

**Department of Business and Management**

**Master's in Management  
Chair of Organizational Design**

**“What lies behind gender and social class  
barriers in the recruitment processes of elite  
industries?  
A study on the Italian job market for  
lawyers.”**

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# 1. Introduction

In Western culture, there exists a tendency to believe that hard work, perseverance, and dedication can lead to the most coveted professional successes, based on merit. Nonetheless, this optimistic view does not fully reflect the complexity of social and professional dynamics. In fact, academic research has repeatedly shown that economic success often stems from factors beyond one's control, determined by chance and personal fortune, such as gender or social class, which influence an individual's academic path and professional opportunities (Thomas, 2018, Rivera, 2015). For instance, according to Rivera (2015), social class is a determining factor that affects not only the quality of available opportunities but also the expectations and evaluations individuals receive in the labour market.

In an inclusive workplace, all individuals should feel welcomed, respected, and valued; no employee's identity characteristics should create an advantage or disadvantage to become who you want to be in your life and enjoying a sense of belonging, support, and empowerment. Equity involves creating fair access, opportunities, and pathways for advancement for everyone, but often people find entrance barriers for working opportunities due to biases and stereotypes. This calls for the identification and elimination of obstacles faced by certain demographic groups, as well as the reform of policies, processes, and procedures that sustain unequal outcomes. Unfortunately, this equity, although it is widely advocated for and in some cases regulated by social inclusion policies in the workplace, is often not implemented due to persistent mental stereotypes that explicitly or implicitly influence hiring decisions in companies. Achieving an ideal situation of inclusion would require eliminating the barriers and stereotypes that affect certain demographic groups, as well as reforming policies, processes, and procedures that uphold unequal outcomes.

This study focusses on the barriers of gender and social class in recruitment processes within elite industries, analysing the specific case of the Italian legal sector. The research aims to explore how employees in the legal sector, who are also involved in hiring processes, are influenced in their decisions by gender or social class signals that emerge from the résumés. The objective of the research is to identify perceptions and mental stereotypes stemming from social class- and gender-related attributes in candidates' CVs, by means of interviews conducted with HR personnel and managers in the legal sector in Rome and Milan. Research has begun to show how these elements influence hiring decisions, particularly when it comes to status perceptions in elite sectors – such as the legal field –, resulting in the persistence of discriminatory biases, whether intentional or subtle. These stereotypes can be harmful to the career opportunities of candidates belonging to groups

affected by stereotypes, even though they are equally qualified and have the same rights to pursue opportunities as preferred groups.

A central aspect of the research emerges from the analysis, which concerns not only the evaluation of gender and social class bias but, more importantly, the intersection between the two. Several studies have shown that, although women are generally perceived as warmer and more collaborative than men, they are often judged as less competent, especially in roles that require technical or leadership skills (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick, 2002). Similarly, people from high-class social status tend to be perceived as more competent, although less warmth, compared to those from less privileged backgrounds (Rivera, 2012), but at the same time social status impact also on the perception of being polish and sophisticated. The interaction between gender and social class leads to the formation of biases regarding the perceptions of competence, warmth, polish, and commitment of each candidate, which are intertwined and confirmed by the Stereotype Content Model and the literature analysed.

This research aims to explore these dynamics in the Italian legal sector, considered an elite labour market, where such discriminatory patterns are expected to be even more pronounced. Through a qualitative study based on interviews with recruiters and professionals in the field, the study will investigate how gender and social class influence perceptions of candidates in terms of warmth, competence, commitment, polish, and cultural similarity.

## 2. Literature Review

According to social psychology, we generally prefer people who are similar to us (Hugenberg, Sacco, 2008). This phenomenon, known as in-group bias (Hugenberg, Sacco, 2008), is suggested to also influence the organisational structure of companies. Conversely, we tend to view people dissimilar to us unfavourably, which is referred to as out-group bias, leading to the formation of social group stratification and discrimination related to class or gender. These phenomena contribute to social stratification and biases within corporate organisations.

A substantial body of experimental literature examines in-group bias in various contexts. For the sake of the present work, this literature reviews how these biases influence recruitment practices and which social dimensions most affect individual perceptions within these groups, thereby contributing to persistent inequality in employment contexts. Furthermore, this research is an extension of the résumé audit study conducted by Calluso & Devetag (2023), which demonstrated gender and class discrimination in employment processes within legal firms and organisations in Rome and Milan.

The literature on this topic is vast and documents how both implicit and explicit biases can shape workplace dynamics. These barriers often stem from intrinsic characteristics inferred from résumés, which do not necessarily reflect an individual's value or actual job performance abilities. As a result, such biases can lead to inequitable outcomes for individuals belonging to historically marginalized groups. Discriminatory prejudice in the workplace extends beyond gender and class and spans various aesthetic and nonaesthetic aspects of a person, affecting various social dimensions such as ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, and disability.

Past studies of labour market bias have mainly used the non-experimental decomposition method to assess discrimination.

The conventional way to assess discrimination in wage disparities was through regression analysis, determining the effect of discrimination by linking unexplained differences in earnings to biased factors. Yet, this method is flawed by the omitted variable bias, making it challenging to accurately measure the actual impact of human capital on salaries. Therefore, the decomposition method gives a limited representation of discrimination. Researchers have utilised audit studies, an experimental approach that directly quantifies discrimination, in order to overcome these constraints. Initial audit research included sending pairs of individuals with varying visible traits to apply for the same position, enabling direct observation of discriminatory behaviour.

The traditional way of assessing hiring bias has changed greatly in the last few years. At first, face-to-face audits were employed to evaluate discrepancies in job offers and view them as possible discrimination. Yet, in the early 2000s, Bertrand and Mullainathan presented a fresh method: correspondence audits. Instead of using actors as applicants for in-person audits, correspondence experiments sent written job applications from fake job seekers to real job postings. Through the random allocation of traits that are safeguarded from bias, researchers can accurately evaluate the influence of these traits on how employers respond. This approach gets rid of the apparent distinctions among candidates that may occur in face-to-face interviews and requires fewer resources. Because it is effective and provides a causal interpretation, correspondence testing continues to be the most preferred method for measuring hiring discrimination today. (Lippens et al., 2023).

Field experiments designed specifically for the measurement of discrimination are typically referred to as audit studies (Pager, 2007). Numerous experimental studies worldwide have utilised the résumé auditing methodology to demonstrate the presence of hiring barriers in several business sectors. The Audit experiments (or correspondence study) have been used to study many forms of discrimination, including on the basis of race and ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and social class, across several domains, such as housing, education, and employment (Galos et al., 2023). An audit study is a form of field research that can be used to assess a behaviour or practice in real-world scenarios (Gaddis, 2018). The advantage of employing this methodology, in contrast to surveys or interviews, lies in the researchers' ability to gather authentic real-world data while significantly reducing the influence of social desirability and recall biases (Loera et al, 2023). This approach may be particularly helpful especially in examining the impact of both implicit and explicit biases related to particular characteristics, including race, gender, diagnosis, and insurance status (Loera et al, 2023).

The technique used in audit studies is the correspondence test approach, which involves simulating communication (correspondence) between job applicants and employers, is based on fictitious résumés matched and submitted to employers. In these studies, two or more résumés are prepared and sent to employers. These résumés reflect candidates with equal levels of education and experience, but some clues are included that reflect the candidate's group membership characteristics, such as race, gender, or age (Pager, 2007).

By comparing the responses to these résumés, researchers are able to identify discriminatory practices and biases present in hiring processes. This approach is highly esteemed for its ecological validity, as it investigates actual employer behaviours within authentic environments, rather than

depending on self-reported information that may be influenced by social desirability bias (Pager, 2007; Riach & Rich, 2002). Furthermore, audit studies provide researchers to draw causal inferences regarding discrimination, as they account for all variables except the one being tested. This control ensures that any differences observed in callback rates can be directly linked to the manipulated characteristic (Heckman, 1998). The capacity to directly assess discriminatory practices within actual employment environments offers substantial proof of bias, thereby establishing audit studies as a crucial instrument for comprehending and tackling inequality in the labour market. (Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

## **2.1 Evidence of Hiring Discrimination**

Lippens et al. (2022) stated that despite a growing diverse workforce, individuals from minority groups still encounter notable discrimination in the job market. This bias may result in lower employment opportunities, higher chances of prolonged joblessness and inactive labour market participation, and ultimately, financial consequences for both businesses and the community. In order to tackle this problem, policymakers must pinpoint the minority groups most impacted by hiring discrimination and grasp the seriousness of the issue. This information can guide the creation of specific diversity strategies, like outreach initiatives, for those who need them most.

Although systematic reviews focus on specific studies, many recent meta-analyses are systematically analysing results of studies that utilise correspondence audits techniques to measure and put into perspective the extent of hiring discrimination. While these meta-studies have been beneficial, most have concentrated on race, ethnicity, and national origin, overlooking other forms of discrimination (e.g. Bartkoski et al., 2018; Gaddis et al., 2021; Quillian et al., 2017). Recent studies have effectively used meta-regression methods to discover trends within the data. For example, Gaddis and colleagues (2021) discovered that the highest levels of discrimination against Black Americans occur in important situations such as hiring and housing. Quillian et al. (2017) found that there was a lower level of discrimination in occupations that demanded a college diploma in comparison to professions that required only a high school diploma or its equivalent. Nevertheless, these studies have been constrained to solely race, ethnicity, and national origin. Baert (2018) overcame these limitations by taking a more extensive approach to hiring discrimination, encompassing all protected grounds under U.S. federal and state law, and compiling a thorough list of correspondence experiments conducted since Bertrand and Mullainathan's influential research.

One of the most extensively studied and enduring forms of discrimination is related to the race or origins of the candidate. Despite the establishment of a legal and regulatory framework against discrimination in the West, the goal of a fair and equal treatment regardless of race or ethnicity has not been achieved. Indeed, the employment barriers due to ethnic origins persist over time with little significant changes. This is demonstrated by the meta-analysis conducted by Quillian and Lee (2022), which examines 90 studies involving a total of 174.000 job applications from Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States. Hence, they concluded that in four of the six countries and for three of the four racial-ethnic groups examined, discrimination has remained virtually stable from 1969 (the year of the first study considered) to 2022.

Among the numerous audit studies on the subject, Lancee (2019) investigates how ethnicity influences hiring procedures, considering how the “interest” that an employer displays in a potential job candidate may vary from one country to another. By comparing discrimination rates across countries using a standardized approach, the research by Lancee (2019) on ethnicity and hiring represents a crucial step in understanding cross-national differences in institutional contexts. Lancee's (2019) study on ethnicity and employment indicates that ethnic minorities consistently experience reduced job prospects in comparison to the majority population, supporting findings from earlier research. Nevertheless, the degree of this bias differs among countries and cultural communities. For example, Ramos, Thijssen, and Coenders (2021) found much greater discrimination against Moroccans in the Netherlands than in Spain. In Spain, Moroccan job applicants had a 6% lower chance of getting a positive response from employers, but this gap was larger at 14% in the Netherlands, Spain displaying a higher unemployment rate than the Netherlands. Several reasons could be behind the increased bias against Moroccans in the Netherlands, such as the intense discussions on immigration and the assimilation of Muslim communities, which may have influenced employers' views on the threat posed by this cultural group. Similarly, Thijssen and colleagues (2021) discovered a notable decrease in discrimination against Turks in Germany when compared against the Netherlands. In Germany, Turkish-origin job applicants were 5% less likely to get a call back compared to majority candidates with the same qualifications, whereas in the Netherlands, this gap was fifteen percentage points. Continuing from Lancee's research (2019), the study analyses discrimination against Latinos, a significant and rapidly growing ethnic minority in both the US and Spain. Yemane and Ramos (2021) discovered that Latinos in the US labour market face substantial discrimination, with notable gender disparities, despite the cultural and linguistic proximity of the two. This kind of discrimination is also intertwined with gender stereotypes. Indeed, in US Latino men experience significant discrimination, but there's no evidence of such bias against Latino women.



Conversely, in Spain, there's no discrimination against Latino men but a significant bias against Latino women. Yemane and Ramos attribute this to distinct stereotypes held about Latino men and women in the two countries.

The percentage of discriminatory cases can be significantly mitigated by labour market regulations and flexibility, which vary between countries. Larsen and Di Stasio (2021) conducted a comparison between Pakistani immigrants in Norway and the United Kingdom, two nations with very comparable Pakistani communities. It was theorized that discrimination in the UK would be reduced because of the country's adaptable labour market, stronger laws against discrimination, and relaxed church-state relations. In labour markets with greater flexibility, employers have the ability to easily hire and dismiss workers, which decreases their fear of risks and lowers the chances of discrimination. Moreover, it was anticipated that the UK's religious system and acceptance of religious diversity in public would help reduce discrimination. Nevertheless, despite these variances, discrimination against Pakistani migrants showed no major distinctions between UK and Norway.

In terms of relevant correspondence studies in this field, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) submitted fictitious résumés in response to 1.300 job advertisements published in the Boston Globe and the Chicago Tribune, manipulating the perceived race of the candidates through their names. The results showed that candidates with names that sound white were 50% more likely to be called for an initial interview compared to candidates with names that sound African American (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004).

Consistent with the theory of ethnic hierarchies (Hagendoorn 1995), discrimination is more pronounced for groups with greater social distance from the majority population, such as Muslims and individuals from African or Middle Eastern countries. This evidence supports the taste-based discrimination theory, suggesting that cultural differences contribute to differential treatment of ethnic groups. Minorities born in other countries are not as likely to get callbacks as in their nation of origin, with significant differences seen among different origin groups. People of Middle Eastern or African descent have a 5% lower chance of receiving a favourable response compared to individuals of European heritage. Furthermore, negative perceptions and hate crimes against Muslims and North Africans increased significantly between 2000 and 2010, following terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists, especially after the September 11, 2001, attacks and subsequent attacks in Europe by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (Branton et al., 2011).

Veit and Thijssen's et al. (2021) research also underscore significant variations among countries in the levels of minority discrimination and the overall impact of birthplace and ethnic background. Racial discrimination is an intricate interplay of the country's institutional background and the attributes of the potential employee. In line with the argument from the "new institutionalist" perspective (Brinton and Nee 1998), the institutional environment in which employers function affects their recruitment practices. Even though the importance of the institutional context has been emphasized in labour market stratification research, studies on ethnic discrimination have frequently neglected this aspect. Lippens et al. (2022) proved a decline in racial-ethnic hiring discrimination in European correspondence studies between 2005 and 2020. Nonetheless, this meta-analysis reveals that ethnic minorities receive, on average, 29% fewer positive responses to job applications compared to the majority group. Among the most discriminated groups are Arabs / Middle Easterners (41% reduction), East / Southeast Asians (37% reduction), and Southern Europeans (33% reduction).

Religious discrimination is another extensively debated issue, although complaints related to religious bias remain relatively lower compared to other forms of discrimination. Di Stasio et al. (2021) investigated hiring discrimination against Muslims in five European countries. Their research design enabled them to differentiate between the effect of originating from a country with a sizeable Muslim population (a "country of origin" or "Muslim by default" effect) and the additional stigma faced by applicants who signal their closeness to Islam (a "religious belief" or "disclosed Muslim" effect). Overall, the findings highlight the significant discrimination faced by Muslims compared to other ethnic and religious groups, while also revealing substantial cross-country variations. This scenario, as already mentioned, increased between 2000 and 2010, and has also been statistically detected by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC 2011a), with a remarkable 96% increase over most other categories protected under the CRA [i.e., race (24% increase), gender (15%), national origin (45%)].

