

“... It’s Who You Know”

Entering the Elite Class Network

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YKTA03K Valta, rakenteet ja eriarvoisuus
Jouni Vilkkä
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1. Introduction

In this essay I explain what is required of an individual to enter the elite in society. Since my main sources are Lauren Rivera's study of American elites published as *Pedigree. How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* and Mike Savage's work on British elites published as *Social Class in the 21st Century*, the findings really should only be generalized to apply to those English-speaking countries. One can only hope things are better elsewhere.

As the title of this paper is intended to hint, connections and being able to make them is an important part of the answer to the main question. For that reason, some basics of network theory are included.

The significance of the main question really has to do with politics, political philosophy, and the ordering of society, because the existence of elites already implies stratification of society. While there might not be a strict class system in place, mobility from lower classes into the elite can be restricted. If so, there is likely to be unfair inequality in the ordering of the society in question. Whether or not that is the case, then depends on the answer to the main question presented above.

2. The Importance of Networks

According to Kadushin, we are usually only aware of our own connections, but a network connects people beyond our immediate connections, in theory possibly encompassing all mankind. In practise, the barrier effect limits this: one's geographical or social location can create barriers to knowing other kinds of people. Some members of a network can be considered 'leaders', meaning that removing them would break up the network, as nodes in the network would lose connection to other nodes beyond the removed point.¹ 'Leader' here should be understood in the etic sense, as a description used by the observers, whereas terms used by the

¹ Kadushin 2012, 4, 8, 9, 111.

insiders of the network are called emic.² That is, the term used by the insiders to denote that person can be something else, if they even consider that person to be anything particularly special. For example, a coordinator (emic term) in an organization could be considered a ‘leader’ (etic term) by the observers, because of her wide range of contacts. Since that person is in a position to connect otherwise separate segments of the network, she wields considerable power in the network (whether she realizes it or not). Such power could be useful to possess, or to be able to tap, in the quest to enter the elite. *It’s not who you are, it’s who you know*. Even if that saying is not the whole truth, there is certainly some truth to it, as will be shown in this essay.

Making connections can be haphazard and simply a matter of random encounters. Just happening to be (for a moment, throughout childhood, or for life, it doesn’t matter) in the right place at the right time, in order to meet a particular person, can be enough. This is called *propinquity*.³ Especially children tend to make friends among the children they happen to be around.

Usually, and especially among adults, more is normally required. Such as *homophily*, literally meaning love of the same. In network theory it means that people who share similar characteristics are likely to be connected; or conversely, if they are connected, they are also likely to share characteristics. Over time, (closely) connected people are likely to share an increasing number of characteristics. In general, people tend to associate with others like themselves.⁴ This has become easier in the modern world, compared to the past, as Kadushin points out:

Social circles are characteristic of modern mass society and serve to integrate apparently disconnected primary groups within larger societies. [...] [In] metropolitan settings people have many different interests, activities, and characteristics and yet are able to find others who share them.⁵

These social circles are informal networks usually formed because of shared interests. Typically the links between people in such circles are not direct, but through a ‘friend of a friend’. Such

² Kadushin 2012, 41, 45.

³ Kadushin 2012, 18.

⁴ Kadushin 2012, 18 - 19, 172.

⁵ Kadushin 2012, 125.

informal circles have no formal structure, nor a formal leader. But like in all networks, some persons can be more central than others. These leaders are often slightly, not greatly, higher in status than their followers.⁶

A common feature of social networks is the social psychological phenomenon Kadushin calls ‘keeping up with the Joneses’: One feels the need to keep up with their peers (in general, not any one particular person) within the network. This is accompanied by feelings of envy for those sharing a similar position in the network or class pyramid, who seem to be doing slightly better than oneself.⁷ Normal people do not envy Elon Musk, for example, but apparently it’s a big deal when a coworker earns 10 percent more than you.

For this essay, the importance of social networks is in their role in landing what will here be called an elite job. According to research in networks, such white-collar jobs are more often found through weak ties rather than strong ties. Those who are closest to us, such as our family and intimate friends, are connected to us through strong ties. Those whom we know in passing who are more likely to convey benefits to us. This is fairly obvious, because they are more likely to have useful information which we otherwise would not know about.⁸ So, wide networks are useful in making a career. Kadushin drives home the point:

[Social] networks are essentially unfair. We can work to improve our connections, but those who gain entry to elite colleges, for example, and thus a ticket to a better life, have had the benefit of cascading connections that they themselves have not made.⁹

3. The Significance of Class Background

In the classical Marxist theory, the concept of class arises from the relations of production.¹⁰ Hill explains this as follows: The means of production are concentrated into fewer and fewer hands,

⁶ Kadushin 2012, 126, 145.

⁷ Kadushin 2012, 65.

⁸ Kadushin 2012, 170; Savage 2015, 132.

⁹ Kadushin 2012, 168.

