one hand, individuals need the capacity to distinguish themselves from others by utilizing criteria related to their community and a sense of shared belonging within their group. On the other hand, for an objective collective identity to take shape, this internal process of identification must be acknowledged and validated by outsiders (Lamont et al, 2015).

It becomes apparent how, even among graduates of the same universities, individuals from the most privileged backgrounds tend to secure the highest-paying positions. This phenomenon, coined in the USA, is often associated with the concept of “pedigree,” which serves as a byname used by elite firms to assess a job candidate's accomplishment track record. “Pedigree” has long been regarded as a highly desirable, if not indispensable, attribute in job applicants. Substantial personal accomplishments are seen as proof of the

applicant's intelligence, dedication to success, and strong work ethic. Employers view pedigree as a quality stemming solely from an individual's effort and abilities.

Social class plays a significant role in shaping how individuals assess and are assessed by others during daily social interactions. This is largely due to the visual aspects associated with class. Consequently, class has an impact on the selection of friends, neighbors, life partners, and, arguably, even new employees (Rivera, 2012).

In her paper, Rivera explained the importance of having a “pedigree” in the process of résumé screening by firm recruiters. Firstly, evaluators took a first look at school prestige or, better, whether or not each student had an elite school in his or her résumé; as a result, Rivera herself stated: “participants overwhelmingly equated university prestige with intelligence”. Other factors which indicated the associateness between a student and the so called “pedigree” include, but are not limited to, the physical appearance of each candidate, the efficiency of their communication skills, and extra-curricular activities. In fact, in terms of extracurricular commitment, the role of “high status” becomes very clear in assessing the differences between students who would privilege activities as a result of personal interest rather than a professional one; the former was, in fact, “associated with white, upper and upper-middle-class culture” (Rivera, 2015).

However, it's important to note that the original definition of the term "pedigree" is closely associated with privilege based on inheritance, quite literally signifying one's "ancestral lineage." The central argument of this dissertation is, indeed, that hiring decisions that may initially appear to be solely based on individual merit are, in reality, subtly but significantly influenced by the socioeconomic backgrounds of each applicant.

In past times, the perpetuation of elite status often took the form of parents passing control of companies or family wealth to their adult offspring. In today's context, the transmission of economic privilege from one generation to the next tends to be more indirect, primarily operating through the educational system. Higher education has evolved into one of the foremost drivers of social stratification and economic disparity. Approximately 80 percent of individuals born into families within the top quartile of household incomes achieve bachelor's degrees, whereas a mere 10 percent of those hailing from the bottom quartile manage to reach the same goal (Alberini et al, 2016).

Hence, once we fully analyze the North American context, it easily assessed how, given the extremely elevated costs of attending a university institution in the USA, the economic resources of parents represent the biggest criteria on which the choice is made: many lower-status and lower-income talented students will not apply to prestigious colleges because of the high costs associated with the tuition of such schools. Once such natural selection is carried through, it becomes evident how students who graduate from prestigious or elite schools, will inevitably have a “pedigree”.

Although the American society's structure is not the same as the Italian one, it is not far from it. The United States and Italy differ in various aspects, including their approaches to public and private investments, population demographics, national financial debt, and government expenditures.

Thus, the concept of “pedigree” cannot be easily extended to the very strong differences between attending a public or private university. Recent research has robustly illustrated the significance of advanced education in

driving socio-economic development, reducing poverty, raising incomes, promoting employment, eradicating child labor, and advancing gender equality. The intensifying competition and globalization of economic activities, the rapid acceleration of technological and scientific knowledge, the information revolution, and, more recently, the global economic downturn all serve to amplify the importance of education and training. These factors prepare individuals for future employment, enhance skills to facilitate greater workplace mobility, and serve as the cornerstone for wealth creation and economic development by nurturing human capital formation.

Certainly, economic theory underscores the positive impact of targeted investments, both public and private, when they contribute to the enhancement of average human capital. In this context, within a well-rounded socio-economic framework, public expenditure should incentivize private investments, including the investments made by households in the education of their children. Therefore, in a highly competitive and multifaceted system, such as that found in Western countries, it becomes imperative to foster a harmonious and mutually supportive relationship among various education levels, integrating public and private institutions where appropriate. This integration can become particularly relevant when specific types of private institutions, equipped with greater autonomy, are capable of creating tailor-made educational programs identified as beneficial to the broader national context (Jewel, 2008).

In the United States, education is viewed as a private investment that individuals and their families choose to support voluntarily if they can afford it, with the aim of capitalizing on it through higher future income. In this country, the demand for private education corresponds to a private supply, where even public schools and universities operate within a market-oriented framework. Consequently, there exists a competition among institutions not necessarily based on the quality of education they provide but rather on the perceived prestige associated with attending a well-known institution as opposed to a lesser known one. This competition is primarily driven by institutions that have the means and resources to attract renowned professors, researchers, or benefactors (Odoardi, 2011).

On the other hand, in Italy, education is constitutionally guaranteed and is considered a right for citizens, often accompanied by government financial assistance. This fundamental difference leads to a misconception about higher education institutions, with people generally not feeling the need to opt for private schools over public ones.

In conclusion, while data might suggest some similarities between the U.S. and Italy, the actual situation differs significantly. In the United States, education has transformed into a commodified service and is subject to market dynamics, whereas in Italy, it remains a fundamental right.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Gender and status in the labor market: a tradeoff**

Although the last decades have undeniably led to a diversification in the workforce by the increase of integration of female workers, both in lower-level and upper-level jobs, this section will focus on analyzing the extent to which such discriminations still appear in many firms' hiring processes. Gender inequalities are hidden in normalcy and are not easy to demonstrate, as they operate mostly when "amalgamated with other dispositions of power and privileges" (Jewel, 2008). Men workers, independently of the social status and class affiliation, earn more than their female counterparts. This is true for both high-status and lower-class working women.

Pierre Bourdieu's work has mostly been "sexually" organized, as it finds its center in nature itself; its premises are sexual differences, gendered habitus, and sex identity (Jewel, 2008). His work has, in fact, never really challenged the role of gender in society, as the natural differences between male and women are taken "as given, basic and common across time and cultures" (Jewel, 2008). In a sense, he failed to recognize - or he underestimated - the presence of a gender bias in most social processes.

Within the context of formal education, there is some evidence indicating that indicators of a higher social class position may offer greater advantages for women in terms of academic performance and achievement, though the precise mechanisms driving these effects remain somewhat uncertain. Gender serves as a significant status attribute that influences perceptions of competence (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). However, in the context of hiring assessments, women often receive less favorable ratings compared to their male counterparts. Considering these biases and the historical underrepresentation of women in high-status managerial and professional roles, it's possible that demonstrating indications of a higher social class carries greater significance for women than it does for men in elite job markets. The prestigious identity associated with a higher social class may serve as a counterbalance to the lower-status identity of being female, which is considered as being part of a minority (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

Nevertheless, a high-status woman with a higher-class background could potentially face the negative effects of such distinction when applying for a job; in fact, as psychological research has shown, most recruiters base their evaluations of two distinct criteria: competence and warmth (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). Such distinction, however, is the first step in the creation of a dilemma: on one hand, high-class applicants may be rated as having more "competence" than their lower-class opponents, with no relevant difference between males and females, mainly because of their educational background and the previously analyzed concept of "pedigree". On the other hand, "warmth" is the factor which highly discriminates women against men: once again, a higher-class background is often associated with being more distant and, thus, "colder" with respect to lower-class individuals. Such tradeoff between competence and warmth does not really disadvantage male applicants (Frisk et al., 2012); rather, it represents a weak point in the evaluation of high-

status women, as they are perceived as “less committed to intensive careers than men” (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

Joan Acker, sociologist, and writer of the “Theory of Gendered Organizations” in 1990, coined the term “ideal worker” while referring to the stereotype of the perfect professional figure as being totally devoted to work. Yet, women do not fit such description because of the external perception that they are not as committed to work as their male counterpart. Having higher-class upbringings becomes then a disadvantage for a woman.

