

LAWYERS' CAREER ASPIRATIONS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTION

Lawyers' career aspirations are shaped within the cultural and institutional contexts of the legal profession. Law schools, law firms, and senior attorneys distribute opportunities and signal which paths count as successful and which are consolation prizes.¹ Professional socialization operates through recruitment, labor markets, and shared narratives that shape what lawyers want for their careers. Sociologists describe such aspirations as "fictional expectations": collective images of the future that guide present action and are embedded in networks and stories that make some futures seem attainable and others remote.² Recalibrating aspirations in line with shared cultural understandings enables individuals to frame constrained choices as intentional and agentic, rather than foreclosed, and behavioral responses reinforce these cultural beliefs.³ Thus, professional hierarchies reproduce themselves by shaping the shared imagination of which futures are legitimate and worth striving toward.⁴

Professional fields cultivate what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "habitus," a set of dispositions, tastes, and ways of thinking through which people aspire to what seems realistic or appropriate.⁵ In law school and early practice, this habitus develops through exposure to rankings, recruiting rituals, alumni success stories, and evaluative feedback that signal which paths are valued.⁶ As Bourdieu notes, "[a]gents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not 'for us,' a division as fundamental and as fundamentally recognized as that between the sacred and the profane."⁷ Race, gender, and class further affect how lawyers interpret these signals, influencing who feels they belong and which futures seem plausible.⁸ What appears as personal

1. See David B. Wilkins & G. Mitu Gulati, *Reconceiving the Tournament of Lawyers: Tracking, Seeding, and Information Control in the Internal Labor Markets of Elite Law Firms*, 84 VA. L. REV. 1581, 1589–90 (1998); Robert Granfield & Thomas Koenig, *Learning Collective Eminence: Harvard Law School and the Social Production of Elite Lawyers*, 33 SOCIO. Q. 503, 516 (1992).

2. JENS BECKERT, *IMAGINED FUTURES: FICTIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND CAPITALIST DYNAMICS* 61 (2016); Ann Mische, *Projects and Possibilities: Researching Futures in Action*, 24 SOCIO. F. 694, 698 (2009).

3. Margaret Frye, *Cultural Meanings and the Aggregation of Actions: The Case of Sex and Schooling in Malawi*, 82 AM. SOC. REV. 945, 946 (2017).

4. See BECKERT, *supra* note 2, at 63.

5. PIERRE BOURDIEU, *THE STATE NOBILITY: ELITE SCHOOLS IN THE FIELD OF POWER* 2 (Lauretta C. Clough trans., 1996).

6. See *id.*; see also Granfield & Koenig, *supra* note 1, at 516; Desmond Manderson & Sarah Turner, *Coffee House: Habitus and Performance Among Law Students*, 31 L. & SOC. INQUIRY 649, 665 (2006); SHAMUS R. KHAN, *PRIVILEGE: THE MAKING OF AN ADOLESCENT ELITE AT ST. PAUL'S SCHOOL* 182 (2011); ROBERT L. NELSON, RONIT DINOVTZER, BRYANT G. GARTH, JOYCE S. STERLING, DAVID B. WILKINS, MEGHAN DAWE & ETHAN MICHELSON, *THE MAKING OF LAWYERS' CAREERS: INEQUALITY AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE AMERICAN LEGAL PROFESSION* 20 (2023).

7. PIERRE BOURDIEU, *THE LOGIC OF PRACTICE* 64 (Richard Nice trans., 1990).

8. See CECILIA L. RIDGEWAY, *FRAMED BY GENDER: HOW GENDER INEQUALITY PERSISTS IN THE MODERN WORLD* 34 (2011); Bryant G. Garth & Joyce S. Sterling, *Diversity, Hierarchy,*

preference is often an adjustment to anticipated exclusion, a recalibration of aspirations to fit organizational realities.

Seen this way, career aspirations are stratified outcomes, rather than neutral indicators of ambition. They are structured by prestige hierarchies that position equity partnership at the symbolic apex of legal practice⁹ and are differentiated by social background and position within the field.¹⁰ Understanding systematic differences in career aspirations requires tracing how social background and institutional and organizational signals shape the professional horizons of possibility in the first place.

This Essay analyzes early career aspirations among lawyers in the United States and Canada using two national cohort studies: *After the JD* (AJD) Wave Two¹¹ and *Law and Beyond* (LAB).¹² Both capture lawyers at formative moments in the development of their professional habitus, when early ideals are reinterpreted through institutional signals and become patterned into durable career orientations.¹³ This data allows us to observe how professional hierarchies shape the futures that early career lawyers perceive as both possible and desirable.

This framework treats career aspirations as structured outcomes of social and institutional processes that reproduce professional inequality.¹⁴ It views career aspirations as future projections—reflecting both the desirable and possible—and sees their hierarchical organization as revealing the positioning of different groups and careers within the legal field.¹⁵ Although career aspirations may correlate closely with objective probabilities of success, this is not because individuals consciously calculate their chances and adjust their ambitions accordingly. Rather, as Bourdieu explains, “the dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions . . . generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands.”¹⁶

and Fit in Legal Careers: Insights from Fifteen Years of Qualitative Interviews, 31 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 123, 150–54 (2018).

9. MARC GALANTER & THOMAS PALAY, *TOURNAMENT OF LAWYERS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BIG LAW FIRM* 101 (1991).

10. BOURDIEU, *supra* note 5, at 2.

11. *See generally* RONIT DINOVTZER, ROBERT L. NELSON, GABRIELE PLICKERT, REBECCA SANDEFUR & JOYCE S. STERLING, *AFTER THE JD II: SECOND RESULTS FROM A NATIONAL STUDY OF LEGAL CAREERS* (2009) [hereinafter *AFTER THE JD II*]. For the first wave of this study, see generally RONIT DINOVTZER, BRYANT G. GARTH, RICHARD SANDER, JOYCE STERLING & GITA Z. WILDER, *AFTER THE JD: FIRST RESULTS OF A NATIONAL STUDY OF LEGAL CAREERS* (2004) [hereinafter *AFTER THE JD I*].

12. *See generally* RONIT DINOVTZER, *LAW AND BEYOND: A NATIONAL STUDY OF CANADIAN LAW GRADUATES* (2015), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2615062> [<https://perma.cc/QQ/E2-NBH7>].

13. Ronit Dinovitzer & Bryant G. Garth, *Lawyer Satisfaction in the Process of Structuring Legal Careers*, 41 L. & SOC'Y REV. 1, 3 (2007).

14. *See id.*

15. *See* BECKERT, *supra* note 2, at 62; Mische, *supra* note 2, at 698; Frye, *supra* note 3, at 946–48.

16. BOURDIEU, *supra* note 7, at 54.

Aspirations thus reflect how professional fields, through habitus, shape one's sense of the attainable: privileging some futures and marginalizing others. Professional aspirations develop through socialization processes that cultivate habitus, teaching emerging lawyers to organize their desires within hierarchically ranked systems, where some career paths represent legitimate success while others operate as secondary alternatives.¹⁷ The structures and orientations of the legal field vary across national contexts, channeling social groups toward distinct career trajectories and creating cross-national differences in the structure of professional hierarchies and the mechanisms that sustain them.