Age-based discrimination is another controversial issue, driven by the overall aging of the workforce within the labour market. The research by Wu & Sun (2021) on age discrimination highlights the prevalent stereotypes surrounding older individuals. These stereotypes often include the belief that older workers experience a decline in work performance, labour skills, and physical abilities. However, numerous studies have challenged this assumption. Posthuma and Campion's findings (2021) suggest that work performance often improves with age, and any decline is typically minimal. Although older people possess more experience in the labour market, exhibit comparable risk aversion levels to juniors and are generally more cooperative, Wu and Sun's (2021) research suggest that employers tend to favour hiring younger individuals over middle-aged and

elderly candidates. Some reasons refer to work skills considered more obsolete (Fossum et al., 1986), or to the fact that these individuals are less familiar with technology and modern job search methods (Gibson et al., 2000) or have a lower likelihood of relocating for work purposes (Theodossiou & Zangelidis, 2009). There are also stereotypes at the corporate level that perceive older workers as less flexible or adaptable to a new environment, leading to a decrease in job opportunities for candidates starting as early as the age of 40 on average (Batinovic et al., 2023). However, in these case studies, audits are less dependable, as it is not possible to compare two résumés with opposing work experiences due to age (e.g., a recent graduate and a middle-aged worker) and expect to obtain reliable results. Nonetheless, the meta-analysis by Lippens et al. (2023) also presented relevant findings regarding this type of discrimination, showing strong discriminatory effects against older candidates compared to lower biases towards younger candidates. Discrimination levels are further shaped by the intersection of gender and age. Neumark et al. (2018), in their study on the U.S. labour market, found that age affects men and women differently. Particularly, women over the age of 50 seem to experience greater discrimination compared to their male colleagues, as they are perceived as less competent or less suitable for the job.

Disability-based unfair treatments remain widespread, persisting despite the presence of legal protections in many countries, observational research and laboratory experiments provide indicative evidence of its existence. Several studies have shown differences in employment and salaries related to disabilities that cannot be completely justified by other factors. Although research on employers yields varying results - indicating, on the other hand, some hesitance in hiring individuals with disabilities, and on the other some studies show positive attitudes - all studies consistently demonstrate a preference for individuals with physical and sensory impairments over those with psychological or intellectual disabilities (Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021). A study conducted by Bjørnshagen and Ugreninov (2021) revealed that experimental research in laboratory settings has discovered comparable moderating influences depending on the type of impairment (Ren, Paetzold, and Colella, 2008). Moreover, Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov (2021) showed that individuals with disabilities were 50% less likely to receive job interview invitations. Even though these studies show proof of bias against disabled individuals, they are constrained by biases that researchers have no complete control over, like social desirability, misperception, and selection effects (Quillian, 2006; Pager and Shepherd, 2008). Correspondence studies have the capability to address these obstacles. Randomized experiments offer direct evidence of the causal impact of a treatment variable, such as disability status, on employers' hiring choices, when compared to observational data (Pager, 2007). Ravaud, Madiot, and Ville (1992) were the first to conduct this study in France, showing bias against

individuals in wheelchairs when applying for jobs without being asked. Stone and Wright (2013) repeated this discovery in the UK, noting comparable levels of discrimination regardless of the amount of interaction with customers. Ameri et al. (2018) expanded this study to the United States, however, their design that was not matched, hence restricting the capacity to make direct comparisons of discrimination rates. Bjørnshagen and Ugreninov's (2021) studied hiring obstacles for applicants with Asperger's syndrome, revealing that a spinal cord injury led to a 26% decrease in the overall chances of attracting any attention from employers. Employers might set lower expectations for disabled individuals because of implicit or explicit associations and stereotypes. Furthermore, these connections could cause employers to think that coworkers with disabilities will limit their colleagues, as they are seen as reliant and in need of help (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008; Kaye, Jans, and Jones, 2011).

While deliberate stereotypes are intentionally utilised to streamline selection procedures, implicit attitudes and stereotypes are thought to subconsciously impact how we view things, feel, and act. Implicit stereotypes are believed to have a significant impact in situations where time is limited or when there is a high level of automaticity, like when employers hastily review a large number of job applications. Over the years, various meta-analyses aimed at examining how different types of discrimination create barriers for groups of people attempting to enter the labour market, considering factors such as the country labour market or the physical or intrinsic characteristics of an individual. However, throughout history, correspondence studies have mainly concentrated on ethnicity, race, and gender (Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021) and less on other kind of biases.

### **2.1.1. Discrimination based on gender**

Despite the greater attention given to gender equality, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, gender biases are still alive and well and affect our beliefs and how we act in the workplace. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducts regular evaluations about people's attitudes toward the social roles assigned to men and women. According to its latest report on the Gender Social Norms Index, nearly 90% of men and women hold some prejudices against women. Nearly half of the world's population believes men are better political leaders than women, and two out of five people believe men are better business leaders than women (UNDP, 2023). This index, which covers 85% of the world's population, demonstrates how social belief obstruct gender equality and continues to influence hiring decisions globally. Gender-based workplace discrimination is conceived as the causal effect of learning that a candidate is a woman versus learning that an applicant is a man, on hiring process. Audit studies provide estimates of the net gender bias in an analysed sample of people (Galos et al., 2023).

Several meta-analyses have examined and combined the numerous studies over time and their results to describe the issue of gender discrimination in hiring in better detail. The literature can sometimes lead to confusing conclusions; indeed, it is referred to as “mixed,” because some studies find bias against women, others against men, and there are still others analysis which find no evidence of bias in either case (Galos et al., 2023).

Galos and Coppock (2023) define that gender composition predicts gender bias. Specifically, the research categorizes each study by occupation, recalculates gender bias within the occupation, and then organizes the estimates based on the gender composition of each occupation. Thus, it is demonstrated that pro-status quo forces reproduce and maintain the status quo by discriminating against women in male-dominated contexts and against men in female-dominated contexts, although this hypothesis has been examined since the earliest audit studies (Galos et al., 2023). In particular, the literature often refers to the concept of the gender gradient to indicate the correlation between gender composition and gender bias (Riach et al., 1987; Azmat et al., 2014; Carlsson, 2011; Ahmed et al., 2021).

Furthermore, gender discrimination also extends to remuneration in the workplace, as wages are not equivalent across industries: men are advantaged in those industries that are higher-paying, and women are advantaged in lower-paying settings (Levanon et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2015).

To demonstrate the presence of this discriminatory phenomenon, the first to apply experimental audit model in 1987 were Riach and colleagues. In the research, they demonstrate the presence of these biases by sending 1,982 résumés of fictitious male and female candidates to 991 job openings in Australia. In this way, the authors were the first to demonstrate a 2.4% decrease for in invitation to an interview for female candidates. Then, Neumark et al. (1996) conducted a second study randomizing the gender of 130 candidates for 65 restaurant jobs in New York City, and they found out a large but not significant negative effect of being a woman. Since then, more than 70 occupational audit studies have been conducted worldwide, randomizing the gender of candidates to demonstrate an occupational correlation influenced by these biases (Galos et al., 2023).

Further expanding on the topic, Schaerer et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis and forecasting survey encompassing 85 field audits and 361,645 individual job applications across 44 years and 26 countries and territories related to gender and hiring decisions. This research is notably important as it not only consolidates results from a wide range of experiments but also offers a longitudinal view of the persistence or evolution of gender biases across various contexts and time frames. The current meta-analysis reveals a significant reduction in

discrimination against female candidates applying for positions traditionally occupied by men, with such bias no longer evident in the past decade. Conversely, prejudice against male candidates seeking roles typically associated with women has remained consistently strong over the years. These findings highlight both the encouraging declines and the stubborn persistence of different forms of gender discrimination.

Finally, gender disparity has also been studied in the context of high-level executive positions within corporations. Bertrand and Hallock (2001) found that women are significantly underrepresented in top corporate jobs compared to men, and the disparity is particularly pronounced in CEO positions and other high-ranking roles. There is a substantial gender pay gap among top executives; women tend to earn less than men even with the same experience, education, and company's characteristics. Moreover, female executives are more likely to be found in roles that are less central to the company's core operations.

### **2.1.2. Discrimination based on social class of origin**

Findings on class-based discrimination in the literature are less frequent compared to those of gender discrimination. Experimental studies on social class discrimination are fewer in number compared to those referred to gender and sometimes the results may appear contradictory (Lippens, Vermeiren, & Baert, 2022). These discrepancies often arise from the lack of heterogeneity in the methodology used to manipulate elements of social status in curricula. For instance, most studies employed a manipulation based on candidate's place of residence or name, which may indicate ethnic connotation (Carlsson, Rooth, 2007) or racial background (Bertrand, Mullainathan, 2004).

One common manipulation involves the candidate's residential address or the surname. Bunel et al. (2016) sent over 2,988 applications in response to a sample of 498 real job offers in Paris in catering industry, manipulating specifically the place of residence in résumés. Their study finds that candidates from high-income neighbourhoods were three times more likely to receive positive feedback compared to those from low-income, sensitive urban areas.

Carlsson et al. (2018) in Sweden supported a similar pattern. By randomly assigning names (denoting a foreign ethnicity) and addresses (denoting social class background) to job applications and controlling for commuting distance, they investigated the impact of living in deprived neighbourhoods on labour market outcomes. No evidence of a neighbourhood signalling effect was found for typical Swedish native names. However, candidates with typical Middle Eastern names from poverty-stricken neighbourhoods were 42% less likely to receive positive feedback.

Manipulating a candidate's name and surname can significantly indicate social class, revealing inherent biases in recruiters' minds. In particular, in the Indian context, surnames normally convey information related to the caste of origin (low vs. high). Hence, Siddique (2011) demonstrated that candidates with names suggesting a lower caste had to send 20% more résumés to get the same positive response rate as upper caste candidates. The results further revealed a difference between organisation types: upper caste candidates were preferred by smaller companies, while lower caste candidates were favoured by larger companies, especially those also operating abroad.

To manipulate a candidate's social background and caste, various elements such as name or residence must be considered, but other factors can delineate a person's "capital". Nowadays, sociologists also accord central importance to the notion of "capital" in explaining phenomena like class structure reproduction and low intergenerational mobility (Lizardo and Skiles 2012, 2016b, 2016a; Di Maggio 2012; Rivera 2012, 2015b; Rivera and Tilcsik 2016b).

The idea of "capital", as introduced in Pierre Bourdieu's initial research in 1984, goes beyond just its economic definition to include the processes of social categorization and hierarchy. Bourdieu's concept of capital consists of three key aspects: financial, societal, and intellectual. An individual's social status is influenced by the type and longevity of capital they possess.

Economic capital is the most concrete and easily measurable form, symbolizing financial and material assets. It grants immediate entry to products and services, impacting an individual's welfare. Affluent parents have the ability to select top-notch schools for their kids or pay for private university tuition, thus ensuring the continuance of elite status from one generation to the next.

Social capital is the term used to describe the relationships and connections that a person builds over their lifetime, which can be shaped by interactions with parents and choices made in childhood. These networks offer important advantages like job prospects, communal assistance, and opportunities to access resources that would not be accessible otherwise.

Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu, is a complex and tricky concept to understand, yet crucial for our comprehension. It can be considered the most prominent display of passed-down economic wealth and is essential in maintaining the power of elite groups. Cultural capital includes a person's knowledge, skills, qualifications, and cultural preferences, and is manifested through the realm of "taste".

The habits and lifestyles frequently mirror the social background and economic resources of the family of origin. This type of capital, referred to as cultural capital, helps individuals to gain entry to high-status roles in society, particularly when looking for candidates who fit into a top-tier organisational environment. In our situation, this adds to the maintenance of social inequality. Cultural capital examples

encompass preferences in music (e.g., country or rock music versus classical or jazz music), hobbies (e.g., horseback riding, sailing versus soccer or basketball), and other indicators like *habitus*, which includes graceful conduct displayed through body language, stance, movements, and conversation.

The idea of cultural capital, as presented by Bourdieu (1973, 1984), suggests that people's educational achievements are greatly impacted by their cultural habits and preferences. This happens because teachers assign levels of competence or merit to students based on these cultural traits in a systematic manner. Therefore, students coming from affluent families, who typically have cultural knowledge, are more likely to receive preference in prestigious schools. Recruiters also carefully assess a candidate's aptitude, which is described as the capability to effectively finish a task (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske et al., 2002). Erving Goffman's (1956) research on "impression management" offers valuable understanding of how people portray themselves to others. This idea emphasizes the significance of being polished, or the skill of presenting oneself in a refined way, in shaping how others perceive you. When evaluating candidates in HR recruitment, elements such as warmth, competence, polish, and cultural similarity can greatly influence how recruiters view them based on their résumé. For instance, women are commonly seen as more approachable and cordial, which can be beneficial in positions that require regular customer engagement.

Researchers have shown in detail how the notion of capital can elucidate occurrences like the perpetuation of class hierarchy and limited generational movement (Lizardo & Skiles 2012, 2016b, 2016a; Di Maggio 2012; Rivera 2012, 2015b; Rivera & Tilcsik 2016b). According to the conventional socio-economic explanation, wealthy families dedicate more resources to their children's early schooling, leading to opportunities for enrolment in prestigious schools and well-compensated careers (Roemer & Trannoy, 2016). Still, studies show that children's results are still impacted by family background even when adjusting results for educational level (Rivera, 2015; Raitano & Vona, 2014, 2015). This emphasizes the link between economic, cultural, and social capital. Through investing in their children's education, parents not only grant admission to certain schools but also instil behaviours, passions, and information linked to specific societal groups, therefore maintaining advantages based on class.

Based on this evidence and on Bourdieu's (1984) insights, several research have begun to simultaneously manipulate diverse indicators of social class, falling under the domain of cultural capital, also referred to as "taste". These indicators include education background and personal interests, as well as extracurricular activities such as sports and music.

Jackson (2009) conducted a study in the British elite job market, where social status was assessed through various indicators, including candidate's name, type of education, extracurricular interests, gender, university attended, and degree classification. The findings revealed that candidates



exhibiting signals of belonging to social elites were favoured by employers because they were perceived as more “suitable” into the corporate culture. The primary driver of this effect seemed to be the educational background. Candidates from prestigious universities such as Oxford or Cambridge were assigned a higher class compared to those from lower-ranked universities.

Spencer et al. (2020) conducted a study to investigate the impact of various factors on call-back rates in Jamaica. While their analysis did not fully substantiate their initial hypotheses, their findings offer valuable insights. Despite using only limited demographic information, they discovered that applicants with high-income-sounding names received more callbacks than those with low-income names. Unexpectedly, address had minimal influence on employer decisions. However, the study revealed a significant gender gap favouring women over men, although social status emerged as the most influential factor in determining call-back rates.

### **2.1.3. Interaction between gender and social class**

The intersection of gender and social class in the hiring process presents a complex landscape in which biases associated with both dimensions can interact, leading to aggravated disadvantages for some groups. While gender and social class bias have been widely studied separately (although gender remains one of the most researched areas in discrimination literature), there is a growing body of research examining how these two forms of bias intersect and influence hiring outcomes. The results can be contradictory, depending on the job position in which the research is done and the characteristics that are sought by the company.

Experimental résumé audit studies are particularly valuable in this context. These studies have shown that various factors influence recruitment decisions. Implicit or explicit signals of gender, social status, or other factors collectively shape our perception of cultural capital. By simultaneously manipulating multiple elements within fictitious résumés, such as the name to indicate gender, educational background, residential address, and personal interests, these studies can examine how these factors interact to affect hiring decisions.

Studies show that employers often make decisions based on perceived competence or skills, preferring those who exhibit high-status characteristics, including white, male, unmarried workers with a standard employment history (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Moss and Tilly 2001; Pedulla 2016).