This dilemma does not really arise when discussing the discrimination bias with respect to lower-class applicants, both male and female. In fact, in that scenario, recruiters based their decisions mainly on the “fit” of the applicant to their firm. This can be explained by applying the organization theory, which shows how each firm’s status is strongly based on the status of each of the entities and workers the firm affiliates with. Although most people may agree that “having status is better than not having any” (Lynn et al., 2012), it is crucial to understand the mechanisms behind the creation of advantages or disadvantages of having status: the signaling mechanism provides that, under uncertainty, status is assumed by external parties who rely mainly on observable characteristics. Aside from this first criterion, status can also underly a privileged position in terms of “confidence”. Hence, not having status is a disadvantage for both male and female applicants.

All the information above is true and has been shown and analyzed by many sociologists and research over the last forty to sixty years; however, in this day and age, it is important to highlight those stereotypes of any “traditional gender role” are more entrenched in individuals with lower cultural capital. Hence, as we grow and evolve into a more fluid and genderless labor market, both man and women will benefit from the greater and richer pool of opportunities and culture capital.

### **3.1: Gender bias in an élite labor market: law firms**

The legal profession is considered, both in the US and Italy, as being an “élite” profession. Although a law degree is universally recognized as being a challenging degree, once obtained, recruiters will put that awareness aside to focus on choosing the perfect candidate for their firm. In fact, while women now account for almost half of law school students, only 20 percent of legal firm partners are women (American Bar Association, 2014).

Moreover, the legal profession labor market is considered as an interesting setting to conduct an analysis on how social status and gender intercept. It has been widely demonstrated how persistent gender bias is in law firms (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016), with inequalities being more present in the upper levels of each organization. Legal education, in this sense, creates a fertile ground for inequalities in the profession, as it increases the perception of the role of a legal profession being an upper-class profession (Jewel, 2008).

Although some evidence shows that higher-class women benefit more from their social class position than their male counterpart in terms of school and university performance, in hiring evaluations women are rated significantly less than men (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). The explanation is to be found in the difference

between social status and identity status: while the former depicts the economic and cultural prestige of the higher classes, mostly composed of employees of elite job markets, the latter represents the social weight of a single individual. In this regard, a woman benefits more from her social status because of the already lower identity status affiliated with being female.

When applying for a job in an elite labor market, higher-class men are viewed as more committed than the respective female applicant. Interestingly, higher-class women are at the bottom of this ranking, scoring a lower level of commitment than lower-status women. Generally, although lower-class applicants are less likely to receive the job offer because of how low their “fit” with the firm is with respect to higher-class candidates, the only individual who truly benefits from his social status and social identity is the upper-class male (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016); the female social identity thus creates a disadvantage which is counterbalanced by the higher-class signals, ending in a nonexistent effect on women with higher status backgrounds.

In view of these dynamics, it becomes clear how most recruiters and evaluators incur in a form of “anticipatory discrimination” (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016), which penalizes high status women not for their actual condition or work ethic, but rather for the expected level of commitment they are perceived to have with respect to a high-level job position. This condition is worsened if the woman applicant is also a mother or if she displays signals of motherhood; while the anticipation of motherhood may increase the “warmth” of the female candidate, it drastically lowers the overall perceived level of commitment, which is considered to be the main criterion, alongside status, that divides future employees from simple candidates (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

The processes described above give us an insight, although it is important to make a clarification: such discrepancies are more noticeable when comparing job candidates whose education is not considered as coming from elite school; in fact, class discrimination may appear as nonexistent when comparing the interactions among applicants of elite schools. In that scenario, recruiters do not really consider the status as a variable, but rather as a given, as it is likely that all elite students have similar family background (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). Class discrimination is more evident when comparing graduates with equal academic and extracurricular competences but from different level schools because, while high-class students come with a pedigree, low-class graduates do not have the possibility to show their quality other than by academic excellence. Moreover, class discrimination may start before recruiters’ discrimination, because low-status applicants may opt themselves out of the possibility of applying for an elite job position; they might consider their academic performances as not being enough because of their educational institutions.

These mechanisms do not really apply to gender discrimination; if on one hand high-class women account for half of the pool of candidates for an elite job position, they are viewed as likely to leave their position in the firm, thus their level of perceived commitment is lower than their low-class female counterpart. Once again, such stereotype does not match the reality of the available data, which shows that high value educated women are “more likely than working-class women to remain in the labor force” (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

Many firms and many evaluators would not consider “diversity” as a framework, in fact most recruiters and top managers would consider job interviews as being as equal as they can be, but this general approach only works out in favor of pedigree graduates, while simultaneously “paving the way for gender and racial biases”. In facts, gender stereotypes are the main drivers of gender bias, which can be found in the perceived level of abilities of men and women (for instance, women are considered as less quantitatively skilled than men), level of commitment, of work continuity and of the overall dedication of women to the firm, always considered as being lower than the commitment and dedication of men (Rivera, 2015).

On a more positive note, however, it has been shown how, although there is no equal gender representation at the top-level job positions of the law labor market (for instance, there are not as many JDS women partner as there are men), a new generation of freshly hired professional women is ought to positively influence gender stereotypes, from entry-level jobs and up to partner ranks positions.

### **3.2: How gender adds up to the discrimination equation**

The labor market is far from being perfectly “equal” and “fair”. In Italy, the principle of equity has gone through a revolution, which has been hindered by many factors, such as sex, religion, culture, social conventions, politics and, generally, by a mixture of all (Maniaci et al., 2015). Although women are not considered part of a minority, their status has always been that of a subordinate group, which has always been disadvantaged in the labor market.

Unjust treatment in the hiring process on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, wealth, social status, religion etc. is not always easy to assess, although much research has been able to create a model which gives us an idea of how different discriminations weight in in the discrimination equation. For instance, it has been proven how applicants from minority groups receive, on average, one third fewer positive responses to their applications than their majority counterparts (Baert et al., 2023).

Cultural reproduction is at the base of these discriminations, as it paves the road for cultural matching in the hiring process of many firms; the main goal of interviewing a possible candidate shifts from it being a mere evaluation of technical skills required for the job, to it being a true matching process between the firm, the recruiter, and the candidate. The main drivers of this process are the observable and unobservable similarities between the parties involved. (Rivera, 2012). Such commonalities among evaluators and candidates go beyond the impactful “sex and race” factors; they are not rooted in what is seen, but rather in what is perceived, such as culture and values.

The selection process portrayed above is, on one hand, a vehicle for diversity and representation of generally underrepresented groups - such as ethnic minorities - as it is depicted as based on the match of cultural signals, personality and out-of-office interests; on the other hand, the selection of new hires may reinforce the pre-existing social inequalities between lower and higher status social classes, hence reiterating in the exclusion of candidates who do not “fit” in the dominant social group (Rivera, 2012).

As part of the “discrimination equation”, many minority groups encounter several obstacles in the recruiting process, more than any white, male, able-bodied counterpart. Gender discrimination is still heavily present in both western and eastern cultures, although it has been in the spotlight for the last couple of decades. However, as the topics of immigration and ethnicity become instilled in our day-to-day conversations, it is important to highlight the “ethnic penalties” (Auer et al., 2018), meaning the disadvantages that immigrants incur into despite their skills and competences being the same as their native counterparts.

What we know today as the “Cultural Reproduction”, is in fact a system of reproduction of inequality which becomes institutionalized, creating systematic discriminatory practices at the expenses of minority groups (Auer et al., 2018).

The evaluators’ psychological processes that occur during the assessment of a possible candidate are not easy to understand, although their decisions are usually preceded by one of two mechanisms: firstly, recruiters tend to assess the nationality – in terms of a specific ethnic society and hierarchy - of each applicant in order to contextualize social distance, work attitudes and work morale (Auer et al., 2018). This process creates, of course, stereotypical perceptions on the weight of specific foreign societies with respect to the domestic one.

The second mechanism that may affect employers’ hiring decisions is the anticipation of the possible match between the foreign candidate and the job hierarchy, meaning how “prestigious” a job is with respect to the social status of that specific occupation (Auer et al., 2018). While the former may lead to an erroneous association between a minority group and their expected productivity, which will favor national applicants at the detriment of immigrant applicants, the latter will mostly create a vicious circle caused by a “downward social mobility and status loss” (Auer et al., 2018), meaning that immigrant candidates will accept unattractive jobs as a direct response to the exclusion from prestigious jobs, thus losing even more social status and distancing themselves from the society of the country they live in.

Once the concept of ethnic discrimination is added up to the concept of gender discrimination, the resulting equation is not the reflection of an “equal” and “just” society, but rather the fruit of centuries of misogyny and xenophobia. For instance, many employers would consider immigrant women as “ideal workers” for many low-wage and high-effort jobs because of their “compliance” (Auer et al., 2018).

