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Gender

Research: How Subtle Class Cues Can Backfire on Your Resume

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Summary. Research on the effect of social class on hiring found that elite law firms' hiring practices discriminate strongly based on social class but that, surprisingly, an advantaged social background helps only men. In the studies, attorneys viewed higher-class candidates of... **more**

Every fall, tens of thousands of law students compete for a small number of coveted summer associateships at the country's top law firms. The stakes are high: getting one of these rare internships virtually guarantees full-time employment after law

school. The salaries are unbeatable, six-figure sums that catapult young students to the top 5% of household incomes nationally and are often quadruple of those offered in other sectors of legal practice. These jobs also open doors to even more lucrative employment in the private sector as well as prestigious judiciary and government roles. For these reasons, employment in top law firms has been called the legal profession's 1%.

Now imagine four applicants, all of whom attend the same, selective second-tier law school. They all have phenomenal grade point averages, are on law review, and have identical, highly relevant work experiences. The only differences are whether they are male or female and if their extracurricular activities suggest they come from a higher-class or lower-class background. Who gets invited to interview?

We set out to answer this question in a series of studies reported in the December 2016 issue of *American Sociological Review*. Based on prior research showing that hiring in top professional services firms is highly skewed toward applicants from wealthy families, we expected that an applicant's social class background would play a decisive role in determining interview invitations. And indeed, we found that, in contrast to our national lore that it is individual effort and ability—not family lineage—that matters for getting good jobs, elite employers discriminate strongly based on social class, favoring applicants from higher-class backgrounds. But our research uncovered a surprising — and disturbing — twist: coming from an advantaged social background helps only men.

We uncovered this through a field experiment with the country's largest law firms. Specifically, we used a technique — known as the resume audit method — that is widely seen as the gold standard for measuring employment discrimination. This method involves randomly assigning different items to the resumes and sending applications to real employers to see how they affect the probability of being called back for a job interview. All in all, we

sent fictitious resumes to 316 offices of 147 top law firms in 14 cities, from candidates who were supposedly trying to land a summer internship position. All applicants were in the top 1% of their class and were on law review, but came from second-tier law schools. This was important because graduates from the most elite law schools (e.g., Harvard and Yale) are typically recruited on-campus. But law school students from second-tier schools must compete for coveted internship positions by sending in their resumes directly to firms in hopes of attracting employers' attention by virtue of their C.V.s.

We signaled gender by varying the applicant's first name (James or Julia). Directly indicating a parent's occupation or income on a resume might be strange for an employer to see, so we signaled social class position via accepted and often required portions of resumes: awards and extracurricular activities. Reflecting the fact that social class is a complex characteristic that cannot be boiled down to income, education, or lifestyle alone, we used a constellation of resume items to signal social class.

For example, to capture the economic component of class, our lower-class applicants received an award for student-athletes on financial aid. To incorporate its educational competent, they listed being a peer tutor for fellow first-generation college students. By contrast, our higher class candidate pursued traditionally upper-class hobbies and sports, such sailing, polo, and classical music, while the lower-class candidate participated in activities with lower financial barriers to entry (e.g., pick-up soccer, track and field team) and those distinctly rejected by higher-class individuals (e.g., country music). But crucially, all educational, academic, and work-related achievements were identical between our four fictitious candidates.

Even though all educational and work-related histories were the same, employers overwhelmingly favored the higher-class man. He had a callback rate more than four times of other applicants and received more invitations to interview than *all other*

Combinations of Résumé Items That Together Signal Social Class

Developed for a résumé audit method-based study on who gets interviews at top law firms.

	HIGHER-CLASS COMBO	LOWER-CLASS COMBO
Last name	Cabot	Clark
Undergraduate athletic award	University athletic award	University award for outstanding athletes on financial aid
Undergraduate extracurricular activity (2008 to 2011)	Peer mentor for first-year students	Peer mentor for first-generation college students
Undergraduate extracurricular activity (2007 to 2011)	Sailing team	Track and field (relay team)
Personal interests	Sailing, polo, classical music	Track and field, pick-up soccer, country music

SOURCE "CLASS ADVANTAGE, COMMITMENT PENALTY," BY LAUREN RIVERA AND ANDRÁS TILCSIK, *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, DECEMBER 2016

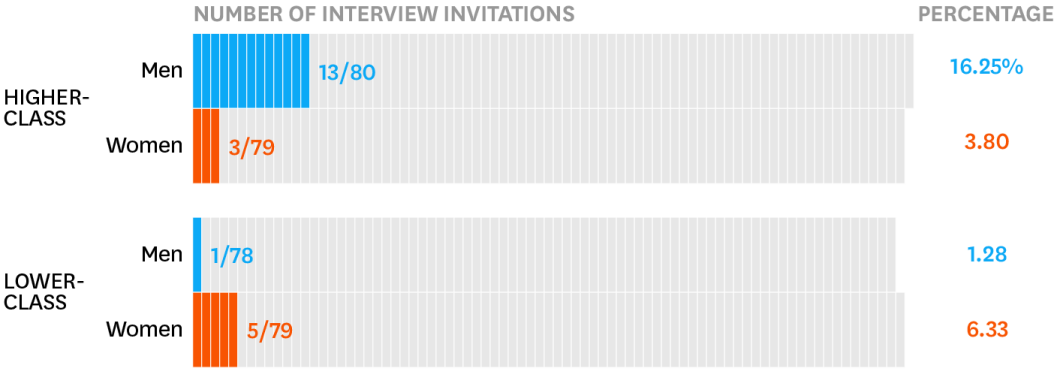
applicants in our study combined. But most strikingly, he did significantly better than the higher-class woman, whose resume was identical to his, other than the first name.