Our analysis reveals three key patterns that clarify how aspirational stratification operates among early career lawyers working in the private firm sector. First, partnership aspirations dominate the professional landscape for lawyers working in law firms in the United States and Canada. Second, gender and race are important for understanding aspirations: we find a gender divide in aspirations to equity partnership in both countries and to business careers in Canada; Black and Asian lawyers report significantly lower partnership aspirations than White lawyers in the United States and significantly higher business aspirations in Canada. Third, educational pedigree produces a counterintuitive pattern: graduates of elite law schools express lower partnership aspirations than their peers from less prestigious institutions, suggesting elite credentials provide access to broader professional "imaginaries" rather than simply intensifying traditional ambitions. These findings demonstrate how professional socialization reproduces inequality through divergent ways of valuing and aspiring to professional futures.

I. THE HIERARCHY OF PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION

Professional fields create stratified systems of aspiration where certain career paths dominate the professional imagination while others occupy subordinate cultural positions. Sociologist and professor Magali Sarfatti Larson's analysis of the professional project illuminates how occupations construct systems where certain career paths are elevated as routes to professional success while others are positioned as subordinate alternatives.¹⁸

Bourdieu's theory of social fields shows how professional hierarchies are maintained through different forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic.¹⁹ Within legal fields, certain career trajectories accumulate these forms of capital more effectively than others, creating advantages that extend beyond individual achievement to shape collective aspirations. For example,

17. *See id.*

18. *See* MAGALI SARFATTI LARSON, THE RISE OF PROFESSIONALISM: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS 193 (1977).

19. BOURDIEU, *supra* note 5, at 264–65.

starting positions in large law firms signal professional achievement and expertise, provide access to elite networks, and bestow prestige that can be converted into other forms of professional recognition and future opportunities.²⁰

Elite institutions shape career opportunities and mold professional ambitions through processes that create hierarchical ordering. Research on elite hiring shows how firms valorize “fit,” a cultural shorthand for ease, polish, and pedigree that systematically advantages those from privileged backgrounds while creating hierarchical distinctions among career tracks.²¹ The hierarchical distinctions present some paths as more legitimate than others, leading students at top schools to absorb expectations of prestige and develop intuitions about which careers naturally follow from their training.²²

Decades of research on law school socialization have documented how elite institutions cultivate specific professional identities and aspirational orientations, staging intensive socialization experiences in which selected students learn both legal skills and professional aspirations.²³ From law school orientation through early experiences in the labor market and workplace, emerging lawyers learn to view partnership as both the natural destination for successful careers and the standard against which alternative paths are measured as acceptable or disappointing. For example, Professors Robert Granfield and Thomas Koenig describe narratives and rituals at Harvard Law School that position graduates' futures in elite positions as preordained.²⁴

This research suggests that public interest drift among elite law students reflects a recalibration of aspirations in response to hierarchical recruitment pressures that direct students toward available opportunities in the private law firm sector.²⁵ Students' initial motivations for attending law school shape how they respond to institutional pressures to reorient their ambitions toward private firms.²⁶ However, the “passion principle” ideology—the dominant cultural belief that people should “follow their passion” in making career choices and that career satisfaction flows from doing what you love—can obscure how students' career aspirations reflect structural constraints rather than individual preferences. Framing career choices as matters of

20. See Ronit Dinovitzer & Bryant G. Garth, *The New Place of Corporate Law Firms in the Structuring of Elite Legal Careers*, 45 L. & SOC. INQUIRY 339, 367 (2020); NELSON ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 49.

21. LAUREN A. RIVERA, PEDIGREE: HOW ELITE STUDENTS GET ELITE JOBS 256–57 (2015).

22. See KHAN, *supra* note 6, at 182.

23. See Manderson & Turner, *supra* note 6, at 662–63; Granfield & Koenig, *supra* note 1, at 517.

24. See Granfield & Koenig, *supra* note 1, at 517. Rituals surrounding recruitment include fly-outs and social events, and the subsequent attention students receive during recruitment affirms their sense of collective eminence.

25. John Bliss, *From Idealists to Hired Guns?: An Empirical Analysis of “Public Interest Drift” in Law School*, 51 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 1973, 2025 (2018).

26. See Granfield & Koenig, *supra* note 1, at 517.

individual passion masks how aspirations are shaped by differential access to opportunities and experiences of exclusion.²⁷

Research on engineering students²⁸ suggests that professional identity traits emphasized by professional cultures are refracted through existing self-conceptions. Many self-conceptions are themselves gendered: shaped by childhood socialization and sustained by recurring interactions with gendered institutions, patriarchy, and cultural beliefs and expectations about women's roles and natural abilities. Gendered self-conceptions translate into gendered professional identities because students are more likely to incorporate professional identity traits that are consistent with what they already believe about themselves.²⁹

If elite institutions primarily function to reproduce existing professional hierarchies,³⁰ we expect graduates of top-ranked law schools to express the strongest aspirations toward partnership. Yet if these institutions also provide cultural and social capital that make alternative high-status careers appear both attractive and viable, elite graduates might demonstrate more diversified aspirational patterns. Understanding how educational pedigree shapes aspirational formation within stratified professional systems requires examining how different institutional pathways teach lawyers to organize their desires across multiple fields of professional distinction.

A. Aspirational Hierarchies in Cross-National Perspective

While the Canadian and American legal systems share common-law foundations and stratified professional hierarchies, they differ in their institutional arrangements, which may shape how hierarchical systems operate.³¹ The large law firm played a significant role in establishing the hierarchy within the legal profession. The creation of the large law firm and its system of talent recruitment, advancement, and promotion was explicitly focused on selecting, cultivating, and retaining elite law school graduates. Elite graduates reciprocated, vying for positions in large law firms after graduation and surviving successive rounds of attrition to compete for equity partnership—the primary marker of professional success. Those who did not make equity partnership understood the outcome as a definitive failure.³² Law schools played a critical role in priming students for this competition:

27. ERIN A. CECH, *THE TROUBLE WITH PASSION: HOW SEARCHING FOR FULFILLMENT AT WORK FOSTERS INEQUALITY* 180 (2021).

28. See Erin Cech, *Engineers and Engineeresses?: Self-Conceptions and the Development of Gendered Professional Identities*, 58 SOCIO. PERSPS. 56, 57 (2015).

29. See *id.*

30. Amy J. Binder, Daniel B. Davis & Nick Bloom, *Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire “Prestigious” Jobs*, 89 SOCIO. EDUC. 20, 35 (2016).

31. Ronit Dinovitzer & Bryant G. Garth, *Law, Empires, Legal Professions, and Status Hierarchies: Comparative Perspectives*, 21 ANN. REV. L. & SOC. SCI. 343, 346 (2025). The Canadian context is more complex given the civil-law tradition in Québec. See *id.*

32. Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 20, at 342; ERWIN O. SMIGEL, *THE WALL STREET LAWYER* 77 (1964).

communicating images and messages reinforced by the curriculum, peers, and the law firm recruiting process, which solidified aspirations for careers in corporate law firms even before graduates entered practice.³³

In the more than half century since the profession's "Golden Age," the legal profession—and the large law firm—have undergone significant transformation.³⁴ The tournament has changed as firms have adopted dual-track partnerships; lengthened the partnership track; and made equity partnership positions scarcer, harder to attain, and unstable.³⁵ Still, equity partnership remains the pinnacle of the law firm hierarchy, with equity partners commanding astronomical earnings that are regularly advertised as a leading metric of law firm success.³⁶ A starting position in a corporate law firm now functions as a professional finishing school where lawyers accumulate symbolic capital that can be converted into opportunities across multiple practice settings,³⁷ redefining large firm departures as strategic capital investments rather than failures.³⁸ Despite these changes, law firms and equity partnerships maintain their position atop the professional hierarchy and continue to attract elite law graduates—not through their partnership opportunities, but through their role as credentialing institutions.³⁹ The rising prestige of corporate counsel positions assisted this transformation, providing legitimate destinations for deploying the symbolic capital accumulated through the large firm experience.⁴⁰

The Canadian legal profession developed along different institutional lines that create variations in hierarchical intensity.⁴¹ Canadian legal practice has historically been less concentrated in large law firm settings, with smaller proportions of lawyers working in the largest firms.⁴² More importantly, government service has retained higher relative prestige compared to the United States, reflecting Canada's stronger social democratic tradition and

33. See Granfield & Koenig, *supra* note 1, at 517.

34. Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 20, at 341. The "Golden Age," often dated to the 1950s and 1960s, was a period of the legal profession in which the large law firm was established and enjoyed great success at the pinnacle of the profession.

