

## Book summary: “The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged” by Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison

In *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*, authors Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison employ qualitative and quantitative research techniques to rigorously demonstrate a significant and previously undetected class ceiling in Britain’s elite occupations. The research is based on ONS Labour Force Survey data as well as in-depth case studies of four sectors – television, accountancy, architecture, and acting – to measure the class pay gap and understand its causes.

Key findings:

- **Existence of a class pay gap:** Those from working-class backgrounds earn on average 16% less in elite occupations than colleagues from privileged backgrounds. This is exacerbated for women, people with disabilities and certain racial-ethnic groups from working class backgrounds who all face a clear double disadvantage. The class pay gap is concentrated in certain elite fields – finance, law, medicine, and acting all stand out.
- **From ‘getting in’ to ‘getting on’:** Conceptualisation of social mobility has been tied to the idea of occupational access but getting in doesn’t necessarily mean getting on. The problem with this fair access agenda is that it tends to ignore differences in people’s resources that they bring into the workplace and the different rewards they reap once there.
- **What’s driving the class pay gap:** The authors use regression analysis on earnings among those in elite occupations controlled for factors thought to effect earnings.
  - **Education** does explain some of the gap – those from privileged backgrounds tend to have higher qualifications and attend more prestigious universities both of which are associated with higher earnings. Yet significantly “even when the upwardly mobile do achieve the highest credentials, including Oxbridge degrees and/or first-class grades, they are not able to convert them into the same earnings premium as the privileged”. When adjusted for demographics, conventional indicators of merit or human capital (hours, training) half the pay gap remains.
  - **There are three other important mechanisms:** the privileged are more likely to **work in London**, in **large firms**, and in certain **elite occupations such as medicine, law and finance**. These factors are all associated with higher pay.
- **Four (hidden) drivers of the class ceiling that propel those from privileged backgrounds:** The resources that flow from our class backgrounds shape our careers well beyond occupational entry.
  1. **The bank of mum and dad** – Financial support from parents offers security, allows people to take risks with their careers and to live in London.
  2. **A helping hand** – Rather than the “old boy network”, informal sponsorship is often a normalised practice, referred to as “mapping talent” or identifying “partner material”. While such exercises are routinely presented as neutral talent spotting, sponsor relationships are rarely established purely on work performance.
  3. **Fitting in** – Mastering behavioural and cultural codes is pivotal to “getting on” in elite workplaces, signalling that you are the “right type” of person and that you fit, even though these codes are often unrelated to the actual work..
  4. **Self-elimination** – not a lack of aspiration or ambition, but more acting based on perceptions of chances of success in the future. People self-eliminate by opting out of opportunities, take a slower or less prestigious career path, or refusing to play the “rules of the game” to get ahead.

- **Misrecognition of ‘merit’:** Much of what is routinely categorised as ‘merit’ in elite occupations is impossible to separate from what the authors term the ‘*following wind*’ of privilege. This metaphor helpfully visualises the experience of the upwardly mobile who often feel they are fighting a headwind. It’s not that such individuals can’t move forward or never reach the top, more that generally it takes longer, happens less frequently and is markedly more labour intensive.
- **Class as capital:** The authors draw on the work of French sociologist Bourdieu for whom class background is determined by three primary forms of capital:
  - **Economic** – wealth and income
  - **Social** – valuable social connections and friendships
  - **Cultural** – educational credentials and possession of legitimate knowledge, skills and tastes
- **Inheritance of cultural capital reinforces class privilege:** Children of educated upper middle-class parents reflect certain dispositions many of which are embodied eg. accent, inflection, gesture, posture, styles of dress, etiquette, manners and a propensity for ‘symbolic mastery’ eg. use of language, elaborate vocabulary, grammar, familiarity with abstraction and theoretical ideas, aesthetic orientation to culture and taste. These inherited resources have a huge impact on individual’s subsequent career trajectories.
 

“...it is much harder to detect the intergenerational transfer of cultural capital [than social or economic capital], and therefore we tend to (mis)read it in everyday life as a signal of a person’s ‘natural’ sophistication...or even innate intelligence”
- **How the authors measure class origin:** There are many ways to measure socio-economic background, the authors think parental occupation is the best single indicator of class origin, using the question: “What was the occupation of the main bread winner in your household at the age of 14?”

## 10 practical steps organisations can take to tackle the class ceiling:

In the book’s epilogue, the authors outline 10 practical ways in which employers can help to address the drivers of the class ceiling. These were developed in collaboration with Nik Miller, Chief Executive of The Bridge Group, a charity that specialises in working with organisations to improve social mobility:

1. Measure and monitor class/socio-economic background
2. Find out whether your organisation has a class ceiling
3. Start a conversation about talent
4. Take intersectionality seriously
5. Publish social mobility data
6. Ban unpaid and unadvertised internships
7. Senior champions are necessary but not sufficient
8. Formalise the informal
9. Support those who want it
10. Lobby for legal protection