¹⁰ Choonara 2018, 16.

the capitalist class. The vast majority, the working class, are forced to sell their labour power in order to survive. They are only paid a fraction of the value they create. The state acts, to a major degree, in the interests of the ruling class (not the whole of society). For Marx, the ruling class was the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class.¹¹

The relations of production, according to Choonara, create a curious situation: “To be oppressed on the grounds of gender or race does not imbue the oppressed with any particular power; exploitation does.”¹² This power comes mostly from the fact that the exploited working class clearly outnumbers the exploiting capitalist class. The role of the state, despite being set up to serve the interests of the ruling class, ends up empowering the growing number of public sector workers in that they have the ability to stop public transportation, waste management, schools, and so on, if their demands are not met. Strikes, demonstrations, and riots being fairly common in almost all countries, is a testament to the power of the working class. Even revolutions have occurred in every decade from 1900 to 2000. All this shows that the working class fight for their interests more than any oppressed class in history.¹³

Choonara notes that in recent history the number of required workers has been reduced by the now common “just in time” method of production. Although their numbers have grown smaller, the workers that remain have become more important, increasing their power to oppose their exploiters. The relationship between capital and labour is thus a two-way dependence. The working class is not completely helpless against the capitalist class.¹⁴

In fact, extreme class differentiation leads to an increase in workers’ perception of their exploitation. Since the “‘Bankers Crisis’ of 2008 there is a wide understanding of the 99% being ruled, fooled and exploited by the 1%,” as Hill puts it.¹⁵ This awareness of exploitation is necessary for there to be any political action to remedy it. And there are things to remedy. Social class is still the cause of great differences in incomes, wealth, status, education, and lifestyle, which all reflect a person’s social class, Hill points out.¹⁶ He submits that capitalism can survive

¹¹ Hill 2018, 34.

¹² Choonara 2018, 19.

¹³ Choonara 2018, 20, 22.

¹⁴ Choonara 2018, 21, 28.

¹⁵ Hill 2018, 35.

¹⁶ Hill 2018, 31.

with sex and 'race' equality, but there can never be an equality between different social classes in a capitalist economy and society, because capitalism is defined as the exploitation of one class by another.¹⁷

Hill states that while there are different strata among the working classes, there is a common interest between them. In his view, the working classes include the old petit bourgeoisie (mostly shopkeepers), which has been joined by the new middle class of professional workers from the mid 20th Century.¹⁸ Pratschke explains these new strata in the middle thusly:

[I]t is possible to distinguish between capitalists and workers at the highest level of abstraction, whilst at lower levels it is possible to identify both petty bourgeoisie and an intermediate (middle) class which acts on behalf of capital or carries out functions of capital. This class is subdivided into 'managers' (who coordinate and control) and 'experts' (who innovate and advise). [...] It seems justifiable to use the term 'new middle class' to refer to these two groups, reserving the term 'old middle class' for the petty bourgeoisie [...].¹⁹

There are of course some extremely rich individuals above the middle class, but what is more important is the new conceptualization of the structure of all those below that very top. In his *Social Class in the 21st Century*, Savage explains this change in how Savage (and presumably many other social scientists by now) see the social structure of society:

Away from longstanding differences between middle and working class, we have moved towards a class order which is more hierarchical in differentiating the top (which we call 'the wealth elite') from the bottom (which we call 'the precariat' which consists of people who struggle to get by on a daily basis), but which is more fuzzy and complex in its middle layers.²⁰

The elite Savage writes about is not the '1 percent' of the Occupy movement that was much talked about at the time, but a larger portion of the population that he estimates to make up about six percent.²¹ While it would be unrealistic for anyone from meager beginnings to try and reach for the very top of the wealth pyramid, where multibillionaires like Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos are, this broader wealth elite seems more attainable.

¹⁷ Hill 2018, 39.

¹⁸ Hill 2018, 36.

¹⁹ Pratschke 2018, 60.

²⁰ Savage 2015, 4.

²¹ Savage 2015, 170.

Class in this new view is based on three types of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Growing economic inequality is connected to a growing class inequality, because these types of capital are connected.²² Savage has used these types of capital to define seven social classes:

[T]he class hierarchy which we distinguished separates out three main groups: a small elite at the top, massively better off than others, a somewhat larger ‘precariat’ at the bottom, who score lower than others in relation to all three kinds of capital, and then five other classes in the middle, who have a much more hybrid mix of sorts of capital and can’t be put in a simple hierarchy.²³

The five classes in the middle have been named by Savage named as follows: the established middle class, technical middle class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, and emerging service workers.²⁴ Classes are formed because inequalities crystallize into classes, when advantages endure over time in a way which extends beyond any specific transaction, Savage explains.²⁵ For example, the wealthiest 20 percent are the most likely to inherit and to also inherit the largest sums of money (in the UK).²⁶ Judging by the GINI-factor, the financial crisis and recession that began in 2008 has globally increased economic inequality within countries.²⁷ Based on average income, the top income class by occupation, labelled “higher managerial and professional” by Savage, earns considerably more annually than the others, and is more clearly apart from the next class than any of the other classes are from each other.²⁸

[...] our analysis points towards the significance of an ‘ordinary’ wealth elite [...] around 6 per cent of the population [of the UK]. Even this relatively large elite group enjoys massive advantages over others. [...] Fundamentally, then, this is a wealthy class, set apart from the other six classes on the basis of striking economic advantages.²⁹

²² Savage 2015, 4.

²³ Savage 2015, 172.

²⁴ Savage 2015, 169.

²⁵ Savage 2015, 46.

²⁶ Savage 2015, 75 - 76.

²⁷ Savage 2015, 65 - 66.

²⁸ Savage 2015, 67 - 69.

²⁹ Savage 2015, 310 - 311.

