A Little Help from My Friends? Navigating the Tension Between Social Capital and Meritocracy in the Job Search*

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Abstract

Job seekers often rely on help from social ties in the search for employment. Yet the job search is characterized by meritocratic ideals according to which candidates should be selected based on their qualifications, not their connections. How do people justify the use of connections given the conflicting cultural logics of social capital and meritocracy? We conduct an inductive analysis of 56 interviews with young Spaniards experiencing a difficult labor market and identify a novel process of justification, situational alignment, that reconciles these conflicting logics. Respondents justified situations in which connections provided assistance as legitimate when they perceived alignment among the job seeker, job, and type of help that connections provided. Respondents deemed illegitimate the situations in which these were not aligned. These justifications allowed respondents to embrace the social capital logic's prescription to use connections, while upholding the meritocratic principle that jobs be awarded based on qualifications. We further find that situations involving close ties were more readily justified than those involving distant others. We test this inductively derived process using a survey experiment with 1,536 young Spaniards. This study demonstrates that perceptions of merit are situated, and advances the understanding of social capital by identifying a novel process of justification that contributes to labor market inequality.

Keywords: labor markets, job search, cultural logics, social capital, meritocracy

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For 50 years, researchers have demonstrated the value of social capital in the labor market by documenting how social ties can help job seekers find work (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, Vaughn, and Ensel, 1981; Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore, 2000; Pedulla and Pager, 2019). Recent research has examined not just whether people have access to social capital but also how they activate it by mobilizing their ties to achieve valued ends (Pachucki and Breiger, 2010; Small, 2017; Smith and Young, 2017). In these studies, people who use their connections to find employment are often presented as the normative standard from which some deviate (Smith, 2007). But an overlooked tension lies at the heart of this process. On one hand, using connections in the job search is a culturally legitimate practice (Sharone, 2013; Kuwabara, Hildebrand, and Zou, 2018; Obukhova and Kleinbaum, 2022). On the other hand, a pervasive commitment to meritocracy—a system in which each person's effort and ability lead to just rewards (Bell, 1972; Castilla and Benard, 2010; Markovits, 2019; Castilla and Ranganathan, 2020; Sandel, 2020)—problematizes the use of connections as nepotistic. These widespread meritocratic beliefs emphasize that people should be hired based on what they can do rather than whom they know. Given the conflicting imperatives of social capital and meritocracy, how do people justify the use of connections to find jobs? These justifications are important because they help to legitimize inequalities that arise in the job search.

Prior research does not account for how people navigate the conflicting cultural logics (Valentino, 2021) of social capital and meritocracy to justify or condemn the use of connections to find employment. Economic sociologists identify market transactions as involving conflicting imperatives of economic exchange and personal relations, such that the same economic behavior can be perceived as legitimate or illegitimate based on the type of relationship between actors. For instance, people might see it as legitimate to pay a childcare provider to watch children but illegitimate to pay a grandparent to do the same (Zelizer, 2005, 2012; Bandelj, 2020). This line of research in economic sociology has largely overlooked the job search process in favor of monetary transactions. In addition, it has emphasized one central factor leading to variation in the perceived legitimacy of behavior: the relationships between actors. But social network scholars have found that job seekers regularly and legitimately use diverse ties in the job search (Granovetter, 1974; Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore, 2000; Barbulescu, 2015; Gee, Jones, and Burke, 2017). If variation in the perceived legitimacy of using connections is not contingent on the kind of relationship between job seekers and their connections, what might explain it? Scholars of symbolic interaction have reminded us that behaviors unfold within social situations characterized by multiple dimensions, including not only the relationship between actors but also the actors' characteristics and objectives (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967; Tavory, 2018), which research has yet to fully examine.

To shed light on how people navigate the conflicting logics of social capital and meritocracy in the job search, we explore how people justify the use of connections in their own job-seeking experiences and the experiences of others. We use the case of young, college-educated Spaniards who face a dire labor market in which high unemployment raises the stakes of using connections to gain an advantage (Verd, Barranco, and Bolíbar, 2019). The limited Spanish welfare state encourages Spaniards to rely on informal social support (Caïs and Folguera, 2013), such that young people generally have experience

using social ties to access resources like employment (Antonucci, 2016). At the same time, recent political events have highlighted pervasive nepotism in Spain, focusing attention on the issue of meritocracy (The Economist, 2015). This case therefore emphasizes the contradictory pressures of social capital and meritocratic beliefs that are common cross-nationally (DiTomaso and Bian, 2018; Mijs, 2018; Pultz and Sharone, 2020), making it conducive to theory development.

Interviews with 56 young, college-educated Spaniards revealed pervasive tensions between two cultural logics in the job search. We found, first, strong reservations on meritocratic grounds about using connections to find a job and, second, a common tendency to approve of the help they and others received from connections. To explain how respondents navigated this tension, we inductively identified a novel process of justification that we call *situational alignment*. We propose that people assess the legitimacy of using connections by considering the alignment of factors in a specific job-seeking situation: the job seeker (the actor), the job they hope to receive (the objective), and the type of help provided by the connection (the behavior). When these factors align, people perceive that the situation sufficiently conforms to the logics of both social capital and meritocracy and are able to justify the situation; when they do not align, the situation is perceived as not justifiable. We developed hypotheses about this process, which we tested using a preregistered factorial survey experiment with 1,536 young Spaniards.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MERITOCRACY: TWO CONFLICTING CULTURAL LOGICS IN THE JOB SEARCH

Social capital, the set of resources that ''inheres in the structure of relations between actors'' (Coleman, 1988: S98), is valuable to people who are trying to find work (Granovetter, 1974; Lin, Vaughn, and Ensel, 1981; Kleinbaum, 2012; Kwon and Adler, 2014; Sterling, 2014; Pedulla and Pager, 2019). Social ties can provide job seekers with information about openings (Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore, 2000), offer them referrals (Smith, 2005, 2007), or even use their influence to tip scales in the job seeker's favor (Bian, 1997). Applicants who use their connections therefore benefit from advantages over similarly qualified but unconnected applicants. The use of social capital also has widespread cultural legitimacy (Kuwabara, Hildebrand, and Zou, 2018), formalized in the idea of networking as a valid job search strategy (Sharone, 2013; Obukhova and Kleinbaum, 2022).

Social capital is thus not only a resource but also a cultural logic, or a shared cognitive structure that shapes decision making and justification (Valentino, 2021). The concept of cultural logics expands on the literature on institutional logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008) by theorizing logics that are widely shared across society and evaluative in nature, oriented toward assessing the legitimacy of a person or behavior. In the context of the job search, the social capital logic promotes the use of connections as an effective and legitimate approach to finding a job.

As the social capital logic endorses the use of social ties to find a job, it often conflicts with another pervasive cultural logic: meritocracy, or a system in which each person gets what they deserve based on their own effort and ability, without preferential treatment (Bell, 1972; Weber, 2001; Markovits, 2019;

Sandel, 2020). In theory, meritocracy could be enhanced by social capital rather than conflicting with it, for instance, if social capital provided unbiased information about real but otherwise unobservable merit. However, this does not seem to be the case in practice. For example, employees hired through referrals do not perform better than similar unconnected applicants (Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore, 2000; Petersen, Saporta, and Seidel, 2000). Efforts to enhance meritocracy often face challenges: Commitments to meritocracy can paradoxically promote inequitable treatment (Castilla and Benard, 2010), and evaluations of merit are inconsistent given that they are shaped by evaluators' own prior experiences of assessment (Castilla and Ranganathan, 2020).

Despite scholarly skepticism about the consequences of meritocratic beliefs, the ideal of meritocracy continues to exert a powerful influence in society. Belief in meritocracy is widespread cross-nationally: The majority of citizens of most countries believe that their societies are meritocratic (Mijs, 2018). This belief that the world does and should reward merit informs people's actions and influences their understandings of themselves and others (Lamont, 2009; Chen, 2015), with specific cultural meanings that vary across national contexts (Friedman et al., 2023). We suggest that meritocracy, like social capital, constitutes a cultural logic with its own set of associated behaviors. In the context of the job search, the logic of meritocracy problematizes the use of connections, associating it with nepotism. Given the conflicting behaviors prescribed by the logics of social capital and meritocracy, we ask, how do people justify the use of connections in the search for employment?

LEGITIMACY AMID CONFLICTING CULTURAL LOGICS: THE IMPORTANCE OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF A SITUATION

In a context with conflicting cultural imperatives, people often need to justify actions that violate one belief while conforming to another. But one cannot justify an action using just any explanation: Justification is culturally constrained, shaped by a shared understanding of what is appropriate (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Scott and Lyman (1968: 51) described how successfully justifying one's actions involves drawing on "socially approved vocabularies" that can "neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question." This constraint means that there are limits to what can be justified. The cultural logics that govern a particular context create bounds within which some justifications are successful, while others are "regarded as either illegitimate or unreasonable" (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 54). These bounds not only structure the legitimacy of justification but may also inform action, which is shaped in part by expectations about future social evaluations (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Vaisey, 2009).

It is rare for a particular action to be condoned or condemned under all circumstances; instead, people can often justify it in some situations while rejecting it in others. This variation raises the question of how people justify an action, such as using connections to find a job, as appropriate in some cases and inappropriate in others given the cultural constraints on legitimacy. Zelizer's (2005, 2012) theory of relational matching proposes that people attempt to match an economic action to social relations deemed most appropriate. For instance, it may be deemed appropriate to borrow money from your cousin but not from your coworker (Bandelj, 2020). For a given type of social relationship, Zelizer (2005: 35) explained, "people erect a boundary, mark the boundary by

means of names and practices . . . designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, [and] bar other transactions as inappropriate.'' But this theory, in which the appropriateness of the action depends on the social relation within whose boundaries it falls, cannot account for some cases, including using connections to find a job. Whether the use of connections is appropriate or inappropriate does not depend primarily on the relationship between the job seeker and their connection. For instance, studies of social capital indicate that job seekers can legitimately use both strong and weak ties (e.g., cousins and coworkers) to find employment (Granovetter, 1974; Barbulescu, 2015; Gee, Jones, and Burke, 2017).

These findings suggest that to understand how actions are justified, it may be important to consider the job search situation more broadly, including dimensions other than behaviors and relationships. The social interactionist tradition conceptualizes a situation as composed of actors; their characteristics and objectives; and the features of their settings (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967; Tavory, 2018). To date, we have little insight into how different dimensions of a situation—such as the actor (e.g., the job seeker), the objective (e.g., the job they hope to receive), or the behavior (e.g., the type of help offered by the connection)—may affect whether an action is viewed as legitimate. Investigating a process of justification also draws attention to the consequential relationship between the actors *within* the situation and the person engaging in justification *of* the situation. Yet, scholarship on the moral legitimacy of economic actions has not considered how relationships between actors might affect justifications of situations involving oneself, close ties, or more-distant others. If the legitimacy of using connections to find a job does not depend only on the relationship between the job seeker and their connection, what else shapes these justifications?