Although many recruiters and human resources managers could agree that employees’ heterogeneity is, among others, a priority for their firms, it is also clear how hiring processes truly gravitate around cultural similarity. Hence, while applicants’ pools may appear as fully diverse in terms of gender, race, demography, etc., such heterogeneity is not as evident when observing the group of new hires, which most likely expresses a deeper-level homogeneity in terms of cultural values (Rivera, 2012). So why is there such a discrepancy between what is sought out to be a priority, and what occurs during daily operations?

The main explanation lies in the concept of matching: on one hand, recruiters ought to look for a “perfect fit” for the firm they represent, as they are fully aware of management’s expectations and the overall pool of existing employees; on the other hand, evaluators’ personal experiences often shape the course of a



job interview, influencing the assessment of each candidate by determining “merit” on a personal spectrum, rather than on a broader and more professional level (Rivera, 2012). Trying to find the “perfect fit” reinforces the pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities and biases in the evaluation of a candidate, and it also reiterates in the search for specific human characteristics, which are not taught in school but are rather inherited from the previous high-class generation of *élite jobs’* employees (Rivera, 2015).

In conclusion, cultural reproduction as explained by Bourdieu acts as a frontrunner for our analysis. In many ways, merit is not an objective and self-revealing criterion for job candidates; rather, it is pre-determined and assessed on the basis of the dominant group’s attributes and on what the high-status social class reinforces through the educational system and, ultimately, through the job market.

## CHAPTER 4

### **The pioneer of our experiment: Lauren Rivera's Sociological Review**

The analysis carried out in the previous chapters had the objective of laying the foundations for the argument of this thesis: demonstrating how discriminatory biases play a role in the hiring processes of many firms linked (but not limited) to the legal job market in Italy.

Previous sociological research, both theoretical and practical, tried to measure discrimination in the labor market through the analysis of subjective experiences (interviews, survey data, etc.); if on one hand this methodical approach represented the first attempt to quantify and categorize the most relevant discriminatory biases in the labor market, on the other it presented many limitations which acted as a deterrent to the full understanding of the complexity of discriminatory practices in many job markets, mainly because it omitted the concept of a dominant social group which inevitably lowered the reliability of the research itself, as well as a lack of practical testing in real-life work settings (Adamovic, 2020).

The application of a résumé study represents a new milestone in the analysis of the same phenomena while considerably reducing the number of uncontrollable variables which could jeopardize the findings of the experiment (Adamovic, 2020). Despite its design being considered as robust, its application is not as common among human resources management and organizational psychology; we believe that the implementation of these strategies could improve the quality of human resources departments among firms in all job markets and it could significantly reduce the probability of incurring in discriminatory acts from recruiters and CV evaluators.

Our experiment has been inspired and has been designed on the basis of Lauren Rivera's sociological research of 2016, in which she analyzed the above-mentioned phenomena in the North American law firms' job market by gathering information on how recruiters and evaluators conduct their operations when receiving résumés from potential candidates. Her research, as well as ours, stems from the need to further investigate the extent to which differences in social class and economic privileges affect each individual's life not only in education, but also in employment. In fact, while shaping the cultural reproduction process of new generations, social class and status also influence the job market by predetermining the fundamental characteristics of the future ruling class; in a way, this process creates "barriers to entry" that are hard to overcome, hence reinforcing the idea of "merit" which, following Bourdieu's beliefs, is more of an ideological concept rather than our current reality. Despite Rivera's study being helpful in understanding discrimination at different levels, our research focuses on the analysis of two main biases: status and gender and the combination of both.

Although such theory is applicable to many labor contexts, this dissertation looks for discriminatory biases in the same elite job market in Italy: law firms. Rivera's job market choice is not fortuitous, as it gives an insight on hiring practices in a very high-wage and prestigious career market while also representing an interesting context in which to observe how the intersection of social class indicators and human characteristics influence the determination of inequalities (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

The methodical approach of her study consists of different stages, from a theoretical planning step to a practical representation and a final action plan, all based on the creation of fictitious résumés of different potential candidates randomly applying for entry-level jobs in law firms. The notional résumés are all randomly assigned different social status signals, as well as class backgrounds and gender, all carefully studied and chosen in the first stage of the research, and all aimed at the creation of a specific perception of each candidate. If on one hand this method guarantees “more direct causal evidence than do observational data” (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016), it also emulates real life human characteristics and employers’ behaviors in hiring processes. For the purpose of Rivera’s study, specific information has been adapted to all candidates: Law school, undergraduate institution, experience and cover letters were the same notwithstanding all other characteristics.

Some limitations may arise from the application of this method in our research: first, we only focus on white-collar high-skilled jobs - such as legal trainees and advisors - hence omitting blue-collar and low-skilled jobs, whose job market is much different and contains social aspects not analyzed in this dissertation (Adamovic, 2020). Secondly, we only report results with respect to discrimination in the first stages of a recruiting process consisting of the visual analysis of a curriculum vitae, withholding the possibility of said biases acting in subsequent steps of the hiring process, such as in-person interviews.

Although we will go into more details about our experiment and its results in the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation, in the following fourth chapter we will understand how our study has been widely inspired by Rivera’s in many ways while still pointing out the main differences which arise from the discrepancies between Italy and the U.S. both from a geographical-logistical and cultural point of view.

#### **4.1: School choice**

An essential element of each applicant’s résumé is the choice of the educational institutions. To better analyze educational-background discrimination, Rivera manipulated the school variable by assigning different undergraduate schools to candidates, thus giving a first idea of social-class adherence, while keeping the same law school for all graduates. The high school choice in our study was driven from the collection on information on each school’s reputation such as the neighborhood and the overall household income of students. This approach follows the guidelines on Rivera’s study, while keeping the Italian cultural mindset which is crucial to preserve the credibility of the résumés at the eyes of Italian recruiters and evaluators.

In this segment, differences between Italy and the U.S become apparent, and they originate from geographical characteristics; in fact, in terms of education, both graduate and undergraduate institutions in Rivera’s experiment are adapted to each firm’s geographical location. This decision evidently responds to the issue of the considerable size of the U.S: choosing the same schools regardless of location could act as a deterrent for north American recruiters which “might dismiss applications from students who attend a law school far outside their geographical area” (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). Thus, the educational institution choice for Rivera

depended both on reputation and geographic proximity to law firm, while our choice was mostly based on reputation and general perception of the institutions.

Other than location, another important aspect is the “quality” of the selected law school, as it itself acts as a status indicator of social class adherence; to overcome this bias (which will be evaluated through different signals), the choice falls on “second tier” law schools (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016) which are considered as having both a high enough valuation of the institution while also allowing the candidates’ pool to be of a reasonable size. Selecting a more exclusive school would pre-empt the purpose of the study by denting the generalizability of the population by income segmentation (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016); only picking super-élite schools would automatically mean only picking students with a pedigree, namely students with high household income, while also overlooking the concept of education parity.

Our résumé audit study presents some differences from Rivera’s study: we overlooked the concept of proximity, as we chose the same university for all four of our fictitious curricula vitae. Such omission stems from the relatively smaller size of Italy with respect to the U.S, as well as the feasibility to travel from the city in which the chosen university is located – Rome – and the two selected cities in which law firms are located – Milan and Rome. As of today, the possibility of moving and travelling from Rome to Milan is in fact easier and faster than ever. With the advent of high-speed rail, in a span of ten years, the number of trains operated per kilometer has doubled in the Italian territory, going from approximately 35 million in 2008 to over 70 million in 2018. The number of passengers transported on the high-speed trains increased from 6.5 million in 2008 to 40 million in 2018, marking a remarkable 517% growth. (FS Italiane, Press Release, 2019) Moreover, the university of choice of our study is not necessarily considered as a second-tier institution, mainly because Italian universities are divided between statal and private universities; all other differences which may arise are only based on general ranking and personal preferences as well as on perception rather than on objectively recognized variations. Hence, they will not be taken into consideration in our analysis. In fact, we chose one of the biggest and most heterogeneous school among statal universities in Rome: La Sapienza University. Of all the large state universities in Italy (namely, universities with more than 40,000 enrolled students), the Sapienza University of Rome ranks third overall, making it a good enough and gender-various enough university to use in our experiment (Fondazione Censis, 2023).