Importantly, Savage also points out the fact that one tends to be better placed to accrue certain types of capital at different stages of life. Since they are all typically accumulated over time, the elite class tends to be older than the others.³⁰

Rivera notes that “class” is a dirty word in the US, where people conflate it with the idea of a caste system, and believe that there is far more mobility within the American economic class structure than there actually is. This is due to what behavioral economists call availability heuristic: since people know someone who has made it “from rags to riches”, they believe it to be possible for anyone to achieve, overgeneralizing mobility from one or a few examples.³¹ What people believe and what is actually the case, are naturally different things. Certainly, even in very rigid class societies, there has to be some amount of movement between ranks, for a complete lack of mobility would threaten the legitimacy and thus stability of existing power structures.³²

Rivera defines elites as individuals who have greatly disproportionate control over valued and scarce resources. There are three subtypes of such elites: economic, educational, and occupational elites; a member of the elite can thus be a member of any, or all, of these subtypes of elites.³³ This is similar to Savage’s view of class, and I believe the elites they discuss are at least very similar, even if one is mostly addressing the elite in the UK and the other the elite in the US. Therefore I trust most of what they have to say about elites applies to elites in both countries (and possibly much of the world beyond them).

One aspect of the formation and reproduction of the elite not covered by Rivera has to do with geography. According to Savage, at least in the UK “the new elite has a distinctive geography, one which seeks out and defines urban cores, not only in London, but in all cities. It is a central urban class.”³⁴ There is a powerful divide between urban and rural areas, as well between northern and southern parts of the country. The urban centers function as “foci of cultural capital (especially emerging cultural capital) and social capital.”³⁵

³⁰ Savage 2015, 176.

³¹ Rivera 2016, 342.

³² Rivera 2016, 300.

³³ Rivera 2016, 344 - 345.

³⁴ Savage 2015, 276.

³⁵ Savage 2015, 296.

Savage writes about an on-going change in cultural capital, defining two types of valuable cultural capital. High brow cultural capital is about old, “legitimate” style of culture associated with theatre, the opera, and classical art. It is more or less the culture of old people. emerging cultural capital, on the contrary, is more the culture of young adults. The latter may be replacing the former in value and legitimacy, but has not yet done so.³⁶

It is curious, though, that high brow cultural capital is connected to self confidence. Because of its legitimacy, it is generally considered to be “good taste”, and its proponents take this for granted. They are unafraid to inflict it on others, perhaps in order to educate them. Proponents of other styles of culture consider taste to be less objective, and lack the self assuredness of the old guard.³⁷ High brow cultural capital is connected to class, and may be one of the ways in which those who possess it may benefit from their class background when applying for jobs: self confidence is typically expected in an applicant, especially in the case of elite jobs, as will be seen later.

There are other ways, in which cultural capital can be significant. Savage tells us:

We have, in recent years, seen the proliferation of cultural markers of class which do not -- least on the face of it -- appear to be directly linked to these occupational classes. [...]

We argue that a new kind of snobbery has emerged [...]. [It] is based on being ‘knowing’, and in displaying awareness of the codes which are used to classify and differentiate between classes.³⁸

While it is not about showing off, cultural capital can make a career. A cultural interest, as well as a hobby or sport, when shared with the right person, such as supervisor or interviewer, can lead to advancement, even within the university system.³⁹

According to Savage, the new elite class is aware of how different it is from other social classes, but seeks to avoid overly ‘snobby’ and public manifestations of such ‘elite-ness’, while nonetheless recognizing its own importance.⁴⁰ Members of the elite like to think that they have earned their wealth with hard work and personal merits, while still thinking of themselves as ordinary. They also very much compare their own wealth to that of others, trying to ‘keep up

³⁶ Savage 2015, 113.

³⁷ Savage 2015, 107 - 109.

³⁸ Savage 2015, 44.

³⁹ Savage 2015, 318.

⁴⁰ Savage 2015, 315 - 316.

with the joneses'.⁴¹ In order to distinguish themselves, members of the new, 'ordinary' elite compare themselves to the old aristocracy, as Savage explains:

By classifying [the aristocratic class] as cohesive, socially inward, even inbred, and by characterizing the upper class as a nepotistic 'old boys' network' where informal contacts developed at school and university often act as pivotal lubricants of prestigious professional trajectories, a wider, ordinarily wealthy elite class can emphasize its distance from those wellsprings of old elitedom and claim a more modest place for themselves.

The 'ordinary' elite class is fundamentally marked by meritocratic motifs [...]. Our 'elite' class has often achieved its advantaged economic position through performing well in the educational system and then succeeding in the cut-throat world of high-level professional and managerial employment. This is a meritocratic culture which is honed around particular, competitive versions of what it is that signifies merit and which, increasingly, informs the vision of elite schools and universities.⁴²

Coming back to the significance of social networks to social classes, Savage notes that wealthy people know several people in high-status occupations; they have 'bridging capital' (connecting separate parts of the network, leaders in the etic sense). The 'skilled' group is not at all socially distinctive. The routine occupation group is more isolated. "It is the elite occupations which are most socially exclusive."⁴³ The wealthy do not blend into the wider population, associating with other people similarly to members of the other categories. Instead, they have acquaintances drawn mostly from their own world. Such social connections also accumulate over time.⁴⁴ This means that the elite forms a class of its own, which is at least somewhat difficult to enter, and which has political significance, as Savage acknowledges:

What we are now seeing is an effective and powerful wealth-elite, who, broadly speaking, are highly engaged politically and know how to lobby, at one extreme, and a precariat, who are largely alienated from mainstream party politics, at the other.⁴⁵

Children of the elite can obviously benefit from their family backgrounds that "help them go to university and to get jobs and have leisure activities in which they are more likely to meet CEOs

⁴¹ Savage 2015, 316.