One such study, which is highly relevant to our research, by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) approach the elite legal market, scrutinizing the processes in U.S. law firms. In this study gender was

manipulated by systematically changing the name of candidates, while social class was manipulated using a combination of several items falling in the domain of “taste”, including hobbies such as music and sports etc. The findings suggest that male high-class candidates are those receiving the highest positive call-back, while no difference was observed across high-class female and low-class males and females. In other words, the social class advantage was observed to favour males but not female candidates.

Following in the footsteps of Rivera and Tilcsik, the study by Calluso and Devetag (2023) examines the same elite legal market, focusing on the Italian firms and employing a similar résumé auditing methodology. By submitting four fictitious résumés to law firms and organisations in Rome and Milan in response to 794 internship applications, they manipulated information such as name, neighbourhood, type of high school (typically relevant in the Italian scenario), and hobbies, such as music and practiced sports, to create four competing profiles. On the other hand, information related to the educational background and academic success, as well as prior job experience, were identical across the four résumés. Hence, these profiles were designed to represent two different genders and two contrasting social classes, while maintaining the same high-quality level CV.

Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) in their paper reported that in order to have a pretest that is reliable, curricula must have at least four signals of social class. Based on this, Calluso & Devetag's experiment also involved the manipulation of multiple information so as to elicit a clear impression of the candidates' background, in line with previous established papers. Indeed, Jackson (2009) reported the results of an audit study conducted in the U.K. labour market that showed that employers seem to favour certain combinations of multiple characteristics, thus social class characteristics considered uniquely do not exert a specific effect. To get a coherent and clear-cut impression of the social class of origin, Calluso & Devetag jointly examined five different items: first and last name, neighbourhood, type of school attended, type of sport played, and type of musical instrument played. As a result, the male and upper-class candidate received a callback rate of 20%, three times higher than the average call-back rate of all three other applicants combined. Thus, being male and belonging to a higher class confers the greatest advantage, consistent with the findings of Rivera and Tilcsik (2016). However, in contrast to the latter, Calluso & Devetag (2023) showed an interaction effect between gender and social class of origin. Indeed, on the other hand of the distribution, the female low-class candidate received a call-back rate of only 2%. Overall, the results showed that the class advantage offsets the potential gender disadvantage: the female candidate in a high class receives a callback rate four times higher than that of her lower-class female peer and that of the lower-class male candidate (i.e., high-class male > high-class female >

low-class male > low-class female).

Another interesting study considering the effect of both social class and gender is the one by Thomas (2018). The study conducted in the United States investigates for the effect of signals of highbrow vs. lowbrow cultural signals in résumés sent to middle-income labour market. The results show that for customer-facing jobs, women with highbrow cultural tastes experienced a higher rate of positive callbacks than those with lowbrow cultural tastes. However, there was no evidence of class-based discrimination for men or for non-customer-facing positions. Hence, the research reveals that cultural signals of class are consequentially related to gender when it comes to client-centred jobs. Therefore, a gender bias, influenced by the type of the target labour market, is evidenced. In line with this evidence, Di Maggio (1982a) showed that in high school, highbrow cultural involvement, familiar background and the intercorrelations among highbrow cultural measures are significantly stronger for females rather than males. These findings imply that women's class-based cultural interests and activities are more consistent and socially prescribed than those of men. They also test Thomas's hypothesis that highbrow, as opposed to lowbrow, taste signals will have a more positive effect on women's labour market outcomes than men's.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: The Stereotype Content Model (SCM)**

Not all stereotypes are alike, usually group stereotypes are judged and perceived differently. For instance, while certain stereotyped groups are viewed favourably as kind and innocent (e.g., housewives), others are despised as callous and inhumane (e.g., rich people). These distinctions undoubtedly matter.

Social psychology recently has shifted away from examining the content of stereotypes, placing greater emphasis on stereotyping processes (for reviews, see Brown, 1995; Fiske, 1998; Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1994; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). This happens because stereotyping processes respond to systematic principles that can be generalized across different instances of stereotyping, while the content of stereotypes is a more volatile concept. However, for the first time in 2002, social psychologist Susan Fiske and her colleagues Amy Cuddy, Peter Glick and Jun Xu introduced the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), asserting that the content of stereotypes can respond to systematic principles, just as stereotyping processes do (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002). The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how stereotypes form and persist in social cognition. This model posits that stereotypes are captured by two dimensions - warmth and competence - and that subjectively positive preconceptions on one dimension do not contradict prejudice but frequently are consistent with uncomplimentary stereotypes on the other dimension (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, Xu, 2002).

Warmth and competence capture aspects elements of social perception, allowing us to assess people according to our perceptions of their intentions and capabilities. The warmth dimension encompasses traits related to perceived intent and sociability, including qualities like kindness, morality, reliability, and sincerity. This category is crucial because determine whether another individual or group intend to harm or help us. Driven by the evolutionary pressures to quickly identify possible threats or allies, people tend to make an initial judgment about the warmth of others. Studies have consistently demonstrated that groups perceived as warm are more likely to elicit positive emotions and cooperative behaviours from others (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, 2008; Fiske, 2018).

The second dimension is competence, it involves assessing whether an individual or group is capable of enacting their intentions. Competence concerns perceived efficacy and ability and it is defined by attributes such as intelligence, skill, efficiency, and creativity. Since people with higher perceived competence are often considered more capable of achieving goals and successfully navigating social institutions, this dimension is directly related to social status and power (Fiske,

Cuddy, Glick, 2008). Research has indicated that respect and admiration for people and groups are primarily based on competence (Fiske, 2018).

Fiske et al. (2002) hypothesized that the interaction between warmth and competence leads to different combinations of stereotype categories, giving rise to unique intergroup emotions – prejudices - directed toward various types of groups in society. Pity is reserved toward warm but incompetent subordinates, envy targets competent but not warm rivals, while contempt is directed at outside groups perceived as neither warm nor competent.

The interplay between warmth and competence leads to four primary stereotype categories, each associated with distinct emotional and behavioural responses (see Table 1):

1. **High Warmth, High Competence:** Groups or individuals in this category, such as the middle class or certain professional groups, are seen as allies and often enjoy trust and respect. Hence, they are perceived positively by people, arousing feelings of admiration and pride.
2. **High Warmth, Low Competence:** This category includes groups such as the elderly or the disabled, who are viewed with sympathy but are not considered capable, so they often evoke feelings of pity and a patronizing attitude.
3. **Low Warmth, High Competence:** business professionals or some ethnic groups (e.g. Asians), are perceived as competent but lacking warmth, and thus can arouse envy and resentment by external groups. They are often distrusted and seen as selfish, despite their abilities.
4. **Low Warmth, Low Competence:** groups such as the homeless or certain marginalized populations fall into this category. They are viewed with contempt and disgust and thus judged as neither trustworthy nor capable, leading to social exclusion and neglect.

**Table 1.** Warmth and competence stereotypes. Common stereotypes, mostly based on socioeconomic status and age, are shared across many countries. Other stereotypes vary by country; persistent stereotypes in the United States appear here (Bergsieker Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012, Study 4; Cuddy et al., 2009; Durante et al., 2013, see link to individual countries; Lee & Fiske, 2006).

	Low Competence (Capability, Assertiveness)	High Competence (Capability, Assertiveness)
High Warmth  (Friendliness, Trustworthiness)	Common: Elderly, Disabled, Children  United States: Italians, Irish  Emotions Evoked: Pity, Sympathy	Common: Citizens, Middle Class, Defaults  United States: Americans, Canadians, Christians  Emotions Evoked: Pride, Admiration
Low Warmth  (Friendliness, Trustworthiness)	Common: Poor, Homeless, Immigrants  United States: Latinos, Africans, Muslims  Emotions Evoked: Disgust, Contempt	Common: Rich, Professional, Technical Experts  United States: Asians, Jews, British, Germans  Emotions Evoked: Envy, Jealousy

Furthermore, the relationship between warmth and competence appears to be influenced also by other two stereotype dimensions long identified as important in intergroup relations: status and competition (Fiske et al. 2002). For subordinate and noncompetitive groups (e.g., the elderly), the positive stereotype of warmth acts jointly with the negative stereotype of low competence to maintain the advantage of more privileged groups. Conversely, for groups that are competitive and with high status outsiders (e.g., Asians) the positive stereotype of competence acts jointly with the negative stereotype of low warmth to justify the outsider groups' resentment of them.

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) is based on analysis in different contexts of several methodologies for measuring warmth and competence. Researchers have refined accurate and reliable indicators of competence and warmth, as well as other variables, in the SCM with the use of experience, data, and psychometrics techniques (Fiske, 2015; Kervyn, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2015). Warmth items include (in the priority order) *warm, trustworthy, friendly, honest, likable, and sincere*. On the other hand, competence items include *competent, intelligent, skilled, and efficient*, as well as *assertive and confident* (Fiske Cuddy, Glick, 2008). Thus, perceptions of warmth and competence may predict specific emotional biases and discriminatory behaviours. Therefore, it is important to consider the role of SCM in predicting emotions and social behaviours. Studies have proven that this predictive model can be consistently applied globally, although the specific content of stereotypes may vary. So, the SCM model not only helps to understand the content of

stereotypes, but also elucidates the dynamics of prejudice and discrimination in social interactions and can be also applied to interactions within a company, such as the hiring processes. Through previous studies, it has been shown that groups perceived as warm and competent are more likely to receive active support and admiration, thus this may result in a greater level of appreciation in being hired, while those seen as cold, and incompetent may be prone to rejection and active harm. By focusing on the dimensions of warmth and competence, the SCM provides valuable insights to our study of training and the impact of stereotypes, which we apply as relevant in the social context of employment processes within law firms and organisations in Italy.

### **3.1. Integrating Polish & Cultural Similarity**

For the purpose of this research, it is essential to integrate the dimensions of “polish” and “cultural similarity” that interact with the elements of the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), offering a deeper understanding of how social perception and discrimination work in the hiring context.

The concept of “polish” had already been explored by Thomas (2018) who defined workers with polish as workers who display “an upper-middle class style of self-presentation and interaction”. In Bourdieusian theory, polish, or comportment, is conceptualized as a key form of capital, a means by which class advantages are expressed and made socially consequential in interactions and institutions (Bourdieu 1984, 1986), just as it is for cultural background and taste.

Thomas's auditing experiment (2018) is crucial for us, because he analysed the concept of “polish” analogously to that of warmth and competence, defining “polish” as the perceived refinement, professionalism, and cultural sophistication of individuals. This was based on other studies that revealed that in middle-class and/or customer-facing work settings, employers often seek workers with upper-middle-class backgrounds and characteristics because they expect them to have a style of speaking, acting, and looking that is appropriate and professional, especially in the white-collar setting (Collins 1971; Moss and Tilly 2001; Williams & Connell 2010). According to the theory behind this study, companies may favour candidates with sophisticated cultural interests when it comes to hiring for customer-facing positions, where high levels of polish are expected. In his experiment, Thomas (2018) takes as a benchmark for measuring polish the traits of applicators that can be perceived as sophisticated, articulate, polished, and professional.

Integrating polish into the SCM involves assessing how this dimension affects perceptions of warmth and competence. For instance, individuals who exhibit refined behaviours and cultural

awareness are often seen as more sociable and trustworthy, hence candidates who display high levels of polish may be perceived as more competent and warmer, thereby increasing their likelihood of being hired in elite industries. This combination may explain why people from wealthy origins, who have had more access to cultural sophistication, are more likely to succeed in landing high-profile jobs. Consequently, polish plays a crucial role in forming recruiters' judgments and perspectives, which affects the hiring process.

In social stratification, our study also aims to consider the role of cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu, analysed in terms of the candidate's cultural similarity, measured as the alignment of an individual's cultural practices, tastes and behaviours with those of the dominant group. Utilizing shortcuts based on cultural similarity is particularly common in the recruitment process for managerial and professional roles (Baron, 1984). According to Bourdieu, individuals who possess cultural capital that matches the expectations of elite institutions are more likely to be perceived favourably in terms of both competence and warmth, so we can imagine that cultural similarity can influence hiring decisions in this market.

A major justification given for this is that employers have knowledge of job requirements and the incomplete potential of employees to meet these requirements, especially in the early stages of their careers. Consequently, decision-makers are more inclined to consider self-similarity as an efficient and quick means to gauge a new recruit's likelihood of performing successfully. Probably, the most significant and persistent mechanism that perpetuates inequality through gatekeeping is the use of cultural similarity as a heuristic to aid the hiring process. (Amis et al, 2020).

Integrating cultural similarity into SCM involves examining how cultural traits shared between an individual and a group influence perceptions and outcomes in social interactions. In the context of recruitment practices, for example, candidates who demonstrate cultural similarity to recruiters are often viewed as more competent and trustworthy; it is those candidates who share status, interests, education, or other cultural cues on the résumé with the group being considered. Hence, this bias toward cultural similarity can perpetuate social inequalities, which benefits members of affluent backgrounds but disadvantages those of less privileged groups.

In line with this reasoning, several studies have reported finding that support this claim. The study by Rivera & Tilksik (2016) investigating the joint effect of social class and gender on hiring decisions, highlights how high-class men were perceived as more suitable for the elite culture and clientele of law firms compared to high-class women, who were conversely seen as less committed to full-time work. This preference was attributed to the perception that high-class men better



embodied the values and cultural expectations of law firms, aligning more closely with the organisational culture defined as elitist and intrinsic to existing employees.

The findings by Amis et al. (2020) further corroborate this by highlighting the role of cultural similarity in hiring practices. They argue that recruitment decisions are often influenced by managers' positive biases toward candidates who are culturally similar to themselves. This use of cultural similarity as a heuristic is particularly prevalent in hiring for managerial and professional positions, where decision-makers may lack perfect information about job requirements and the potential of employees to meet these requirements. Therefore, they use similarity to themselves as an efficient means for assessing how likely it is that a new recruit will perform well.

### **3.2. Evidence of stereotyped attribution based on gender, social class, and their interaction**

#### **3.2.1. Gender**

Studies by Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2008) have shown that gender discrimination is multifaceted and can appear in different and complementary forms. There is hostile sexism, directed primarily toward nontraditional women (such as feminists and career women), which manifests itself through competitive and antagonistic attitudes. However, another equally harmful form is the benevolent sexism, addressed toward traditional women (such as housewives). Women are perceived as "wonderful" and therefore require protection and provision. This perception, symptom of a paternalistic society, occurs because women are seen as so communal and warm, but not particularly competent (Cuddy, Fiske and Glick, 2008). In contrast, nontraditional women (e.g., career women) are recognized as competent, but are seen as lacking warmth (see also Eagly, 1987; Glick et al., 1997; MacDonald and Zanna, 1998). Social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000) posits that gender stereotypes follow from social structure, specifically from a gendered division of labour. Considering the empirical evidence, it follows that due to gender bias, women may not be considered for positions that require a high degree of perceived competence, which may lead to discriminatory hiring practices.

The gender discrimination is even more evident in parenting situations, known as the "motherhood penalty". Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) demonstrated the existence of negative biases in recruiting processes for women with children, compared to women without children or males with and without children. Specifically, mothers are perceived as less competent than non-mothers, while men do not face a penalty for fatherhood. On the contrary, fathers may receive better evaluations compared to

non-fathers. This phenomenon is highlighted in the audit study, which shows that employers discriminate against mothers but not against fathers, resulting in lower callback rates for mothers (Correll, Benard, and Paik, 2007).

Another peculiar research is the one of Rudman and Glick (2001), where participants evaluated women and men displaying agentic behaviours through questionnaires and rating scales. Rudman and Glick examined how prescriptive gender stereotypes lead to negative reactions or backlash against women who exhibit agentic traits, such as assertiveness, confidence, and ambition, typically associated with leadership and competence. That way, the study aims to investigate participants' attitudes and reactions towards agentic women compared to agentic men and communal women. Women who displayed acted-out traits were often considered less likable and more hostile than their male counterparts and women who displayed more communal traits.