QUALITATIVE METHODS

To investigate how people justify the use of connections in the context of finding a job, we conducted interviews with young, college-educated Spaniards in Madrid. Through an inductive analysis of these qualitative data, we identified a novel process that we term *situational alignment*, through which respondents navigated the conflicting cultural logics of social capital and meritocracy. We then used these qualitative data to derive hypotheses regarding situational alignment, which we tested in a survey experiment with a sample from the broader population of young Spaniards.[1] In this section, we describe the data and analytical approach used to develop our inductive findings.

Setting: The Job Search Among Young Adults in Spain

We explore beliefs about the job search through the case of young people in Spain, who face a dire labor market that exacerbates the conflict between social capital and meritocracy. Employment precarity among young workers started rising before 2008 and intensified during the recession (Picot and

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[1] Preregistered on AsPredicted, #158852, https://aspredicted.org/8bks-w2zm.pdf. The wording of the hypotheses and the terms we used to refer to the three factors changed from the preregistration; the predictions and the order in which they are presented remain the same.

Tassinari, 2017; Marques and Hörisch, 2020). In 2013, near the peak of the crisis, unemployment surpassed 30 percent among 25- to 34-year-olds (Consejo de la Juventud de España, 2013). Unemployment rates remained high at the time of our interviews in 2018, even among the highly educated: Among Spaniards with tertiary education, one-quarter of those under age 25 were out of work, and more than 10 percent of 30- to 34-year-olds were unemployed (Consejo de la Juventud de España, 2018). As a result, job seeking was a prominent concern.

The case of young Spaniards accentuates the contradictory pressures of social capital and meritocracy, which influence the job search across national boundaries (DiTomaso and Bian, 2018; Mijs, 2018; Pultz and Sharone, 2020). The Spanish case lends itself to a study of social capital because the country's limited welfare state encourages citizens to rely on informal social support to meet basic needs (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Hall and Soskice, 2001). Spain exemplifies a ''familistic'' welfare model (Caïs and Folguera, 2013: 558) that places economic responsibility on family and personal relationships (Antonucci, 2016). Thus, many young Spaniards have experience relying on family and friends, especially to provide them with housing and money. Using connections in the job search is also a widespread and culturally legitimate practice in Spain (Camargo Correa, 2016), although it is less formalized than in countries like the United States, where networking is promoted in diverse venues (e.g., U.S. Department of Labor, 2012; UC Berkeley Career Center, 2020).

At the same time, the concept of meritocracy has become salient in Spain. In 2010, almost 70 percent of Spanish citizens believed that their society was meritocratic, which is around the average rate among developed countries (Mijs, 2018). Meritocratic beliefs underpin the negative connotations of the common slang word *enchufe*, a specific term for accessing resources through connections, which literally means ''electrical plug'' (Viaña, 2017). The negative valence of *enchufe* and the corresponding public attention to meritocracy may have become more acute in recent years due to national scandals over rampant political cronyism (The Economist, 2015).

While Spain is a useful site for investigating ideas about using connections in the job search, the cultural logics of social capital and meritocracy are present across countries. We expect our findings to extend to other contexts, including the United States and many European countries, where these two logics are salient in the job search (e.g., Sharone, 2014; Camargo Correa, 2016; Mijs, 2018; Pultz and Sharone, 2020). In the Discussion section, we describe how these dynamics may vary across populations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Between May and July 2018, we conducted 56 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with college-educated Spaniards between the ages of 25 and 35 (Arnett, 2004) in Madrid, Spain's capital (see Online Appendix A for a list of respondents). We focused on these respondents as part of a larger project by Ayala-Hurtado about young college graduates' employment experiences. Because we were interested in whether and how people justify the use of connections in retrospect, we drew on interviews, which best capture cultural strategies used to evaluate past experiences rather than prospective decision making (Vaisey, 2009; Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). Although cultural logics inform both

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Interview Sample (N = 56)

	N	%
Employment status		
Employed	49	87.5
Stably employed	26	46.4
Precariously employed	23	41.1
Unemployed	7	12.5
Gender		
Man	27	48.2
Woman	29	51.8
Socioeconomic background		
Upper middle class	19	33.9
Middle class	21	37.5
Working class	16	28.6
Mean age	29.2	

prospective action and retrospective justification (Valentino, 2021), we focus on how logics structure people's ability to justify past experiences. These justifications are central to maintaining or reshaping the boundaries of collective beliefs about legitimacy (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

Since our intention was to build theory about beliefs regarding job-seeking processes, we sampled to capture variation in characteristics that we thought might shape ideas about the job search, including respondents' professional conditions and socioeconomic backgrounds (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Small, 2009; Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski, 2019). First, we included respondents with varying degrees of success in finding employment, specifically those who were stably employed, precariously employed, and unemployed, which we categorized based on their current employment statuses and job contracts (see Table 1).[2] This sampling allowed us to develop a theory about justification that is robust to variation in respondents' labor market position. Second, we recruited respondents with different levels of socioeconomic advantage, including upper-middle-class, middle-class, and working-class backgrounds, which we identified based on their parents' education and occupations during respondents' adolescence. This variation allowed us to evaluate cultural beliefs across social class. The resulting sample is not representative: Graduates from working-class backgrounds are overrepresented, those from upper-middle-class backgrounds are underrepresented, and respondents' employment status roughly parallels the employment distribution of Spanish college graduates (Saura, 2019; Consejo de la Juventud de España, 2021). To address the possibility that working-class respondents may express an especially high number of reservations about the use of connections in the job search, we considered variation across social class background in the analysis. All respondents are White; few non-White Spaniards have graduated from university (Portes, Aparicio Gomez, and Haller, 2016).

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[2] We categorized most people with fixed or indefinite contracts as stably employed and those with temporary or internship contracts as precariously employed. We categorized as precariously employed a few respondents with fixed or indefinite contracts who described forced underemployment or extremely low wages.

Our focus on young people is valuable for two reasons. First, early labor market experiences are particularly consequential (Gebel, 2010; Kahn, 2010; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Liu, Salvanes, and Sørensen, 2016). Young people's beliefs about legitimate job search practices may shape their employment outcomes, with lasting effects throughout their careers. Second, young people's beliefs about the job search may affect the way recruiting evolves as this group becomes the prime-aged workforce and employers increasingly focus on attracting and retaining them (Carpenter and de Charon, 2014; Stewart et al., 2017).

The highly educated group that we focused on is a conservative context for capturing concerns about the use of connections in the job search. Because higher education is closely associated with merit (Frank and Meyer, 2020; Monaghan, 2022), this group is likely to feel that they are qualified for more jobs and, therefore, likely to find it easier to justify using connections in their own search for employment. In comparison, less-educated respondents are likely to feel that they are underqualified for more jobs, which potentially creates stronger reservations about using connections to gain an advantage in the job search. Moreover, insofar as people are likely to be connected to others with characteristics similar to their own, we would expect similar dynamics to pertain to justifications involving close ties. Highly educated respondents are likely to find it easier to justify the use of connections of their similarly highly educated peers, compared to less-educated respondents' assessment of their similarly situated peers. Thus, if we observe a tension between social capital and meritocracy among a highly educated group, we expect it to be present more broadly.

We recruited primarily through snowball sampling, which is useful for populations that cannot be easily accessed through their organizational affiliations (Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski, 2019; Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen, 2021). This strategy was important because many people in the population we targeted exist between the kinds of organizations that could provide systematic access, like universities and stable employers. Snowball sampling was also effective for our substantive focus because experiences of employment precarity and perspectives of *enchufe* are sensitive subjects. Respondents who were referred by someone they trusted were much more willing to speak about these topics. Indeed, attempts to find respondents through non-referral methods were largely unsuccessful, and a few potential respondents stated that they did not wish to discuss these topics with a stranger.

Snowball sampling, however, can raise issues if recommended participants share individual and social network characteristics with their recommenders. To address this concern, we asked respondents to recommend two acquaintances who were not interconnected, specifically prompting them to recommend people who they thought were likely to provide a perspective different from their own. As a result, respondents frequently recommended people with different employment conditions or educational credentials, although it was less common for respondents to recommend people from very different social class backgrounds. Asking people to leverage their connections for the purposes of referral might nonetheless lead us to respondents who are disproportionately favorable to the use of social capital, which would make our sample

conservative. As we will show, even if our sample of participants is weighted toward well-connected people who frequently offer and accept opportunities from their friends, they still demonstrate reservations about using connections to find jobs; such reservations among people who are less well connected may be even stronger.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish by Ayala-Hurtado, a fluent Spanish speaker, and recorded. They ranged from 39 to 149 minutes, averaging 85.4 minutes. As a foreigner with prior experience living and working in Spain, Ayala-Hurtado's position allowed her to provide background knowledge that informed the analysis while also prompting respondents to explain complicated concepts as they would to an outsider. Our interview guide aimed to capture respondents' perceptions of using social capital (see Online Appendix A). We focused primarily on respondents' own use of social ties, asking respondents to describe situations in which they had asked for or received different types of help—including help finding a job—from family, friends, or acquaintances. To deepen our understanding of attitudes toward using connections, we also urged respondents to describe instances of help featuring other people. Follow-up questions prompted respondents to evaluate these cases, which elicited assessments of the legitimacy of using social ties.

Using an inductive, iterative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), Ayala-Hurtado transcribed and coded the interviews and translated the excerpts included in this paper. In line with recent scholarship, we outline the stages of our research, including the most important turning points (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm, 2021; Pratt, Sonenshein, and Feldman, 2022). In the first stage of analysis, we conducted descriptive, open coding in NVivo (Locke, 2001; Charmaz, 2014), primarily using codes directly related to words and phrases that respondents used. For instance, respondents variously described seeking jobs through connections, for themselves and others, as ''obvious,'' as ''typical in Spain,'' or as ''annoying,'' all of which were created as codes. Notably, the most common code related to discussions about job-seeking help was ''unfair'' (*injusto*). For instance, Blanca described how ''when *enchufe* is used to favor a person who hasn't put so much effort in . . . if the person who has followed the whole path, put in the effort, isn't rewarded, that's where it hurts. There I see it as much more unfair'' (see Online Appendix A for an extended exchange between Ayala-Hurtado and Blanca, including this quote). Another pervasive, related code at this stage was *enchufe*, the slang term for finding a job through connections that respondents like Blanca used with a decidedly negative valence.

In the second stage, we aimed to understand the source of respondents' sense of unfairness regarding seeking jobs through connections. In this stage, we began to code concepts like ''effort'' or ''training'' (as in the example in Online Appendix A). Through theoretical memos and by reading the literature, we gradually abstracted these findings to uncover respondents' prominent emphasis on the logic of meritocracy. At the same time, we noted that respondents generally accepted the use of connections to seek employment, as they shared examples of receiving information about job openings, referrals, and more direct assistance both in their own experiences and in those of others. Thus, we identified a tension between social capital and meritocracy in the job search.