⁴² Savage 2015, 323.

⁴³ Savage 2015, 144 - 145.

⁴⁴ Savage 2015, 148, 149.

⁴⁵ Savage 2015, 396.

and aristocrats.”⁴⁶ In fact, universities are important in creating important connections; the more educated you are, the more likely you are to know elite professionals who might help you in your career.⁴⁷ Therefore, let us turn next to education.

4. Class and Education

To answer the question about climbing into the elite, it is important to take a look at the effect of social class in education. After all, it is common knowledge (or at least assumption) that education plays an important part in the job market.

Hill states that social class has an effect on an individual’s educational achievements, such as reading age, grades, and entrance to higher education. Teachers teach people from different backgrounds in different ways, using different teaching methods. Even the hidden curriculum of the school is connected to social class. Finally, as a result of these factors, social class has much to do with which jobs are acquired.⁴⁸

Hill explains how various social scientists have provided explanations for the role of schools in the class system. Althusser believed that the state uses two types of apparatuses to ensure the continuation and enforcement of the current (capitalist) system: ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) that include the educational system and mass media, and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) that include such things as the police, law, and army. At school these functions are both present: as ISA, the school persuades children that the status quo is fair and legitimate, and as RSA, the school uses disciplining and punishing ‘deviant’, non-conformity or rebellion. Bowles & Gintis showed how the hidden curriculum reproduces the social and economic class structure of society within the school. It implicitly trains school students for different economic and social futures on the basis of their social and economic pasts, or in other words, on the basis of the socioeconomic class of their parents. Bourdieu noted how schools

⁴⁶ Savage 2015, 154.

⁴⁷ Savage 2015, 148.

⁴⁸ Hill 2018, 32.

recognize and reward middle-class and upperclass knowledge, language, body language, and diminish and demean working class and some minority ethnic cultures. Bourdieu also attacks the idea that schools are meritocratic, claiming instead that despite the appearance of fair competition, the curriculum and exams serve to confirm the advantages of the middle-class. The types of ‘cultural capital’ schools privilege and validate are not familiar to lower class children, ethnic minorities, or immigrants. In poor areas teenagers are typically guided into different work futures than those attending suburban schools in wealthy areas, or the prestigious private schools. Schools, in Bourdieu’s view, are middle-class institutions run by and for the middle class. “Some are trained/educated to rule, others to supervise, others to serve,” as Hill puts it. Bernstein chimed in by focusing on the way schools privilege and reward middle-class ‘restricted language’. He also revealed significant social class differences in curriculum and pedagogy.⁴⁹

Class may still be strongly connected to the attained level of education, especially in the US. According to Rivera, about “80% of individuals born into the top quartile of household incomes will obtain bachelor’s degrees, while only about 10 percent of those from the bottom quartile will do so.” Further emphasizing the connection between parental income and top level university education, Rivera continues to state that “over half of the students at top-tier business and law schools come from families from the top 10 percent of incomes nationally.”⁵⁰

Rivera explains that the inequality in education in American schools begins already in public primary and secondary schools, because school funding is largely based on a given region’s property values.⁵¹ The wealthy tend to live in a wealthy neighbourhood, and *mutatis mutandis* for the poor. This leads to wealthy areas having better funded, and thus probably in many ways better schools. Meanwhile, there are also expensive private schools, the existence of which certainly does nothing to reduce the economic inequality of the situation. In fact, as Rivera reveals, “selective college admissions committees prefer students from schools with strong reputations for academic excellence.”⁵² Since the students at better-funded schools are likely to do better, on average, than students at other schools, even those who do well despite studying at a badly funded school are likely to be disadvantaged by the bad reputation of their school.

⁴⁹ Hill 2018, 34 - 35, 41, 42 - 43.

⁵⁰ Rivera 2016, 16.

⁵¹ Rivera 2016, 17.

⁵² Rivera 2016, 18.

Rivera further illustrates the benefits of having wealthy parents and other resources: Parental financial support is very useful for students by making it possible for them not to work for a living. Instead, they can concentrate on academic achievement, as well as accept unpaid internships, or simply network and make friends who may prove useful connections later on in life. Parents' social networks are also useful, for example in getting applications accepted. The student's own social network is not to be frowned upon either, for their friends and study buddies can provide motivation, tips, and advice, or even influence the student's aspirations. The student will even benefit from having cultural resources: they will influence her aspirations, worldviews, tastes, values, interaction styles, modes of self-presentation, and behaviors, which are all class-based differences that will be useful in trying to acquire an elite job. Even preschool-age American children tend to rate people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds as more competent, trustworthy, and likable, so clearly class influences who we choose as friends or hire to work for us. In such ways the wealthy background of the student greatly benefits her. Less affluent people emphasize stability and pay in job choices, whereas more affluent people emphasize fulfillment, enjoyment, and self-expression. These are economically based distinctions that steer individuals towards paths consistent with the economic class they grew up in, reproducing the class divisions.⁵³

One clear example of how economic class influences educational achievements is the existence of test prep courses. These are also available (in the US) in areas where wealthy families have vacation homes.⁵⁴ Commercial services such as these make it more likely for the children of wealthy families to do well in school, and to get accepted to universities. Being accepted to an elite university will be a useful step toward entering the elite, and will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁵³ Rivera 2016, 19, 21.

