

# Discussion of “The Class Gap in Career Progression: Evidence from US Academia”

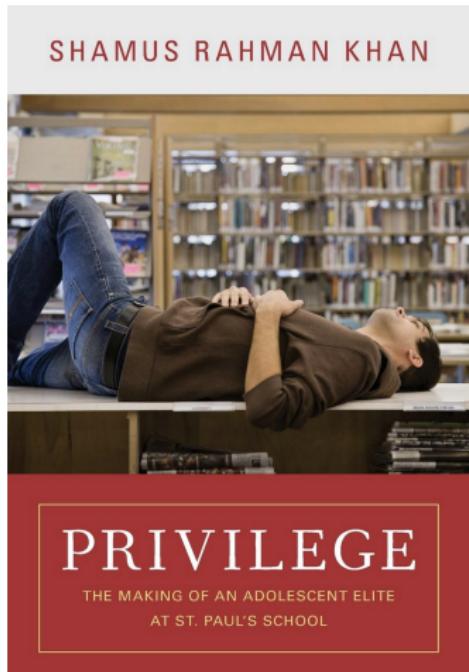
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# Class and Access to Elite Institutions

"Ninety percent of Harvard students come from families earning more than the median national income of \$55,000, and Harvard's dean of admissions defined "middle-income" Harvard families as those earning between \$110,000 and \$200,000. [...] **Harvard's "middle income" is the richest 5 percent of our nation.** This alone should tell us a lot about our elite educational institutions. While they look more open to us, this is in no small part because to us openness means diversity, and diversity means race. But class matters."



Privilege: The Making of An Adolescent Elite  
at St. Paul's School (2011)

# The Class Ceiling: Beyond Access

## The Class Ceiling

Why it Pays to be Privileged

Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison

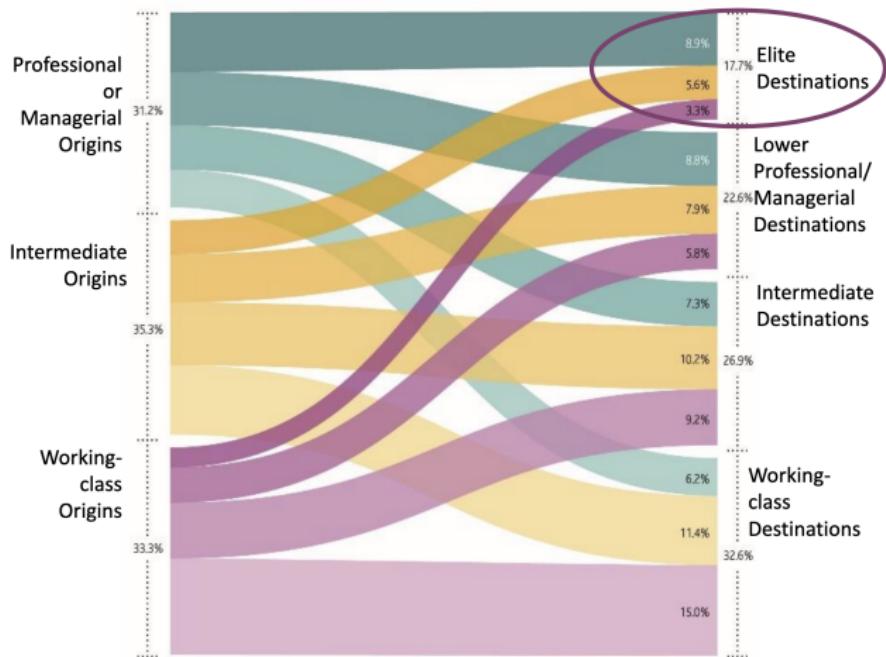


"Seminal....updates our understanding of modern Britain  
and class itself." Amol Rajan, BBC Media Editor