However, both our résumé audit study and Rivera’s study are only feasible if some factors are upheld: firstly, graduates must all have the same educational level, same degree grade (*summa cum laude*), same skills and competences. Since graduating from second tier schools (with respect to top-level prestigious private universities), students have less probability to be hired solely based on their academic background, which makes it crucial for our candidates to have stellar academic results in order to be considered as potential new hires (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). Secondly, they all must have professional experience and extracurricular activities related to their degree; in each curriculum vitae the former variable only differed in terms of legal office name and in minor variation in activities and tasks, while the former depended on the chosen social status background each résumé was chosen to have. Thirdly, each candidate also had his or her own cover

letter to support the application; it included a general summary of the information present in the résumé, as well as positive reinforcements that highlighted the overall optimistic spirit of each applicant. Cover letters are very common and are almost required when applying for highly skilled job positions (Adamovic, 2020). Lastly, both our research and Rivera's study were decided to omit the variable of physical appearance generally tied to the integration of a picture in the CV; in Italy, many résumés present a profile picture in the first page of the curriculum vitae, which gave immediate indications on both gender and physical appearance. To avoid looming in further unaccountable biases, and although it being fairly common in Italy (less in the U.S), we decided to withhold such information.

## 4.2: Law firms

As part of the audit, one of the first steps provided the creation of an employers' database. In Rivera's study, the sample of employers was directly drawn from the web based NALP Directory of Legal Employers, a publicly available online database of office-specific law firms in the United States. From this database, Rivera was able to map 316 legal offices located in 14 U.S. cities, belonging to 147 different law firms. The sampled offices also provided starting salary, gender ratios, number of partners and of associates, as well as recruiters' contact information (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

In Italy such directory does not exist, hence our collection is mostly internet-based; none of the above-mentioned information is usually publicly available in Italy, and the only relevant information accessible was the number of employees and potential open job positions in the firm. This difference could hinder the quality of the study, as it prevents us from analyzing the composition of legal offices at a deeper level.

Another difference between Rivera's study and ours can be found in the application procedures: in on one hand, Rivera's employers' pool also encompassed the modalities to submit applications, which were the same for all law firms and legal offices; this substantially facilitated and expedited the application process, once again guaranteeing uniformity and consistency all throughout the experiment. On the other hand, however, the information available to us was mostly inconsistent among legal offices and law departments, as each firm provided different terms and conditions on how to apply to open job positions; some legal offices had their own website pages through which the application had to be sent, following the registration of a personal account and the filling out of online forms with personal information, while other offices' websites did not provide any "immediate" procedure through which to send an application – sometimes as a result of unavailability of open job positions - so it was necessary to send a spontaneous application by e-mail to the head of the legal office or, if that information was available, to the head recruiter partner of the firm.

It becomes evident how these different application methods could easily lower the quality of the collected final data; however, we overcame such prospective challenge by sending job applications proportionately to offices with open positions and career-dedicated websites with respect to spontaneous applications through e-mail addresses created *ad hoc*.

### 4.3: Rivera's résumé study results

Coherently with the assumptions made from previous literature research, Rivera's study results exhibited very strong distribution biases. The high-class male applicant's callback rates were significantly higher than the callback rates of the other candidates: 16.25 percent against the 3.83 percent rate obtained by summing all other candidates' rates. The percentage of the high-status male is four times the percentage of the high-status female, low status male and low status female candidates. These results, despite being perfectly in line with the expectations, are startling considering that all four candidates all had the same academic and professional characteristics listed in their résumés (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

This result indicates both social status and gender bias, as well as the bias originating from the interaction between the two terms. Higher-class signals significantly increased the probability of receiving a call back from a legal firm for the male applicant, while they were associated with a relatively small decrease in the rate of call back for the high-class woman applicant. Such striking difference simply reflects the interaction between gender and status that we analyzed in the third chapter of this dissertation, confirming the thesis that higher-status women are penalized from the social class indicators rather than being rewarded. The main cause of this discrepancy is the perception of "commitment" that high-status women receive from recruiters and evaluators, with their level of dedication being viewed as lower with respect to lower-status women (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

When observing the single interaction between high-status and low-status male, Rivera's experiment shows no evidence that the former candidate is more competent or committed than the latter, meaning that warmth and commitment – two basic dimensions of social judgment – are not responsible for the differences in the final results of the résumé audit. The same can be said about the other interaction analyzed, the within-gender perceived bias: male and female of each social status category did not receive significantly different results only based on their gender. Hence, the crucial interaction which led to the most substantial differences is to be found in the gender-status equation.

Following Rivera's quantitative findings, we can suggest that recruiters are more likely to view high-class women through the lenses of a gender stereotype than their lower-class counterpart; evaluators and human resources employees fall into the trap of discriminating high-status women in a pre-emptive way rather than in response to actual and proven indicators (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). High class women are penalized for their potential "family arrangements" or "external commitments", which lower the expectations of recruiters with respect to potential commitment to the job position.

Rivera's experiment does not only give us an answer to the question of discrimination in the job market, but it also gives us a model to evaluate future distribution of top-level positions in both private firms and other élite positions in society, such as judicial or political roles (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016).

Despite it being based on U.S. society and job-market, Lauren Rivera's résumé audit study can help us formulate the thesis that in most developed western countries, hiring processes are not classless and genderless;

gender-status biases are not easily accountable when observing real life interactions between recruiters and possible candidates, as they are deeply enrooted in our perception, which unavoidably leads to a flawed distribution of job opportunities both at the entry-level and top-level positions of a firm.

## CHAPTER 5

### Our field experiment

Bourdieu's cultural reproduction of dominant social groups theory introduced the concept of "pedigree" in reference to students who come from families with high-status and high economic backgrounds. Literature research and the observation of previously conducted studies and audits allowed us to formulate the thesis on which this dissertation is based upon: the interaction between two important discriminatory biases, namely gender and social status, leads to an unbalanced distribution of job opportunities in elite job markets – such as the legal job market – thus ultimately resulting in flawed distribution of income in most western societies.

Despite it being the benchmark of our research, it is important to highlight that Rivera's work provides useful insights when analyzing the U.S. job market's hiring processes while still not arising as a general and an absolute theory covering the same phenomena in all western countries; for this reason, our study stems from the necessity to observe and measure the extent to which the same discriminatory biases influence hiring processes and CV screening procedures in the Italian legal job market.

The legal labor market in Italy is knowingly filled with bureaucratic pitfalls: after five years of university, law graduates must undergo a period of at least 18 months of forensic traineeship (usually underpaid or even non-salaried), which then gives them the possibility of taking the state exam (the Italian equivalent of the Bar exam in the U.S.) consisting of two theoretical tests. Upon passing said exam, law graduates officially become lawyers. The process to become a lawyer thus requires a minimum of six and a half years, hence highlighting how, without the adequate financial support, many aspiring lawyers are cut out of the pool of future attorneys simply because of their economic background. However, for those who manage to complete the entire academic path to become a legal counselor, the road may still be uphill once entering the job market. This reality is the reason behind this study: we want to understand how to recognize and ultimately eradicate discriminatory biases connected to the general labor market and, specifically, to the legal job market.

#### 5.1: Theoretical planning stage

Due to the broad nature of the study, a preemptive literature search was crucial to better understand the origins of both discriminatory biases and, more generally, of inequalities in the selection process of many job markets. In order to create strong theoretical foundations, we studied and laid out Bourdieu's view of "merit" and explained the three axioms of his cultural reproduction theory, which allowed us to fully understand how dominant groups keep their hegemony by guaranteeing their presence in the most relevant societal roles, starting from the educational institutions and up to the top-level workforce. In this sense, when discussing the concept of "class adherence", we refer to the analysis of class going beyond the mostly superficial categorizing of individuals of a society into predefined groups like the working class, the middle class, and the upper class. Instead, it is based on the assessment of a person's class belongingness by studying not only the amount and



nature of their capital, but also the duration for which they have possessed that specific capital, namely the consistency overtime of staying in a particularly elevated social group. “Habitus” is a strong cultural heritage, not easily eradicated from society, hence the need for practical research becomes evident as a tool to lower discriminatory practices in both education and job markets (Jewel, 2008).