35. See Marc Galanter & William Henderson, *The Elastic Tournament: A Second Transformation of the Big Law Firm*, 60 STAN. L. REV. 1867, 1875–76 (2008).

36. *The 2025 Am Law 100*, LAW.COM, <https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/am-law-100/> [https://perma.cc/ZXZ8-XLR8] (last visited Jan. 6, 2026).

37. Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 13, at 34; Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 20, at 345; NELSON ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 90.

38. Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 20, at 344.

39. See *id.*

40. See Robert Eli Rosen, *The Inside Counsel Revolution: Professional Judgment and Organizational Representation*, 64 IND. L.J. 479, 481 (1988); David B. Wilkins, *The In-House Counsel Movement*, PRAC. MAG., May/June 2016, <https://clp.law.harvard.edu/knowledge-hub/magazine/issues/the-changing-role-of-the-global-general-counsel/the-in-house-counsel-movement/> [https://perma.cc/JJH3-T2JU]; Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 20, at 355.

41. Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 31, at 346–48.

42. Harry W. Arthurs, Richard Weisman & Frederick H. Zemans, *The Canadian Legal Profession*, 11 AM. BAR FOUND. RSCH. J. 447, 501 (1986); Ronit Dinovitzer & Meghan Dawe, *Early Legal Careers in Comparative Context: Evidence from Canada and the United States*, 23 INT'L J. LEGAL PROF. 83, 92 (2016).

the historical role of lawyers in Canadian public administration.⁴³ Despite these caveats, large Canadian law firms have experienced significant expansion in recent decades, playing an outsized role in the imaginaries of Canadian law students and the career paths of elite law graduates.⁴⁴

Taken together, there is reason to expect that in the Canadian context, there may be more space for alternative career orientations within stratified professional systems. These institutional variations may create different forms of aspirational hierarchy. Both systems likely maintain partnership's dominant position but do so through different mechanisms and with varying degrees of hierarchical concentration that shape how lawyers learn to rank and value different professional futures.

B. Stratification of Aspirational Horizons

Aspirational hierarchies structured by social identity channel different groups into distinct levels of professional stratification. Gender has become crucial in this process. Gendered norms around the “ideal worker” who is free of caregiving obligations continue to privilege access to elite hierarchical positions while relegating others to secondary career tracks.⁴⁵ Professor Cecilia L. Ridgeway shows how these expectations subtly shape who is recognized as capable of occupying top positions and who is directed toward alternative hierarchical levels.⁴⁶

In law firms, these hierarchical dynamics carry consequences for career trajectories. While a significant body of work has established differential outcomes for lawyers resulting from their social classes and demographic profiles,⁴⁷ here we focus on the role of aspirations in this process. Professors Elizabeth Gorman and Fiona M. Kay document how women and lawyers of color⁴⁸ face structural barriers to advancement that operate through hierarchical positioning, including exclusion and channeling toward “lower-status” career tracks within professional hierarchies.⁴⁹ Scholars have

43. Dinovitzer & Dawe, *supra* note 42, at 102.

44. See Ronit Dinovitzer & Meghan Dawe, *Canada: Continuity and Change in a Modern Legal Profession*, in 1 *LAWYERS IN 21ST-CENTURY SOCIETIES: NATIONAL REPORTS* 65, 69 (2020); Harry W. Arthurs, *Poor Canadian Legal Education: So Near to Wall Street, So Far from God*, 38 *OSGOODE HALL L.J.* 381, 382 (2000).

45. See MARY BLAIR-LOY, *COMPETING DEVOTIONS: CAREER AND FAMILY AMONG WOMEN EXECUTIVES* 6–7 (2003); Joan Acker, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations*, 4 *GENDER & SOC'Y* 139, 149 (1990).

46. See RIDGEWAY, *supra* note 8, at 153.

47. NELSON ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 80; Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 13, at 41–42.

48. EMPLOYMENT EQUITY ACT REVIEW TASK FORCE, *A TRANSFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK TO ACHIEVE AND SUSTAIN EMPLOYMENT EQUITY* 162–65 (2023), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/documents/corporate/portfolio/labour/programs/employment-equity/reports/act-review-task-force/EEA-Review-Task-Force-Report-2023-v2.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/4MEK-6V7L>].

49. Fiona M. Kay & Elizabeth H. Gorman, *Women in the Legal Profession*, 4 *ANN. REV. L. & SOC. SCI.* 299, 308–09 (2008) [hereinafter Kay & Gorman, *Women in the Legal Profession*]; Fiona M. Kay & Elizabeth H. Gorman, *Developmental Practices, Organizational Culture, and Minority Representation in Organizational Leadership: The Case of Partners in Large U.S. Law Firms*, 639 *ANNALS AM. ACAD.* 91, 107 (2012).

also documented how women and law students of color must present a White, male, and cisgender ideal to succeed,⁵⁰ performances that may redirect professional energy away from partnership aspirations toward alternative career strategies.

Family roles reinforce these hierarchical patterns. While mothers often face penalties tied to assumptions about availability for elite positions, recent research shows that fathers may receive institutional rewards for their parental status that enhance their access to elite career tracks.⁵¹ The “fatherhood premium” in lawyers’ careers frames caregiving as a sign of maturity and stability for men. This asymmetry reinforces hierarchical gender positioning rather than reflecting actual family circumstances.

Class background further structures hierarchical access through cultural mechanisms that extend beyond material advantages. Even lawyers from working-class origins who enter elite institutional spaces may experience cultural barriers that affect their positioning within aspirational hierarchies.⁵² Families in which the parents work as professionals, such as lawyers, transmit both access to elite positions and specific orientations toward appropriate hierarchical destinations, with different class backgrounds potentially channeling lawyers toward distinct professional aspirations.

Together, these mechanisms illustrate how aspirational hierarchies are shaped by social identity through institutional processes, which create differentiated pathways to distinct hierarchical positions. Rather than individual trajectories, this evidence reflects hierarchical sorting processes that influence which professional futures different groups perceive as accessible or desirable.

II. DATA AND METHODS

This Essay draws on data from two national cohort studies of early career lawyers: the U.S.-based *After the JD*⁵³ and the Canadian-based *Law and Beyond*.⁵⁴ Both studies observe lawyers’ careers within the first several years after bar admission, offering comparable snapshots of a critical period in professional socialization when new lawyers’ early ideals confront the realities of the workplace and labor market.