⁵⁴ Rivera 2016, 27.

5. Being Accepted to an Elite University

Rivera submits that in the US, tertiary education is critical for stable employment and economic security, while also being among the most expensive educations in the world. To be accepted in an elite university, it helps if one's parents had attended the same university (this is called student 'legacy'). Donations can also pave the way, so wealth is clearly a factor. Other than that, the applicant's extracurricular achievements, such as a successful career in sports, will help.⁵⁵

But as a path toward the elite, it isn't enough to just go to any university. As Savage emphasizes:

[G]oing to university matters a great deal for entering the elite, but it is not the only ticket to elite entry [...]. It matters too, *which* specific university is attended and *where* [...]. [...] Even within Oxford or Cambridge there are higher- and lower-status colleges [...].⁵⁶

Interestingly, it is no longer enough to be able to go to university, even an 'ancient' one (in the UK), or an Ivy League one (in the US), in order to make it to the elite after one has the degree. Savage points out that while graduates are five times more likely than non-graduates to make it (in the UK), even then only 15 percent of the graduates do in fact make it. About half of the graduates end up in the established middle class. The good news for the student is that practically none of the graduates fall into the precariat.⁵⁷

The academically inclined student (in the UK, at least) wishing to go for the PhD is advised to choose their university well, for "many graduate recruiters target a limited set of universities only, and there is clear evidence that entry to postgraduate higher degrees is strongly associated with attending a small set of older universities."⁵⁸

The graduates of elite universities tend to be high not only in economic, but also cultural capital, as is to be expected, as they are over-represented in the elite class.⁵⁹ Despite the

⁵⁵ Rivera 2016, 26, 45.

⁵⁶ Savage 2015, 221, 235. Italics in original.

⁵⁷ Savage 2015, 229.

⁵⁸ Savage 2015, 234.

⁵⁹ Savage 2015, 253.

importance of elite universities, as a path to the elite, those from high social class origin seem to be able to make it without a degree from them. It seems, according to Savage, that:

[...] any combination of social class background and secondary schooling, attending Oxford (and to a lesser extent another Golden Triangle university) confers advantage. These effects are clearly different from attending a Russell Group university. However, an independent education is particularly effective in social reproduction, because those with senior managerial or traditional professional parents, but with no degree, are as likely to enter the elite [...], as working class, comprehensive educated Oxford graduates.⁶⁰

Another way in which class inequalities are increased, is 'educational homogamy': people find (marriage) partners at the university, among those similarly qualified.⁶¹ One is less likely to marry out of their class, and this tendency entrenches class divisions.

After receiving their elite university degree, one might pause at this point to ask whether they actually want to go for the best paying jobs in the private sector. Perhaps some other career, such as that of a scientist, would be more appealing? One might think a university would encourage such thinking, but there is a good chance it will not. At least in the US, the quality of universities is measured by the starting salaries of their graduates. This, Rivera notes, provides an incentive for the faculty to guide their students toward jobs in high paying elite firms.⁶² Financial considerations indeed provide ample reason for the student to seek such jobs. After all, university education in the US costs 60 to 100 thousand USD per annum easily, so the student is likely to have heavy student debts to repay. Also, elite firms throw lavish parties to entice students with a life of luxury at recruiting events.⁶³ Further, the whole scene seems to be geared toward that goal, as Rivera describes:

An explicit purpose of business school is to provide opportunities for developing strong and wide social connections that graduates can call on in the future; many students believe that networking will prove more important than classroom learning for advancing their careers. [...] These events and activities, which make up the bulk of the informal curriculum at elite institutions, are not included in tuition. Students thus frequently take on extra debt to enable participation.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Savage 2015, 247.

⁶¹ Savage 2015, 251.

⁶² Rivera 2016, 102.

⁶³ Rivera 2016, 77, 80.

⁶⁴ Rivera 2016, 81 - 82.

Elite undergraduate institutions have pools of alumni the students may be able to call on, to help them prepare for elite job interviews. Top business schools are swarming with former consultants whom the student can likewise ask for help. These types of networks are clearly only made possible by attendance at elite schools.⁶⁵ Next I will turn my attention to the process of job interviews at elite firms.

6. The Goal: Acquiring an Elite Job

The goal is now near. To rise to the elite, one needs an elite job. Such jobs (in the US, according to Rivera) are to be found in Elite Professional Service (EPS) firms: banks, consulting, and law, also known as the Holy Trinity or Ivy League ‘finishing schools’. All three types of firms draw from similar applicant pools.⁶⁶ Elite class occupational blocs (in the UK, according to Savage) similarly include banking, finance, business, media, law, academia and more.⁶⁷ Technology companies have more recently entered the fray, competing for the same students in recruiting.⁶⁸

The word *Pedigree* in the title of Rivera’s book is a term used by the employers in elite firms to denote a job candidate’s record of accomplishments. It simply refers to the applicant’s education and previous employers.⁶⁹ The notion is that their hiring decisions are based on individual merit, but as Rivera shows, they are actually very much shaped by the applicant’s socioeconomic background.⁷⁰

The first part of the pedigree is the university the applicant attended. Rivera reveals that ESP firms (in the US at least) have their own preferences among them, ordered into categories of core, target and nonlisted institutions (universities). The core is made up of the elite universities most valued by the firm. The students in those institutions are the main target, and the company

⁶⁵ Rivera 2016, 244.

⁶⁶ Rivera 2016, 31.