The backlash was rooted in prescriptive gender stereotypes that dictate how women should behave. Acted behaviours violated these stereotypes, leading to negative evaluations. In the outcome of the study, women faced a double constraint: they were penalized for not conforming to traditional gender roles (by being agentic), but they were also criticized if they adhered to communal roles (for lacking agency and leadership qualities).

Similar gender biases are particularly observed when it comes to leadership positions occupied by women rather than men, perceived differently by external eyes. Heilman and Okimoto (2007) investigated the thoughts of people who evaluated successful men and women in typically male leadership roles. The results found that women who demonstrated success in male roles were perceived less positively than successful men in the same role. The main reason behind this penalization is a perceived deficit of communality. In particular, successful women were seen as less warm, cooperative and collaborative, qualities that society typically expects from women. Heilman and Okimoto concluded that the breakdown of gender norms of communality is one of the main causes of prejudice against successful women in male-dominated roles. This suggests that when women excel in male-dominated tasks, social norms about acceptable female behaviour are challenged, therefore unfavourable social views result.

Based on the literature revised above, the current study aims at investigating the following research question:

*Research Question 1 (Gender Discrimination): In the Italian elite labour market, how do HR perceptions of candidate competence, polish, cultural status, and warmth differ between male*

*and female candidates?*

### **3.2.2. Social Class and its interaction with gender**

In the American culture, the stereotype content model (SCM) shows that wealthy people are often seen as skilled (high competence) but lacking in warmth, possibly because wealth is linked to success in the workplace, requiring certain talents and independence (Fiske, Cuddy, et al. 2002). On the other hand, it is common for the poor to be seen as having a high level of warmth but a low level of competence, which could be related to stereotypes of unfriendly, lazy, and untrustworthy, or lacking opportunities because perceived less competent or not very warm.

What is the reason for the continued existence of stereotypes? They have a cognitive purpose in simplifying our world, enabling us to categorize people and anticipate their actions faster. Nevertheless, stereotypes serve a social function by legitimizing social disparities and maintaining the existing order. Media, politics, and education have a substantial impact in reinforcing and spreading class-based stereotypes due to cultural factors. These factors help keep harmful stereotypes alive, resulting in prejudice and discrimination.

These stereotypes can result in extensive impacts. Discrimination frequently occurs when people are unfairly judged and treated based on their social class and gender biases. Opportunities may be restricted when expectations are influenced by stereotypes, impeding ambitions and possibilities. Moreover, these stereotypes can cause strain or harm to interpersonal relationships. The Social Cognitive Model (SCM) helps us understand how stereotypes of class and gender overlap, shaping our attitudes and actions. It is essential to acknowledge and confront these stereotypes in order to promote a fairer and more diverse community.

The only study that provides insights into how social class of origin may be perceived in terms of stereotyped attribution – in the specific context of the labour market - is the one by Rivera (2015a). Rivera conducted an extensive ethnographic study of on-campus hiring processes by top investment banks, management consulting firms, and law firms in the United States (i.e., the so-called “Holy Trinity” in US). This revealed widespread evidence of class biases rooted in recruiters' ideological notions of merit that appeared to be deeply grounded in the attribution of competence and merit to signals of highbrow cultural taste.

Along the same lines, Moss and Tilly (2001) and Rivera (2012, 2015b) suggested that workers from upper-class backgrounds are judged to be more suitable for managing elite clientele of prestigious firms due to their superior style of speech, presentation, behaviour and interaction.

Consequently, candidates who exhibit greater cultural affinity and polish are defined as ideal to the corporate culture of these organisations (Rivera, 2012).

Overall, there exist a paucity of studies investigating the stereotyped attribution based on social class of origin. Further, no study has been conducted in the Italian elite labour market. Hence, the current study aims at investigating the following research question:

*Research Question 2 (Social Class Discrimination): In the Italian elite labour market, how do HR professionals perceive differences in competence, warmth, polish, and cultural status between candidates from different social classes?*

The intersection of gender and social class is intricate when the Social Cognition Model (SCM) is used. For example, affluent women may be seen as ambitious and capable (high competence) as well as cold and calculated (low warmth), defying conventional gender stereotypes. On the other hand, impoverished individuals might be seen as indolent, aggressive, or inadequate in supporting their families (low competence and low warmth), further strengthening traditional perceptions of masculinity linked to financial achievement. These observations demonstrate how societal views and assessments of people are influenced by a combination of gender and social class, resulting in unfair and prejudiced results.

As for the interaction between gender and social class of origin, some insights are offered by the study by Thomas (2018) described above. Indeed, Thomas found that high-class female candidates are favoured in customer-facing positions compared to low-class ones, but no difference was observed for male candidates. In order to disentangle the causes of these effects, Thomas (2018) also went beyond these results by investigating the reasons behind the recruiters' choices. The author conducted a survey-experimental study on a sample of 1,428 U.S. hiring managers to understand how résumés were perceived by recruiters. It followed that these patterns might be explained by the relatively positive effect of highbrow cultural signals on perceptions of polish and competence and their relatively negative effect on perceptions of warmth of female candidates. Despite hiring managers potentially not appreciating highbrow applicants as much as lowbrow applicants in terms of personal pleasantness (i.e., warmth), employers are systematically more likely to reward displays of highbrow taste, especially when expectations of polish are high, which is traditionally associated with women in customer-facing roles. Previous works have approached related concepts, such as competence or cultural capital, but Thomas (2018) was the first to integrate the factors of competence, warmth, and polish in the context of social class discrimination employment decision and detailed their impact on the perceived suitability of applicants.

The specific interaction between gender and social class of origin may give rise to specific patterns of stereotyped perceptions – especially considering also the dimensions of cultural matching and polish – as each of these two features is characterized by specific combinations of attribution. Further, no study has investigated such attribution in the context of the Italian elite labour market, hence, here we aim at investigating the following research question:

*Research Question 3 (Interaction between Gender and Social Class Discrimination): In the Italian elite labour market, how do the combined effects of gender and social class influence HR perceptions of candidate competence, polish, cultural status, and warmth in the hiring processes? Is it possible to identify specific configurations of features attributed to candidates based on the interaction of gender and social class of origin?*

## 4. Experimental study

The objective of this study is to explore how perceptions of gender and social class influence hiring processes in an Italian elite legal sector, specifically focusing on law firms and corporate legal departments. In order to achieve this scope, we employ a qualitative methodology, conducting semi-structured interviews with human resources professionals who oversee recruitment practices within this sector. These interviews enable us to explore the intricate perceptions and biases that influence the hiring process, especially those associated with gender and cultural and socioeconomic status.

This experiment aims to fill the gaps in the literature on hiring discrimination, particularly with regard to class bias, for which there are only few empirical studies, unlike the large number of studies addressing discrimination based on gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, or religion. Specifically, we aim to approach this with a qualitative methodology, as there are many auditing studies, but none that delve deeper into the formation of stereotyped perceptions that lead to the reproduction of such mechanisms. Hence, as an initial step, interviews may represent optimal methodological tool for identifying critical components. We want to investigate these perceptions by directly engaging with those who experience them, specifically by consulting individuals in the legal sector who are responsible for corporate hiring processes.

In line with our research objectives, we seek to explore how the dimensions of competence, warmth, polish, and cultural status are perceived differently between men and women, or between individuals who appear to come from a higher social and cultural background compared to those who seem to come from a lower sociocultural context. According to our analysis, these differing perceptions of key elements may lead to the formation of class- and gender-based discriminatory dynamics in the hiring processes for elite segments of the job market, and the one of legal positions legal positions.

Additionally, we expect that social class will play a significant role in hiring preferences, with higher-class candidates being favoured and more likely to be selected. Moreover, we anticipate that gender biases may intersect, resulting in a preference for male candidates over female candidates in certain situations, such as in contexts where less warmth is required. This hypothesis is supported by prior research, including the work of Calluso & Devetag (2023), which demonstrated that male candidates from affluent backgrounds experienced markedly more favourable hiring outcomes compared to other demographic groups. Indeed, in their study male and

upper-class candidate receives a recall rate of 20%, almost three times higher than the average recall rate of all three other candidates combined, which is 7%. Thus, perfectly in line with the findings of Rivera and Tilcsik (2016), the maximum advantage is conferred on the male candidate and belonging to a higher class.

This research focuses on the elite service industry because we are primarily interested in delving deeper into previous investigations that demonstrate the existence of discrimination mechanisms aimed at elite reproduction, a phenomenon first shown in the United States labour market, and also observed in Italy. Indeed, the legal sector is characterized by a remarkable consistency worldwide, providing some of the highest salaries to its employees, especially in law firms specializing in the domain of business law. Furthermore, it is believed that legal education plays a role in perpetuating social inequalities by promoting the idea that the legal profession is linked to the upper class. This education often instils in students the necessity to conform to specific dress and behavioural standards, which, under the guise of maintaining a "professional image," tend to convey signals associated with high social status (Jewel, 2008).

We look at the Italian market for several reasons. The Italian job market offers a compelling case for investigating social mobility and class dynamics, as the country experiences notably low levels of social mobility compared to other similar nations. The pronounced regional disparities, especially between the Northern and Southern regions, further accentuate this phenomenon (Acciari, Polo, & Violante, 2022). These factors make Italy a valuable context for analysing the influence of social class on access to elite professional roles, with potential findings that may have wider implications. Research conducted by Barone and Mocetti (2021) reveals a notable persistence in elite occupations, emphasizing the impact of labour market structures in perpetuating these trends. Similarly, Boloise and Raitano (2018) identified significant intergenerational inequalities, utilising data from the Bank of Italy's Survey on Household Income and Wealth (2000-2016), thereby establishing Italy as an exemplary environment for investigating how social class influences employment prospects.

Rome and Milan, emblematic of Italy's central and northern territories respectively, serve as a valuable basis for comparing regional disparities in labour market dynamics. This comparison is particularly relevant given the perceived cultural and economic divide between the North, often regarded as more progressive, and the South, which is frequently associated with traditional and patriarchal norms. Notably, Milan is distinguished by its significant concentration of wealth, particularly in elite sectors such as the legal field, making it more elitist than Rome. The study

conducted by Calluso & Devetag (2023) found unexpected differences in terms of gender and social class bias between Rome and Milan. Indeed, their findings point at a slightly worse social class stereotype and a much stronger gender bias in the labour market in the city of Milan, as compared to Rome. Moreover, according to a recent report, in Milan are located the 50 biggest Italian law firms in terms of yearly turnover, many of which typically (but not necessarily) maintain secondary offices in Rome. (Di Molfetta, 2022). Therefore, it is likely that the higher concentration of wealth in Milan, which makes the city's labour market even more elitist than Rome's, may represent a factor contributing to its higher levels of reported discrimination, making it an essential focal point for this study.

Given the expectations from our literature review, we anticipate that the responses obtained from interviews will demonstrate the differential perception of candidates based on social class and gender, as a consequence of long-standing stereotypes.

## **4.1 Sampling**

To gain preliminary insights into the recruitment processes and the underlying biases, we conducted in-depth interviews with four Human Resources (HR) professionals from the legal sector, specifically working in legal firms or legal departments within a big corporation. These professionals were selected based on their geographical location and the nature of their workplace, ensuring a balanced representation from both law firms and corporate legal departments based in Rome and in Milan. Because the current study is aimed at gaining insights into the underlying mechanism of gender and class discrimination observed in audit study (Calluso & Devetag, 2023), these selection criteria are relevant to maintain consistency with that sample of firms originally employed. The interviewers included:

- A recruiter from a law firm in Rome.
- A recruiter from a law firm in Milan.
- A recruiter from a corporate legal department in Rome.
- A recruiter from a corporate legal department in Milan.

Participants were approached through professional networks such as LinkedIn or directly through e-mail obtained on their profiles on the official websites of their respective workplaces. Selection criteria included their current role, level of experience, and their active involvement in recruitment decisions within their organisations. By targeting HR professionals actively engaged in the recruitment process, the study aimed to capture nuanced insights directly from those responsible



for candidate evaluations. This approach was deemed essential given the complex nature of recruitment biases and the legal sector's specific challenges in talent acquisition.

The interviews, lasting approximately forty minutes each, were designed to explore initial expectations and perceptions regarding the candidates' evaluation criteria. The main objective of this qualitative phase was to identify themes and variables that impact how the respondent perceives candidates' warmth, polish, competency and commitment to work based on his or her gender and social and cultural background.

Furthermore, another important consideration is that interviewed participants were selected from a targeted list of medium or large law firms or corporations in Rome and Milan, while small firms were discarded. Indeed, we contacted only people who were involved in the selection processes in medium or large legal settings working on these two cities. The rationale behind this choice lies in the fact that this study is a continuation of the research conducted by Calluso & Devetag (2023), hence, it relies on the same résumés they constructed and the same list of companies they considered. Therefore, in order to maintain the integrity of the research and avoid potential biases or detection, we have selected only medium to large companies, as smaller firms might have recognized the résumés submitted in the previous study. In this way, we were able to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the participants' responses.

The profiles of the four selected respondents reflect a diverse set of characteristics that align with the aim of the study, especially in capturing diverse perspectives based on gender, location, and professional setting. Each respondent contributes a distinct viewpoint shaped by their specific roles and context: two participants work within legal firms, providing insights from a traditional law firm perspective, whereas the other two operate within corporate settings, presenting an alternative perspective on legal recruitment in large organisations. The geographic distribution between Milan and Rome further enriches the dataset, reflecting the regional differences in recruitment practices within the Italian legal sector. It is also worth noting that, within corporate legal departments, those responsible for the selection process typically hold positions more aligned with HR functions (with a final decision often made in consultation with the operational manager of the legal department). In contrast, within law firms, the recruitment processes are predominantly handled by legal professionals, especially for medium-sized firms where partners are primarily responsible for managing the selection process and conducting evaluations of potential candidates.

The four selected respondents of the semi-structured interviews present the characteristics displayed in Table 2.

*Table 2. Characteristics of respondents considered in the legal sector based in Rome and Milan.*

<b>Legal sector</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Work position</b>
Firm	Rome	Man	57	Partner
Firm	Milan	Man	48	Senior Manager & HR
Department	Rome	Woman	61	HR Director
Department	Milan	Man	60	Manager - HR

## **4.2. Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

Given the complexity and specificity of the subject matter, this study employs a qualitative approach, and semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method for data collection. These interviews were adopted to comprehensively investigate the factors that influence recruitment decisions in the Italian legal industry, defined as an elitist sector.

The decision to employ a qualitative approach was influenced by several key factors. Firstly, interviews provide legal professionals with a dynamic platform to express their nuanced opinions, allowing for a more thorough investigation of the respondents' answers, particularly as they pertain to initial impressions and perceptions in hiring processes. Conversely, surveys with a limited set of responses might be more challenging to manage, as they offer some insight into the mental image formed by recruiters, but we would likely fall short in probing deeper into the reasoning behind those answers. As Saunders, Thornhill, and Lewis (2019) note in their book, interviews are particularly effective for exploring complex topics and gaining insights into participants' perspectives, because they allow flexibility in questions and can adapt to the context and specific skills of the interviewee, thus allowing for broader discussions and deeper exploration of their expertise and insights. Furthermore, interviews are especially advantageous when researchers require clarification and further probing of responses, a capability that is often not possible with structured surveys.

The qualitative aspect of this research is further strengthened by the adoption of an interpretivist approach. This methodology facilitates a flexible interview format, enabling the questions to be tailored to the dynamics of the conversation and the unique expertise of each interviewee. Although a foundational set of topics was established, the precise wording and order of the questions were adjusted based on the participant's role and background. This strategy ensured

that the interviews remained pertinent and stimulating, thereby improving the reliability and depth of the data gathered.