We focus on respondents working in private law firms, where the partnership track represents the dominant organizational hierarchy and equity partnership operates as the field’s primary marker of professional achievement. For the United States, we rely on AJD (fielded in 2007 and 2008). The study surveyed 3,750 lawyers from a national cohort of

50. LANI GUINIER, MICHELLE FINE & JANE BALIN, BECOMING GENTLEMEN: WOMEN, LAW SCHOOL, AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE 60 (1997); Swethaa S. Ballakrishnen, *Rethinking Inclusion: Ideal Minorities, Inclusion Cultures, and Identity Capitals in the Legal Profession*, 48 L. & SOC. INQUIRY 1157, 1172 (2023).

51. NELSON ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 294–95.

52. BOURDIEU, *supra* note 5, at 107–08.

53. AFTER THE JD II, *supra* note 11.

54. DINOVTZER, *supra* note 12.

individuals who graduated between 1998 and 2000 and were admitted to the bar in 2000, with an oversample of lawyers of color.⁵⁵ We restrict our sample to those in private practice—excluding lawyers who had already attained equity partnership (as they were not asked about aspirations) and those with missing data on our partnership aspirations measure—yielding an analytic sample of 1,003 respondents. This restriction focuses our analysis on lawyers still navigating aspirational formation during the critical early career period.

For Canada, we use data from LAB (fielded in 2012 and 2013), which surveyed the entire population of lawyers who graduated after 2007 and were called to the bar in 2010 (excluding “special calls” who were previously licensed in other jurisdictions); this study yielded 1,099 eligible responses.⁵⁶ Of these, 699 were working in private firm settings at the time of the survey. Analytic samples vary slightly by aspiration measure due to missing item-specific data: 687 for partnership aspirations, 682 for business aspirations, and 679 for public sector aspirations.

Both surveys include direct measures of career aspiration that allow us to examine the relationship between professional socialization and career orientations. In AJD Wave Two, respondents in private practice were asked to rate on a ten-point scale how strongly they aspired to specific roles within the firm: equity partner, nonequity partner, of counsel, or contract lawyer. LAB asked about aspirations to equity partnership within private firms⁵⁷ and included two additional items: aspirations to seniority in a corporate legal department and seniority as a government lawyer. We focus primarily on equity partnership in both datasets and use the Canadian data to explore how aspirational stratification operates across multiple career domains beyond traditional firm structures. These aspiration measures capture how the profession shapes what lawyers learn to want during this critical socialization period, with the hierarchical ordering of mean scores and distributional patterns revealing the organization of professional desire.

III. ANALYTIC STRATEGY

We explore the relationship between aspirations, social background, organizational context, institutional settings, and career orientations through three complementary analyses: (1) examining mean differences and distributional patterns across career domains to establish hierarchical ordering, (2) comparing predictive models across aspirational domains to reveal how social stratification operates differently at different levels of professional hierarchy, and (3) analyzing cross-national differences in the magnitude and significance of key predictors to assess whether hierarchical processes operate with varying intensities across national contexts.

55. AFTER THE JD II, *supra* note 11, at 89.

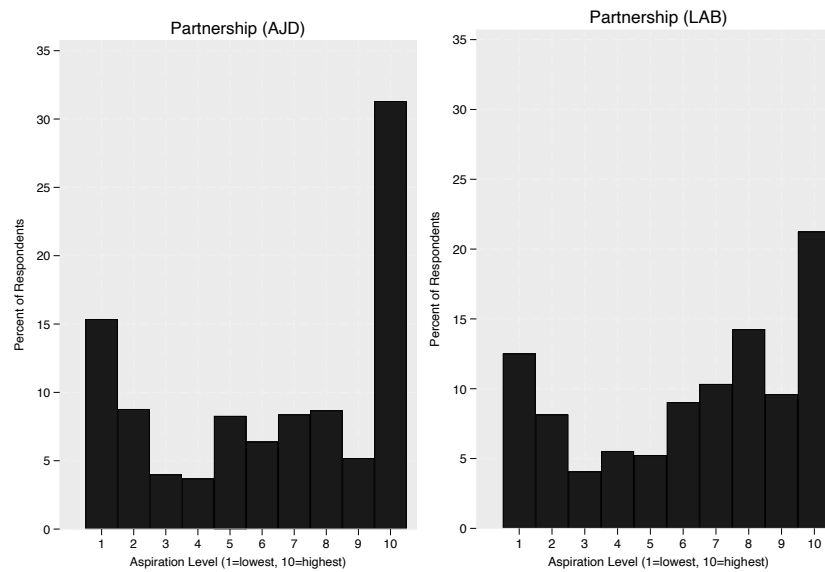
56. DINOVIETZ, *supra* note 12, at 6.

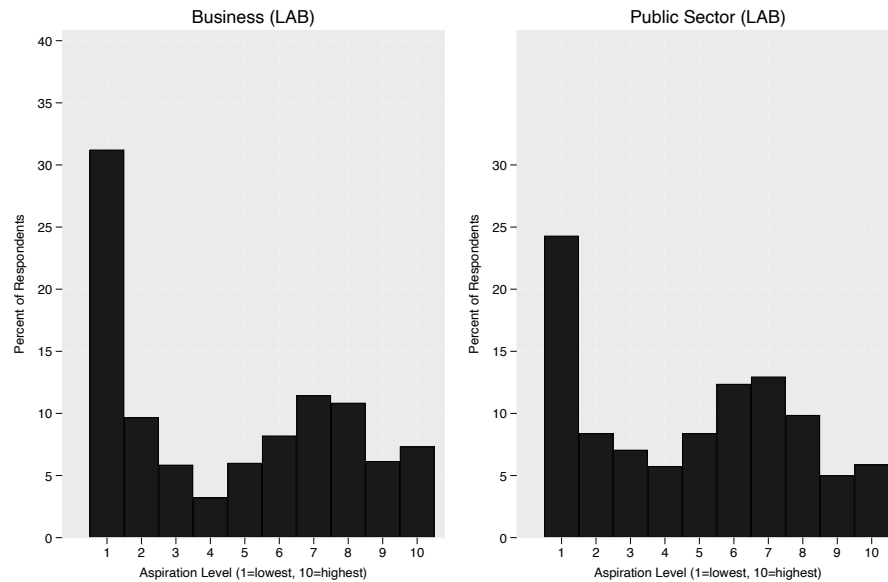
57. LAB respondents were asked about aspirations to equity partnership in a large law firm and aspirations to equity partnership in a mid-size law firm. We measure partnership aspirations using respondents' highest score on these two measures.

*A. Aspirational Hierarchies
in Legal Practice*

Figure 1 presents the frequency distributions of career aspirations across the four measures. The top panels show partnership aspirations in both countries, revealing concentration at both ends of the scale: in the United States (AJD), 31 percent of respondents expressed maximum aspiration (10) while 15 percent reported no interest (1); in Canada (LAB), 21 percent scored 10, and 13 percent scored 1. The bottom panel displays business and public sector aspirations among Canadian lawyers, which show markedly different patterns. Business aspirations are concentrated toward the lower end of the scale, with 37 percent scoring 1 and only 7 percent scoring 10. Public sector aspirations follow a similar curve, with 28 percent scoring 1 and 7 percent scoring 10. These distributions indicate that partnership operates as a defining professional commitment that lawyers in firms either strongly embrace or largely reject, while business and public sector careers represent secondary orientations within private practice.