Other than Bourdieu’s analysis of economic, social and cultural resources, our experiment has found its theoretical foundations in many previous studies on discrimination in recruitment – which presented results coherent with our own findings – as well as in studies set to find the enrooted cultural disadvantages on minority groups penalized by the constant application of an erroneous hiring methods; new-hires selection processes are, in fact, mostly looked as a spasmodic research for the “perfect fit” that ticks all the boxes of requisites imposed by top-level human resources management, hence fortifying the idea of hiring practices viewed more as a cultural matching between intrinsic cultural characteristics of both the candidate and the recruiter, rather than an objective analysis of each applicant’s potential contributions to the firm purely based on their academic and professional achievements, free from prejudices and stereotypes (Rivera, 2012). Despite it being a utopian image of society, genderless and status-free job markets and opportunities, as well as education institutions, could efficiently allocate resources in every country’s job markets, more than present’s day level of efficiency, aiming at lowering income stratification of classes and, consequently, lowering the gap between upper classes and lower classes.

Although it being a strongly felt current topic, discrimination in the workforce has only been examined and studied in the last decade, hence the amount of available literature material is gaunt, and there exist very few Italian analysis which could be used to strengthen our thesis. However, we believe that the existing studies – and especially résumé studies – despite not being constructed on the Italian society, allow us to apply the same research and application methods to our social structure, and we believe this dissertation could strongly deepen a conversation which is always addressed superficially by both our politically- representative groups and the general media.

Once the formulation of thesis of this dissertation has been completed, the following step provides the choice of the most appropriate research method. Rivera’s sociological review inspired us to proceed with a résumé study, as it gives the most reliable data and overall truthful results with respect to laboratory or artificial studies, as it allows us to investigate discriminatory biases in a real context such as the élite environment of legal job markets in Italy.

This research technique stipulated the creation of four fictitious CVs: one for the upper-class male, one for the upper-class female, one for the lower-class male and one for the lower-class female. By applying this method, we were able to select a number of variables we decided to keep constant among all four profiles: age, education level, city, degree grade and university, soft and hard skills, and the number of professional and extracurricular activities. On the other hand, we decided to control and manipulate other variables to give specific indications on the class adherence of each candidate.

Such variables are: first name and family name, neighborhood of residence, high school, hobbies – in terms of musical instrument played – and lastly, sports played. To understand the general public’s perception of these class indicators, we conducted a pretest using an online survey using the platform Prolific, in which we asked individuals to rate, on a Likert scale, their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements related to the variables we decided to manipulate. Thus, the Likert scale range captured the intensity of participants’ feelings for a given question, asking them to scale each item presented in the answer on a ranking of 0 to 5 (0 being “I associate it to very low class” and 5 being “I associate it to very high class”). With respect to the neighborhood of residence, we chose to ask participants how they would evaluate 15 of the most famous neighborhoods in Rome in order to better understand which ones to use in our fictitious résumés.

**Table 1**

<p>Per ciascuno dei seguenti quartieri della città di Roma, indichi in che misura ritiene che questi si associano ad uno status sociale basso o elevato.</p> <p>Esprima il suo giudizio muovendo il cursore sulla scala Likert a 5 punti: punteggio “0” corrisponde a “classe sociale bassa” ed il punteggio “5” corrisponde a “classe sociale alta”.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Parioli</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Trieste</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Centro Storico</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Tiburtina</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Cencocelle</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Prenestina</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Flaminio</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Prati</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Casal Bertone</li> <li><input type="radio"/> EUR</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Magliana</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Olgiate</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Collina Fleming</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Garbatella</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Tor Pignattara</li> </ul>

From the findings related to the statement of table 1, we found that participants rated the Parioli and Centro Storico neighborhoods as the most representative of a high social class student, whereas the neighborhoods most associated to lower-class individuals were found to be Centocelle and Magliana. These results helped us insert the first manipulated variables in the CV of each candidate: the high-class male was set to be resident in Parioli, the high-class female was set to be resident in the Centro Storico, while their lower-class counterparts were resident respectively in Magliana and Centocelle.

The second set of signals we studied were first and last name; these variables are very important, as they serve “as important indicator of social class” (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). Once again, our online survey helped us choose from a set of generic females’ first names very common in the city of Rome, and the options that participants had to grade are listed below.

**Table 2:**

<p>Per ciascuno dei seguenti nomi propri di persona di sesso femminile, indichi in che misura ritiene che questi si associano ad uno status sociale basso o elevato.</p> <p>Esprima il suo giudizio muovendo il cursore sulla scala Likert a 5 punti: punteggio “0” corrisponde a “classe sociale bassa” ed il punteggio “5” corrisponde a “classe sociale alta”.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/> Ludovica</li><li><input type="radio"/> Lucrezia</li><li><input type="radio"/> Lavinia</li><li><input type="radio"/> Augusta</li><li><input type="radio"/> Virginia</li><li><input type="radio"/> Ginevra</li><li><input type="radio"/> Costanza</li><li><input type="radio"/> Beatrice</li><li><input type="radio"/> Giulia</li><li><input type="radio"/> Francesca</li><li><input type="radio"/> Barbara</li><li><input type="radio"/> Consuelo</li><li><input type="radio"/> Giorgia</li><li><input type="radio"/> Martina</li><li><input type="radio"/> Sara</li></ul>

Table 2 shows a set of 15 Italian female first names, very common in the city of Rome, and among which our participants chose the two which represented the high and low class: Lavinia was found to be the first name most associated to a high-class individual in Rome. Hence, our first profile belonging to a highly economic background was called Lavinia and lived in the Centro Storico. On the other hand, the name that participants strongly associated to lower classes was Consuelo, which then enriched the profile of the low-status female candidate living in the neighborhood of Centocelle, situated in the southern part of the city of Rome.

The same approach was used to establish the identities of the male candidates, whose names were Tancredi for the high-status male and Antonio for the low-class male. The survey also helped us choose their families’ names: Lavinia, the high-class female candidate, had the last name “De Santis”, while Tancredi, the high-class male, had the last name “Mancini”; both family names, decided through the online survey

mentioned above, carry strong high-class connotations. For their low-status counterparts, the selected last names were “Valentini” for Consuelo, the low-status female candidate, and “Marini” for Antonio, the low-status male candidate; all four family names are of Italian origins, hence eliminating the ethnic bias, which we have purposely decided not to include in our study.

We completed the profile of each of our candidates using the survey’s results for each of the manipulated variables as follows:

**Table 3:**

	High Class	Low Class
Female	Name: Lavinia De Santis High school: Liceo Classico Sport: Equitazione Strumento musicale: Arpa	Name: Consuelo Valentini High school: Istituto tecnico Sport: Balli latino-americani Strumento musicale: Chitarra
Male	Name: Tancredi Mancini High School: Liceo Classico Sport: Equitazione Strumento musicale: Organo classico	Name: Antonio Marini High school: Istituto tecnico Sport: Calcio Strumento Musicale: Batteria

Table 3 shows how the four manipulated variables (name, high school type, sport, and musical instrument) are distributed among the four profiles following the general public’s perceptions of the social class indicators. Specifically, sport and music are considered as “lifestyle markers” (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016), hence their role is significant when considering the adherence of each candidate to a specific social class: “equitazione”, namely horse-riding in English, has very strong high-class connotations in Italy and more particularly in Rome, as it is a very expensive and resource-consuming sport; on the other side of the spectrum, “calcio” (soccer in English) and “balli latino-americani” (latin-american dance in English) are linked to much lower economic expenses and overall lower connotations. Despite sports being perceived as “more democratic than traditional highbrow cultural forms” (Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016), being able to participate in any athletic performance is a strong indicator of social class stratification. In fact, if soccer and latin-american are associated with lower economical barriers to entry, affluence towards horse-riding is strictly bound to individuals belonging to higher income households. The same concept also applies to music as Bourdieu’s culture reproduction of dominant groups’ theory suggested that it pertains to the sphere of “taste” and “distinction”; being able and to cultivate and exhibit aspects of upper-classes’ tastes, such as classical music or being able to play a classical music instrument such as the harp or the classical organ, is a clear signal of belonging to that specific group, which inevitably feeds into the mechanism of cultural matching hence, as we explained in the previous chapters, being an indication of discriminatory and biased hiring processes (Rivera, 2012). As Bourdieu explained, the variable items associated to higher classes are usually more time and energy-consuming with respect to those

pertaining to lower classes, indicating a higher availability to the cultivation of a leisure-centered hobby or passion.