In order to maintain the objectivity and reliability of the participants' responses, a cover story was used when contacting the interviewees. This approach was specifically designed to mitigate the risk of respondents modifying their answers due to the sensitive nature of the actual research topic – gender and social class discrimination. The study was justified with a different objective, informing participants that the research focused on the application of artificial intelligence (AI) systems in the CV screening processes of medium and large firms within the legal sector. Below the introduction made to the participants.

*"We are conducting a study aimed at understanding how to improve the effectiveness of AI-based résumé screening systems. Specifically, we are exploring how these systems can be enhanced by integrating the analysis of employees' activities and personal interests, as well as organisational culture, to better understand how these factors influence performance, job satisfaction, and the development of cross-functional skills that contribute to greater efficiency within companies."*

This alternative presentation aimed to reduce social desirability bias, ensuring that respondents did not feel pressured to provide ethically motivated answers. By obscuring the true purpose of the study, we sought to obtain more authentic and unbiased insights into their decision-making processes.

In addition, to promote an environment where participants could openly share their opinions, complete anonymity was assured during the data collection phase. This measure was implemented in accordance with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation EU 2016/679), which mandates that all personal information provided by interviewees were handled exclusively for scientific research purposes. Participants were clearly informed that their data would be employed for non-commercial objectives and processed in an aggregated format, thereby protecting their privacy, and ensuring the highest level of confidentiality. By ensuring total anonymity, we tried to establish a secure atmosphere that encouraged participants to express their genuine opinions without the concern of being identified or facing professional consequences. This strategy was essential in facilitating a more transparent and sincere dialogue, ultimately improving the validity of the insights gathered.

#### **4.2.1. CV's features**

The curricula used in this research were created and analysed in the previous audit study by Calluso & Devetag (2023). Since this study is a continuation of the previous analysis, it was essential to use the curricula of the four candidates to maintain the coherency of the research. The curricula are designed to manipulate specific signals associated with gender and social class discrimination, which are the focus of our analysis.

The basic CVs were created to include the main information suitable for an early-career high-quality candidate, incorporating academic experiences, preliminary professional experiences such as internships or work placements in law firms, and extracurricular activities like sports, music, and volunteering. Specifically, following the literature, it is more appropriate to present the CVs of recent graduates to identify the focus of discrimination, isolating and examining only signals of virtue that should not affect hiring opportunities. Conversely, if we were to present candidates with extensive experience, it would be more challenging to monitor the interviewer's choices and associate them to the signals. Indeed, in this case the candidates' experiences would become more relevant to the hiring decision, as also analysed in the study by Rivera and Tilcsik.

The structural grid of each curriculum presented is shown in table 3.

**Table 3.** *Structure of each fictitious curriculum used in the interviews.*

Surname and Name	
Residential address	
Personal and Contact information	
Work experience 1	University education 1
Work experience 2	Experience abroad
Work experience 3	Educational background
Soft skills & IT skills	Language skills
Volunteer work	Hobbies & Interests

The signals used by Calluso & Devetag (2023) for manipulation are several. Firstly, to manipulate the signals related to gender discrimination they simply used the candidate's name, either male or female. However, social class required more effort; various features within the CVs were adjusted to convey a clear perception of the candidate's social background. Specifically, for the social and cultural status, five elements were manipulated: first and last name, residential address, type of school or university attended, type of sport practiced, and type of musical instrument played. This approach follows Tilcsik's (2016) analysis, which suggests that CVs

presenting fewer than four indicators of social class have a less clear impact in forming an impression of the candidates' backgrounds. The specific manipulations included in the CVs to convey social class signals are summarized in table 4.

**Table 4.** *Items for High- vs. Low-Class Manipulation. Summary of the items included in the résumés to manipulate high- vs. low-class background. (Calluso & Devetag, 2023).*

	<b>Female</b>		<b>Male</b>	
	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>
<i>Name</i>	Lavinia	Consuelo	Tancredi	Antonio
<i>Neighbourhood</i>	Via del Corso	Via di Centocelle	Viale dei Parioli	Via della Magliana
<i>High school</i>	Classic Studies	Hospitality	Classic Studies	Technical Professional Institute
<i>Sport</i>	Horseback Riding	Latin Dance	Horseback Riding	Soccer
<i>Music</i>	Harp	Guitar	Pipe organ	Drums

In order to obtain results and hypothesize a correlation with the adjusted elements in the CVs, the curricula needed to be identical in terms of the candidates' qualifications and skills, academic and work experiences, and technical and soft skills. For this reason, all four curricula present a carefully crafted professional layout that is nearly identical; maintaining high-quality CVs was crucial to highlight the stereotype. Regarding academic education, the type of education and the institution attended vary. In terms of extracurricular interests, all candidates are involved in sports and music, but the type of sport and musical instrument practiced differs according to social class dimensions (items were selected based on a rating study, see Calluso & Devetag, 2023 for additional details). Thus, the aim is to demonstrate that individuals from a higher social class are attributed with superior merit components, as interviewers evaluate signals that are virtually irrelevant in assessing a candidate's competence, and these might influence how closely the candidate is perceived to align with the company's organisational culture or reflect similarities with the interviewer themselves.

#### **4.2.2. Interview**

To begin, once the interviewees agreed to participate, they received the four fictitious résumés, which formed the basis of the interview questions. This was done so that the interviewee would have greater familiarity with the candidates before conducting the interview. During the interview, résumés were presented to the respondents in a randomized order. The questions aimed to investigate the candidates' perceived attributes, including warmth, competence, polish, and cultural similarity and alignment with the organisation's culture. This approach facilitated a more

profound insight into the perceptions and biases of recruiters, while also ensuring alignment with the methodological framework established in earlier literature.

During the interview, the structure of the questions was nearly identical for each candidate presented. The aim was to assess the interviewee's perception of the dimensions of the Stereotype Content Model, namely warmth and competence, along with other equally relevant dimensions that create biases within the processes, such as the applicant's polish, perceived commitment, and the cultural matching between the candidate and the respondent. To evaluate these aspects, each candidate was assessed by the respondents based on questions regarding how these dimensions were perceived when viewing the curriculum for the first time. Specifically, the questions were intended to extract a comparison between all the candidates, such as whether a particular dimension was perceived at first glance as belonging more to a candidate like Consuelo rather than Lavinia. To analyse these dimensions, the following definitions were considered:

- **Competence:** Judging the candidate's skills, qualifications, and abilities.
- **Warmth:** Assessing how friendly and approachable the candidate appears based on the CV.
- **Polish:** Evaluating the candidate's sophistication and professionalism.
- **Commitment:** evaluating how the candidate is inclined to work hard, even beyond normal working hours.
- **Cultural Status:** Evaluating the candidate's educational background, social standing, and perceived ability to secure prestigious positions, reflecting their overall cultural status and connections within their professional and social networks.
- **Cultural similarity / matching:** Gauging the alignment between the candidate's background and the organisational culture, as well as any personal similarities.

It is essential to note that each question did not directly ask the interviewee how they perceived these dimensions based on the curriculum. Instead, the questions were formulated using specific attributes that are mentally associated with these features, as examined in the literature by Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2018), as described in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Questions and adjectives used to measure each dimension in the interviews, previously examined by Cuddy, Fiske and Glik (2018).

Dimensions	Questions asked in the interviews
Competence	Does the candidate seem <b>competent</b> to you? Which are the elements included in the résumé that make you think the candidate is <b>capable, qualified, or skilled</b> .
Warmth	Based on the information in this CV, how <b>friendly, warm, or cordial</b> does the candidate seem to you? If yes (/no), what are the elements that suggest that the candidate is (/is not) <b>trustworthy or well-intentioned</b> ?
Polish	How <b>sophisticated or eloquent</b> does this candidate seem to you, reading his/her CV? If yes (/no) what details indicate that the candidate has (/not has) a <b>professional or polished presentation</b> ?
Commitment	How <b>loyal or willing</b> to work does this candidate seem to you? Are there any indications that the candidate would be particularly <b>committed or willing to work hard</b> for the company?
Cultural Status	In your opinion, could the candidate land a <b>prestigious or successful job</b> ? How do you perceive the <b>cultural status</b> of the candidate? Do you think this may affect the achievement of <b>high-levels results</b> ? If yes (/no), what are the elements that suggest you that, for example to be <b>well-connected</b> to the society.
Cultural similarity / matching	Do you believe the candidate is <b>aligned with the organisational culture</b> ? Do you perceive the candidate to be <b>similar to you</b> in any way? Perhaps you have things in common, such as education or sporting or musical interests (e.g., do you play the same sport or play the same instrument).

For each candidate, a dichotomous question was then posed regarding the willingness to call the candidate back for a further interview. Once all four candidates had been examined, a final question was asked about which candidate would be preferred and recalled for an additional interview, if only one could be selected.

The last set of questions included a few demographic and personal information. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, their workplace location, and their position within the company. For the purposes of the cultural matching analysis, the interviewees were also asked about their specific musical or sporting interests. Finally, respondents were asked about their academic background, including secondary school and university attended, to assess also whether these were private or public institutions. This might be relevant, it may help to understand if there are similarities between the candidates' backgrounds, particularly in relation to secondary education. It would also be interesting to know whether the interviewees attended a public or private university, as this could potentially reveal the cultural status, although this is not a definitive assumption. In fact, in Italy, public universities are more numerous than private ones, and some public universities

also have high levels of prestige and international reputation, while private ones are considered more elitist. Therefore, it might be worth exploring whether interviewees who attended such universities have a greater affinity for high-class candidates. In any case, we must note that all four candidates in the CVs attended a public university, to keep the qualifications equal and avoid the reputation of the university from having an effect.

To conclude, the interviews focused on understanding how HR professionals perceive and evaluate candidates based on various CVs attributes, including education, work experience, and personal interests. The interviews also aimed to uncover any implicit biases related to gender or social class discrimination through the perceptions of some features in candidates. Thus, the responses were analysed to identify common patterns and themes.

### **4.3.The Gioia Methodology and Grounded Theory: Transforming Qualitative Research in International Business and Entrepreneurship**

To thoroughly understand and analyse the dynamics of perception and the biases identified from our semi-structured interviews, it is essential to first adopt a methodological approach that allows for rigorous and structured analysis of qualitative data, to reach consideration that aim to investigate our research questions. The most suitable methodology for our case is the Grounded Theory analysis method, which allows us to derive assumptions based on data within a rigorous and solid structure.

Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is a research methodology developed within the interpretive paradigm. This analysis technique aims to understand and interpret the meaning of action for the social actor, rather than seeking the causes of social phenomena.

Grounded Theory (GT) methods, introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), have become a valuable tool for constructing theories, especially regarding the progress of research in international business (IB) and international entrepreneurship (IE). GT's capacity to explore the complexities of phenomena and unearth fundamental processes empowers researchers to move beyond simple observation (e.g. semi-structured interviews) and provide detailed explanations. Grounded Theory helps management fields create more significant and applicable research by basing theories on empirical data instead of depending on existing hypotheses. The interpretivist and constructivist paradigms that form the basis of GT consider the organisational world as a dynamic, interconnected system in which individual components impact each other. This viewpoint emphasizes the significance of studying phenomena as a whole rather than separately. Additionally, the researcher's



necessary participation in gathering data (as in the case of interviews) and forming theories emphasizes the subjective aspect of research and the researcher's impact on the resulting outcomes (Magnani & Gioia, 2022).

In contrast to unstructured single or multiple case study designs which often do not include systematic data coding and analysis methods, the Grounded Method (GM) provides improved rigor with its systematic research approach. This consists of three phases of data analysis: initially, establishing analytics codes and categories, structured into first-order (informant-focused) codes and second-order (theory-focused) themes and aggregate dimensions; next, constructing a grounded theoretical model through constant comparison of data across time and informants; and finally, communicating study results through a thorough, data-driven storyline, often using second-order themes and aggregate dimensions and citing informants' first-order quotes (Magnani & Gioia, 2022).

Based on the findings of Magnani & Gioia (2022), it can be inferred that the Grounded Theory (GT) method, with its systematic approach to collecting evidence and coding data, conforms to the usual criteria used in quantitative studies. Furthermore, possibly more significantly, the GT has the potential to enhance knowledge by utilising a reasoning process that combines induction and abduction, leading to new theoretical insights. This enables the creation of "top explanations" or "innovative hypotheses" about the phenomenon being studied. Although some academics have criticized the GT as a "template" that replaces reasoning with "proceduralism," it is important to recognize that the GT is not meant to be seen as a strict "cookbook" of rigid procedures. Rather, it should be used as a methodical method for reliable and thorough qualitative data analysis that fosters innovative theoretical advancement and assists in clear communication with reviewers and editors (Gioia et al., 2022).

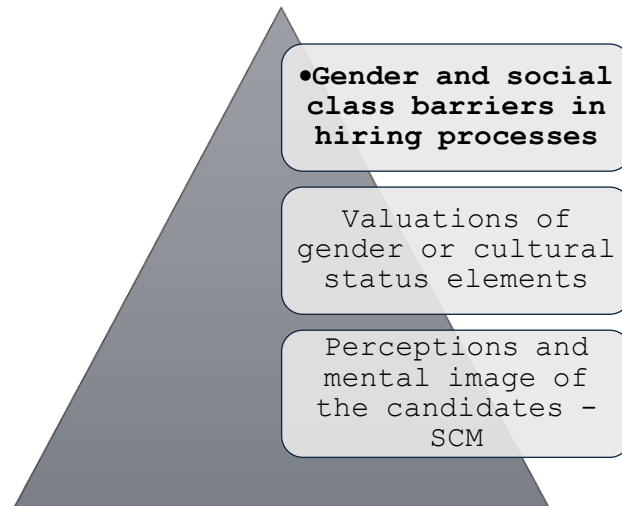
The adoption of Grounded Theory is particularly advantageous for our qualitative experimental study, as it facilitates a comprehensive examination of the perceptions and biases revealed through the semi-structured interviews. This methodological framework, which emphasizes systematic data coding and theory development grounded in empirical findings, effectively captures the intricate dynamics of gender and social class within the recruitment processes of the Italian legal sector and the perception of the interviewees who all deal with recruitment processes and thus have internalized some mechanisms of operations.

The GT analysis technique is based on the simultaneity of data collection and analysis phases, using a theoretical sampling method (different from probabilistic sampling and the logic of

quantitative analysis). It involves a progressive coding of information, from which various levels of reasoning follow to transform the data into theoretical considerations, using a continuous comparison of data reached. The goal is to ensure that the interpretations align with the reality of the phenomenon under investigation, developing in parallel with the phases of analysis that lead to a theoretical outcome. This is achieved by progressively expanding the number and characteristics of the data gathered from participants, in response to the need for clarification and further exploration that arise from the interview questions (Tarozzi 2008).

The first phase of sampling, before starting the analysis, involves mapping the main processes related to the phenomenon under investigation. This allows the identification of specific areas within which to look for observations. As the legal sector is being analysed, partners and HR managers in the legal sector were selected, in particular, those involved in the hiring processes. In formulating the questions prior to the interviews, the main elements that might influence hiring decisions due to gender and social class bias were mapped, based on the theoretical framework identified – i.e., the Stereotyped Content Model. Thus, semi-structured questions were selected to investigate these elements and create an inductive link in the analysis phase. Then, at the end of each interview, the progressive considerations allowed for the expansion of evaluations and the refinement of questions for subsequent interviews, as the method suggests. In this way, the process was designed to identify the categories of analysis of the phenomenon and the relationships between them, in order to integrate all these elements into a comprehensive theoretical model that explains the phenomenon in its complexity.

In Grounded Theory, data analysis is conducted simultaneously with data collection through three progressively more abstract phases of coding, followed by the conceptualization of the data and theoretical analysis. Thus, in our case as well, three categories of analysis of the phenomenon were identified (Figure 1), which gradually led to the definition of increasingly specific data, useful for the creation of a final thesis.