In the third stage, we began to explore how respondents navigated this tension. To do so, we compiled all respondents' stories and anecdotes about specific events that had occurred or could occur, including those relating to themselves, to people they knew or had heard about, and to hypothetical situations. By rereading the transcripts, writing theoretical memos, and reexamining the codes, we identified that respondents stressed the importance of key characteristics of a given situation in their explanations of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of using connections. We particularly saw recurring examples in which respondents emphasized the suitability of the job seeker due to relevant training or hard work; the type of job offered; and whether the help allowed the job seeker to circumvent an interview (examples of the first two are present in the exchange in Online Appendix A). We called this process of justification *situational alignment*.

In the fourth stage, we considered the possibility of variation, particularly along the lines of social class background and employment status. We systematically compared the codes and theoretical memos from prior stages of analysis related to members of each group to ascertain whether there were discernible differences among them. As we discuss below, we reached the conclusion that there was no major variation along these lines.

In the last stage, we returned to the compilation of stories and anecdotes about particular situations and examined similarities and differences among stories about the respondents themselves, those involving friends or loved ones, and those involving people they did not like or know well. By rereading the transcripts and writing theoretical memos, we discovered that respondents' perceptions of the situation were colored by their relationship with the job seeker in ways that made the use of connections appear more justifiable for close ties than distant others.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Meritocratic Reservations About Using Connections in the Job Search

It is not easy for a young college graduate in Spain to find a job. Twenty-one of the 56 respondents described months of difficulty finding employment, and 40 respondents described difficulty finding a good job that provided stability. Rubén, unemployed, shared this complaint: "When I started to send résumés [they said], 'We'll call you' but they don't call you. I haven't even gotten to the point of them [contacting me to tell me], 'You're not in the running for this job.'" At the time of the interviews, 30 respondents were either unemployed or employed in unstable, low-wage jobs.

Respondents were keenly aware that it was beneficial to use connections in the effort to find work. Julia, precariously employed after months of searching, argued that "help is indispensable nowadays. [Without it] people wouldn't have half their jobs." This sentiment was broadly shared. Iván, who was stably employed, explained, "I don't think I've found a single good job without being recommended by someone or knowing someone already working there." Sara used the national slang to describe the issue: "In Spain, it's *enchufe*. Totally . . . If you have *enchufe*, you'll do great, but if you don't . . . you won't." Respondents primarily drew on the cultural logic of social capital to address instrumental ends: If one wanted to find work, using connections was invaluable.

While acknowledging the benefits of connections, most respondents expressed reservations about the use of social ties to find employment, emphasizing their strong belief that applicants should get jobs on the basis of merit.[3] The issue of meritocracy emerged spontaneously in response to questions about the use of social ties. Forty-seven of the 56 respondents discussed the importance of meritocracy in hiring, mostly critiquing employers' reliance on connections rather than merit. This sentiment was shared by respondents with varying employment conditions. Pablo, who worked three jobs to make ends meet, explained, "It angers me . . . [when connections] take precedence over meritocracy," describing it as an "abuse." Samuel, who found all his previous jobs through contacts, argued that the system is "unfair" since there are "many people who don't have those networks, who can't [get] work but are very suitable." Ana, who had recently found a stable job without help after facing major hurdles, described strong negative feelings toward finding jobs through connections: "Nobody is going to [pull strings] for me, so for people to do it for others [seems unfair]. Not everyone has that opportunity. And in the end you should be hired for who you are." Respondents primarily drew on the cultural logic of meritocracy to address moral issues, assessing whether job search strategies were right or wrong. Given that these two logics provided conflicting prescriptions, together they created a need for respondents to justify the use of connections.

Justifying the Use of Connections Through Situational Alignment

Despite respondents' concerns about the use of connections to find jobs, 51 of 56 respondents had received some form of assistance from social ties in the effort to find work, including Pablo, Samuel, and Ana; all but one respondent described being open to receiving help under certain circumstances. Respondents largely justified their own use of connections, deeming it legitimate, and frequently also justified situations in which others used connections. In this section, we describe how respondents justified or condemned the use of connections through situational alignment by assessing the alignment between dimensions of the situation: the job seeker (the actor), the job (their objective), and the type of help provided by connections (the behavior). These justifications were structured by the requirements of both social capital and meritocratic logics, demonstrating shared limits to respondents' ability to justify. The justifications allowed them to embrace the social capital logic's prescription to use connections and to uphold the meritocratic prescription that jobs should be given to those who deserve them. Respondents frequently distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate situations by labeling the latter with the slang term *enchufe*.[4]

Situations were considered legitimate—not *enchufe*—if the job seeker was suitable for the specific job based on hard work, credentials, or experience and if help was provided in a way that allowed the employer to evaluate the job

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[3] To describe their concerns, they used the word "*mérito*" or described merit using words like "suitable" ("*válido*"), "capable" ("*capaz*"), "prepared" (*"preparado"*), or "competent" ("*competente*").

[4] A few respondents instead distinguished between "good" and "bad"*enchufe*. We use *enchufe* throughout faithfully to how each respondent described it; when we use it ourselves, we use it to refer to the most common, negative meaning.

seeker's suitability. Luisa exemplified how respondents justified situations based on their perceived alignment of the three dimensions. Although Luisa had exceptional privilege, with a wealthy father who pulled strings to have her résumé reviewed by a high-status company, she used situational alignment to justify finding a job this way:

> What my father did was put my résumé on the table. He put it on the table and then they did all the interviews. I passed the interviews based on my own merit [*mérito*]— the person who first interviewed me is now a close friend, and she tells me, ''No, you passed by being competent, and it's evident.'' Because my work has been very, very good. I left [that company], but I kept in contact with some friends there, and I said, ''If this [job I want] comes up, give me a call,'' and they called me. They thought of me, so it's true that I received the help, because if they hadn't called me, I wouldn't have the job. They're colleagues who know how I work and know if I suit or don't suit [the position]. But [they did] help . . . I always give the speech I just gave: The only thing [my dad] did was put my résumé on the table. I got the job; my dad didn't get it for me. And I truly believe it. But there are many times that if you're the son [of someone important], you'll get the job for sure [regardless of qualifications].

Luisa justified her situation, judging it to be legitimate based on the alignment between her suitability as the job seeker (''my own merit,'' ''my work has been very, very good,'' ''being competent'') for the job in question (''[the recruiters] know if I suit or don't suit'') and the type of help, which allowed an evaluation of her suitability (''[he] put my résumé on the table,'' ''I passed the interviews,'' ''I got the job; my dad didn't get it for me''). This alignment conformed to both the social capital logic and the meritocracy logic. She drew a sharp distinction between herself and the hypothetical son of someone important, whose chances of getting the job were assured by virtue of his connections alone. Other respondents similarly used situational alignment to justify others' experiences. Belén, for example, used situational alignment to justify the help her family members offered each other:

> My uncle helped my cousins get jobs. He gave them access to the interviews and then my cousins had to earn the positions from there, but [the companies] hired them. [That help] overcame a barrier—they didn't have to send a résumé and maybe have [the company] reject them without looking at it. Instead, they entered directly into the interview stage . . . As long as . . . they don't insert [the person] directly without an interview . . . into a job where you don't suit, or they don't know if you suit or not because they haven't investigated if you're suitable or if you can do this job.

Whereas Belén focused on family members, other respondents quoted below justified the use of connections by friends, acquaintances, or hypothetical others.

The majority of respondents, 41 of 56, across all social classes both articulated a tension between the logics of social capital and meritocracy and similarly navigated this tension by assessing the alignment among the job seeker, job, and type of help. Although both the social capital and meritocratic logics guided this process, they played different roles. Most respondents, like Luisa and Belén, reflected on past events that largely followed the instrumental logic of social capital, describing situations in which someone received help from

connections. But in the process of justification, they foregrounded the moral meritocratic logic, distinguishing between situations that were sufficiently in line with meritocratic principles to be viewed as legitimate and situations that were not.

As the cases of Luisa and Belén demonstrate, respondents typically described situations comprehensively and in ways that foregrounded the importance of alignment among the job seeker, the job, and the type of help. They often centered one of these three dimensions, even as each dimension was assessed with regard to the others. In what follows, we examine respondents' justifications, which we have organized according to the focal dimension in each.

Situational alignment centering on the job seeker. Most often, respondents foregrounded the suitability of the job seeker, defining suitability relative to the job in question. Respondents defined a job seeker's suitability based on the job seeker's hard work or job-relevant qualifications, particularly educational credentials and experience. We understand this suitability as job seekers' *situated merit*, or merit vis-à-vis the demands of the job. While merit is often treated as an inherent feature of the job seeker, our data suggest that respondents perceived merit as a product of an alignment between the job seeker and the job they hoped to attain.

Respondents frequently defined job seekers' situated merit in terms of specific qualifications, particularly relevant education and credentials. Pilar, who was referred for a job by her boyfriend's mother, explained that she was comfortable applying to the position because ''logically I think that I deserved [it]'' based on her degree in administration:

> I could do it perfectly. I was perfectly qualified to do it . . . if they had been able to offer me [the job] through official channels, I would have been able to apply and get it on my own. In fact, I competed with others who were also involved in administration.

Despite having received an advantage in the form of a referral from someone connected to the company that similarly qualified applicants did not have, Pilar's degree allowed her to justify the situation. Marina, distinguishing between situations she approved of and those she disapproved of, similarly described how the distinction would be evident by ''looking at that person's résumé'':

> If you see that the person has the adequate experience and training, although it might be *enchufe* . . . if the person is suitable, although someone has helped them get [the job], I think it's wonderful. It would be different if a person who wasn't as suitable received a job instead of one who is suitable.

Marina described a person's situated merit as dependent on the alignment between the job's requirements and the person's experience.

Respondents also defined situated merit as the product of hard work or effort. For example, when discussing her college friends who had received jobs through family, Noelia differentiated between those who were suitable for those jobs and others who were unsuitable by emphasizing work ethic:

I have architect friends whose parents are architects and [those friends are] very good, because from a young age they've been taught how to work, and they've seen a lot and been trained before college, and [there are] other [architect friends] who don't lift a finger, and when they graduate from college everything [to set them up for a job] has been done for them.

Although both sets of friends graduated with the same degree and received jobs through their families, Noelia drew a distinction based on some friends' previous work experience, which she contrasted with the lack of effort exerted by those she viewed as lazy. Job seekers could also demonstrate hard work in pursuit of a position. For instance, Carlos described his friend's process of obtaining a job at a private school as legitimate because of her effort:

She had it easier because her boyfriend's parents were also [working] at that school. You could say ''They helped her,'' but this is also a very competent person. She fought for it. [She asked,] ''What do I have to do to get this job?'' And they told her, ''Look, you need English.'' So she learned English. [They said:] ''Learn something about cooperative learning'' . . . and she worked to do that. They told her where to go, who to talk to, and she did it all . . . She did what was necessary . . . to be able to get in. In the end she got the job, but she worked for it a lot.

This kind of help would not normally be provided to a job applicant—it was an advantage that Carlos's friend received because of her connections. But to Carlos, the hard work his friend exerted in pursuit of the job demonstrated her suitability, increasing his perception of her situated merit and legitimizing the situation.