Figure 1: Distribution of Career Aspirations by Sector

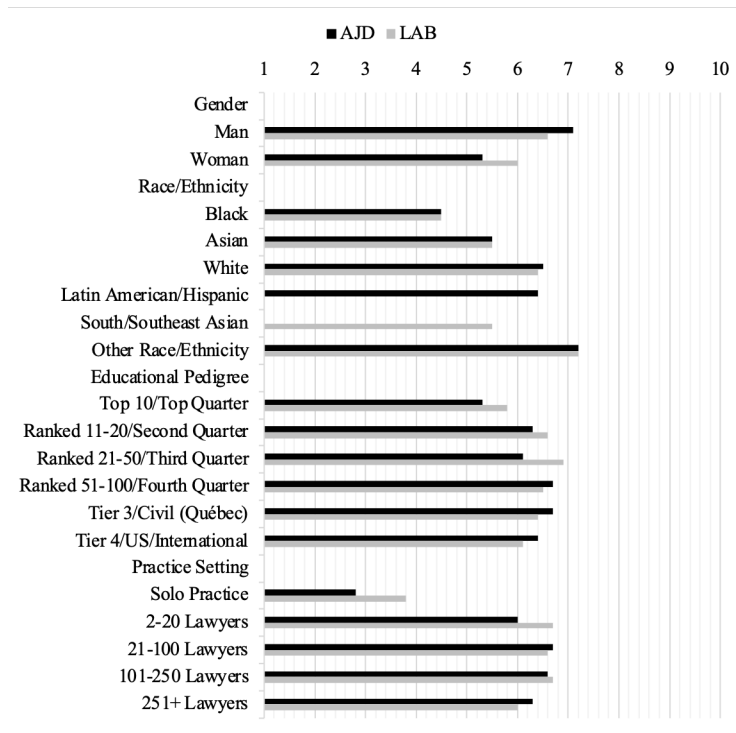




B. How Social Position Shapes Aspirational Hierarchies

While distributional patterns establish the hierarchical ordering of career domains, understanding how aspirational stratification operates requires examining the factors that shape these orientations across social groups. We do so through a series of regression models. Before discussing the results, we present mean partnership aspirations by key social and institutional characteristics, revealing how aspirational hierarchies intersect with systems of social stratification (Figure 2). Remarkably, the mean score for partnership aspirations among both sets of respondents is identical at 6.3 out of 10, indicating a striking similarity across two national contexts. In both the United States and Canada, women express significantly lower mean partnership aspirations than men, and the highest aspirational scores are reported by graduates of mid-ranked law schools and lawyers working in mid-size law firms. Career aspirations also differ significantly by race. In both samples, White lawyers have higher average aspirations than Black, Asian, and South/Southeast Asian lawyers. Meanwhile, some other minority groups—Latin American/Hispanic in AJD and “other” in both surveys—report similar or even higher averages.

Figure 2. Mean Partnership Aspirations by Demographic and Institutional Characteristics (on a Scale from 1–10)



Below, we present regression results for partnership aspirations in both national contexts, revealing how traditional markers of professional status orient aspirations to the field's dominant career track. The independent variable in the analysis is self-reported aspiration for equity partnership in a law firm, which respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10.

Demographic characteristics include parental education, which measures the highest level of education attained by either of the respondents' parents—graduate/professional degree, undergraduate degree, and college or less (as the reference category). Gender and LGBTQ+ identity are measured using dummy variables, with men and non-LGBTQ+ as the reference categories. Racial and ethnic categories differ between datasets to reflect national contexts: the U.S. sample (AJD) includes separate indicators for Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other non-White categories, while the Canadian sample (LAB) includes Black, Asian, South/Southeast Asian, and other non-White categories, with White as the reference category in both samples.

Educational pedigree is measured using law school rankings: *U.S. News & World Report*⁵⁸ for AJD and *Maclean's*⁵⁹ quartile rankings for LAB. This

58. U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., AMERICA'S BEST GRADUATE SCHOOLS 28–33 (2003).

59. *Ranking Canada's Law Schools*, MACLEAN'S (Sep. 18, 2009), <https://macleans.ca/education/universitycollege/ranking-canadas-law-schools-2-3/> [<https://perma.cc/M8NJ-7Q5A>].

measure included separate binary indicators for Québec civil law schools and international/U.S. law degrees in the Canadian sample. Lower-ranked institutions serve as the reference category in both samples.

Organizational context and workplace signals capture the institutional environments where professional socialization occurs and that structure early career opportunities. Organizational context includes firm size categories (solo practice and firms with more than 251 lawyers, with small and mid-sized firms as reference) and location in a major metropolitan area. These measures reflect the different institutional settings that provide distinct signals about career possibilities and professional legitimacy.⁶⁰

Workplace signals include both the institutional cues lawyers receive and the commitments they signal to others: work-life conflict (seven-point scale measuring how frequently work interferes with home or family life); perceived social isolation (binary indicator of self-reported desire for more or better mentoring); workplace discrimination (binary indicator representing whether respondents experienced discrimination in the workplace in the past two years); number of hours worked the week prior; logged annual earnings,⁶¹ which reflects hierarchical position and signals professional success; and initial career motivations, reflecting investment in prestige and credential building (a scale that we developed from the results of a factor analysis of LAB data measuring the importance of prestige, career mobility opportunities, earnings potential, and skill development in initial sector choice, with a comparable measure constructed for AJD). These measures collectively capture how lawyers interpret institutional signals about inclusion or exclusion while simultaneously signaling their own positioning and commitment within professional hierarchies.

Career orientations include satisfaction with work substance, work conditions, power track advancement, and social value of work (each measured on a Likert scale),⁶² as well as expectations of the importance of work to personal goals in the future (a binary indicator). Family status includes binary indicators for being married and having any children.

We address missing data using Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations (MICE) in accordance with best practices for social science research.⁶³ We generate twenty imputed datasets and pool results across the completed models.

60. Elizabeth H. Gorman, *Getting Ahead in Professional Organizations: Individual Qualities, Socioeconomic Background and Organizational Context*, 2 J. PROS. & ORG. 122, 134 (2015).

61. For both AJD and LAB, we recoded earnings of \$10,000 or less and earnings in the ninety-eighth percentile as missing.

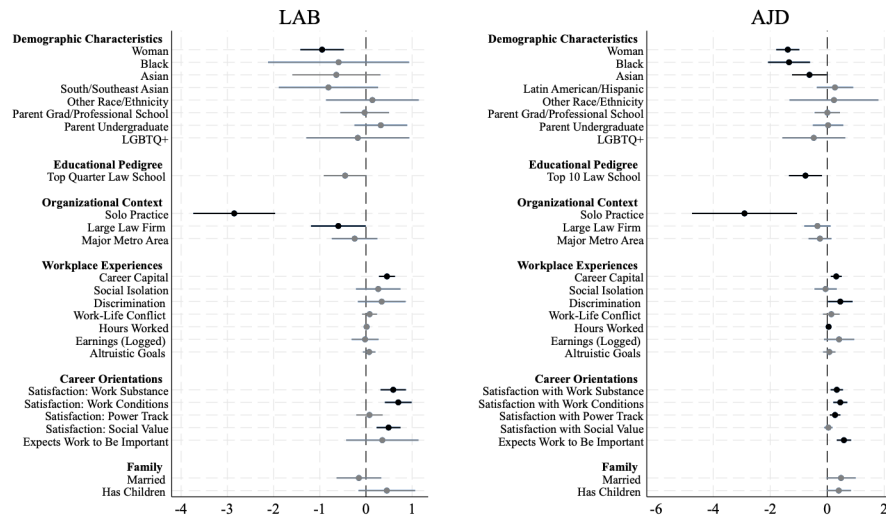
62. *What Is a Likert Scale?*, QUALTRICS (Oct. 31, 2022), <https://www.qualtrics.com/articles/strategy-research/likert-scale/> [<https://perma.cc/57V6-WG6N>] (“A likert scale, or rating system, is a measurement method used in research to evaluate attitudes, opinions and perceptions. Likert scale questions are highly adaptable and can be used across a range of topics, from a customer satisfaction survey, to employment engagement surveys, to market research.”).