The complete résumés represent the first part of the application of the theoretical framework of this study; however, once we have identified the job market and its location, as well as the discriminatory biases we want to analyze, we need to choose the level of the job positions we will apply for. In our study, as well as in Rivera's study, the selected category was entry-level job positions. For the purpose of our study, we created profiles of four newly graduated law students who are in search for a law firm or legal office willing to sponsor their forensic traineeship, which has to be thoroughly recognized by the Italian state. This decision stems from the inability to declare the registration to the Italian chamber of lawyers in our candidates' résumés, as it would also imply that our candidates have many years of experience, hence hindering the possibility of being hired for entry-level positions, besides the practical limitations linked to the publicly available list of all lawyers registered in the chamber of lawyers of each city in Italy. This choice, besides being a necessity aimed at preserving the ethics and morality of the experiment, also helps us maintain the CVs as general as possible without losing credibility.

## **5.2: Practical planning stage**

Once the theoretical stage of the study had been defined, the second step of the experiment provided the practical application of the information previously collected. Specifically, in this stage we established the number of applications we needed to send in order to obtain results which were as clear and as satisfying as possible. First, we mapped out all legal offices and law firms practicing in the territory of the city of Rome and Milan; as mentioned in the fourth chapter, one of the limitations we encountered, which also differentiates our study's layout from Rivera's, was the availability of a clear and complete database of legal offices and law firms in Italy. By law, the only requested database in Italy is the one mapping the qualified lawyers in each city. The presence of legal offices is not part of a database, so we had to create one purposely for our study by looking on Google and other search engines. Through the information available online, we were able to map out a total of 453 law firms, legal offices, and legal departments of big companies, 217 in Rome and 236 in Milan. We then divided these law firms and created three subgroups based on the number of employees of each office; firms with less than 15 employees were considered "small", firms with 15 to 40 employees were considered medium and firms with over than 40 employees were considered big. In total, we were able to map out 115 "small" legal offices, 109 "medium" offices and 158 "big" law firms. We decided to send job applications for both open job positions and spontaneous applications.

Each firm/office received two résumés, and they were distributed in "couple": we sent the CVs of candidates from the same social class but with opposite gender. Hence, Lavinia and Tancredi applied to the same firm, whereas Consuelo and Antonio applied to the same job openings. We also created cover letters to accompany spontaneous applications or to insert in career websites upon request, and the structure was similar for males alone and were similar in their structure for females. In order to maintain and guarantee the credibility of each

profile, we also created separate email accounts through which we sent all the spontaneous applications and on which we received most of what from here on will be referred to as a “callback”. We also added a phone number to each profile, using the same for the two females, and another one for the two males. Any form of contact we received, either by email or by phone call, was considered a callback. These contacts could be positive, in the case in which the recruiter asked to further investigate the profile of the selected candidate, or negative, in the case in which recruiters communicated a specific profile was not going to be taken into consideration for the future steps of the hiring processes. A lack of contact from evaluators – no email and no phone call - was decided to be considered as a negative callback.

In total, we sent out 794 applications, but we only received a total of 83 positive callbacks as a sum of all candidates’ callbacks. This means we only received 10.4% of callbacks. The remaining 89.6% of law firms and legal offices did not answer or did not find the profile as fit for the position. We will go more into detail about these findings in section 5.4 of this chapter.

Along with practical planning, this stage also highlighted some dilemmas in the ethics and morality of the experiment. On one hand, some may argue that conducting an experiment on individuals who are not aware they are being tested questions the ethics and morality of not asking for consent and permission, as well as the general time loss each recruiter had to incur into while examining a CV of a candidate who does not actually exist. However, as the need for this study became more and more persistent, the benefits of this résumé audit outweighed the disadvantages which arose from questioning the morality and integrity of the experiment. Concerns about the methodology could be balanced by future action undertaken by human resources organizations and top-level HR management, who could actively work to “reduce discrimination in employment in the future” (Adamovic, 2020).

Moreover, we established a timeline for the collection of the data. We planned two different rounds of application submissions: the first round started on May 12<sup>th</sup> 2023 and ended June 30<sup>th</sup> 2023, for a total of 7 weeks, while the second round started on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2023 and ended 7 weeks later, on September 9<sup>th</sup> 2023. Sticking to these timeframes was crucial to collect data in the most equal and organic way possible, so to significantly reduce uncontrollable variables. The time difference between the submission of an application and a callback (negative or positive) is not easily accountable for, as we did not dispose of any previously collected data, nor could we estimate the number of days or weeks between these two actions.

However, seven weeks represented the most appropriate deadline for both open job positions – which generally do not take as much time to hire a new employee to fill the vacant role – and spontaneous applications. Along with the other limitations we encountered as we defined the structure of the experiment, we believed that the probability of getting a callback for candidates whose application was received “before” than their female/male counterpart was higher, as recruiters were most likely to use their time and energy to find the right “fit” and right candidate as soon as possible.

We randomly assigned each law firm and legal office to each couple of candidates to avoid incurring in a distribution bias, and we sent out 202 applications for Lavinia, the high-class female candidate, 204

applications for Tancredi, the male counterpart, 193 submissions for Consuelo and 195 submissions for Antonio. The difference in the number of submissions arises from the random distribution of small legal offices to each candidate.

### **5.3: Action stage**

Through the course of the résumé audit, we decided to apply to job opportunities in a very specific way: we sent out two applications to each office by “couples”, meaning each female sent her application alongside her male counterpart. Despite it being one of Rivera’s most significant results, we decided not to analyze the gender-status interaction discriminatory bias directly, hence the decision to send out CVs as a couple for candidates with the same social class indicators. However, in the results we will see how the above-mentioned bias was partly present in our study as well.

As part of the action stage, we sent out applications in two specific timeframes, both of 7 weeks duration. We recorded each submission in an Excel spreadsheet, through which we conducted all following data analysis. For each law firm and legal office, we mapped out the name, the city, the size (namely, the number of employees), the candidate we randomly associated to each of the offices, the submission date as well as the feedback date, and the outcome (positive, negative, on hold), as well as the type of submission: spontaneous, in the case in which the specific firm or legal office did not have an open position available or did not provide the general public with information about career opportunities, and open in the case in which we found specific and entry-level openings.

After the résumés had been sent out, we recorded the responses received both by email and by phone call. We counted the positive and the negative responses for each candidate, and also established that a “no response” after the 7 weeks marks was going to be accounted for as a negative response. This stems from the awareness that, in many cases, recruiters do not take the time to inform applicants they have not been selected for the following steps of the hiring process, hence leaving all non-selected candidates with a non-response. It is important to track the responsiveness of each callback as it measures discriminatory practices from both a status and gender-bias point of view: while all candidates may potentially receive positive feedback, the rapidity with which each applicant receives it could indicate “preferences” with respect to specific categories of candidates, either status-wise or gender-wise. Previous studies and research only focused on the overall outcome of job submissions; if on one hand a positive callback represents a positive attempt to limit discriminatory biases, on the other it could conceal deeper forms of prejudice. For this reason, we believe the rate at which each candidate received positive feedback is very important and, as we will see in the following subchapter, truly correlates to the overall results of this study.

## 5.4: Results

Upon expiry of the established timeframe, we were able to collect data and formulate concrete and complete results of this résumé study. Overall, out of a total of 794 applications submitted, we only received 84 positive callbacks, 36 from law firms located in Rome and 48 from firms located in Milan, while the number of negative responses amounts to 33 across both cities. In total, we received 117 responses, which only represents the 14.7% of overall submissions. This low percentage of tangible responses, both negative and positive, could stem from the period in which we conducted this study; in fact, throughout the year, there is seasonality in job searching as well: summer, especially from mid-July to late August, is, for instance, a rather unresponsive period in Italian as well as other country's job markets (Contardi, 2021). Hence, such small percentage is coherent with the period of the year considered as less active. The number of applications with no responses amount to 677 but, as we previously stated, such number will be accounted for as a negative response. Thus, we can conclude that we received a total of 84 positive feedback and a total of 710 negative feedback which, in terms of percentages, respectively represent the 10.6% and 89.4% overall.

However, despite this gap being relatively large, it does not affect our findings in terms of discriminations based on gender and social status.