Respondents also described examples of illegitimate situations that they were not able to justify in which unsuitable job seekers—those who were lazy or did not have the correct qualifications—received jobs through connections. Some respondents referred to their own friends or themselves as unsuitable for certain jobs. For instance, Angela justified her decision not to take a job at her father's firm at the peak of the economic crisis:

My dad wanted me to work in his company without pay, or paying me a little just for me to learn something, but I didn't want to . . . It was like, for me as the boss's daughter to arrive at a place where people would have to teach me, knowing they were firing everyone . . . I didn't want to.

Angela justified this difficult choice, which led her to leave the country in search of employment, based on the lack of alignment between her qualifications and the job (''people would have to teach me''). However, when providing examples of illegitimate situations, most respondents identified people who were more distant from them. Sergio, who was very complimentary about most of his master's program cohort, criticized the use of connections by a few whose educational achievements he found lacking:

There are classmates from my master's who were not the best and got jobs at great companies because they knew people . . . For example, in the master's [degree], these people ranked lowest based on their grades . . . [but] they were placed in jobs that [made me think]: ''My God. What are you going to do with this guy?''

Lidia similarly expressed anger about people she had seen get jobs through their families, drawing on her interpretations of suitability, training, and hard work: ''They haven't put in any effort to get the job! I think it's terrible. Training isn't valued, effort, competencies, nothing [is valued]. What's valued is that you know people who get you that job.''

   Situational alignment centering on the job. Respondents also justified the use of connections through situational alignment by focusing on the type of job. Situations involving jobs seen as low skill were more likely to be deemed legitimate than were situations involving professional jobs. If the job was understood to require little training or effort, the bar was lower and more people were considered suitable for the position. Cristian described several friends who worked as waiters at bars owned by their parents, saying, ''I don't think that's very bad, because it's one of those jobs that anyone can do . . . When it's a job that requires someone to be specialized, that's where the problem is.'' Víctor, who laughingly said he was *enchufado* [plugged] into his job working at a grocery store, critiqued some people's use of connections as illegitimate based on their lack of credentials for the job and then said, ''I don't feel that way because I've worked in this [role] before. But even if I hadn't, it's not a job that needs [special skills] . . . Anyone can do it. So I don't feel bad.'' Raquel similarly described this sentiment:

> A robotics job isn't the same as a waiter's job, which anyone can do. Even [my job] as a secretary, making Excel tables, anyone can do it. Obviously [for a more specialized job], we've studied for a degree, they've told us we need to study, they've formalized everything . . . and it would be logical to hire someone who has had that [training].

Respondents found it easier to justify situations in which connections were used to access jobs that they viewed as low skill because they perceived that many more job seekers had the situated merit for these jobs. Moreover, some respondents described a second reason for justifying the use of connections to access jobs seen as low skill: These jobs offered limited power and financial status. For instance, Raquel contrasted being a ''waiter in a cafeteria'' with working ''as a councilor in the city government,'' saying, ''it's also a question of power—both purchasing power and real power that you have.'' The minimal influence and rewards of low-skill jobs reduced respondents' concerns about the legitimacy of using connections.
   Conversely, when respondents described illegitimate situations, they particularly focused on high-status jobs and often gave more-abstract examples to illustrate their critiques. Julian described a hypothetical situation: ''If [the job] has certain requirements and [the applicant] fulfills them, I don't think that's bad. What shouldn't happen are those *enchufes* where if I've [majored in] Education and you're going to put me in an executive position where I have no idea . . . how to do that job, I think that's bad.'' Álvaro, who had difficulty distinguishing between *enchufe* and legitimate help, said he knew one thing was *enchufe*: ''The politician's son [who] is handpicked for a [high-status job in a] public institution controlled by the same politician.''

Situational alignment centering on the type of help. Finally, respondents often emphasized the type of help provided by a connection. They typically defined appropriate help as that which allowed the employer to evaluate the job seeker's situated merit for the job in question, especially through an interview. For instance, Iván argued that he obtained his job legitimately through a referral from a close coworker, somewhat defensively insisting on the importance of the interview process:

> What are we talking about? Are we talking about people who aren't qualified . . . but they get it because they have contacts within the company? . . . Because I've had to do two or three interviews to get this job, nobody has [just given it] to me.

Lorena similarly described her most recent successful job search, in which she was told of a job opening with advance notice that allowed her to prepare: "I'd like for the process to be clean, but . . . I mean, I did an interview, I passed through all the filters." Thus, many suggested that help was appropriate only if it did not circumvent the interview process.

Similarly, respondents who identified illegitimate situations often emphasized the lack of an evaluation process; again, these examples tended to be more abstract and less likely to feature the respondent or their close ties. Claudia, for example, said,

> I think it's great to include the [recommended] person for the first cut, up to the interview, but you have to value their abilities much more highly. That's where I think *enchufe* is sometimes negative, because you shouldn't choose someone just to do a friend a favor. You really have to look at the person's suitability for the job.

David succinctly characterized illegitimate *enchufe*s as ones in which a job seeker's connection says, "You're my little friend [*amiguito*], I'll give you a job without [going through the typical] selection process."

We also investigated whether respondents distinguished situations based on the job seeker's relationship with their connection, and we found that concerns about relationships generally came down to the type of help that connections were likely to offer. Respondents suggested that the relationship mattered insofar as closer ties would be more likely than distant ties to offer inappropriate help to the job seeker, including help that bypassed evaluation processes. For instance, a parent was deemed more likely than an acquaintance to inappropriately plug an unsuitable child into a job opening.

Our qualitative findings thus showed that across employment statuses and social class backgrounds, most respondents engaged in a similar process of justification by assessing the alignment among job seeker, job, and type of help. However, not all respondents drew these distinctions to navigate the two logics. One respondent rejected the social capital logic entirely in seeking a job for herself, deeming it "unfair." (She also said that her parents disapproved of this attitude, calling her an "idealist.") Nine respondents stated no objections to any kind of job-seeking help and did not bring up the concept of meritocracy at all. Seven respondents voiced meritocratic concerns about using connections but did not try to justify any particular situations, instead either ignoring the tension or shrugging it off as an unfortunate but unavoidable reality. This sizable minority of respondents suggests that for some, one logic may dominate the

other in the job-seeking context. This group was composed of respondents from all social class backgrounds but included a disproportionate number of people with stable employment. It is possible that their lack of attention to one or both logics was partly a product of their stable positions, which reduced the salience of these job search dynamics. Since these findings developed inductively and we asked no specific questions about meritocracy or situational alignment, it is also possible that some respondents who did not discuss navigating the two logics held beliefs similar to those described but simply did not bring them up in conversation.

Situational Alignment, Bias, and Implications for Inequality

As a justification process, situational alignment sheds light on how people can legitimize labor market inequalities. Situational alignment primarily legitimizes two types of unearned advantages identified in previous research. First, compared with other job seekers, those with more privilege often have more-valuable social capital, which gives them access to better opportunities that can perpetuate income inequality (Bourdieu, 1986; Petersen, Saporta, and Seidel, 2000; Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo, 2006). Second, more-privileged job seekers have more opportunities to cultivate valuable signals of merit, like elite credentials, making them suitable for more-lucrative employment opportunities (Autor, 2014; Collins, 2019). Silvia, an upper-middle-class respondent who had recently found stable employment, described being aware of both types of advantages:

> Because of where I was born, the people my parents know . . . I've had an easier path than someone who starts in the lower middle class but is able to study for a university degree . . . I had the luck of going to [an elite] private school.

While situational alignment does not create the unequal outcomes, it can legitimize them, which helps to destigmatize unearned advantages. Sebastián demonstrated this legitimization when describing the substantial help received by a close friend, who he described as coming from an ''elite Spanish family'':

> I don't think I could tell my friend, ''Your father's not acting right [by providing help in the job search].'' My friend's father is right in helping my friend, and my friend has had to pass through [interviews at various] companies and demonstrate his worth, but I think it generates a lot of inequality in Spain.

Sebastián's understanding of how his friend ''demonstrate[d] his worth'' (by revealing his situated merit through interviews) allowed Sebastián to justify the help from his friend's father as ''right,'' even as he acknowledged that this type of help contributed to inequality.

The role of situational alignment in legitimizing the unearned advantages of privileged job seekers and the disadvantages of less-privileged job seekers was evident in four situations that we have already introduced. Luisa, whose father ''put her résumé on the table,'' came from a very wealthy family. Her powerful father's valuable social capital provided access to a job with a salary, benefits, and future growth potential beyond the reach of most respondents. Sergio's wealthy parents paid for a prestigious private master's degree that ''placed him

professionally.'' This degree allowed him to understand himself and most of his similarly elite classmates as ''working like crazy,'' having ''super good'' training, and having ''educated themselves completely,'' making them suitable for high-status positions.

Meanwhile, the job-seeking situations that less-privileged respondents justified had very different outcomes. Víctor, who came from a working-class background, was directly *enchufado* into his position by a family friend, but the help he received led him only to a grocery store job, making less than half of Luisa's salary and a third of Sergio's. Similarly, Pilar, whose family was working class, justified using her connections during her own job searches, but those connections had led only to ''unofficial jobs'' like babysitting and tutoring; her attempt to use a referral to secure a job related to her degree was unsuccessful. While Luisa, Sergio, Víctor, and Pilar all justified their job-seeking situations in the same way, the outcomes were very different based on their family backgrounds. Situational alignment helped them to legitimize these unequal outcomes as consistent with meritocratic ideals.

Moreover, this justification process appeared to be exacerbated by a bias in situational alignment. Respondents assessed the alignment among job seeker, job, and type of help to justify their own experiences and the experiences of others. But as we have shown in our analysis, respondents were more likely to justify situations featuring themselves or a close tie, like a friend or family member, while they were more likely to deem unjustifiable those situations featuring someone they did not like or know well. Respondents' descriptions displayed bias toward themselves and close ties, consistent with ideas of particularism (Heimer, 1992). They more often drew on specific information about the situation and justified it when it featured themselves or close ties, while they addressed the situations of distant others in a more abstract and universal fashion.

Our data suggest that two factors enabled particularism in situational alignment. First, access to additional *information* with which to justify a situation was essential: Given more information about their close ties, respondents had more opportunities to identify alignment. For instance, Ana was very outspoken about the unfairness of using connections in general. However, she immediately acknowledged that she would use connections, claiming that those situations would be legitimate because she was confident that her own friends would only provide appropriate kinds of help: ''Yes, but because I trust that [my connections] won't do it in bad faith, you know? They'll respect the selection process.'' Although Ana considered the use of connections to be objectionable in principle, she drew on additional information about her friends' characteristics to implement ''modifications of general rules'' (Heimer, 1992: 158). Similarly, Pablo described getting jobs directly through contacts as ''abuse'' but also admitted to having had a few such experiences himself, including in one of his three precarious jobs: ''I was somewhat hand-selected for that, although I don't consider it [*enchufe*] . . . [My connection] had worked with me [before] and he knew who I was and how I worked. So he bet on me.'' Pablo drew on insight into his own skills and work ethic, as well as his connection's knowledge of his abilities, to approve of his situation despite his general disgust for using connections.