**Figure 1.** The three levels of coding identified through the Grounded Theory analysis in the research. The inductive process starts from basic elements referring to candidates' perceptions and mental images (SCMs) and goes on to assess valuation on elements of gender and social class and detect biases that influence hiring processes in the Italian legal market.

- **Valuations of gender or cultural status elements in the résumés**

Firstly, the lowest category of concrete data to be measured through the interviews was identified, in order to structure the questions and the analysis to be conducted. The elements to be investigated were the dimensions of perception of warmth, competence, polish, commitment, cultural status, and cultural similarity (See previous chapters on literature review and SCM).

For each of these features at least two questions were structured (Table 5) to go into an initial superficial analysis of respondents' perceptions of these elements. Then, data were perceived regarding how respondents judge these variables in candidates based on their presentations and the combination of social and gender factors included in résumés.

The advantage of this method of analysis and the use of theoretical sampling lies in the flexibility and dynamism of the data collection process. Indeed, after gathering the initial data, an increasingly accurate investigation was conducted for each interview, which suggested new directions to explore or gaps to fill in the emerging categories. Specifically, after identifying concepts and categories of analysis that emerged, the first interviews allowed us to understand where to direct subsequent questions, refining them to better understand which elements of the curricula most influenced these perceptions. To provide a concrete example, Respondent 1 helped to understand that candidates with low-class characteristics were perceived as more predisposed to commitment. This observation allowed us to delve deeper into subsequent interviews, asking why commitment was perceived as greater and whether this idea had a direct connection with the candidate's presumed social background. In other words, whether the candidate was perceived as

more willing to work hard due to elements related to their background, such as an unusual secondary education or learning to play an instrument as a self-taught individual.

- **Perceptions and mental image of the candidates – reference to the SCM**

The second phase of coding is more focused, as the initial sampling and data collection provide a clearer idea of the key topics that need further investigation. Specifically, during the ongoing analysis and at the conclusion of the interviews, while reconstructing the inductive process to arrive at theoretical results, it was helpful within the second phase to analyse exactly which gender and social status elements (intentionally included in the CVs) had the greatest impact on the image of the candidate formed in the minds of the interviewees.

The second phase of coding and analysis was carried out progressively to improve the subsequent interviews, but also at the end, to allow the inductive process to build theoretical results that can be generalized to arrive at a final thesis. In particular, here the focus is on understanding whether and what the relationship was between perceptions noted by respondents and the elements present in the résumés, why certain elements influenced the image more, and whether these correlations changed according to gender and social status of the applicants. Hence, the first coding category focused on understanding was the perceptions of the candidates, and then the analysis continued investigating which elements had the greatest influence on these perception dimensions, in relation to associations made with the SCM. Later, we sought to find out how the comparison between gender (female / male) or social background (high-class / low-class) was implicated in the valuation.

Thus, once the interpretative categories were understood, it became increasingly easier, even after the first interview, to conduct more targeted investigations into the most relevant themes and those that most influenced the discriminatory biases under analysis. In this way, questions that were less substantiated from the interviewees' perspective and less clear also emerged, allowing for the refinement of these for future interviews. For example, the question asking 'if the candidate is aligned with the organisational culture' was often considered unclear for the interviewees. Respondents did not clearly identify the CV elements that could provide an answer, and therefore they gave generalized answers, confirming that it is difficult to understand without knowing the person. Thanks to progressive sampling, I understood how it was more difficult to consider the candidate's fit within the organisational culture in the case of a department within a corporation, compared to a law firm, which seems to have a more pronounced and centralized elite organisational culture focused on the legal sector.

To recap, in this second phase of analysis, particular attention was given to the following themes:

- Impact of the candidate's residential address.
- Evaluation of the sports and musical activities undertaken, and how these influence the perception of a person's sophistication or warmth.
- Candidate's name and gender, and how gender influences the perception of competence and warmth.
- Weight of volunteer activities in strengthening perceptions of reliability, dedication, or commitment
- Type of academic path (particularly secondary education) attended, and how this influences the perception of those dimensions.

- **Gender and Social Class barriers in hiring processes**

The third phase of data coding, after the interviews were completed, involved a more abstract conceptualization of the data based on the identification of relationships between the categories that emerged from focused coding. In this phase, through a process of data induction and hierarchical organisation of the themes, the analysis of the main category was reached, leading to considerations related to the proposed research questions. The core category represents the final and most abstract categorization of the analysis, and in our case, it refers to cultural and social biases in selection processes, specifically the interaction between gender and social class biases.

All the previously analysed categories and progressively made assessments have been useful in reaching conclusions, particularly in producing more generalized and theoretical analyses that refer to:

- Perceived differences based on the gender of the candidates.
- Effects of social class on the perception of candidates.
- How gender and class interact in evaluation processes.

The use of Grounded Theory and its flexibility was necessary to reach out conclusions not only regarding the two types of discrimination considered individually, but also to connect them

and categorize results related to the intersection of gender and social class biases. In this way, we were also able to confirm the existing literature and prove the formation of preferences connected to perceptions and assessments based on various elements included in the CVs. These preferences lead to interconnected results of the two forms of discrimination and a matrix effect, revealing which gender and social status were preferred by the interviewees and for what reasons. The core category is the central element for explaining the psychosocial process underlying the social phenomenon of gender and social status discrimination.

#### **4.4. Results of the interviews**

A prominent theme that surfaced across all interviews is the recognition by the interviewees of the difficulties involved in assessing certain attributes of candidates solely through the examination of a résumé. They admitted that it is challenging to perceive certain candidates' dimensions and features, such as their competence or skills, by merely reviewing a curriculum, making it difficult to make judgments and compare highly qualified recent graduates like those presented. The interviewees conveyed uncertainty regarding their preferences and expressed the desire to interview all candidates prior to reaching any conclusive decisions. Nevertheless, when prompted, they articulated their views and indicated their preferences. This situation led to an interesting paradox: on the one hand, respondents admit the impossibility of making a final choice based only on seeing a résumé. On the other hand, when pressed to express a preference, they make assessments that are often based on subjective elements, such as likability, gender, experience in specific contexts, or even CV formatting (which was highly similar across candidates).

##### **4.4.1. Gender**

Lavinia and Consuelo share an academic profile of undoubted excellence, having both earned top grades in both high school and college. They both have attended an Italian public University in Rome and had Erasmus experiences abroad, demonstrating openness and adaptability. Lavinia and Consuelo, thanks to their academic backgrounds, are both considered qualified and competent (within the limits of competence and qualifications that can be attributed to recent graduates with little field experience). Consuelo holds a degree in Law, with a thesis on corporate law, but followed a less traditional path for someone aspiring to become a lawyer, having attended a hospitality secondary institute. This factor led interviewees to perceive her as determined and committed to achieving high results despite following an 'unusual' educational path for someone pursuing a law degree. Lavinia, on the other hand, followed a more traditional route with a classical

high school diploma and a degree with honours in commercial law. This path makes her appear competent in the eyes of the interviewees, but her more classical education, along with other factors, makes her seem a more 'sophisticated' candidate than Consuelo in terms of logical skills and preparation.

Completely in line with SCM theories (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2008), both female candidates are perceived as warmer and friendlier than the male ones. Even though the elements highlighted by respondents to measure warmth are the same for all four CVs, such as volunteering or team sports, the women conform to the stereotype of being perceived as warmer than men, especially since these cases involve a sector with high interaction with the final customer. Respondent 2 even admits to generally preferring a woman over a man (*“in my experience, I have always had better and more satisfying results from young female candidates than from young male candidates”*). Despite this statement, however, the candidate tends to prefer Lavinia in the end but does not place as much importance on the other female candidate. Nonetheless, all the interviews also reveal that this perception of 'warmth' is not easily deduced solely from the CV, as it is more closely tied to the impression formed when meeting the candidate in an interview.

As for the two male candidates, Antonio and Tancredi, they also share a strong academic background, having both earned top university honours. Their passion for sports, horseback riding and soccer, respectively, played at a competitive level, underscores their competitive spirit and dedication. In general, the two men are perceived as more competent than Consuelo, despite having very similar experiences, but not directly more competent than Lavinia, likely due to Lavinia's more elite background. Respondent 1 even stated that the tasks assigned to Consuelo seem to be more office-related and more '*girlish*' tasks, thus requiring fewer technical skills and more organisational ones. Antonio and Tancredi are evaluated more neutrally in terms of warmth, with Antonio being perceived as more friendly than Tancredi, thanks to his interests in soccer.

#### **4.4.2. Social class**

Social class biases are deeply rooted in society and can negatively influence the perceptions and evaluations of others. Individuals from a higher social class are often perceived as more competent, ambitious, and polished (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016), while those from lower social classes may be stereotyped as less motivated and less competent, but at the same time warmer (Durante et al., 2013). These biases can limit the opportunities for the latter, creating a vicious cycle of inequality.

The elements manipulated within the résumés were noticed by the interviewees and influenced their choices and considerations regarding the candidates. Lavinia and Tancredi are similar in their résumés in terms of high cultural status elements, while Antonio and Consuelo share experiences typically associated with lower cultural status.

Lavinia, a resident in one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Rome, is passionate about competitive horseback riding and studies classical harp at the conservatory. She received her classical high school diploma from a high school located in another well-regarded Roman neighbourhood, which makes her perceived as more competent and classically trained (there is a perception of greater rigor associated with a classical high school education and conservatory training). Respondents imagined her as more sophisticated than Consuelo and Antonio, and her polish is also reinforced by her social status, residence, and the activities she does such as harp or riding.

Tancredi, a resident of Viale dei Parioli, graduated from a notable classical high school in Rome, which makes him perceived as more conceited and privileged, but also as the most competent (possibly due to his experience as a junior counsel in a law firm, stated by Respondent 3 and 4). Tancredi, being imagined as the more competent but privileged and less humble candidate, despite his achievements, is perceived as having everything handed to him on a silver platter. As Lavinia, Tancredi is similarly seen as a sophisticated and formal person, but more distant. This greater polish, in Tancredi as well, emerges when considering his interests, as he practices competitive horseback riding and studies classical organ at the conservatory. However, these assessments of his social status and polish are perceived as a disadvantage for Tancredi, who is considered arrogant, cold and lacking humility (respondent 1 and 2), while they are seen as an advantage for Lavinia, who is considered well-suited for more elite environments like the legal field (respondent 1). Explicit considerations have been made with respect to Lavinia's and Tancredi's affluent background. This consideration confirms Durante et al.'s findings (2013), which suggest that people from higher social classes are perceived as more competent but less warm compared to those from lower social classes, such as Antonio e Consuelo.

On the other hand, Consuelo and Antonio exhibit elements of low cultural status that lead to stereotypical associations of lower social class, and therefore they are viewed as less competent and less suited for this field. Consuelo, lives in a neighbourhood considered blighted, she received her hospitality diploma in Rome and enjoys Latin American dancing as a sport and plays self-taught guitar. Consuelo is seen as more outgoing and joyful, especially because of her interest in group



dances. Respondents 1 and 2 smile when looking at Consuelo profile, imagining her as a whimsical person (in Italian “estrosa”), but at the same time there is a perception that these elements and her cheerful image may undermine her abilities and competence. Similarly, Antonio lives on Via della Magliana and plays soccer and drums in a rock band, which makes him perceived as more friendly and sociable (higher perceived warmth for Antonio and Consuelo rather than for Lavinia and Tancredi). He graduates from a technical high school, and for this reason, he is perceived as less competent or suited to pursue a legal career, despite his excellent results throughout his academic journey, and notable internship experiences (i.e., as legal intern in the ONU, New York).

As for commitment to work, it is associated with elements of cultural status. The interviewees show the perception that individuals of high status seem to have an easier time achieving good outcomes because they are trained from a young age to follow ambitious models. On the other hand, candidates of low status seem to have to work harder to achieve the same results. Hence, Antonio and Consuelo are seen as more inclined to work hard, given his more practical background and their commitment to achieving good results (although this assessment is made more for Antonio than for Consuelo). All applicants are seen as willing, but Consuelo and Antonio are perceived as more determined because of their unusual path, and yet still managed to achieve good results in their studies. It seems to exist the idea that Consuelo’s less affluent status (especially because of the secondary schooling) created greater obstacles in her ability to undertake law studies, and she must work harder than Lavinia or Tancredi in order to achieve the same excellent results. Despite this commitment consideration for low-class status, Consuelo is still perceived as less competent, and the hard work perceived as a minus rather than as a positive feature. Same happens with Antonio, who is perceived by the interviewees as more inclined to work hard to achieve his goals, with a higher perception of commitment compared to Consuelo, despite the reasons given for the responses being the same. Moreover, although for different reasons, both Tancredi and Lavinia are also perceived as individuals who have worked hard to achieve excellent results, especially because the interviewees (particularly those residing in Rome and familiar with the city) recognized the reputation and rigor of the classical high schools they attended, giving them credit for having achieved outstanding results through dedication.

Overall, we can infer from the interviews that Lavinia and Tancredi, coming from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, are seen as they had the possibility to cultivate elite interests and passions from a young age, which leads the interviewee to create a direct correlation in their mind with the social status of the candidate, and then influence their choices, even though they tend to not admit it. In contrast, it seems that Consuelo and Antonio, despite showing great determination and

talent, are still suffering the loss of unequal opportunities. However, in the end, the person who suffers the most from this stereotype is Consuelo, the girl from a lower social status, perceived as the least competent, even though she is positively perceived in terms of warmth (i.e., as extremely cheerful).

#### **4.4.3. Interaction between gender and social class**

The analysis of the cases of Lavinia, Consuelo, Tancredi, and Antonio allows us to observe how social class, intertwined with other factors such as cultural capital and individual choices, influences life trajectories in a complex way. While all four candidates share academic excellence, they present different paths and aspirations, shaped by their social backgrounds and the opportunities available to them.

The analysis of the interviews reveals interesting dynamics related to the social perceptions associated with the candidates. Both women, Lavinia and Consuelo, are generally perceived as warmer, meaning more empathetic and friendly, compared to the male candidates (as suggested by Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002), Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2008), Rivera and Tilcsik (2016)). However, within this category, Consuelo stands out for her greater spontaneity and friendliness, while Lavinia is associated with a more refined and sophisticated image, defined as 'polish.' This latter characteristic, combined with her social background, makes her particularly suited to interacting with an elite clientele. Among the men, Antonio is perceived as the warmer and friendlier, while Tancredi, though considered competent, is perceived as more arrogant and less approachable. Although Tancredi was perceived as more competent, perhaps because of his experience at a well-known firm, he was penalized by an image that was too cold and distant. Conversely, Antonio, who came from a less privileged social background, was evaluated positively for both his competence and his willingness to engage. The fact that he attended a technical institute and had the idea that he had to overcome obstacles to achieve these goals helped create an image of a humble and determined person, characteristics that made him more empathetic in the mind of the interviewers. His passions, such as soccer and guitar, further reinforced this perception of human warmth, as opposed to Tancredi's more elitist interests, such as classical organ and horseback riding. Completely different is the mental image created for Consuelo. Logically, following the previous valuation, we expect that Consuelo should appear just as willing and competent as Antonio, but that is not the case. Despite her experience in prestigious institutions such as the European Commission in Brussels and a Roman law firm, Consuelo, who seems to come from a lower socioeconomic background, is considered the least suitable by all interviewees. Respondent 1

explicitly pointed out this disparity, devaluing her professional experiences and attributing them to low-level tasks, such as administrative assistance, despite her involvement in skilled activities, such as mediation and university tutoring. These differences in perceptions are deeply rooted in gender and social class stereotypes, which influence people's expectations and evaluations.