**Table 4**

Positive Callbacks (N)			
	Female	Male	Total
High	23	41	64
Low	5	15	19
Total	28	56	84

**Table 5**

Positive Callbacks (%)			
	Female	Male	Total
High	28%	49%	77%
Low	6%	17%	23%
Total	34%	66%	



**Table 6**

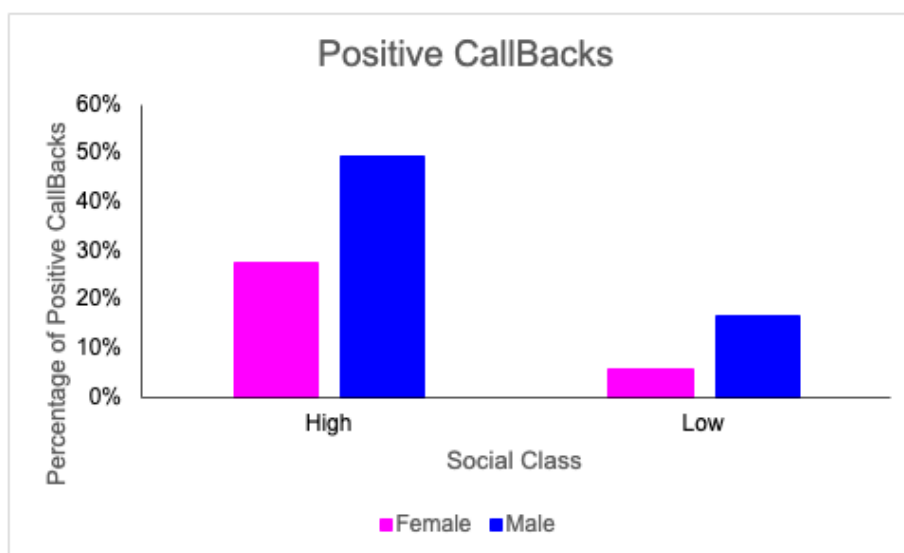


Table 4 numerically shows the detailed positive feedbacks received for each candidate, while table 5 shows the same results in percentage. From both tables the difference between candidates is strongly evident: on one hand, the candidate with the highest rate of positive callbacks is the high-status male, while the lowest rate of responses is met by the low-status female applicant. Hence, while Tancredi (high-class male) received almost half of the total amount of positive feedback, which is 49%, Consuelo's callbacks (low-class female) only amount for the 6% of the overall number of responses. By looking at table 6, it becomes visually apparent the difference of positive responses between all four candidates. On the right side of the graph, both high-class profiles received more positive callbacks than the profiles on left side of the graph. Hence, the first discriminatory bias based on class status is easily observable and is coherent with both the previously available literature we examined during the theoretical planning stage, and with our expectations based on Rivera's experiment. Moreover, when looking at in-gender discrimination (meaning gender discrimination in each social class group), our male candidates received more positive feedbacks than their female counterparts. Looking at the high-status participants, Lavinia and Tancredi, the difference between the number of positive callbacks is significant: Tancredi received 18 extra positive responses with respect to Lavinia, so 21% more in terms of percentages. This discrepancy is lower when observing the in-gender bias in the lower-status participants: Antonio received 10 extra positive callbacks with respect to Consuelo, which amounts to 11% more in terms of percentages.

Despite being based only on the first step of a selection process, the screening of the four résumés highlighted the same phenomena described by Rivera: while Tancredi highly benefitted from the high-class indicators clearly presented in his CV, Lavinia's profile was not found to be as convincing as her male opponent's. This difference is explained by the perception we explained in the third chapter of this dissertation, in which we thoroughly analyzed the two types of measurement used in the valuation of females' and males' résumés: commitment and warmth. While warmth may have equal weight for both applicants, commitment is perceived

stronger in the males than in the females, especially when analyzing the high-class group. Lavinia, simply for being a woman, is considered as being potentially less committed to a future job position, as their working abilities are not viewed objectively as the sum of both academic achievements, professional experiences, and personal skills, rather as the sum of these factors minus the possibility of (rightfully) devoting a portion of her life to a possible family.

While the public opinion might agree that such conception is more appropriate for older and obsolete society structures, and although it being unconstitutional and illegal in our country, with a law stated in art. 27 which promotes “the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions” (law 9 December 1977, n. 903, article 1, commi 1, 2, 3 e 4; law 10 April 1991, n. 125, article 4, comma 3) this discrimination against women (and more specifically against high-class women) is deeply enrooted in our culture, is hard to account for and is evidently a harsh realization emerged from this study. The same analysis done on the lower-status participants, Consuelo and Tancredi, provides the same indications on gender discrimination, although the percentages appear much lower in response to an overall lower number of responses received by said group.

**Table 7**

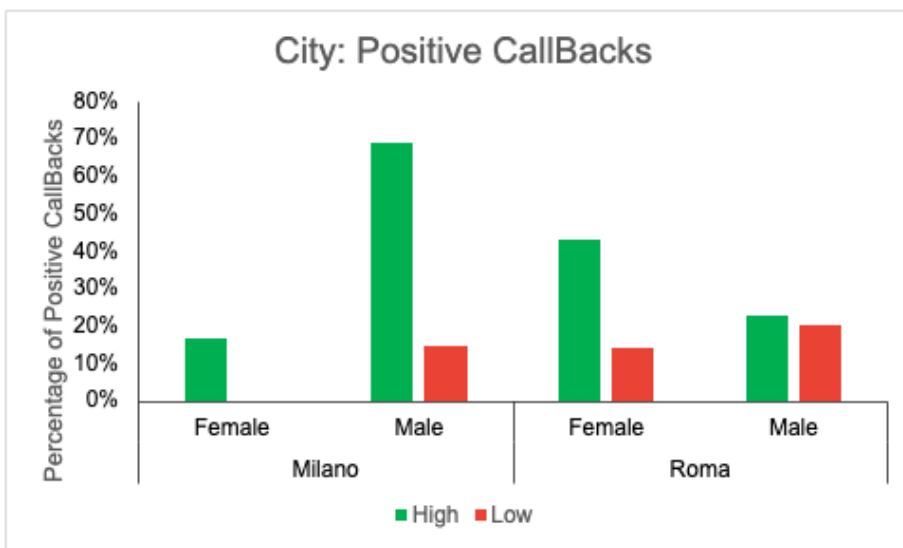


Table 7 is important as it further examines these discriminatory biases divided by the two different cities analyzed in our study, Milan and Rome. The first visual impression that stands out is the absence of low-status female, which we called Consuelo, from the overall positive callbacks in the city of Milan. This means that, out of all the applications submitted by Consuelo in both law firms and legal offices in Milan, she did not receive a single positive response. Other than highlighting an unfortunate characteristic of our current world, this result further confirms the pre-existing idea of gender and status discrimination.

**Table 8**

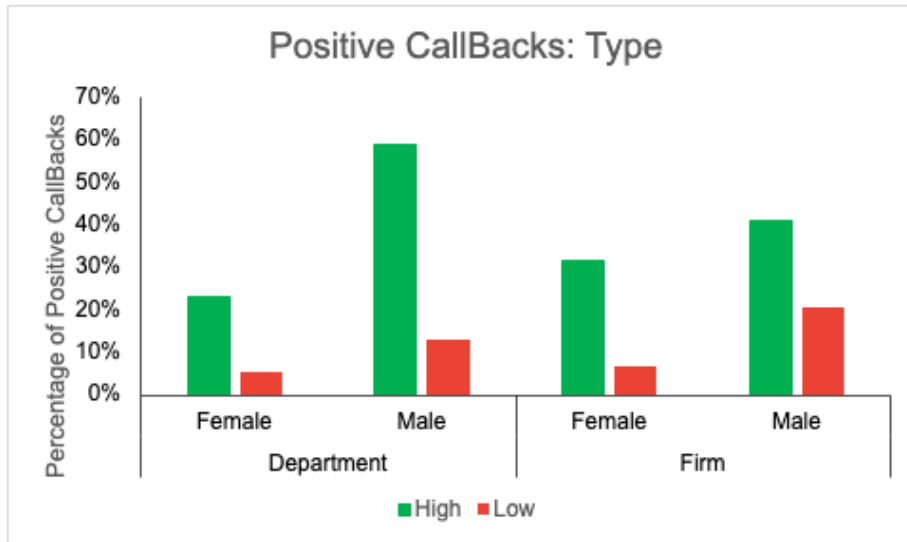
Positive Callbacks by City (%)				
	Milan		Rome	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
High	17%	69%	43%	23%
Low	0%	15%	14%	20%
Total	17%	83%	57%	43%

The graph represented in table 7 is numerically explained in table 8. The latter also helps us explain how, despite results being uniform across cities, certain discriminatory biases are more strongly present in Milan than in Rome: in Rome, male participants of both class statuses do not appear to have received different responses, while female candidates received a strong status discriminatory biased, as the high-class female received higher positive callbacks than the lower-class female. However, in Milan, both biases are much more persistent in both genders and represent the worst-case scenarios mainly for the lower-status female, Consuelo.