Our data also suggest that close relationships are associated with *motivation* to use available information to justify a situation: Respondents were more likely

to find alignment in a situation featuring a close tie than in a nearly identical situation featuring a distant other. Paula described how she considered her friends favorably: ''If my friend is a suitable, qualified lawyer, [and] normally our friends see us with good eyes . . . I'll tell him to send in his résumé.'' Meanwhile, Carlos, who praised his friend's persistence in requesting specific guidance on what to do to get a teaching job, demonstrated additional motivation to find alignment for close ties when he contrasted these actions to what he called ''one of the bad *enchufes*'':

> One acquaintance has gotten herself into a school, but [it was] through insistence and being a pain in the neck, and [ultimately the employer said] ''Since she's here, we'll give [the job] to her. We'll give it to her and that way she'll be happy, and we'll see how she develops.'' That shocked me.

According to Carlos's descriptions, both women behaved similarly, suggesting that his closer relationship with one of them motivated him to distinguish that friend's praiseworthy persistence from his acquaintance's unappealing ''insistence.''

Respondents from all social class backgrounds exhibited particularistic bias toward those they were close to. But this bias plays a role in legitimizing inequality: Since elites, compared to less privileged job seekers, are more likely to have close ties to other elites, while less-privileged people are more likely to have close ties to other less-privileged people, elites are also more likely to justify the hires arising from other elites' advantages.

THEORETICAL SUMMARY AND HYPOTHESES

Through an inductive analysis of interviews, we developed the concept of situational alignment to explain how and when respondents justified the use of connections in the job search. Respondents distinguished between legitimate situations, characterized by a perceived alignment among the job seeker, the job, and the type of help connections provided, and illegitimate situations, in which these were not seen as aligned. Even when respondents focused on one dimension, they evaluated that dimension in relation to the others. Respondents perceived using connections as justifiable when it led to the hire of a job seeker who they deemed suitable for the specific job and when the connections provided help in ways that maintained a process for evaluating suitability, such as an interview. Under these conditions, the perceived alignment allowed respondents simultaneously to uphold the logic of meritocracy and to embrace the social capital logic. Respondents typically condemned situations that did not fulfill these conditions, including those that involved hiring unsuitable job seekers or hiring suitable job seekers without subjecting them to evaluation. While situational alignment was broadly used, respondents applied it in a biased manner that favored their close ties over distant others.

Because we developed the theory of situational alignment inductively and used a non-representative sample of young college graduates, we aimed to establish broader relevance by testing it deductively in a separate sample. To do so, we derived hypotheses from the inductive theorizing and tested these hypotheses with a survey experiment that allowed us to directly manipulate the variables of interest. Using survey methods also allowed us to collect data from

a sample that reflects the broader population of young Spaniards on key dimensions.[5]

Hypotheses

First, we set expectations about the overall effect of each dimension of situational alignment: the job seeker, the job, and the type of help. We do not expect that the qualities of any given job seeker will have a main effect on the legitimacy of using connections, because the value of their qualifications depends on the job. We do expect that the legitimacy of using connections will vary with the nature of the job: People will be more favorable toward hiring situations in which the job is viewed as low skill rather than high skill. Interviews demonstrated that low-skill jobs are seen as jobs ''anyone can do,'' such that a much larger number of job seekers will be viewed as suitable. The perceived skill level of the job will also affect the legitimacy of the hiring situation irrespective of the job seeker's qualifications; interviews demonstrated that jobs deemed low skill were of less concern because of the limited ''power'' and earning potential they offered.

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** People will consider a hiring situation in which a job seeker used connections more legitimate when the job seeker applied for a low-skill job, compared to a high-skill job.

We also expect that the type of help provided by connections will have a main effect on perceptions of legitimacy. We anticipate that people will tend to view hiring situations as more legitimate when job seekers receive help that is limited to a referral, such that the job seeker must pass through an interview before being hired. By contrast, when the help received from connections leads directly to a hire without any interview or other selection process, we expect to find stronger reservations about the legitimacy of the hiring situation.

> **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** People will consider a hiring situation in which a job seeker used connections more legitimate when the help involved a referral, compared to when the help allowed the job seeker to circumvent a selection process.

Because situational alignment emphasizes the relationship among multiple dimensions of the situation, our primary predictions address interactions between two or more features of the situation. First, we expect that the job seeker's situated merit for a specific job based on their education or experience, which we refer to here as the ''match'' between job seeker and job, will affect respondents' perceptions of the legitimacy of a hiring situation.

> **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** People will consider a hiring situation in which a job seeker used connections more legitimate when the job seeker's education and experience matched the job, compared to when they did not match the job.

We also expect that the job seeker, job, and type of help will interact to affect perceptions of hiring legitimacy. In particular, we expect that the effect of the type of help provided will vary according to the nature of the alignment

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[5] All data, analysis files, preregistrations, and survey materials are available at https://osf.io/wnjq9/.

between job seeker and job. In other words, we anticipate a three-way interaction effect as respondents evaluate the features of a situation relative to one another to assess the situation's legitimacy.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The match between the job seeker's education and experience and the job will have a greater positive effect on the perceived legitimacy of a hiring situation when the job seeker received help through a referral, compared to when the help allowed the job seeker to circumvent a selection process.

Finally, we theorize situational alignment as a biased process of justification. People can either rely on general norms or assess the particulars of a situation to more easily perceive alignment. They are more likely to embrace the latter when considering close ties. Because of the particular information that respondents know about themselves and close ties but do not know about more-distant others, in addition to their motivation to justify such situations, they are more often able to perceive alignment and justify their own experiences and those of others close to them.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): People will consider a hiring situation in which a job seeker used connections as more legitimate when the job seeker is a close tie of theirs, compared to a distant other.

In the next section, we describe the experiment we used to test these hypotheses.

EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

Participants

We conducted an original factorial survey experiment with Spaniards in January 2024, expanding beyond the college graduates who were the subject of the interviews to include young adult respondents with characteristics reflecting the Spanish population along key dimensions. We recruited participants through Netquest, a prominent survey research firm in Spain, Portugal, and Latin America (Revilla et al., 2015; Gallego and Marx, 2017; Marcos-Marne, 2021), with 105,000 panelists in Spain (Netquest, 2023). Our analysis focused on a sample of 1,781 respondents; as in the interview study, respondents were aged 25 to 35, but these respondents included young people with all levels of educational attainment. After excluding respondents who failed two or more attention checks, as preregistered, we had a final sample of 1,536. This sample was designed to roughly align with the young Spanish population along key dimensions, including gender (54 percent women and 46 percent men), employment status (81 percent employed and 19 percent unemployed), and social class status, for which Netquest uses several categories to represent the socioeconomic distribution of Spain (see Table 2). We oversampled college graduates because they were the focus of the interview study: Just over half (52 percent) of our survey sample had completed college, while nearly half (48 percent) had not. Among the Spanish population, around one-third of 25- to 44-year-olds have a college degree (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2016).

As with other online surveys, our sample included only people who had access to the internet and chose to participate for pay. Over 94 percent of the population

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Survey Sample (N = 1,536)*

	N	%
Employment status		
Employed	1,245	81.0
Unemployed	291	19.0
Gender		
Man	709	46.2
Woman	827	53.8
Educational attainment		
College degree or more	796	51.8
Less than a college degree	740	48.2
Socioeconomic status		
High	325	21.2
Middle	643	41.9
Low	568	36.9
Mean age	31.8	

* Socioeconomic status is determined by Netquest based on a calculation that incorporates occupation, educational attainment, employment status, the number of income-earning individuals in a household, and the size of the household. We collapsed the seven categories they provided into three.

of Spain uses the internet (World Bank Group, 2021). Insofar as beliefs about merit and social capital are widespread in the population, we do not anticipate correlation between selection-related characteristics and the beliefs about merit and social capital that shape situational alignment in the job-seeking context. Because our analysis focuses on a young population, incomplete internet access is less of a concern than it might be if our focus were primarily on older respondents (Bethlehem, 2010).

Procedure

We presented survey respondents with a vignette describing a simple hiring situation in which an applicant applies to a job, receives help from a connection, and is hired. We then asked respondents to evaluate the situation. Our dependent variable consists of responses to this question: ''To what extent do you agree with the decision to hire [the job seeker]?'' This question was designed to capture respondents' perceptions of the legitimacy of the situation overall. We chose to focus on respondents' reactions to the hiring decision rather than the legitimacy of a job seeker using connections, because our interview data show that legitimacy is determined not only by job seekers' behavior but by the alignment of various features of the situation. For instance, for our interview respondents, how the employer responded to the use of connections—whether they circumvented the interview or left it in place—was important. Thus, we focused on the hiring decision in order to encompass all parts of the situation, from the request for help to the final hiring outcome. We chose to ask about respondents' agreement with the decision as a broad gauge of their perceived legitimacy of the situation. However, for a robustness check, we also asked directly about whether respondents viewed the hiring situation as legitimate. Responses to both questions were registered using a five-point Likert scale. Results were mostly consistent across outcomes. (For more information

on Likert scale conventions in Spain, see Online Appendix B; for results of the alternative outcome, see Online Appendix C.) We also included an open-ended text response question asking respondents to explain their decisions.

The vignette randomly varied three features: the *job seeker*, the *job*, and the type of *help* received from a connection—in this case, a cousin who is a long-time employee of the hiring organization (see Online Appendix B). Job seekers were represented as having either graduated with a degree in human resources and worked in that field post-graduation (the ''professional'' job seeker) or as having graduated with a degree in tourism and worked as a waiter in a restaurant (the ''food service'' job seeker). The job was represented as either a human resources position in a business (the ''professional'' job) or as a waiter position in a restaurant (the ''food service'' job); we made this choice because restaurant waiter was frequently cited by interview respondents as the prototypical low-skill job. The cousin was represented as having either given a referral that aided the job seeker in receiving an interview, after which the job seeker was hired (''help that gives access to interview''), or their influence allowed the job seeker to circumvent the interview process and get hired directly (''help that circumvents interview'').

To explore bias in situational alignment, we randomly assigned respondents to a distant other or a close tie condition. In the distant other condition, respondents were presented with a vignette in which the job seeker was someone unknown to them named Javier. In the close tie condition, respondents were presented with the same vignette but asked to imagine a close tie of theirs in place of Javier. We elicited the name of a close tie by using a translation of the General Social Survey name generator, which asks respondents to name someone with whom they recently spoke about ''important matters,'' prompting respondents to select someone ''close to their own age'' so that they would focus on close ties who might reasonably be imagined to have only two years of work experience. There were thus 16 possible vignettes; each respondent was presented with only one (see Table 3).