⁶⁷ Savage 2015, 318.

⁶⁸ Rivera 2016, 339.

⁶⁹ Rivera 2016, 134.

⁷⁰ Rivera 2016, 15.

wants to recruit as many of them as possible, and they spare no expenses in recruiting at those universities. The target institutions are secondary, and there is much recruiting in them. Also, the number of recruits from them is more limited. Finally, the nonlisted institutions are considered lesser, and there is no effort to recruit from them. It is still possible to be accepted, even with a degree from such an institution, but only if the applicant is sponsored. Without a sponsor, the application is discarded, without anyone even looking at it.⁷¹

There are good reasons for the ESP firms to recruit from elite universities. They see it as the easiest and least expensive way to find lots of good applicants, without having to look for the proverbial needle in the haystack. They also believe the students at elite universities to be the best and the brightest candidates. Finally, it's about prestige and status for the firm: the firm looks good if it has lots of elite graduates working for it. And all the other big and powerful corporations are doing the same thing, so it's a competition between elite firms.⁷²

What I find particularly odd about this recruitment method, though, is that it is based on some spurious assumptions, as Rivera shows:

It was not the content of an elite education that employers valued, but instead the perceived rigor of these institutions' admission processes.⁷³

[T]he credential EPS firms valued was not the education received at a top school but rather a letter of acceptance from one.⁷⁴

So, the firms do not actually seem to value the education at the elite school, just their method of selecting students. This is apparently because they believe this method to select the most intelligent students, and they believe such people to make the employees. This is obviously based on the belief in static, easily quantifiable general intelligence. Psychologists might not consider this a valid method of selecting the best employees, but let's not get sidetracked here. The big, glaring point to be made here is the fact that the whole process of recruiting at these ESP firms as described by Rivera, is completely unprofessional and done by admittedly

⁷¹ Rivera 2016, 51.

⁷² Rivera 2016, 53 - 56.

⁷³ Rivera 2016, 113.

⁷⁴ Rivera 2016, 116.

incompetent interviewers! That is to say, the applicants who made it past the application review step were interviewed by revenue generating professionals, not professional recruiters, such as human resources managers.⁷⁵ It is no wonder then, that instead of actually finding the employees best suited for the job, they tend to find people who have the right social background. This can be seen in their perception of the choice of education:

[F]ailure to attend a super-elite school was an indicator of intellectual failure, regardless of a student's grades or standardized test scores.⁷⁶

Also, the interviewers focused much attention on the extracurricular activities. What was expected was involvement in formalized, high-status leisure pursuits which are actually signals of wealth and high social class. The preferred activities can also be described as upper- and upper-middle-class, 'white' culture. Yet, these activities were used to judge the candidate's sociability and 'well-roundedness', as a means to assess their cultural fit in the firm.⁷⁷

[T]hose without significant extracurricular experiences or those who participated in activities that were primarily academically or preprofessionally oriented were perceived to be 'boring,' 'tools,' 'bookworms,' or 'nerds' who might turn out to be 'corporate drones' if hired.⁷⁸

Even some wealthy students fail to participate in enough of the right types of activities to be accepted. Unfortunately for working class students, they typically focus on academics during their time at the university. This leads to the lack of 'proper' extracurriculars, and so diminishes their chances of being employed by the ESP firms. Evaluators place the most emphasis on experiences that were strongly correlated with parental socioeconomic status, especially super-elite university credentials and high-status extracurricular activities. Résumé signals that are widely accessible, such as class rank at the university, and the content of cover letters, are simply ignored. This creates barriers for students from less privileged backgrounds; they don't even get invited to an interview.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Rivera 2016, 33.

⁷⁶ Rivera 2016, 114.

⁷⁷ Rivera 2016, 119, 121, 125.

⁷⁸ Rivera 2016, 120.

⁷⁹ Rivera 2016, 27 - 28, 126, 111, 300.

Similar to the way education was viewed, when assessing prior work experience the interviewers emphasized prior work prestige rather than the content of the job.⁸⁰

Evaluators believed that prior employment at a namebrand organization was a signal that candidates had successfully navigated a rigorous screening process and thus likely had strong cognitive and social skills.⁸¹

Clearly, the prestige of the organization doesn't really have anything to do with what the actual job was, or what the applicant had learned at the job. Strong cognitive and social skills of course can be useful in any job, but one would think that a more defined skill set would be of more use, yet the interviewers seem to be uninterested in even looking for such things. So, what one needs to have in order to get selected for the elite job is not any particular skill set, just any job at a prestigious past employer.

To get to past the résumé viewing and interview steps, there is of course one good way mentioned at the very beginning of this essay: utilizing networks, calling in a favor, or asking for one. EPS firms advertise themselves as a way to develop a lifelong network of close friends in high places. This could be taken as a hint, but according to Rivera, less affluent students even at elite schools do not usually know that for EPS firms, connections are more important than a good CV.⁸²

This is because hiring in elite firms is a *sponsored contest*. Rivera likens the interview system to a gated playing field: only those sponsored by individual elites are allowed to move past the gate onto the field. In order to have more than a very slim chance of getting the job, the applicant must have the right social capital, i.e. network connections. These connections do not necessarily have to be extremely influential people, for recruiters trusted the recommendations of even the most junior firm employees.⁸³

Of course it doesn't hurt to have higher recommendations:

⁸⁰ Rivera 2016, 133.

⁸¹ Rivera 2016, 134.