Thus, the presentation of the main findings of the interviews highlights the existence of implicit discrimination in hiring processes and seems to confirm the literature analysed earlier. In the next chapter, we will delve deeper into the implications of these insights and explore the broader considerations they raise.

#### **4.4.4. Summary of preferences**

In the first interview (department firm – Rome), Antonio was favoured as the leading candidate, primarily for his perceived likeability and better-structured CV. Lavinia was identified as the second choice, followed by Tancredi, while Consuelo was regarded as the least favoured option, as she was described as having less relevant experience, often perceived as more administrative and support-oriented (*“Consuelo was mostly assigned to tasks involving group organisation and back-office work, rather than core legal matters.”*).

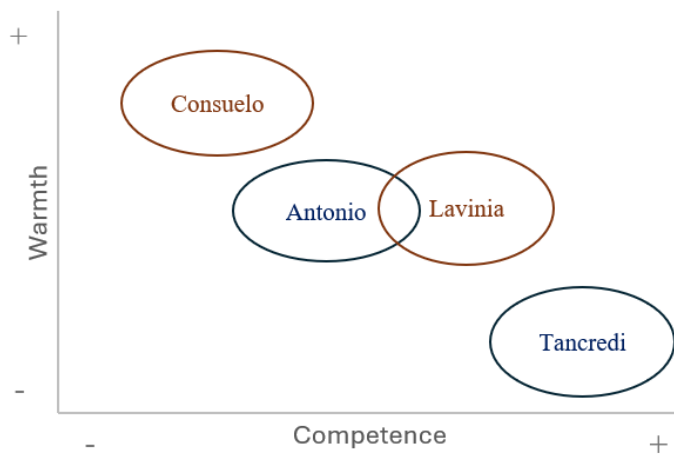
In the second interview (legal firm – Milan), Lavinia was identified as the preferred candidate, significantly influenced by the interviewer's tendency to favour female candidates. Tancredi was placed at the bottom of the ranking, as he was perceived to be less humble than the other candidates (*“I have the feeling that I would be dealing with someone less humble than the others... I believe that young candidates need to understand that when they enter a work environment, they are newcomers and should behave accordingly. They need to integrate into a setting where there is an organisation, with small or large hierarchies, and it is important to manage relationships intelligently. My impression is that Tancredi might struggle with managing these relationships.”*).

Interview three (legal firm – Rome) and four (department firm – Milan) yielded an ambiguous result, as respondents were more hesitant to give their preference and emphasize a willingness to consult all candidates before making a final decision. Nevertheless, in the third interview, Tancredi emerged as a tentative frontrunner owing to his relevant experience at a renowned law firm in Rome. In a similar vein, Interview 4 reflected a lack of decisiveness, but at the end the respondent highlight Lavinia as the leading candidate, attributed to her classical

education, while Tancredi was regarded as the secondary choice, because he also presents classical background.

Thus, the absolute preferred candidate over all was Lavinia (high – class female), while the least favourite and never chosen was Consuelo (low – class female). The results reveal that respondents' preferences are influenced by cultural status elements manipulated in CVs and influence social class and gender stereotypes. This influence is due to respondents' different perceptions on the dimensions of warmth and competence, as well as commitment, polish, and cultural similarity. The dimensions that are most revealing on class and gender stereotypes, and the interaction between the two, are warmth and competence, which are rated to varying degrees according to gender or high and low social background, or even the interaction between the two (Figure 2).

Our findings are slightly different from those presented in the previous research by Calluso & Devetag (2023), where the CV most preferred was the high-class male candidate. However, in our analysis we are taking into consideration a limited sample of respondents, and, as a whole, our results are consistent with the literature reviewed and the principles of the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick e Xu, 2002).



**Figure 2.** Perception of the four candidates on warmth and competence, also considering the Stereotype Content Model.

## 5. Discussion and Implications of the Results

### 5.1. Exploring results: A discussion on Gender and Social Class bias in Hiring

The data pulled from the interviews clearly confirm the dynamics predicted by the SCM (Stereotype Content Model). The interviewers' perceptions, heavily influenced by stereotypes related to social class and cultural capital, significantly guide their evaluations and choices. Although all the interviewers claim to consider the competencies and potential of all the candidates, in practice, when prompted, they make a choice that tends to fall more frequently on those with a higher sociocultural profile. This phenomenon, known as confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), leads individuals to seek and interpret information in ways that confirm their pre-existing beliefs. In this specific case, the interviewers seem to place greater value on the experiences and skills acquired in privileged environments, underestimating the potential of those who come from different social backgrounds. It is interesting to note how this tendency also manifests itself towards young graduates, individuals at the very beginning of their careers who can still be shaped and who can easily further develop their skillset and competences, suggesting that class stereotypes are deeply rooted and difficult to change.

The study was able to address all the three research questions, as the interviews revealed structural correlations regarding perceived competence and warmth, as well as differences in polish, cultural similarity and commitment based on the candidate's gender and social background, or the interaction between the two.

*Research Question 1 (Gender Discrimination): In the Italian elite labour market, how do HR perceptions of candidate competence, polish, cultural status, and warmth differ between male and female candidates?*

The stereotype content model predicts that in the case of female or male groups, they are viewed ambivalently, as competent but not warm or as warm but not competent, reflecting the intersection of perceived warmth and competence. This model prove that women tend to be perceived as warmer but less competent than men, especially in positions that require leadership and technical skills (Cuddy, Fiske, Glick, 2002). The results of our interviews highlight this stereotype. Although all the candidates were initially considered presumably competent, upon further analysis of the responses, the perception of competence varied based on gender and social status.

Overall, the person perceived as the most competent was Tancredi, particularly due to his experience as a junior counsel in a law firm. However, all the interviewees had difficulty expressing evaluations about competence, as it is challenging to assess young candidates with little work experience by only looking at their résumés. Despite this, from the interviews, Consuelo appears to be the least competent applicant. Respondent 1 specifically stated that it seems this girl was previously assigned less important functions in her work experience, tasks that could be considered back-office, as support or office organisational duties. Actually, this statement could be linked to a perceived lower competence due to gender or social class (low-class), or the intersection of these two features, considering that the experiences of the four were all very similar and consistent with those of recently graduated young adults.

The stereotype related to women is divided into traditional women, perceived as warmer and subject to paternalistic prejudices, and career women, perceived as colder but more competent (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This stereotype is linked to paternalistic prejudices, which primarily arise in the context of gender stereotypes, especially for women. This stereotype even becomes more pronounced when it comes to women mothers, who are perceived to be warmer but even less competent and dedicated than childless women and men (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Indeed, traditional women and other groups that have low socio-economic success are perceived as non-competitive, warm, and at the same time incompetent (Durante, 2008). The paternalistic prejudice reflects liking but lack of respect (sometimes expressed as pity), due to the incompetence attributed to the lower status group. In our research, although we are considering young female candidates and thus unable to deeply explore the difference between traditional women and career women, we can to some extent affirm the paternalistic bias emerges between Consuelo and Lavinia. Consuelo is perceived as warmer compared to Lavinia, but at the same time less competent, probably because she is seen as a more traditional woman due to her low-class status. Conversely, Lavinia is viewed as a more structured woman with a classical and sophisticated background (thanks to her classical high school education, attendance at the conservatory, and competitive horseback riding), making her somehow more suited to certain environments and social circles she has been accustomed to since childhood (as also stated by Respondent 1).

For the male gender, this paternalistic bias is almost absent, and in fact, it was not observed in our interviews. Tancredi and Antonio appear to be perceived as similarly competent but less warm and friendly compared to the female candidates, especially Tancredi is seen as colder and distant, although this may be attributed to elements of social class.

*Research Question 2 (Social Class Discrimination): In the Italian elite labour market, how*

*do HR professionals perceive differences in competence, warmth, polish, and cultural status between candidates from different social classes?*

Our results confirm what was demonstrated by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016), higher-class applicants better fits than lower-class candidates within the elite culture and the legal sector. Lavinia and Tancredi were preferred over Antonio and Consuelo, even though law school records, professional experiences, and undergraduate academic achievements were identical across all applicants.

The evaluators' preferences were influenced by deliberately manipulated elements of cultural status, which were noticed by the interviewees and associated with the candidate's social class. Although the interviewees repeatedly admitted that they did not consider elements less aligned with the job position in hiring decisions, they were still influenced by the social status indicators present in the CVs. The most distinctive elements that were representative of the candidate's social class were cultural status markers, secondary education experience, and residence. Overall, individual evaluations for each candidate were positive, as all interviewees considered it favourable for candidates to have personal interests and hobbies outside of work. Additionally, extracurricular activities such as sports, music, or volunteering were seen as indicators of the candidates' commitment, showing their ability to manage multiple activities while still achieving excellent academic results. However, when it comes to comparing candidates, various elements stand out, particularly in the case of high-class candidates.

Lavinia, compared to Consuelo, was explicitly recognized as belonging to a higher social class. The interviewees described her as more polished and professional, thanks to her more classical and sophisticated presentation (due to her classical secondary education, competitive horse riding, and conservatory studies), making her seem more suited for the legal sector, where a certain level of seriousness and precision is required – qualities not attributed to Consuelo. Consuelo, on the other hand, is perceived as an 'extravagant' and 'joyful' person due to her musical and sporting activities; because of these features, she is also perceived as generally less suitable for the law career, and her work experience judged as less relevant in the eyes of the interviewees, despite the CV being structured with the same level of qualifications of her peers.

The same happens in the case of Antonio and Tancredi. The candidate belonging to a lower class is perceived as warmer than the high-class one, due to his more common activities, such as playing soccer or participating in a music band. Tancredi, who belongs to the high-status group, is perceived as colder and more distant, even arrogant, while at the same time more sophisticated,

competent, and capable. Indeed, consistent with the SCM, perceived social status predicted perceived competence (Cuddy, Fiske, Glick, 2008). Upper social classes tend to be perceived as competent but lacking warmth, while lower social classes are viewed as warm but lacking in competence (Durante & Fiske, 2017).

The group of candidates are linked to greater competence when the candidate is associated with elements of high-class status, whereas the candidate is seen as less competent when is perceived as powerless and belonging to low-class status (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick and Xu, 2002), although this stereotype is more evident in the female gender than in the male one (Antonio and Tancredi are perceived to be similarly competent). This connection, which represents a correspondence bias, legitimizes power and prestige hierarchies, and justifies this discriminatory system. It stems from the belief that people get what they deserve (Lerner & Miller, 1978) and that people's behaviour is influenced by their traits and social status (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Specifically, respondents associate people with high cultural status elements (Lavinia and Tancredi) with a greater likelihood of having more resources and thus more control over life choices. Fiske highlighted this concept in her work, where she states that status allows for more resources and consequently a greater ability of this group to control things (e.g., educational institution chosen for child, activities and hobbies pursued), which would result in greater power.

All the interviewees state that there are elements in the CVs that reveal the candidate's cultural and social status, but they also claim that this has nothing to do with the ability to achieve greater results in the future or being advantaged in doing so. Nevertheless, Interviewee 1 admits that, inevitably, the social and cultural capital of the candidates could position them to have greater familiarity and be more easily integrated into an elite sector like the legal field. All the interviewees also seem to associate greater competence and polish with Tancredi and Lavinia due to their classical education and activities such as horseback riding or playing the harp or organ, while Antonio and Consuelo are perceived as warmer, due to more accessible activities like guitar playing or group sports like dancing and soccer.

About the commitment, there is a different perception that stems from the association with the candidates' social class. Antonio and Consuelo are perceived as individuals who had to work harder to achieve the same goals, likely because they had fewer resources at their disposal. For example, the interviewees all commented on the 'unusual' secondary education paths taken by these two candidates. Precisely because these paths are unusual, even though they are considered a disadvantage because they do not prepare one for a law career (according to all respondents), they seem to enhance the perception of commitment for these two candidates. Consuelo and Antonio were seen as more likely



to work hard and achieve excellent results, as they had previously overcome obstacles and succeeded despite having fewer resources. Nonetheless, overall, this additional work is not necessarily perceived as a strength (as these candidates probably had to work harder to achieve similar results), but rather as a possible flaw, as they are perceived as lacking in critical skills necessary for the job (despite the following brilliant educational path).

This perception does not apply to Lavinia and Tancredi, as the common belief is that it was easier for them due to the greater resources and social background they come from, which in some way facilitated their success and better prepared them to achieve good results. This assessment is based on the common but flawed assumption that status invariably derives from ability (as opposed to such factors as opportunity, inheritance, or luck; Fiske et al., 1999, 2002b). In short, status assesses the capability of groups to control resources. However, this assumption is not always shared. In fact, high-status individuals are still considered more competent and with better education, which stems from attending a classical high school. Specifically, Interviewee 1 highlights Tancredi and Lavinia's excellence in graduating with top marks from the two most prestigious high schools in Rome, known for their excellent reputation in educating students, and therefore attributes significant commitment to both candidates.

Overall, our statements contrast the findings of Rivera and Tilcsick (2016), who linked the concept of commitment to gender, stating that higher-class women were seen as less committed to work and thus less likely to conform to the 'ideal worker' model (Acker, 1990), typically expected in intense, all-or-nothing occupations. In our research, we did not find any type of association between gender and commitment, and the willingness to work hard is correlated more with social status than with the candidate's gender.

Finally, Tancredi is recognized for his high competence but is also considered by 2 out of 4 interviewees as the least humble and the coldest candidate, because, based on the presentation of the CV and cultural status elements, he appears to be a presumptuous person and less inclined to respect hierarchies within a law firm (respondent 2). This assessment results in envious prejudice; thus, the candidate elicits perceptions of arrogance, coldness, and lack of sincerity, because the association with high status and potential success opportunities leads to inferences about competence but produces inferences about warmth that go in the opposite direction (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2002).

*Research Question 3 (Interaction between Gender and Social Class Discrimination): In the Italian elite labour market, how do the combined effects of gender and social class influence HR perceptions of candidate competence, polish, cultural status, and warmth in the hiring processes? Is*

*it possible to identify specific configurations of features attributed to candidates based on the interaction of gender and social class of origin?*

In the analysis of the interaction between gender and class stereotypes, all the previously discussed themes emerged, particularly regarding mixed stereotypes, where gender and social class groups, especially when analysed together, can be perceived as competent but not warm, or warm but not competent. Sometimes, these perceptions are stronger for one group of interactions than for another.

Typically, the level of polish was always implicitly associated with the high-class group and inversely related to the candidate's perceived warmth (being sophisticated, often associated with a classical education, seems to influence the perception of being distant and cold).

As already noted by Rivera and Tilcsik, the effects of social class signals vary markedly by gender. However, unlike Rivera and Tilcsik, our research sample reveals that women (and not men) who display markers of higher social class are significantly more likely than other candidates to be invited for interviews at top law firms in the legal sector. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the sample of interviewees is too small to be representative and does not allow to make general considerations regarding the participants callback rate.

Tancredi and Consuelo emerged as the profiles most aligned with the SCM. Tancredi was perceived as more competent, being a high-class male, and thus also seen as a sophisticated person due to his activities in horseback riding, conservatory studies in organ playing, and his attendance at a classical high school. The candidate's residence was also noted as associating him with a certain high social context, even by interviewees from Milan who are not familiar with Rome but still recognized the street, mentally linking it to one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the city. Conversely, Consuelo perfectly matched the image described by the SCM, as a low-class female she was imagined as a cheerful and warm girl, especially due to her dancing activities and self-taught guitar playing. At the same time, however, she was considered the least competent, due to her less conventional education, deemed unsuitable for someone preparing to become a lawyer (even though this is secondary education, and the candidate graduated with top marks). Moreover, in terms of polish, the girl received no evaluation, as the low cultural status elements did not influence the perception of sophistication. Nonetheless, adjectives used to describe her, such as "extravagant", implicitly convey the idea of an unsophisticated person.