Table 3. Variables in Survey Vignette[*]

Variable	Value = 1	Value = 0
Job	Food service job A well-known **bar** [casual restaurant] in Madrid is looking for a **waiter**. The ideal candidate for this position should have at least two years of work experience in a related field.	Professional job A well-known **company** in Madrid is looking for a **Human Resources Technician**. The ideal candidate for this position should have training in Business Administration and at least two years of work experience in a related field.
Job seeker	Food service job seeker Javier/[Name] studied **Tourism** at the Complutense University of Madrid. After graduation, he/she worked for two years as a **waiter** at a popular restaurant. He/She had to leave his/her job because the restaurant closed. He/She found out about this job opportunity and decided to submit his/her résumé.	Professional job seeker Javier/[Name] studied **Business Administration** at the Complutense University of Madrid. After graduation, he/she worked for two years as a **Human Resources Administrator**, first as an intern and then with a permanent contract. He/She had to leave his/her job because the company closed. He/She found out about this job opportunity and decided to submit his/her résumé.

Table 3. (continued)

Variable	Value = 1	Value = 0
Help	Gives access to interview Javier's/[Name's] cousin, who has worked for the company/bar for a long time, gave the hiring manager a good recommendation. The manager **decided to invite** Javier/[Name] **to an interview. After the interview**, the manager offered Javier/[Name] the job.	Circumvents interview Javier's/[Name's] cousin, who has worked at the company/bar for a long time, gave the hiring manager a good recommendation. The manager **decided to offer** Javier/[Name] **the job without having to go through an interview**.

* Bold font is used to identify differences across conditions and was not included in the actual vignette. Both conditions (distant other, close tie) include random assignment to each of these three vignette variables, yielding a total of 16 conditions. The specific job title ''Técnico de Recursos Humanos'' (Human Resources Technician) was chosen because it was mentioned in interviews and appeared frequently on job boards to refer to an HR associate.

This experiment replicated and extended two prior, similar experiments that we conducted as part of this research and that yielded similar results (see Online Appendix D for description and results). In addition, we conducted an experiment to examine the robustness of our findings concerning H1–H4 in a sample of older Spanish respondents, aged 36–64 years (mean age = 51.3 years; N = 801) and found substantively similar results (see Online Appendix E for details).

EXPERIMENTAL FINDINGS

To test our hypotheses, we measured the association between respondents' evaluations of the hiring decision and the job, type of help, and job seeker's status as a close tie or distant other, as well as a two-way interaction between job and job seeker and a three-way interaction among job, job seeker, and type of help. We estimated the outcome using ordinal logistic regression. We present evidence for each hypothesis in the form of regression results (Table 4) and illustrate our results in figures by plotting coefficients and average effects within conditions. We present regression results without controls; all coefficients of interest remained consistent when we included controls for participants' employment status, educational attainment, gender, and social class background.

Consistent with our hypotheses, regression results (Table 4) show a significant positive effect on agreement for decisions featuring the food service job, compared to the reference group of the professional job (H1, Model 1). Respondents agreed more with hiring for food service jobs, which are typically considered low skill. This finding is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows a positive and significant ordinal logistic regression coefficient for the food service job. Regression results also show a significant positive effect on agreement for help that provided the job seeker with access to an interview, compared to the reference group of help that allowed the job seeker to circumvent the interview (H2, Model 2). This finding is also illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the positive and significant ordinal logistic regression coefficient for a decision in which help from connections provided only access to an interview.

We find a significant positive effect of the match between job and job seeker (H3, Model 3). Respondents were more favorable toward hiring decisions

Table 4. Ordinal Logistic Regressions of Agreement on Predictors, Main Sample*

Model Condition Hypothesis	(1) All H1	(2) All H2	(3) All H3	(4) All H4	(5) All H5	(6) Distant H5	(7) Close H5
Food service job seeker			-1.384•••	-1.152•••	-1.140•••	-1.376•••	-0.862••
			(0.138)	(0.196)	(0.196)	(0.273)	(0.284)
Food service job	0.485•••		-0.736•••	-0.248	-0.240	-0.384	-0.0829
	(0.0922)		(0.132)	(0.192)	(0.192)	(0.270)	(0.275)
Help that gives access to interview		1.259•••		1.835•••	1.841•••	1.826•••	1.871•••
		(0.0965)		(0.198)	(0.199)	(0.281)	(0.281)
Food service job seeker × food service job			2.483•••	2.006•••	1.998•••	2.252•••	1.708•••
			(0.193)	(0.272)	(0.272)	(0.377)	(0.394)
Food service job seeker × help access interview				-1.014•••	-1.015•••	-0.832•	-1.230••
				(0.267)	(0.267)	(0.372)	(0.383)
Food service job × help access interview				-0.538•	-0.562•	-0.305	-0.870•
				(0.273)	(0.273)	(0.385)	(0.389)
Food service job seeker × food service job × help access interview				1.208••	1.222••	1.192•	1.317•
				(0.378)	(0.379)	(0.532)	(0.542)
Close tie					0.285••		
					(0.0933)		
Cut 1	-2.305•••	-2.051•••	-3.158•••	-2.409•••	-2.273•••	-2.195•••	-2.742•••
	(0.106)	(0.104)	(0.137)	(0.166)	(0.172)	(0.227)	(0.253)
Cut 2	-0.609•••	-0.282•••	-1.374•••	-0.520•••	-0.376•	-0.423•	-0.616••
	(0.0726)	(0.0709)	(0.106)	(0.143)	(0.151)	(0.204)	(0.203)
Cut 3	0.250•••	0.647•••	-0.433•••	0.518•••	0.667•••	0.657••	0.395
	(0.0712)	(0.0728)	(0.0999)	(0.144)	(0.152)	(0.205)	(0.202)
Cut 4	1.904•••	2.408•••	1.347•••	2.482•••	2.636•••	2.544•••	2.451•••
	(0.0876)	(0.0947)	(0.107)	(0.159)	(0.167)	(0.228)	(0.224)
Observations	1,536	1,536	1,536	1,536	1,536	785	751

• $p < .05$; •• $p < .01$; ••• $p < .001$.
*Standard errors are in parentheses.

Figure 1. Effect of Experimental Conditions on Agreement with the Hiring Decision*
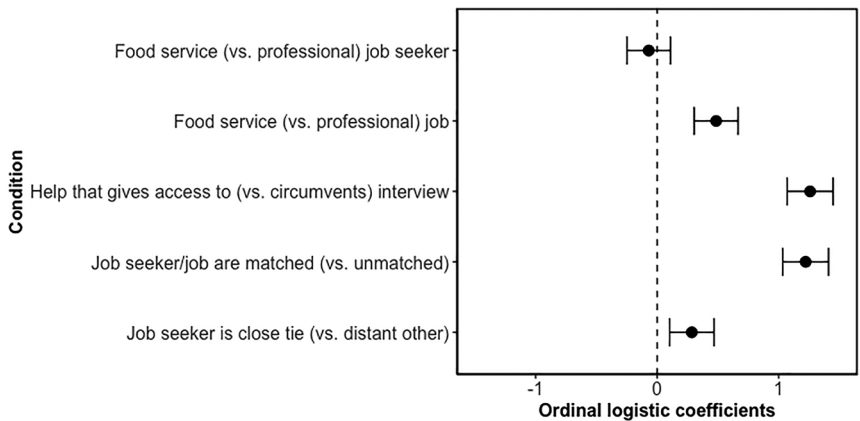

* N=1,536. Coefficients based on ordinal logistic regressions of job seeker's qualifications (no hypothesis), type of job (H1), type of help (H2), job seeker/job match (H3), and the hire of a close tie (H5). H3 is illustrated using a binary variable (1 if job and job seeker are matched, otherwise 0) rather than the interaction effect reported in Table 4.

when job seekers' qualifications matched the job requirements than when they did not match. Figure 1 illustrates the ordinal logistic regression coefficients for a positive job-to-job-seeker match, compared to the reference category for an unmatched job and job seeker. For the purposes of illustration, Figure 1 represents the match using a binary variable, with the value of one when the job seeker and job are both professional or when the job seeker and job are both in food service, and otherwise a value of zero; Table 4 reports interactions. Moreover, Figure 2, illustrating the average agreement within each condition (with standard errors), shows that respondents agreed more with hiring decisions when the job and the job seeker were matched, when the professional job seeker was hired for the professional job or when the food service job seeker was hired for the food service job, than when they were not matched. This held true both when the help gave the job seeker access to an interview (left panel) and when it allowed the job seeker to circumvent the interview process (right panel).

Consistent with H4, the regression results also show a significant three-way interaction among job seeker qualifications, job skill level, and type of help provided, suggesting that all three dimensions are interdependent in shaping perceptions of legitimacy (Model 4). Figure 2, which shows average agreement for each condition, illustrates the multidimensional nature of these evaluations. When help from connections gave the job seeker access to an interview (left panel), respondents on average had a positive view of the hiring decision, except when the food service job seeker was hired for the professional job, which had a neutral average rating due to the mismatch between the job seeker and the job. When the help allowed the job seeker to circumvent the interview (right panel), respondents on average tended to disagree with or be neutral toward hiring decisions, especially when the job seeker and job did not match; the exception was the hire of the food service job seeker for their matching job, which elicited a slightly positive assessment from respondents, on average.

**Figure 2. Means and Standard Errors for Each Combination of Job Seeker Qualification, Job, and Type of Help***

Mean agreement within condition
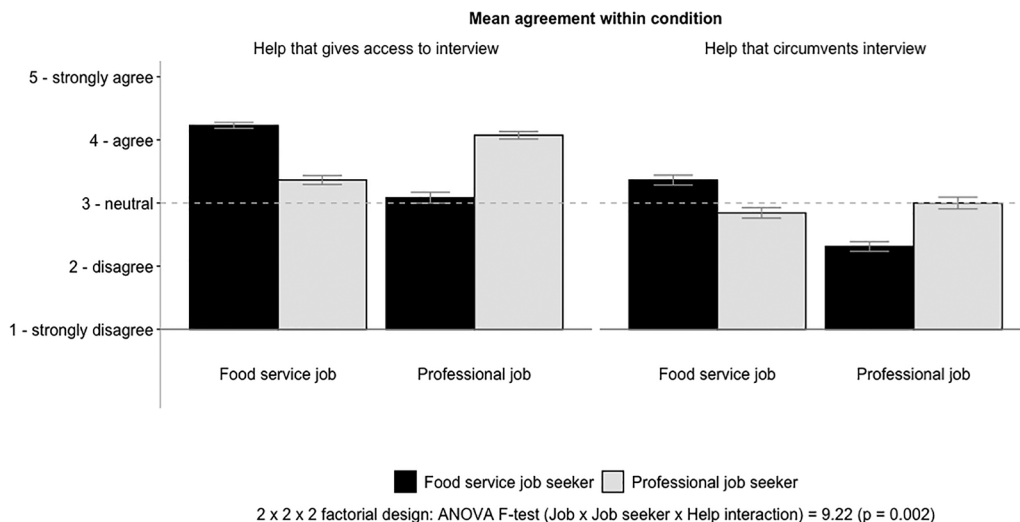
* N=1,536. Responses are on a five-point scale from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree" ("nada de acuerdo" to "muy de acuerdo").