Inevitably, the following question arises: would our results be different if we were to observe only the city of Rome? While gender bias might not be an issue in recruiters and evaluators located in Rome, status bias is still present: table 8 shows how both female and male belonging to the high-class group received more positive callbacks in Rome. Hence, status bias is present even if we only look at the city of Rome. On the other hand, gender discrimination does not apply for the high-class participants, while it is observable for the lower-class candidate. This partly explains how our results may or may not differ; however, only collecting data from Rome’s database would also hinder the entire experiment as the pool of employers would significantly decrease, as well as undermine the statistical power of our overall findings.

Another type of distinction we want to analyze is the difference between legal offices and legal departments. Theoretically speaking, a legal office works independently as it is composed of a specific number of lawyers and employees, and it is targeted to both private citizens and public businesses; legal departments usually arise from big companies’ necessity to have in-house legal counselor who only work for the company. In this sense, we observe a difference in the presence of these two types of law firms in the two cities we analyzed: Milan is composed of a higher number of legal departments, as it is considered as the typical Italian headquarter for many business and international corporations; in Rome there exists a stronger presence of legal offices, as Rome itself is the capital of Italy, so it has the biggest and most important legal institutions and legal courts.

**Table 9**



**Table 10**

Positive Callbacks by Type of office (%)				
	Department		Office/Firm	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
High	23%	59%	32%	41%
Low	5%	13%	7%	20%

Both table 9 and table 10 give us graphical and numerical explanation to the differences between legal departments and legal offices among applications sent in Rome and Milan. Legal departments present a high gender discrimination bias in both social classes, while also indicating a strong discriminatory presence of status bias. These results do not surprise us, as they are coherent with the previous examination of biases divided by city: Milan tragically shows a strong gender bias, as well as a strong interception of both gender and status bias, which perfectly reflects a higher number of legal departments when compared with Rome. On the other side of the spectrum, independently owned legal offices and law firms have a marginally lower status bias for male candidates and a slightly lower gender bias among profiles with high-class background. In both cases, as well as in the distinction between cities, the high-status male received the majority of positive callbacks independently of the city and the type of office he submitted his application to.

While these findings show continuity in our study, the discrepancy between legal departments and law firms leads us to another paradox: how is it possible that legal departments, which usually have to comply with hiring policies established by top-level human resources management of the big publicly-held corporations they are part of, show a stronger gender bias than independently owned law firms, which do not have to comply to any specific regulation of female to male gender ratio among employees?

To answer this question, we must analyze the ESG Compliance: ESG stands for Environmental, Social and Governance, which are the three macro spheres each company must regulate with respect to very specific principles. Environmental compliance refers to the adaptation of each business to practices which do not intentionally harm the environment and the ecosystem, as well as the implementation of risk management practices through every stage of the production process. Governance compliance, on the other hand, impacts all decisions aimed at the wellbeing of stakeholders and investors, as well as the management of all employees and both internal and external transparency. Finally, social compliance is the macro sphere responsible for the social impact of each business, intended as the sum of practices which regulate all internal and external relationships with employees, customers, and communities in the area of its operations. Hence, most social dilemmas and commonly discussed topics are in the sphere of expertise of the social compliance.

The topic of gender discrimination is among those who mostly impact such regulations; however, as our study's results show, social compliance is the hardest to manage out of the three categories, as it does not follow state laws or strictly imposed stakeholders' indications, rather they are responsible for adapting the human capital of the company to current events and topics.

The limitation with this concept is that social issues are not easily eradicated, so they must be carefully analyzed on a deeper level. As many firms' beliefs and values usually shape the internal employees' view of the company itself, the concept of cultural matching finds fertile ground as recruiters and evaluators reiterate in the application of their expectations onto each possible candidate, thus not being able to construct an objectively complete evaluation of any applicant. They rather reflect their own and their company's values on each job opening in their firm and then look for the perfect fit which naturally adapts to the culture and ideas of both recruiters and the firm as a whole.

**Table 11**

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: CallBack					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	$\beta$	F	p
Corrected Model	3,944 <sup>a</sup>	7	0,563	6,292	0,000
Intercept	0,024	1	0,024	0,270	0,603
<b>Size</b>	0,030	1	<b>0,030</b>	<b>0,332</b>	<b>0,565</b>
<b>City</b>	0,062	1	<b>0,062</b>	<b>0,687</b>	<b>0,407</b>
<b>Type</b>	0,122	1	<b>0,122</b>	<b>1,366</b>	<b>0,243</b>
<b>ID</b>	0,141	1	<b>0,141</b>	<b>1,569</b>	<b>0,211</b>
<b>Gender</b>	0,870	1	<b>0,870</b>	<b>9,720</b>	<b>0,002</b>
<b>Class</b>	2,340	1	<b>2,340</b>	<b>26,130</b>	<b>0,000</b>
<b>Gender * Class</b>	0,091	1	<b>0,091</b>	<b>1,021</b>	<b>0,313</b>
Error	70,380	786	0,090		
Total	83,000	794			
Corrected Total	74,324	793			
a. R Squared = ,053 (Adjusted R Squared = ,045)					

From a more statistical and econometrical point of view, table 11 shows us the univariate model analyzing gender effect by class effect. When looking at the row “gender \* class”, the gender by class effect of discrimination confirms our previous findings and shows the interaction between the two individual biases we have analyzed throughout the course of this dissertation. As Rivera herself stated in her results, the most important data collected is not the gender bias and status bias when singularly analyzed, rather the interaction between the two factors, which finds both theoretical and practical grounds in our study as well.

## Conclusions

Despite almost all western countries and societies being based on the concept of “merit”, seen as the perfectly stereotype-free social climbing tool able to eradicate all social fractures between upper classes and the lower classes, it does not find real applicability in the real world. Social class, economic background, and status shape individuals’ life since the very first years of education, thus creating a domino effect which becomes impossible to arrest once it reaches the higher steps of the social pyramid.

This dissertation is aimed at the understanding of how the two major discriminatory bias, gender and status, influence hiring processes in one of the most élite job markets in Italy which, to this day, are still believed to be free of any stereotype against both women and lower-class individuals. Although we do not condemn individuals who believe in the power of education and devote their academic careers to proving that hard work and social skills can make you emerge from a pre-destined social condition, we believe it was crucial to analyze and understand how and why these biases are still persistent today, even in a period in which social injustices lie at the heart of many institutional conversations.

Our study showed how strong the correlation is between the rate of positive callbacks and the adherence to both a high social class and the predominant gender (not numerically, rather socially). When hiring for entry-level jobs, recruiters do not consider potential candidates as the sum of their academic achievements and their professional skills and experiences, rather they tend to influence each evaluation with their own expectations on the right candidate, their firms’ expectations, and the overall expectations of the dominant social group in each job market. However, if we found these implications to be true for three out of the four fictitious profiles we created, the high-class male stood out as the only candidate who benefitted from his gender and for the subtle class indicators present in his résumé.

The interception between gender and status bias perfectly explains the numbers and data collected and graphically showed in chapter five: while being associated with high social class markers positively intercept with the male gender, thus establishing the perfect conditions for our upper-class male candidate to stand out and receive almost half of the overall number of positive callbacks, the same association intercepting the female gender obtains the opposite effect, as the upper-class female encountered a disadvantage because of the perception recruiters and employers’ have with respect to females in general (seen as less committed to stay for long in a specific job position) and, specifically, to high-class females, which are considered as having an even lower need for a stable job position. On the other hand, status bias analyzed by itself still gives an important description of a deeply enrooted issue in our society which inevitably and maybe, unconsciously, still benefits the upper classes by creating specific attributes that can only be inherited generationally and not acquired later in life.





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