63. Ian R. White, Patrick Royston & Angela M. Wood, *Multiple Imputation Using Chained Equations: Issues and Guidance for Practice*, 30 STAT. MED. 377, 377 (2010).

C. Regression Results

As illustrated by Figure 3, gender emerges as the most consistent predictor of partnership aspirations across both countries, with women reporting significantly lower aspirations than men ($p < .001$). Although many hypothesize that women may opt out (or are pushed out) of the partner track due to family or work-life conflict, this finding indicates that women's lower aspirations persist net of these—and many other—potential explanatory factors.⁶⁴

Figure 3. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Predicting Partnership Aspirations Among Lawyers in Law Firms⁶⁵



The models from AJD indicate that for women, Black, and Asian lawyers in the United States, aspirational stratification operates independently of mechanisms such as family commitments, law school attended, work context, or work orientations. These models also show a consistent pattern in which Black ($p \leq .01$) and Asian ($p \leq .05$) respondents report lower aspirations to equity partnership than White respondents, though the coefficient for Asian respondents is smaller. Although Canadian patterns show similar significant effects for gender, they do not show such effects for race (in the full model), likely reflecting both sample size limitations and

64. See Julia B. Bear, *Forget the "Mommy Track": Temporal Flexibility Increases Promotion Aspirations for Women and Reduces Gender Gaps*, 45 PSYCH. WOMEN Q. 294, 302 (2021); Fiona Kay, Stacey L. Alarie & Jones K. Adjei, *Undermining Gender Equality: Female Attrition from Private Law Practice*, 50 L. & SOC'Y REV. 766, 788–91 (2016).

65. Omitted categories include men, White, non-LGBTQ+, law schools ranked outside top ten/top quarter, law firms with 2 to 250 lawyers, locations outside metropolitan areas, has not experienced social isolation or workplace discrimination, does not expect work to be important in five years, not married, and no children.

different mechanisms of racial experiences operating within each national context.

Contrary to expectations, measures of social class background are not significant drivers of aspirations in either dataset, perhaps because they are subsumed by other measures, such as law school pedigree (which is statistically significant). Educational pedigree shows a paradoxical pattern: American lawyers who graduated from top ten law schools report significantly *lower* partnership aspirations than peers from less prestigious institutions ($p < .05$). This inverse relationship in the United States suggests that elite credentials provide access to broader professional imaginaries that extend beyond traditional firm hierarchies, creating diversified aspirations where prestigious credentials expand rather than narrow the range of valued professional futures.⁶⁶

Organizational context reveals how workplace structures shape imagined futures. Not surprisingly, solo practice produces one of the strongest and most consistent effects, with solo practitioners in both countries reporting partnership aspirations approximately 2.8 points lower than lawyers in small to mid-sized firms, revealing how current work settings themselves can foreclose, or make irrelevant, certain career pathways ($p < .01$ or better). There is no significant effect for working in a large firm in either sample.

Workplace experiences reveal how institutional signals shape aspirational development. Firm investment in career capital significantly increases partnership aspirations in both LAB ($p < .001$) and AJD ($p < .01$). Hours worked significantly predict higher partnership aspirations among American lawyers ($p < .001$) but not Canadian lawyers. In AJD (but not in LAB), experiences of discrimination paradoxically significantly increase partnership aspirations.

Career orientations show how positive workplace experiences are key to imagining one's future. Among American lawyers, satisfaction with the substance of work ($p < .01$), work conditions ($p < .001$), and the power track ($p < .01$) all significantly increase partnership aspirations. Among Canadian lawyers, satisfaction with the substance of work ($p < .001$), work conditions ($p < .001$), and the social value of their work ($p < .001$) increase aspirations. Finally, one of the strongest predictors of partnership aspirations among American lawyers is found among those who rate the anticipated importance of work in their future as high. This finding strongly echoes Professor Mary Blair-Loy's research on work devotion, where men who devote themselves to work reap career, social, and moral rewards for their investments.⁶⁷

D. Cross-National Comparison

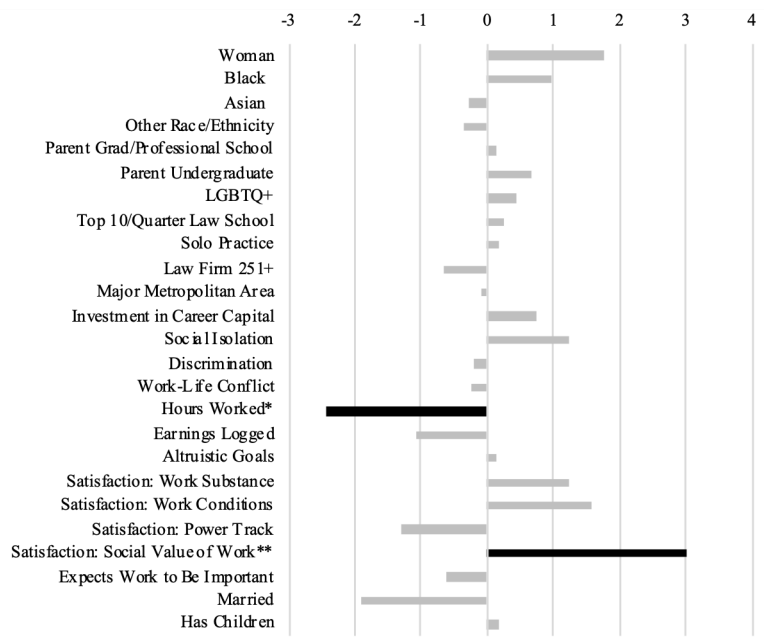
We conducted z-tests comparing the Canadian (LAB) and American (AJD) partnership aspirations models to determine whether coefficients for

66. See Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 13, at 33.

67. BLAIR-LOY, *supra* note 45, at 179–80.

each predictor differ significantly across samples.⁶⁸ Two mechanisms show significant differences across countries (Figure 4). First, the positive effect of hours worked on partnership aspirations is significantly stronger in the United States than in Canada ($p < .05$). This pattern aligns with empirical research on the intensive work cultures in large U.S. firms, where long hours signal commitment and competitive advantage.⁶⁹ The elite American firms—like other high-end professional service firms—embed notions of the “ideal lawyer” who demonstrates dedication through visible time investment.⁷⁰ In contrast, the weaker relationship in Canada likely reflects more varied promotion timelines and lower billable hour expectations.

Figure 4. Z-Tests Comparing OLS Regression Models Predicting Partnership Aspirations in LAB and AJD



** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$

Second, the positive effect of satisfaction with the social value of work is significantly stronger in Canada than in the United States ($p < .01$). This positive effect suggests that the public's perception of the law's broader

68. See generally Clifford C. Clogg, Eva Petkova & Adamantios Haritou, *Statistical Methods for Comparing Regression Coefficients Between Models*, 100 AM. J. SOCIO. 1261 (1995). “A Z-test is a type of hypothesis test that compares the sample's average to the population's average and calculates the Z-score and tells us how much the sample average is different from the population average by looking at how much the data normally varies.” Z-Test: Formula, Types, Examples, GEEKSFORGEEKS (Dec. 12, 2025), <https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/data-science/z-test/> [https://perma.cc/D4XV-UQXT].