Finally, we find evidence of differences in perceptions of legitimacy based on the relationship between the actor and the person justifying the decision. In a regression that includes a dummy variable for evaluating the decision to hire a close tie rather than a distant other, the effect is positive and significant (H5, Model 5; see also Figure 1). This result indicates that respondents tend to agree more with the hiring decision when the job seeker is a close tie rather than a distant other.[6]

Going beyond this test of our hypothesis, we explored variation in perceived legitimacy across distant others and close ties by comparing separate regressions of respondents in the distant other (Model 6) and close tie conditions (Model 7). Respondents in both conditions showed strong effects for the type of help, the job-to-job-seeker match, and the three-way interaction. Figure 3's illustration of the average agreement provides suggestive evidence that patterns of evaluation vary somewhat across distant other and close tie conditions, although our data are not designed to formally test variation in the interaction among job, job seeker, and help across these two conditions (a four-way interaction for which we are underpowered). In most situations, respondents on average agreed more with hiring decisions regarding a close tie than a distant other. In particular, negative effects of circumventing the interview are somewhat mitigated in the close tie condition, but most differences are modest in size.

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[6] In our experimental design, the job seeker's gender varied in the close tie condition but not in the distant other condition, in which Javier was the only possible job seeker. When looking only at men job seekers—including all observations in the distant other condition and observations in the close tie condition in which the respondent identified their close tie as a man—we find that the close tie effect is directionally consistent with the effect of the close tie variable in our main analysis. Future research can further examine possible gender bias in situational alignment.

Figure 3. Means and Standard Errors for Each Combination of Job Seeker Qualification, Job, and Type of Help, Distant Other and Close Tie Conditions*
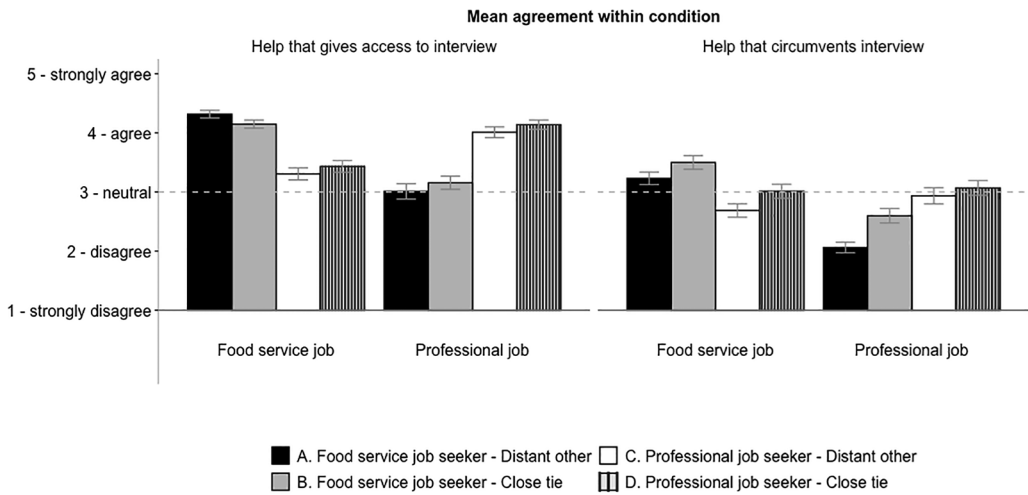
2 x 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design: ANOVA F-test (Job x Job-seeker x Help x Connection interaction) = 0.12 (p = 0.733)

* N=1,536. Responses are on a five-point scale from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree" ("nada de acuerdo" to "muy de acuerdo").

We interpret these results as indicating primarily that the extent to which respondents agreed with a given hiring decision resulted from situational alignment for their close ties and distant others alike, but respondents who evaluated decisions involving their close ties could draw on privately available information about their friends to supplement the information in the vignette, leading to somewhat more-positive reactions. Our data suggest that respondents in the close tie condition more often understood the job seeker as generally hardworking and as having positive personality traits that made them additionally suitable for the job they were offered. For instance, in a question about whether the job seeker (Javier or the close tie) was hardworking, 70 percent of respondents in the close tie condition indicated that their close tie was very hardworking, while only 13 percent of respondents in the distant other condition said the same about Javier. Open-ended survey responses also illustrated this dynamic. One respondent, evaluating a hiring decision involving her close tie, explained her resounding agreement: "Because he's a person who's totally responsible for any job and [who's] hardworking." Another respondent stated about his friend, "He has education, [a good] attitude, and he doesn't have a job." This respondent integrated his friend's established qualifications (his education) and additional information about the friend (his attitude), as well as his sense of his friend's need (his unemployment), which motivated him to look favorably at the situation and arrive at a sense of alignment. This tendency for respondents to think positively of their close ties led respondents to be somewhat less critical, even in the situation in which the food service job seeker is offered the professional job without an interview—the hiring decision that was by far the most frequently condemned. While many respondents still vehemently disagreed—one respondent said the decision was "inconsistent and [showing] the lack of certain fundamental values"—some respondents

agreed because of their perception of the characteristics of the people in question. For instance, one respondent who said she agreed with the decision described her friend this way: "She's one of the few people I trust and I know she's hardworking and can perfectly fill any job."

Our experimental test thus provides empirical support for our inductive theory. The results show that situational alignment is a multidimensional process of justification that is used to assess job search situations based on the perceived alignment among job, job seeker, and type of help provided in relation to the cultural logics of social capital and meritocracy. Moreover, people use situational alignment when assessing both distant others' and close ties' experiences, although people are more likely to justify the experiences of close ties and hold distant others to a higher standard.

DISCUSSION

In the search for a job, two cultural logics lead to conflicting beliefs about using connections to gain an advantage: A social capital logic promotes the use of connections, while a meritocratic logic problematizes it. In interviews, young Spanish college graduates articulated strong reservations about using connections on meritocratic grounds, yet most also described connections as valuable and admitted to using connections in their effort to find work, which created a need to justify these circumstances.

Through an inductive analysis of our interview data, we identified a novel process of justification through which these conflicting logics can be reconciled, which we term situational alignment. In our study, situational alignment occurred when there was a perceived alignment among three facets of the hiring situation: the job seeker, the job, and the type of help that connections provided. When these facets were perceived to be aligned, sufficiently conforming to the logics of both social capital and meritocracy, respondents justified the situation as legitimate. But these perceptions of alignment were biased: Respondents were motivated to use their access to greater information about their own experiences and those of close ties to develop more-favorable impressions, compared to their assessment of distant others. In a survey experiment, we tested our inductively derived process and demonstrated that situational alignment shapes assessments of hiring decisions.

Spain is a useful site for theorizing justification in the job search because beliefs about social capital and meritocracy are salient, but we expect that people justify the use of connections through situational alignment in other contexts. Research shows that both social capital and meritocracy logics are pervasive cross-nationally. Mijs (2018), for instance, found that belief in meritocracy is high in many countries worldwide. Studies have also demonstrated a common belief across multiple countries that jobs can and should be found through connections (Bian, 1994; Sharone, 2014; Camargo Correa, 2016; DiTomaso and Bian, 2018; Pultz and Sharone, 2020). We would thus expect to find a similar tension and a similar process of justification in many countries beyond Spain. Insofar as these logics may have different cultural content (Friedman et al., 2023), the specific outcomes of situational alignment may vary, as discussed below.

This study advances our understanding of social capital by identifying a novel process of justification that may contribute to labor market inequality in

meritocratic contexts. Our findings also have important implications for multiple areas of scholarship detailed below.

Implications for the Literature on Social Capital

The findings contribute to scholars' understanding of social capital. Building on a rich literature historically focused on measuring the resources available through people's social networks, recent studies have advanced understanding of how people actually activate their social ties (Pachucki and Breiger, 2010; Kleinbaum, 2012; Small, 2017; Smith and Young, 2017; Castilla and Rissing, 2019). These studies have provided insight into whether and how people translate the resources latent in their relationships into valuable gains. Yet, across these studies, scholars often assume that the desire to leverage social networks is the norm. We highlight two overlooked facets of social capital activation: First, social capital is not just a resource but also a cultural logic, or a shared cognitive structure that shapes thought and action (Valentino, 2021); second, the logic of social capital can conflict with other widely shared commitments, including the commitment to meritocracy.

Our study highlights the importance of understanding social capital as a cultural logic because social capital's meaning, including people's beliefs about what it is and how it can appropriately be used, is likely to vary across contexts. In Spain, the social capital logic underpinned the common concern about *enchufe* in the job search and framed social capital as an unearned privilege. In other countries, including the U.S., social capital may, instead, be understood as the product of individual effort through networking and the cultivation of professional contacts. In contexts like the U.S., we expect that there will be more opportunities for people to reconcile the logics of social capital and meritocracy during the job search, since social capital may be seen as earned rather than unearned. By considering the content of the social capital logic, researchers may better understand variation in beliefs about the job search across different cultural contexts.

Our study also highlights how the social capital logic conflicts with the logic of meritocracy, shedding light on past research about people's use of social ties to find employment. For instance, Smith's extensive work (2005, 2007; Smith and Young, 2017) has demonstrated that social capital is used differently among poor Black workers in the U.S. than among middle-class White workers, whose experiences were long framed as normative (Granovetter, 1974), in that poor Black job seekers are hesitant to use connections to find work. The framework of situational alignment provides insight into why this might be the case. Smith (2007) has shown that many poor Black job seekers describe a tension between the acknowledged benefits of seeking jobs through connections (social capital) and their own sense of their trustworthiness and competence (their situated merit). Their hesitance to use connections often stems from concerns that their job performance will reflect poorly on their recommenders or that their competence will be called into question. This finding is in line with the process of situational alignment theorized from our data, which shows that people justify the use of connections to find employment when job seekers have experience, skills, and personal characteristics that are viewed as suitable for the job and when employers thoroughly assess those qualifications. Many of Smith's respondents lacked conventional markers of preparation, including

education credentials and previous long-term employment, and therefore may have been less likely to feel that they could legitimately mobilize their networks to gain access to job opportunities.

Implications for the Literature on Meritocracy in Organizations

These findings also help to advance scholarly understanding of meritocracy in organizations. The rich and growing literature on meritocracy demonstrates the shortcomings of most meritocratic systems. Organizational commitments to meritocracy can backfire by enhancing individual bias (Castilla and Benard, 2010), and meritocratic assessments are applied in variable ways (Castilla and Ranganathan, 2020). We contribute to this literature primarily by demonstrating that assessments of merit are fundamentally situated, meaning they depend on the features of the context. Judgments about whether a person has merit are not based on the person alone. A job seeker who has ideal qualifications for a high-level corporate executive position—someone seen as highly meritorious in that context—may lack merit for the role of a teacher. Our findings suggest that research on meritocracy and its meaning for individuals and organizations can achieve greater precision by using the concept of *situated merit*, which highlights the importance of context in determining the degree of merit a given person is perceived to have.