Why did the higher-class man do so much better than the higher-class woman? To further explore this issue, we conducted a follow-up experiment with a sample of 210 practicing attorneys from around the country. We asked each attorney to evaluate one of the same resumes we used in our field experiment and to tell us whether they would like to bring the candidate in for an interview. We also asked them to rate their candidate on factors proven to influence how favorably people view job candidates but that vary between men and women. These included perceptions of the candidate's competence, likability, fit with an organization's culture and clientele, and career commitment.

Just like the employers in our audit study, the attorneys we surveyed favored interviewing the higher-class man above all applicants, including the higher-class woman. This time, though,

Higher-Class Men Received More Interview Invitations at Elite Law Firms Than All Other Applicants Combined

Based on a study using the résumé audit method.



NOTE THE DIFFERENCES IN CALLBACK RATES FOR HIGHER-CLASS WOMEN, LOWER-CLASS MEN, AND LOWER-CLASS WOMEN WERE NOT STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT, BUT HIGHER-CLASS MEN RECEIVED SIGNIFICANTLY MORE CALLBACKS THAN ALL OTHER CATEGORIES.
SOURCE "CLASS ADVANTAGE, COMMITMENT PENALTY," BY LAUREN RIVERA AND ANDRÁS TILCSIK, *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, DECEMBER 2016

we were able to understand why. Attorneys viewed higher-class candidates of either gender as being better fits with the culture and clientele of large law firms; lower-class candidates were seen as misfits and rejected. In fact, some attorneys even steered the lower-class candidates to less prestigious and lucrative sectors of legal practice, such as government and nonprofit roles, positions that tend to be more socioeconomically diverse than jobs at top law firms.

But even though higher-class women were seen as just as good "fits" as higher-class men, attorneys declined to interview these women because they believed they were the least committed of any group (including lower-class women) to working a demanding job. Our survey participants, as well as an additional 20 attorneys we interviewed, described higher-class women as "flight risks," who might desert the firm for less time-intensive areas of legal practice or might even leave paid employment entirely. Attorneys cited "family" as a primary reason these women would leave. Parenting strategies vary between social classes, and the intensive style of mothering that is more popular among the affluent was seen as conflicting with the "all or nothing" nature of work as a Big Law associate. One female attorney we interviewed described this negative view of higher-

class women, which she observed while working on her firm's hiring committee. The perception, she said, was that higher-class women do not need a job because they "have enough money," are "married to somebody rich," or are "going to end up being a helicopter mom." This commitment penalty that higher-class women faced negated any advantages they received on account of their social class.

Our findings confirm that, despite our national myth that anyone can make it if they work hard enough, the social class people grow up in greatly shapes the types of jobs (and salaries) they can attain, regardless of the achievements listed on their resumes. More broadly, our results illustrate a phenomenon that social scientists call "intersectionality" — a fancy way of saying that, when it comes to understanding sources of advantage and disadvantage, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Crucially, we have found that privilege works differently for men and women in the labor market. While coming from a higher-class background helps men, it can actually hurt women.

Together, biases related to social class and gender skew employment opportunities toward men from privileged backgrounds. Our research adds another twist to just how difficult it is for certain groups to get ahead, even when they achieve an advanced degree.

There are some potential solutions for law firms, however. While biases themselves are difficult to change and merely making people aware of them via training has little payoff, there are quick and cost-effective ways

to make the playing field more even in resume screening. When it comes to social class, the answer is simple: ditch the extracurricular activities. We were able to conduct our study only because employers and career services offices encourage (if not require) students to lists hobbies and activities on resumes. Without this information, we would not have been able to indicate social class background effectively. While social class still manifests in other types of resume cues (especially attendance at a top-tier undergraduate institution or law school), blinding evaluators to extracurricular activities or having students omit them from resumes entirely could eliminate those class signals that are least performance-related.

As for gender, blinding evaluators to first names (or substituting with initials) could help keep more women in the pool. In fact, one reason why women seem to do better when they come from the most elite schools may be that employers have limited ability to screen resumes and do not have the chance to engage in the types of resume-based class and gender discrimination we found in our study. Eliminating signals about class and gender as resumes are screened could open the door more widely for talented individuals with varied backgrounds, while creating a more diverse workforce of qualified talent.

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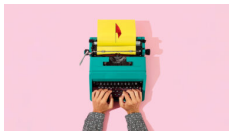

Why Companies Should Add Class to Their Diversity Discussions