69. Galanter & Henderson, *supra* note 35, at 1892; NELSON ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 68–69.

70. See Kay & Gorman, *Women in the Legal Profession*, *supra* note 49, at 319.

social contribution plays a more central role in shaping partnership aspirations within the Canadian legal profession, potentially reflecting stronger traditions of public service and access to justice commitments endemic to the Canadian legal profession.⁷¹

These cross-national variations indicate that while the core mechanisms of professional stratification operate similarly across national contexts, institutional arrangements shape how work intensity and professional values translate into partnership ambitions, with each factor carrying different weight in structuring aspirational hierarchies across the two legal fields.

E. Alternative Career Orientations

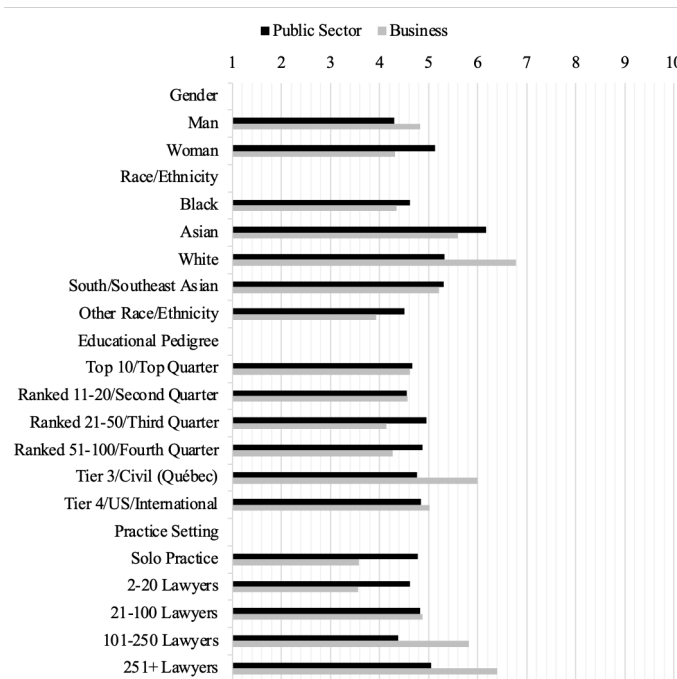
The results of our models exploring aspirations to law firm equity partnership reveal that women and people of color have absented themselves from what we identified as the dominant professional culture. We wondered: if equity partnerships are not among the set of possible futures that women and people of color see for themselves, what might be their fictional futures,⁷² the futures they imagine for themselves? To answer this question, we modeled two alternate sets of career aspirations—business and public sector careers (these questions were only available for LAB study respondents).

The bivariate distribution of these alternate aspirations is shown in Figure 5. The results suggest that business and public sector aspirations converge and diverge systematically from partnership models and introduce some variation in these patterns by gender and race, revealing distinct positions within professional hierarchies.

71. Robert Granfield & Fiona Kay, *Pro Bono Legal Work in Canada*, in *GLOBAL PRO BONO: CAUSES, CONTEXT, AND CONTESTATION* 112, 118–19 (Scott L. Cummings, Fabio de Sa e Silva & Louise G. Trubek eds., 2022).

72. See BECKERT, *supra* note 2, at 62–63.

Figure 5. Mean Public Sector and Business Aspirations by Demographic and Institutional Characteristics (LAB)



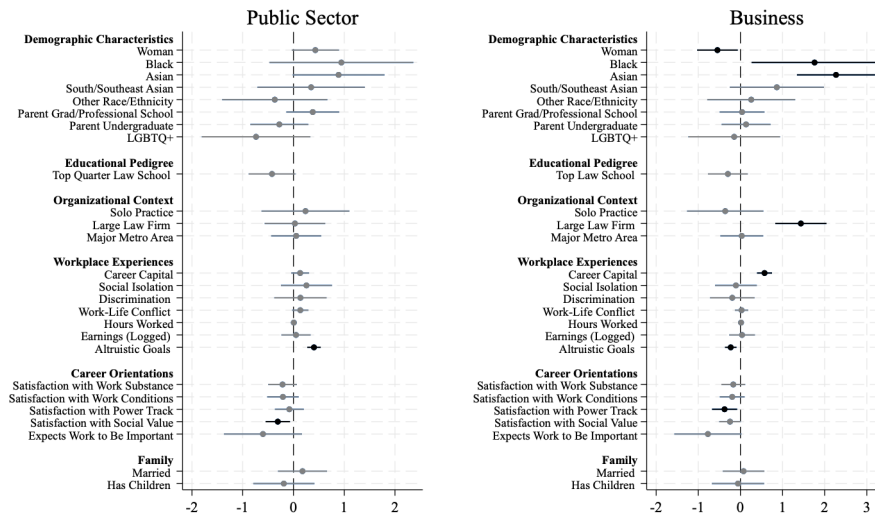
We again estimate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models using the independent variables described above. The results for business aspirations (Figure 6) suggest that these operate as alternative strategies within professional hierarchies. Some key patterns for business aspirations track closely with law firm aspirations, reflecting similar goals and values. This is not surprising: the homology between law and business is evident in the increasing pattern of associates who depart law firms for positions as inside counsel in business.⁷³

Tracking the result for aspirations to equity partnership, women report consistently lower business aspirations ($p < .05$). One difference is in the racial patterns. Business aspirations are strongest among Asian lawyers and are present, but more moderate, among Black lawyers. These positive aspirations suggest that people of color imagine a future in which they can advance in business. Working in a large law firm and prioritizing career-oriented advancement—prestige, mobility opportunities, earnings potential, and early skill development in the initial sector choice—also raises business aspirations, indicating that business careers reflect values that align with private-practice ambitions. Two variables that reduce business aspirations are altruistic career goals and satisfaction with the power track. Not surprisingly, a stronger desire for altruism conflicts with the pursuit of a

73. Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 20, at 355.

business career. Alternatively, those who are currently satisfied with their earnings and opportunities for advancement (the “power track”) in their current law firm positions are less likely to express a desire for a business career.

Figure 6. OLS Regression Predicting Public Sector and Business Aspirations Among Respondents in Law Firms (LAB)⁷⁴



We also present regression models for aspirations to seniority in the public sector. In the baseline model (not shown), women report aspirations to seniority in the public sector that are nearly 1 full point higher than men ($p < .001$), while Black lawyers report aspirations 1.77 points higher than White lawyers ($p < .05$).⁷⁵ But once we control for career orientations in the full model, neither gender nor race has a significant effect, meaning women and Black lawyers' aspirations to public service do not differ from their male, White counterparts.

It is worth noting that family commitments, being married, having children, and expectations that work will be important in one's future are not statistically significant predictors of public sector aspirations in the whole model. Taken together, these results suggest that family circumstances do not constitute the primary framework for understanding public sector aspirations. On the other hand, lawyers employed at law firms expressed a greater interest in pursuing public sector careers when they had altruistic goals ($p < .001$). Finally, satisfaction with the social value of work in one's

74. Omitted categories include men, White, non-LGBTQ+, law schools ranked outside top ten/top quarter, law firms with 2 to 250 lawyers, locations outside metropolitan areas, has not experienced social isolation or workplace discrimination, does not expect work to be important in five years, not married, and no children.

75. The baseline model controls for social class, law school attended, and organizational context.

current job reduces the desire to work in the public sector. It seems that there is no desire to work in the public sector when one's goals are met in their current workplace.