⁸² Rivera 2016, 96, 104.

⁸³ Rivera 2016, 46, 47, 70, 73. Savage 2015, 132.

Candidates with the right individual sponsors could actually receive hall passes and bypass résumé review altogether.⁸⁴

The firms also used what they called courtesy interview and courtesy hiring. This means that they might interview or even hire someone as a favor to a business partner, or some other connection important to the firm.⁸⁵

Those applicants who, for whatever reason, made it to the interview stage, now have to prove their worth. As mentioned earlier, this is where cultural fit is seen as the most important criterion. To assess this fit, the interviewers look for matches in leisure pursuits, backgrounds, and self-presentation styles. Good answers in an interview show that the applicant has “done her homework” and looked up information about the firm. The information required to make an impression, though, is the kind one can only acquire with the right connections, among the athletes and secret societies at the elite universities. The interaction styles favored by the interviewers (such as leading the conversation, interviewing the interviewer) are typical of American, economically privileged people, in other words, members of the elite class. Children are socialized into the classes they were born into, learning how to interact with people, among other things. This is one of the many ways in which class background influences who gets the elite jobs.⁸⁶

For example, agency is considered important by the interviewers:

An essential part of telling an effective story was to present one’s experiences as resulting from a series of personal decisions rather than from serendipitous circumstances, such as chance or luck, or from access (or barrier) to valuable opportunities.⁸⁷

Ironically, given it is a high paying elite job that one is applying for, it is important to emphasize intrinsic motivations, such as inner drive for applying for the job, rather than extrinsic motivations, such as need for money, or desire for high status.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Rivera 2016, 140.

⁸⁵ Rivera 2016, 140.

⁸⁶ Rivera 2016, 168, 169, 203 - 204, 218.

⁸⁷ Rivera 2016, 185.

⁸⁸ Rivera 2016, 185.

Often people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not want to reveal their origins, fearing they'd be penalized for being 'outsiders, dissimilar to their interviewers. Low-status people typically perceive professional and private life as separate spheres. This is going to disadvantage them, when they could turn it into an advantage. When telling about themselves in the interview, a dramatic story, especially a variant of "from rags to riches", would be very much appreciated. Unfortunately, individuals from low socioeconomic background are usually unaware of this potential advantage. Of course, it only works if you did actually succeed; if you failed to overcome your obstacles, you will be considered a "buzzkill", a downer, and you will not be hired.⁸⁹

In general, the type of narrative style that evaluators preferred had four significant socioeconomic dimensions: (1) It presumes that candidates *had* choices. (2) Research shows that choosing jobs and schools on the basis of individual passion or desires for self-actualization is an economically privileged way of perceiving life choices. (3) Psychological research shows that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to see their experiences as connected to others and as shaped by structural and external factors instead of being the product of an array of discrete choices. A narrative style that emphasizes individual choice, freedom, and distinctiveness is a more middle- and upper-class way of perceiving the world. (4) The idea that an individual controls one's fate is a specifically American [individualistic] way of framing the world.⁹⁰

It is clear then, that despite some appearance of meritocracy, the way EPS firms select their hirees is far from it. And the advantages of an elite background don't stop in one getting an elite job, as Savage notes:

Meritocratic recruitment does not eradicate the advantages which are enjoyed by those who come into these occupations from privileged backgrounds. [...] Those who are best paid in many elite occupations are those who came from the most advantaged background.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Rivera 2016, 193, 195, 196.

⁹⁰ Rivera 2016, 188.

⁹¹ Savage 2015, 201.

7. Discrimination by Gender, Race, and Class Background

In the past chapters I have been discussing the path of entry to the elite. There are some additional hurdles that shall be covered here, having to do with discrimination that legally should not occur, but does. Access to university education can already be limited on the basis of class, gender and ethnic background. In the UK, pupils from independent and state schools have very different chances of being admitted to a university. These inequalities are amplified in the case of elite universities.⁹² And as seen above, failure to graduate from an elite university will likely close the doors to elite jobs as well. Even with the degree, discrimination will be a problem: according to many empirical studies women, minorities, and people with working class background are unlikely to be invited for a EPS job interview.⁹³ In the US, there are ‘diversity recruitment events’ that supposedly address this issue, but according to Rivera they are actually just public relations stunts, aimed at branding the firm as one that cares about diversity.⁹⁴ This isn’t to say the interviewers are or the company culture is blatantly racist, but rather that the unprofessional interviewers are unequipped to do a better job. Their only instructions are to consider themselves as the measure of merit. This leads them to expect good applicants to be similar to themselves. This in turn can lead to unintentional discrimination based on ‘race’, gender, and other such factors.⁹⁵ Between first and second round interviews, the interviewers had group conversations. According to Rivera, they did not reduce such discrimination:

[Group] conversations actually *amplified* evaluative biases based on candidates’ categorical membership groups, including their gender and race. This occurred because stereotypes provided a common lens through which to perceive applicants’ pluses and minuses and a common language through which to discuss those strengths and weaknesses.⁹⁶

⁹² Savage 2015, 222.

⁹³ Rivera 2016, 108.

⁹⁴ Rivera 2016, 65.

⁹⁵ Rivera 2016, 220.

⁹⁶ Rivera 2016, 253. Italics in original.