We further contribute to the emerging understanding of meritocracy as a cultural logic. While the salience of meritocracy across national contexts has been documented (Mijs, 2018), much research has understood meritocracy as having a uniform definition: that ability, hard work, and qualifications lead to success. Only recently have scholars begun to consider how the ideal of meritocracy consists of cultural content that can vary across social groups (Friedman et al., 2023). We enrich this understanding by theorizing meritocracy as a cultural logic that not only encompasses certain ideas but also prescribes specific behaviors. Further research is needed to develop a full understanding of this complex, highly influential concept and how it may vary across contexts. For instance, just as the definition of merit may vary cross-nationally to emphasize talent versus hard work (Friedman et al., 2023), so may the emphasis vary across different fields within one national context. Moreover, these different conceptions of merit may encourage or sanction different kinds of behaviors, interacting with structural inequality in distinct ways (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2020). Understanding what meritocracy means in different contexts can shed light on these dynamics.

Situational Alignment and Contributions to the Understanding of Morality in Economic Behavior

Our novel concept of situational alignment extends theories of the morality of economic behavior, particularly the model of relational matching (Zelizer, 2005, 2012; Bandelj, 2020), to analyze justifications in the context of the broader situation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Garfinkel, 1967; Tavory, 2018). The job search is not unique in being characterized by multiple, conflicting cultural logics (Swidler, 1986; Vaisey, 2009; Lizardo, 2017). And while foundational insights suggest that legitimacy is culturally constrained (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), little research has examined how justification is socially patterned. Our study speaks to cultural theories about how people justify economic behavior.

Influential research on relational matching has focused on how people try to align their behavior with a specific type of social relationship by matching a behavior to people for whom that behavior is appropriate. For instance, borrowing money from a cousin might be considered appropriate, while borrowing from a coworker is seen as inappropriate. But the case we examine in this article reveals that a match is not only a function of the behavior and the relation; instead, a situation might be deemed legitimate or illegitimate for a given behavior and relation because other components of the situation are varying. For example, borrowing money from a coworker might be deemed legitimate in light of salient cultural logics—on the one hand, a logic of self-reliance, and on the other, a logic of community support—if the borrower is known to be a trustworthy person who would undoubtedly pay it back and if the borrower's economic needs are sympathetic (not stemming from personal irresponsibility) and short term (not requiring long-term investment).

In the job search context, the relationship between the job seeker and their connection is insufficient for understanding when using connections is considered legitimate. As our findings show, people may be able to justify a situation in which a job seeker uses a family member's help to find employment when the job seeker is qualified for the job and is required to pass through an interview. Those same people may condemn a situation in which the same job seeker uses the same family member's help to bypass the selection process and secure a job for which they are not qualified. Our novel process of situational alignment thus provides an expanded toolkit for exploring how people make sense of contested economic behaviors.

Situational Alignment and Contributions to Organizational Theories of Conflicting Logics

A large literature has examined how competing logics are managed within and between organizational contexts (Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Jay, 2013; McPherson and Sauder, 2013; Besharov and Smith, 2014; Malhotra et al., 2021). These studies have typically found that logics are reconciled through the domination of one logic over the other, through the cultivation of a hybrid logic, or through the separation of logics across organizational structures. We add to this literature by showing how two conflicting logics can be upheld as legitimate at the individual level through situational alignment. Insofar as people's justifications based on situational alignment are culturally constrained and therefore meaningfully patterned, our concept extends prior research on rationalization (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996; Margolis and Molinsky, 2008).

Our findings contribute to micro-level research on institutional logics. Recent work has suggested that the process of choosing an institutional logic through which to understand an event is ''socially distributed and negotiated'' based on the ''coherence'' of a given story (Zilber, 2024: 207). Situational alignment sheds light on the process through which people evaluate this coherence to often arrive at a ''blended decision'' (Zilber, 2024: 204), relying on more than one logic.

We would expect the concept of situational alignment to generalize readily to organizational contexts in which merit conflicts with other cultural logics. For instance, a growing debate over diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives pits the logic of diversity against the logic of meritocracy. In a hiring situation, a DEI logic may privilege the selection of candidates from underrepresented

groups, who can bring diverse experiences to the organization or whose selection—sometimes despite their having fewer traditional qualifications than other candidates have—represents equitable treatment in light of systems of race and gender exclusion. A meritocratic logic, in contrast, may privilege the selection of a candidate with the most traditional qualifications or the most high-status version of those qualifications. Perceptions of a tension between these logics undergird zero-sum thinking regarding diversity (Herring, 2009; Brown and Jacoby-Senghor, 2022) and have fueled a rising DEI backlash, under the auspices of concern for upholding meritocratic systems that reward achievement. Situational alignment helps to explain some of the ways that these logics are reconciled within organizations, by taking into account the characteristics of an actor, their past behavior, and the specific demands of the job. For instance, when a candidate from an underrepresented group who lacks traditional qualifications is known to have alternative types of qualifications or to have overcome some specific type of adversity, they may be perceived as suitable for the job. Alternatively, such a candidate may be perceived as suitable when the demands of the job mean that people from underrepresented groups are particularly effective—for instance, insofar as their background helps them connect with specific market segments (Bielby, 2012). The theory of situational alignment also helps explain why some ideals, like ''multicultural meritocracy,'' appear effective for reconciling these tensions by being sufficiently attentive to the demands of each logic (Gündemir et al., 2017: 34).

Implications for Understanding Inequality

Our findings also speak to research on how inequalities are legitimized in the context of the job search. The tension between social capital and meritocracy raises the question of how people justify the use of connections and the unearned advantages that can result. We identify a novel process of justification that legitimizes inequalities generated via two pathways, which are documented by rich literatures. First, privileged applicants have access to more valuable social capital through their ties to other privileged people; and second, privileged applicants have more opportunities to cultivate markers of merit through opportunities like elite education, expensive graduate degrees, and unpaid internships (Loury, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 1999; Petersen, Saporta, and Seidel, 2000; Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo, 2006; Autor, 2014; Collins, 2019). Situational alignment legitimizes the use of connections for all types of job seekers, but privileged job seekers legitimize *more-valuable* advantages than less-privileged applicants do, simultaneously reaping unearned benefits and reassuring themselves that their circumstances are sufficiently aligned with meritocratic ideals. We therefore provide evidence of a cultural practice through which meritocratic commitments coexist with structural inequality and actually help cleanse inequality of stigma (McCoy and Major, 2007; Castilla and Benard, 2010; Markovits, 2019; Mijs, 2019; Sandel, 2020). By justifying unequal outcomes in the job search, situational alignment plays a crucial role in legitimizing—and therefore propping up—systems of inequality.

We find evidence of bias inherent in situational alignment, which exacerbates these inequalities. Our findings apply Heimer's (1992) theory of particularism and universalism, which argues that although organizations are expected to operate according to impersonal universalist principles, in practice accomplishing

organizational goals requires attending to individuals in a particularist fashion. She argued that particularism is the product of access to information about a particular case and relationships with people who provide access to that information. Like Heimer, we find that access to additional information is essential: Given more information about their close ties, respondents had more opportunities to identify alignment. We also show that relationships produce motivation to use those particulars to justify: Respondents were more likely to find alignment in a situation featuring a close tie than in a nearly identical situation featuring a distant other. Our results confirm and extend Heimer's model by considering its implications for bias, allowing respondents to justify close ties' experiences even when they violated the generally held principles that respondents applied to distant others. This, in turn, has implications for inequality in light of homophily. Given a stronger desire and greater ability to justify the situations of close ties, the fact that privileged people are more likely to have relationships with other privileged people means that their advantages are more readily justified by others who have power and resources.

Situational alignment may also provide insight into inequalities that emerge in other domains. For instance, research has shown that advantaged and disadvantaged groups have different views about how to align the logics of diversity and meritocracy. Advantaged actors, including White people and men, tend to view ''identity-blind'' approaches as more legitimate, while disadvantaged groups tend to prefer ''identity-conscious'' approaches (Konrad, Richard, and Yang, 2021: 2189); similarly, whereas privileged groups embrace a ''business case'' for diversity, disadvantaged groups prefer a ''moral case'' (Georgeac and Rattan, 2023: 69). An extension of our insights into bias in situational alignment—wherein we found that respondents drew on additional information and motivation to more often agree with the decision to hire a close tie than a distant other—may help to explain these patterns. These groups all seek to reconcile the logics of diversity and meritocracy, but they have divergent visions for how to do so based on the information available from their own social positions and personal experiences. For instance, dominant group members who lack experience with systemic marginalization are more likely to see removing bias as sufficient to achieving a level playing field; disadvantaged groups, who have seen how identity structures opportunities through multiple simultaneous mechanisms (Reskin, 2012), are more likely to feel that leveling the playing field requires affirmatively supporting people who have been structurally disadvantaged. Both groups may also be informed by their personal motivations, as identity-conscious policies are more likely to benefit underrepresented groups, while the benefits of identity-blind policies may continue to accrue to privileged group members.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

Our findings also point to several paths for future research. First, while we identified the three features of a situation that are particularly relevant to assessing legitimacy in a job search context shaped by social capital and meritocracy logics—the actor (job seeker), objective (job), and behavior (type of help)—in other domains, other features of the situation may be as or more salient. Future research is needed to explore which situational factors are relevant in other contexts in which cultural logics conflict. For example, in a different domain, many

heterosexual couples today navigate a tension between gender-egalitarian ideologies and ideals of efficiency (in the context of gendered labor market opportunities) as they make decisions about the division of household labor (Daminger, 2020). When men and women can make sense of the alignment of the facets of the situation that are relevant to these logics, they can justify—rather than condemn—an unequal division of labor whereby women bear the brunt of the housework. Some features of the situation that matter may be distinct from those in the job search context. For instance, Daminger (2020) showed that men and women consider the alignment of behaviors (e.g., who claims which household tasks), perceived personal characteristics (e.g., women described as planners and men as disorganized), and each actor's other commitments (e.g., which partner has a longer commute or more unpredictable hours at work). Further research is needed to understand which dimensions of a situation are salient to situational alignment in other domains.

Further research can also explore the extent to which concerns about the conflict between social capital and meritocracy, as well as the situational alignment people use to resolve that conflict, may guide the way people prospectively make decisions. The interview data used to develop our theory are best suited to capturing retrospective justifications and are unreliable as predictors of future action (Vaisey, 2009; Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). But while we have focused on justifications, research has suggested that cultural logics guide both justification and decision making (Valentino, 2021). Respondents in our study occasionally reflected on opportunities they had declined, citing meritocratic concerns. Using other methods, future research can explore how meritocratic commitments may constrain the use of social capital, with varying effects across the population.

The job search is characterized by a deep but often overlooked tension between two conflicting cultural beliefs: that we should use our social capital to maximize our job prospects but that we should earn the job based on our own qualifications and without the benefit of unearned advantages. By inductively analyzing how young people make sense of the job search in the midst of these conflicting prescriptions, we shed light on a novel process of justification, situational alignment, through which conflicting cultural logics can coexist at the individual level and be upheld as legitimate. Our discovery of situational alignment in the job search sheds light on how social capital and meritocracy shape individual sensemaking and provides insight into how inequality in the labor market is legitimized and perpetuated.

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