Antonio, the low-class male candidate, was perceived as fairly competent compared to the

peers. He also attended a technical secondary school, which is considered inadequate for developing the critical thinking necessary for someone wanting to pursue legal studies. Here, it is interesting to note that despite the common assumption according to which classical studies – through the study of ancient Greek and Latin - provide a much higher reasoning and critical thinking, such association has never been proven empirically, hence, it can be regarded as stereotype.

Nonetheless, Antonio is still preferred over Consuelo, thus implicitly being seen as more competent. This preference could be attributed to the candidate's male gender, which makes him seem more suitable for the legal context in the collective imagination. At the same time, the candidate from a lower class is perceived as warmer than Tancredi, despite also being male. Indeed, Antonio, thanks to playing soccer and drums in a band, gives the impression of being a more humble and friendly person compared to Tancredi, who engages in activities generally associated with higher social ranks. In other words, the stereotype associated with the low-class background seems to prevail over the being a male.

Finally, Lavinia, the higher-class female, received a corresponding advantage in overall evaluations. Lavinia is perceived as fairly warm, being a woman, although her high cultural and social status tends to reduce this perception, as she appears to have a more structured and classical demeanour than Consuelo. At the same time, Lavinia is perceived as competent, because despite being a woman, her personal education is seen as high-level due to elements of cultural status. Furthermore, like Tancredi, Lavinia is perceived as refined and sophisticated, thanks to her high status.

Regarding commitment, Lavinia and Tancredi are considered hardworking individuals, especially as Interviewee 1 points out that the classical high schools they attended in Rome are of excellent quality, making the candidates commendable for their commitment in graduating with top marks. Nevertheless, the general impression is that people with fewer resources who still achieve excellent results, like Antonio and Consuelo, have a greater tendency to work hard to climb the ladder and reach good levels, and therefore might be considered more likely to put in hard work. Despite this, interviewees also point at the fact that technical institutes are less complex, hence, despite receiving high grades, Consuelo and Antonio most likely did not have to work as hard as Lavinia and Tancredi; hence, also in this case, despite recognizing the hard work, considerations related to social class seem to still diminish the value of such work in comparison with high-class candidates.

Finally, regarding the cultural similarity between the organisation and the individual, no particular evidence was found in our case. It seems that the in-depth views from the interviews on

organisational culture depend on the company in question. For instance, respondent 2, who works at a law firm in Milan, says he does not prefer Tancredi due to the perception of him as a person inclined to competition and dominating others, a trait that does not align with the culture of the law firm where he works, where people respect hierarchies and aim for a common goal. This was an unusual valuation, since in the collective imaginary people tend to associate Milan with an environment of greater job competitiveness than Rome. On the other hand, respondents 3 and 4 seem to prefer Tancredi over Antonio, for example, precisely because of his more classical and sophisticated background, stemming from his high social status, as they consider him more fitting for a legal context.

About the similarity between the candidates and the interviewees, most of the interviewees (Respondent 2, 3, 4, except for 1 who does not work directly as a lawyer but is an HR manager in a legal department) have a classical academic background more similar to that of the high social status candidates. As for correlations between the instruments played or sports practiced and the preferences indicated, no direct correlation seems to emerge. However, Interviewee 1 emphasizes how the theme of similarity between the chosen candidate and the hiring professional is very common in hiring processes, especially when the candidate assesses the last interview with the top manager. Usually, there is a tendency to choose a candidate similar to oneself to share the vision in terms of action or simply to have more topics for conversation during work hours. Nonetheless, Interviewee 1 points out that this method is flawed and that the best choice would be to embrace diversity in order to enrich both personal and company backgrounds.

In conclusion, we can affirm that our findings are in line with the general claims of the SCM, especially regarding social class stereotypes. Indeed, final preferences related to social class were stronger than those related to gender. As for gender stereotypes, our research differs from the results of Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) and Calluso and Devetag (2023). In those studies, it appears that the higher-class male advantage in employment (Smigel, 1964) endures, at least for applicants outside the most elite law schools, using a sample of CVs from graduates of the same public institution in Rome. In our case, it is the high-class female who prevails, being perceived as warmer compared to the high-class male, and equally competent.

The results of this research are valuable and enrich the literature considered because they confirm the existence of stereotypes of gender and social class, aligned with the Stereotype Content Model, which affect the hiring processes in the Italian legal industry. Our research demonstrates how cultural and social status, combined with gender, influence the perceptions of candidates, in terms of warmth, competence, polish and cultural similarity with the company. This is extremely relevant

considering that candidates share the very same features in terms of education, academic achievement, and job experience. Nonetheless, features that are supposed to be irrelevant for candidates' evaluation, such as hobbies, place of residence and such, appear to exert a considerable impact in shaping HR impressions of candidates, even diminishing the value of the actual educational and work achievements.

These findings reinforce previous literature, illustrating how males are considered more competent than females, although less warm. At the same time, people from high-class status are perceived as more competent, but more distant, less humble, and cold. These stereotype interactions generally lead to a preference for people of high social status, as social class stereotypes override gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, our study elucidates on how implicit biases, particularly those related to socioeconomic background and gender, continue to play a significant role in elite sectors such as the legal field. By exploring these dynamics in Italy, the research provides insight into hiring practices in Rome and Milan, offering interesting data on how cultural contexts influence class and gender discrimination. The implications of this study could be interesting and useful as a pilot experiment for a future experiment aimed at delving deeper into the issue of gender and social class stereotypes in the Italian legal sector, using a larger sample and a quantitative approach.

## **5.2. Limitations of the study**

Assessing the quality of a study requires careful analysis of its limitations.

The most relevant limitation of this research concerns the size of the sample taken into consideration, which is also the reason why this study calls for a further in-depth analysis. The sample taken into consideration included only 4 respondents, which represents too restricted a sample to obtain solid results on the topic. The first challenge we encountered was to reach and contact legal experts available to spend time for our research, the legal sector often requires many efforts and deal with several projects simultaneously including deadlines, especially in cases of medium to large companies. The difficulty lay notably in finding four candidates available in a specific field of operation (HR or partner director) in Rome and Milan, two of whom were employees in a medium or large law firm and two of whom were employed in a medium or large-sized corporations within the legal department. Despite we should consider the difficulty of finding people who fit these standards and are willing to conduct the interview, the relatively small sample size limits the representativeness of the findings across a broader spectrum of work environments,

thus affecting the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, one of the initial objectives was to achieve more focused insights to make a comparison between respondents from Rome and Milan.

Given the perceived cultural and economic divide between the North, often regarded as more progressive, and the South, which is frequently associated with traditional and patriarchal norms, the study initially was aimed also at investigate the manifestations of discrimination across two culturally and economically divergent cities. This was the reason why we focused on looking for respondents employed in Rome and Milan, specifically people who are assumed to have two different perceptions based on experiences and backgrounds also influenced by the city in which they work. Notably, Milan is distinguished by its significant concentration of wealth, especially in elite sectors such as the legal sector, making it more elitist than Rome. In fact, findings from Calluso & Devetag's previous study indicated a slightly worse social class stereotype and a much stronger gender bias in the labour market in the city of Milan, compared to Rome. Despite the use of grounded theory, which provides a solid methodology for analysing findings in the business field, this goal could not be achieved due to the paucity of respondents and insights collected. The small and non-representative sample size made it impossible to draw definitive conclusions regarding potential differences between the two cities, thereby restricting the relevance of the findings to a broader professional context.

Another significant problem of this thesis concerns the simultaneous presentation to the interviewees of four very similar résumés. These curricula were created and previously used in the audit study by Calluso & Devetag (2023), who followed the guidelines of similar and accurate correspondence experiments (e.g., Rivera, Tilcsik, and Thomas). The résumés were carefully designed to represent four similarly qualified candidates, each with a similar structure and at least four signals of social class in their curricula for manipulating discriminatory elements, as suggested by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016). The CVs from the previous study were structured very similarly to represent four equally qualified candidates for the position, aiming to obtain results attributable solely to associations made with the manipulated gender and status elements. However, in the audit experiment, the résumés were not all sent together to the companies; instead, for each legal firm and legal department, they were sent individually and randomly (or at most two to large companies), to ensure a reliable callback ratio and decrease the risk of detection.

In our study, the purpose was precisely to compare all the four résumés and understand the different perceptions of the interviewees for each candidate, and how their evaluations could be attributed to elements in the résumés. However, by doing so, the interviewees noticed the extreme

similarity of the candidates, who had very close academic and personal experiences. All these elements, while constructing an image of excellent candidates, inadvertently made the profiles appear somewhat unrealistic to the respondents, who questioned the possibility of receiving 4 candidates so 'perfect'. Interviewee 1 even remarked that the candidates seemed artificial, as it is too challenging to find, at the same time, 4 optimal candidates, all with excellent academic performance, and at the same time excelling in competitive sports, engaging in musical pursuits, and participating in extensive volunteer work. All respondents, to varying degrees, noted the fictitious nature of the CVs, which may have slightly biased their baseline perception of the candidates. Consequently, this may have influenced the respondents' answers, as they consistently concluded that the study was also focused on social status, since the CVs mainly differed in terms of cultural status elements. The result may have led to a potential disconnect between the study's outcomes and the actual dynamics observed in recruitment practices.

Linked to the previous point, the academic experience regarding secondary education selected in the résumés is also another challenge we found in the analysis of the results. The use of multiple types of institutes included in the curricula among the various candidates may have partly compromised the reliability of the study. In fact, it was repeatedly pointed out in the interviews that a classical high school education is more common for people who aspire to work in legal sector, because there is a belief that a classical high school provides different qualifications and fosters the development of critical thinking, which is not typically associated with attending a technical secondary institute. Moreover, nowadays attending a particular secondary school does not necessarily indicate belonging to a specific social background, and attending high schools rather than technical institutes is no longer an option limited to individuals from more affluent social backgrounds. On the other hand, it is also true that until a few years ago, classical high school education, compared to technical institute education, might have reflected the family's social and cultural status and the way a youth was raised. Although times have changed, the mindset of affluent families to raise their children by following more rigorous and classical models has remained intact, with the belief that these paths foster critical thinking and offer greater opportunities for continuing higher education, something not commonly associated with technical institutes. Indeed, while today even individuals from lower social backgrounds can attend classical high schools, it is still rare to find affluent families enrolling their children in a technical institute. Therefore, although secondary school education is no longer as strong a cultural status marker as it once was, it remains a stereotype that persists over time. Additionally, it was very useful to take this into consideration, as it was the most discussed element by the interviewees. Hence, candidates from classical high schools might have been perceived as more academically qualified. Thus, the

use of secondary school attended as an element of cultural status reflect the complexities of social privilege associated with school reputation, geographical location, and the resulting influence on social capital, as emphasized in Bourdieu's theory.

To conclude, some interviewees, during the course of the questions, inferred the underlying theme related to social and gender discrimination, despite the use of a cover story to justify the questions. Certain questions, such as those addressing the perception of a candidate's cultural status, made the sensitive topic more explicit. This may have influenced the behaviour and responses of the interviewees, partially compromising the authenticity of the data collected, as their answers may have been swayed by moral and ethical principles once these issues were made evident. Nonetheless, all participants demonstrated openness and a willingness to respond sincerely and without filters (given anonymity) to the questions.

To overcome these limitations, the ideal approach would be to delve deeper into the research through an additional quantitative study that will examine a much larger sample using a questionnaire, reaching a broader target of respondents. This would result in a more robust and meaningful analysis, by seeking a statistical and significant correlation between the signals of gender and class discrimination and the various perceptual dimensions of polish, warmth, commitment, competence, and cultural similarity, using questions with Likert scales. Nevertheless, a quantitative study does not allow for an in-depth exploration of the interviewee's perceptions or an understanding of the reasons behind certain responses, something that is possible through interviews and a qualitative approach. However, it would be useful to further confirm and more reliably validate the results obtained in this research, further in line with the literature considered. These are the reasons why a quantitative study would be the natural continuation of this analysis, providing an opportunity to consolidate the findings we have observed.



## 6. Conclusions

Gender and social class stereotypes emerged from the interviews, showing how belonging to a certain social class, a candidate's gender, or the interaction between these two features can affect hiring decisions in an elitist context like the Italian legal sector. Moreover, these stereotypes appear in the interviewees' perceptions when evaluating candidates based on dimensions such as competence, warmth, polish, cultural status, commitment, and cultural similarity.

The most significant insight that surfaced from our research is that social class stereotypes are the primary drivers of the interviewees' evaluations. The cultural status elements included in the résumés were highlighted in each interview, showing that the influence of social class stereotypes is stronger than gender stereotypes.

Social class stereotypes were particularly evident in the evaluation of competence and warmth, as we expected based on the results of the Stereotype Content Model, but also in the assessment of a person's polish and commitment. Regarding cultural similarity between interviewees and candidates, no specific association emerged from the interviews, despite the existence of cultural matching and its impact on hiring decisions being acknowledged by the interviewees.

To sum up, the dimensions that had the greatest impact on the evaluation of discriminatory biases in this experiment were warmth and competence.

Overall, a gradient seems to exist in terms of perception of warmth and competence across the four candidates. Consuelo, the least favourite candidate is perceived as high in warmth and low in competence, with both features regarded as the more extreme across the two candidates. Consuelo is perceived as very warm, probably because she brings together two features both associated with warmth (i.e., being a female and being from a low social background), for the same reasons she is perceived as the least competent, as both females and low class are associated with low competence. To the other extreme of the distribution, we can find Tancredi who is perceived and the least warm - being both male and from a high class, hence, two features associated with low warmth - but highly competent, despite being perceived as arrogant. Lavinia and Antonio appear to stand in intermediate positions in this gradient: Antonio is perceived as moderately warm, and likable – possibly due to the two contrasting features on being a male, hence low warmth, and being from a low social class, thus, high warmth. In terms of competence, he is perceived as moderately competent, again bringing together two contrasting features; indeed, as a male he would be

perceived as competent, nonetheless, being from a low class his perception of competence is somewhat undermined. Similarly, Lavinia is perceived as moderately warm, being a female (high warmth) but from an affluent background (low warmth). In terms of competence, despite being a woman, whose perception is to be low in competence, the polish and affluent background restores the competence perception making Lavinia a desirable candidate.

Moreover, the evaluation of the candidates' polish was also significant, although if secondary and almost implicitly inferred from the interviewees' responses. Assessments of polish were made exclusively in relation to the candidates' social class background. Overall, a high-class status background seems to predispose candidates to a more sophisticated and structured image, which helps making Lavinia the most desirable candidate, thanks to her competence and moderate warmth (far from the perceived eccentricity of Consuelo). However, this evaluation intertwines with the others previously made and varies for the male candidate, Tancredi, as his sophistication becomes a disadvantage, further emphasizing his lack of warmth, despite his high competence.

Finally, the dimension of commitment to work was rated highly for each candidate, although the evaluations varied based on the social class. Overall, the interviewees attributed more value and competence to high-status candidates who attended classical high schools, perceiving them as more committed to work. According to the interviewees, achieving top grades at a classical high school is considered more difficult compared to achieving the same grades at a technical institute. These evaluations influence interviewees' preference for high-class status candidates, who are seen as more determined to work hard, partly due to their educational background. On the other hand, low-class status candidates were acknowledged for their effort in achieving good academic results despite their 'unconventional' path. Nevertheless, despite the excellent results achieved, Consuelo and Antonio were hindered by the interviewees' bias, as being perceived as less qualified and less determined to commit and work hard compared to Tancredi and Lavinia.

Hence, from this consideration, it is possible to observe how social class and gender have a different weight in judgments and career considerations. Indeed, social class appears to be a more important determinant than gender, as it drives most of the considerations made by the interviewees, and it is the one that appears to have the highest potential to shift individual perception of warmth, competence, polish and commitment.

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