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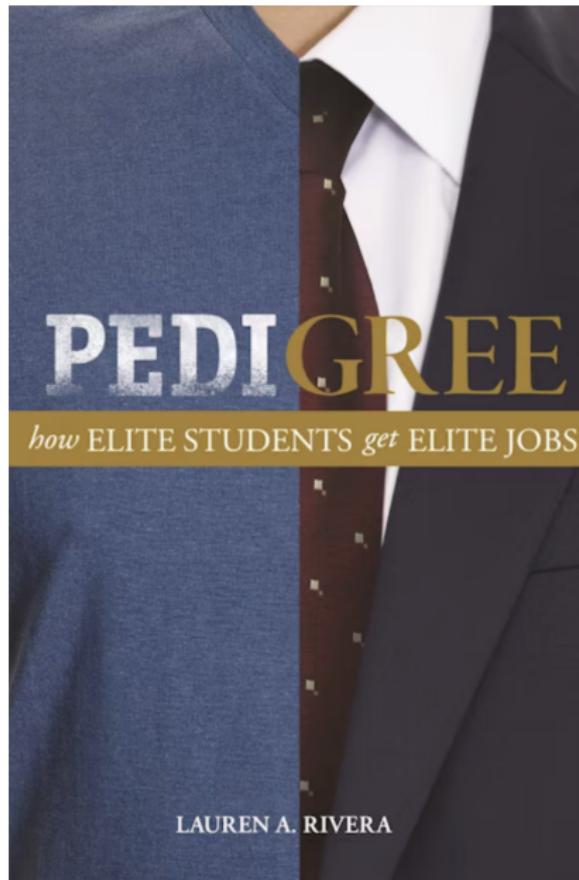
Friedman & Laurison document how class privilege perpetuates  
even after entry into elite occupations

# Class Origins and Elite Destinations



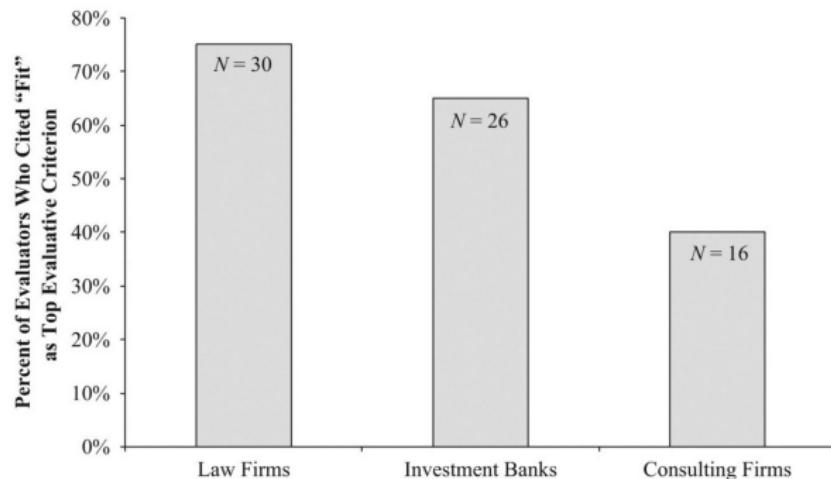
- ▶ Only 3.3% from working-class origins reach elite destinations
- ▶ Professional/managerial origins are 5x more likely to reach elite positions
- ▶ Strong class reproduction: origins predict destinations

## 'Cultural Fit' & Access to Elite Jobs in the US



# Hiring for Fit Often Means Hiring Oneself

- ▶ Nearly 70% of employers in law firms and investment banks consider 'fit' to be the **most** important criterion.
- ▶ Fit often refers to play styles *outside* the office
- ▶ Social compatibility, comfort level with colleagues, shared hobbies, experiences, and upbringing
- ▶ Such aspects are (highly) correlated with social class



# This Paper Tackles (Really Well) An Important Question!

- ▶ **Question:** Does socioeconomic background affect career progression in elite occupations (US academia)?
- ▶ **Data:** SDR-WoS-NSF linked panel (1993-2021)
  - ▶ 30,000 PhDs per wave, multiple career stages
  - ▶ Complete publication and funding histories
- ▶ **Key Finding:** Within same PhD program/field/cohort:
  - ▶ First-gen 13% less likely to get R1 tenure
  - ▶ Tenured at institutions ranked 9% lower

# Strong and Credible Research Design

## **Identification Strategy:**

- ▶ Within PhD program × field comparisons
- ▶ Rich controls for:
  - ▶ Research productivity (publications, citations, NSF grants)
  - ▶ Demographics (gender, race, birth region)
  - ▶ PhD cohort fixed effects
- ▶ Multiple robustness tests:
  - ▶ Alternative rank measures
  - ▶ Different productivity metrics
  - ▶ Sample restrictions