Stereotypes are more likely to affect hiring evaluations in ambiguous situations, where the quality of a candidate is not clear.⁹⁷ For the negatively stereotyped, even minor failings were considered to be due to internal shortcomings, whereas for others, they were explained away with external factors.⁹⁸

For those who do get invited for an interview, the requirements may be different from those of white, middle class males. Women, for example, are required (especially by female interviewers) to show more empathic interaction than men.⁹⁹ Asians, particularly females, are usually considered dull conversationalists.¹⁰⁰ The math skills of Asian women are typically not questioned.¹⁰¹ An important quality the interviewers called ‘polish’, is defined differently for white men vs. minority men.¹⁰² Being unattractive, especially for females, was perceived as lack of polish.¹⁰³ Minority people are rejected for small weaknesses that are not counted against whites. Black men might be rejected for being unprofessional or immature, whereas white men with the same failings are only seen as needing coaching for the second round of interviews.¹⁰⁴ White men who are only adequate can still receive the job offer, but black men have to excel in proving their analytical skills. When a woman’s performance is unclear, interviewers scrutinize her math skills heavily. Men making mistakes might have ‘off days’, but for a woman they are signs of ‘inferior math/analytical skills’.¹⁰⁵ Stereotypically masculine activities are considered making a greater fit for both men and women, but men will be penalized for feminine self-presentation styles, interests, and experiences.¹⁰⁶ Sports seem to be an important thing for the reviewers, and not being into sports might be considered ‘feminine’, i.e. bad. Whatever the reason, Rivera notes that the failure to be active in sports is not good for the applicant:

Even among the economically privileged students who attend unlisted schools and lack insider social connections never make it on the playing field in the first place. For those who do make it

⁹⁷ Rivera 2016, 264.

⁹⁸ Rivera 2016, 266.

⁹⁹ Rivera 2016, 219.

¹⁰⁰ Rivera 2016, 220.

¹⁰¹ Rivera 2016, 273.

¹⁰² Rivera 2016, 266.

¹⁰³ Rivera 2016, 302.

¹⁰⁴ Rivera 2016, 267.

¹⁰⁵ Rivera 2016, 271.

¹⁰⁶ Rivera 2016, 273.

to résumé review, some affluent students [...] who are not current or former varsity athletes will be eliminated from competition [...].¹⁰⁷

Compared to the elites of earlier times, the new elites are more diverse in terms of gender, race and religion. Entry to the elite is more open and formalized in an attempt to make it more fair, but the way top-tier EPS firms select new members is still causing social closure, according to Rivera.¹⁰⁸ Early life experiences and parental resources have critical influence on later economic opportunities.¹⁰⁹ The financial crisis of 2008 has further intensified the biases Rivera has been observing.¹¹⁰

8. So, What Does It Take?

Studying for this essay has revealed only one surprise, as far as I'm concerned: how unqualified and incompetent the recruiting process at EPS firms is (at least in the US). It probably enables one with good social networking skills to land the coveted job, assuming everything else is acceptable to the elite employer. As the adage claims, 'it's not who you are, it's who you know', meaning that friends in the right places can provide invaluable assistance in acquiring elite jobs. Toward that end, it really helps if one is from an elite background. After all, 'who you know' is likely to be people from your social circles. Lacking a high social background, it still may be possible to attend an elite university (and before that, school, and before that, kindergarten), although financing it, especially in the US, will be difficult. A scholarship based on athletic achievement would be very helpful in that regard, and it would also be considered the right kind of merit by the recruiters at elite firms later. Lots of the right kind of extracurricular hobbies at the university will be necessary. The higher the achievements, the better. Jobs or unpaid internships at the most prestigious namebrand companies should be the next goal after

¹⁰⁷ Rivera 2016, 300.

¹⁰⁸ Rivera 2016, 325.

¹⁰⁹ Rivera 2016, 327.

¹¹⁰ Rivera 2016, 338.

graduating. Another option would be to start one's own company, and make it very successful. All through the way up to that point one should be making lots of useful connections, people one can call on for advice and preparation help for the big job interview. It would also be advantageous to be young and good looking, white, and male.

But before applying, perhaps one should pause and ask, is membership in the elite even worth pursuing? Perhaps it is worth considering a different point of view, such as can be found in the writing of one Matthew Nisbet. He is a scientist, not a businessman climbing the corporate ladders. But being a full tenured professor, he can still be considered a member of the professional elite. This short autobiographical account of his career and life may be illuminating to the above question, or even cautionary to anyone desiring to rise to the ranks of the professional elite:

Graduating from Dartmouth College in 1996, my career has followed a path familiar to many other alumni from elite universities. For nearly two decades as an academic, I have devoted myself to the relentless accumulation of credentials, networks, experiences, and achievements, consistently working seventy-hour weeks. Evenings and weekends were not opportunities to relax but instead a time to catch up on a backlog of research projects, dream up new ones, and write popular articles (like this one). Completing my doctorate in four years, by the age of twenty-seven I had landed a tenure-track position; by thirty-five I was tenured; and by my early forties I was a full professor. [...]

Similar to my educated peers in law, medicine, finance, or technology, I had been working an "extreme job" [...].¹¹¹

Eventually he suffered excruciating nerve pain as a result of his exhaustive, endless work. Quoting journalist Derek Thomson, he explains that work for members of the educated elite has become a religion that promises identity, transcendence, and community. In order to reach "fulfillment", massive amounts of work and work-related activities are necessary.¹¹² Entering the elite may be difficult, and it might turn out to be more than one bargained for.

¹¹¹ Nisbet 2020, 26.

¹¹² Ibid.

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