The models for aspirations to business and public sector positions highlight several important patterns. Public sector aspirations appear to be driven by moral orientation with a commitment to altruistic goals, coupled with dissatisfaction with the current social value of work. Thus, public sector aspirations appear to operate less according to explicit patterns of stratification and instead symbolize an idealized track that aligns with social values. Both the bivariate and initial models suggested trends by race and gender that were fully accounted for in the full models. Thus, we can conclude that women and Black lawyers are somewhat more drawn toward public sector work than White men. This is also tied in part to how women and Black lawyers experience their current jobs and to their stronger emphasis on doing socially meaningful work. In that way, we identify how values can also reflect positions in social space.

By contrast, aspirations to business careers are patterned by gender, race/ethnicity, and organizational location. Thus, business aspirations look more stratified: more common among Black and Asian lawyers, concentrated in large corporate firms, and desired by those who value career investment and advancement.

IV. DISCUSSION

We find that women and people of color report systematically different aspirations than White men, even net of extensive background and workplace controls. Their aspirations are not “different” in their more benign interpretation but reflect departure, rejection, or capitulation—or, as Albert O. Hirschman puts it, exit, voice, or loyalty.⁷⁶ Our results raise the question of whether the alternate and diverging aspirations expressed by women and people of color are best understood as rational calculations of future payoffs, especially because the U.S. data shows that women currently represent 28.8 percent of equity partners, and people of color represent only 12.7 percent.⁷⁷ In Bourdieu's terms, however, thinking about these aspirations as rational responses misses the point. He argues that the aspirations reflect a practical sense shaped by position—aspirations calibrated to the structured likelihoods of the legal field rather than pure forecasting. Agency remains as a regulated improvisation: inventive but bound by how the field values different forms of capital.⁷⁸ Our inquiry also marshaled a range of background, institutional, and work-related variables to better understand the structure of aspirations. Our results show that signals

76. See generally ALBERT O. HIRSCHMAN, EXIT, VOICE, AND LOYALTY: RESPONSES TO DECLINE IN FIRMS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND STATES (1970).

77. NAT'L ASS'N OF L. PLACEMENT, 2024 REPORT ON DIVERSITY IN U.S. LAW FIRMS 18 (2025), https://www.nalp.org/uploads/Research/2024-25_NALPReportonDiversity.pdf [https://perma.cc/GD4F-RJKA].

78. BOURDIEU, *supra* note 5, at 2.

and settings shape what feels attainable. The findings both supported our expectations but also offered important nuances. First, perhaps surprisingly, social class background was not a significant predictor of aspirations. Yet the effect of attending an elite law school was significant in the U.S. context. This suggests that educational pedigree substitutes for social background, given the meaningful pathway connecting social advantage to elite law schools.⁷⁹

The relationship between elite law schools and aspirations provides much food for thought. Elite law graduates report *lower* partnership aspirations than similarly situated peers from less prestigious schools. This expression of aspirations—seemingly disclaiming what is often regarded as the most elite status in the legal profession—is not meaningfully different from one of the earliest findings from the AJD study. The study showed that elite law school graduates early in their careers expressed the lowest levels of career satisfaction among those working in large law firms and were the most likely to express intentions to leave those positions.⁸⁰ From this vantage point, expressing aspirations or satisfaction can be understood as part of having a “feel for the game” of the legal profession.⁸¹ Those who are elite understand how to position themselves, and their expressions of aspiration reflect their understanding of how the profession’s dynamics will unfold.

The results also highlight the role of institutional and work-related contexts. For example, job satisfaction (with the substance of the work itself, with work conditions, and with advancement) supports partnership goals by making the pathway feel both worthwhile and possible. In AJD, reported discrimination accompanies *higher* partnership aspirations; this may reflect selection into high-stakes arenas where both advancement and affronts are more visible, or it may reflect a turn to partnership as a bid for autonomy and recognition within the profession. Finally, rating “work” as central to one’s future strongly predicts partnership aspirations in the United States, echoing Blair-Loy’s account of work devotion—where sustained investment is rewarded not only with career returns but with social and moral validation.

By considering alternate possibilities—aspirations to business and the public sector—we can form a stronger picture of the structure of the legal profession. The LAB models show that business aspirations are aligned with those of equity partnership; they are lower among women and stronger among Asian and Black lawyers. They rise with large firm experience and career-oriented goals, and they fall with altruistic aims and satisfaction with the power track. On the other hand, public sector aspirations reveal a different trend: women and Black lawyers show slightly higher aspirations compared to their male and White counterparts. This difference is accounted for once we control for pre-law school aspirations and career orientations.

79. Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 13, at 11.

80. *See id.* at 10–12; Ronit Dinovitzer & Bryant G. Garth, *Not That into You*, AM. LAW., Sep. 2009, http://individual.utoronto.ca/dinovitzer/Publications/Into_You_2009.pdf [https://perma.cc/FQP6-6UUX].

81. BOURDIEU, *supra* note 7, at 66; Dinovitzer & Garth, *supra* note 13, at 32.

Additionally, greater satisfaction with the social value of their current work is associated with lower public sector aspirations.

Read through Bourdieu's frame, the futures imagined by lawyers in their early careers are not free-floating preferences but rather practical senses of what is attainable in specific positions—business and public roles appear as plausible futures when signals in the field mark what is, and is not, plausible.

V. LIMITATIONS

While our theoretical framework emphasizes professional socialization as a dynamic process, the surveys capture aspirations at a single point in time. This cross-sectional design limits our ability to make strong causal claims about how institutional experiences shape aspirational development. We cannot directly observe the temporal sequence through which workplace signals, peer interactions, and evaluative feedback influence how lawyers come to envision their professional futures within hierarchical systems. Our results also suggest that the field's hierarchical structure is likely communicated early on, particularly during law school socialization, and likely even before.

Our analysis also focuses on lawyers working in law firms. We chose to do so to hold the initial selection constant and to compare similarly situated lawyers. Yet this also constrains our insights into the broader formation of aspirations in early lawyer careers. Examining the broader cohort of lawyers in their early careers across various settings can offer valuable insight. We hope future research will attend to this.

Despite these limitations, our approach offers essential insight into aspirational stratification. First, aspirations measured two to three years (Canada) and seven to eight years (United States) post-bar admission capture lawyers during critical socialization periods when hierarchical career orientations are being calibrated. Second, by comparing patterns across national contexts with different institutional arrangements, we can identify how structural variations in legal systems produce systematic differences in aspirational stratification.

CONCLUSION

The institutional signals embedded in law school cultures, firm structures, and professional networks construct differentiated horizons of possibility, making some paths seem natural and attainable and others foreclosed. When career aspirations are interpreted as a measure of preferences or ambition, the extent to which careers are sorted along lines of race, gender, and class becomes obscured. Such sorting occurs before individuals ever "choose" their paths. Yet recognizing aspirations as artifacts of habitus does not preclude individual agency. It reframes it as navigation within constraints. Lawyers resist, reinterpret, and strategically deploy institutional signals, even as they are shaped by them. Business aspirations common among people of color may reflect a strategic orientation toward spaces perceived as less exclusionary, rather than a simple devaluation of elite law practice. This

recalibration of what seems possible and what counts as worthy responds to structural barriers while asserting alternative definitions of professional success. The symbolic apex of legal practice thus remains delimited by the cultural and institutional signals and professional structures that shape who can imagine themselves belonging in elite spaces—and who is led to imagine otherwise.