# Mechanisms for the Class Gap

## Paper Tests and Rules Out:

- ▶ Pure productivity differences (only explains 1/3)
- ▶ Selection out of academia (no gap)
- ▶ Geographic preferences (no evidence)
- ▶ Financial constraints (no support)

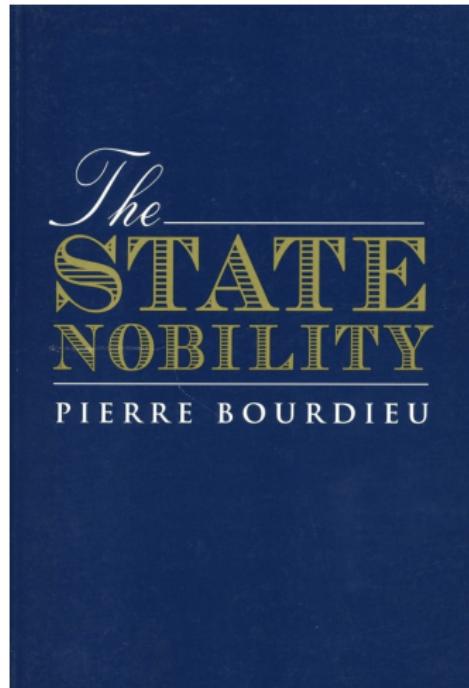
## Suggests a Role for Discrimination:

- ▶ “Group-based disparities among equally qualified individuals”
- ▶ Network barriers (coauthor evidence)
- ▶ Systemic barriers to access research funding (11% NSF gap)
- ▶ ‘Cultural capital’ constraints

# Class Reproduction in Elite Institutions (Bourdieu 1996)

## Bourdieu's framework:

- ▶ **Economic Capital**
  - ▶ Not primary mechanism
  - ▶ Similar debt levels
  - ▶ No financial sorting
- ▶ **Cultural Capital**
  - ▶ NSF grant 'fit'
  - ▶ Academic 'habitus' (learned behaviors)
  - ▶ Institutional codes
- ▶ **Social Capital**
  - ▶ Network homophily
  - ▶ Coauthor prestige
  - ▶ Professional ties



The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field  
of Power (1996)

# Suggestion 1: Career Dynamics & Network Formation

## 1. Career Trajectories:

- ▶ Key transitions: postdoc vs. direct tenure-track; institutional mobility; time to tenure
- ▶ Cumulative advantages: role of initial placement and early-career gaps; moves between institution tiers; time to tenure by background

## 2. Collaboration Networks:

- ▶ Early-career patterns: advisor characteristics, junior-senior connections
- ▶ Network quality: collaborator prestige and productivity, network development speed (e.g., time to first senior collaborator).

## Suggestion 2: Sectoral & Institutional Heterogeneity

### Explore Field- and Sector-Specific Class Gaps:

- ▶ Analyze heterogeneity across fields:
  - ▶ Resource requirements (lab vs. theoretical)
  - ▶ External funding dependence
- ▶ Test heterogeneous effects by sector
  - ▶ Class gaps likely more pronounced in some sectors
  - ▶ Will make the later comparison with industry richer

### Institutional Heterogeneity:

- ▶ Do class gaps vary by:
  - ▶ PhD program rank
  - ▶ Department size/resources
  - ▶ Any “equalizing institutions” (where gaps are smallest?)

# Great Paper on An Important Topic!

## **Major Contribution:**

- ▶ Detailed careful analysis of within-elite occupation class gaps
- ▶ Clean identification of mechanisms
- ▶ Generalizable beyond academia

## **Points to Policy Priorities for the Profession:**

- ▶ Early-career network formation
- ▶ Structured mentoring programs
- ▶ Funding pipeline support

As the world becomes more multi-ethnic and diverse, class or socioeconomic disparities are even more important to study.

## References

1. Bourdieu, P. (1996). "The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power." Stanford University Press.
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3. Khan, S. R. (2011). "Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School." Princeton University Press.
4. Rivera, L. A. "Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs." Princeton University Press.
5. Stansbury, A. and Rodriguez, K. (2024). "The Class Gap in Career Progression: Evidence from US Academia." Working Paper, Fall 2024.