
Reuben Mark Initiative for Organizational
Character and Leadership Research Series

Pay it Forward: How Unfairness Repeats in Peer Evaluations

Leadership Implications

- How people have been evaluated in the past affects how they evaluate others in the future.
- Both overrecognition and underrecognition are perpetuated in evaluations, though for different reasons.
- Overrecognition is relatively simple to counter, while underrecognition is more difficult to rectify.

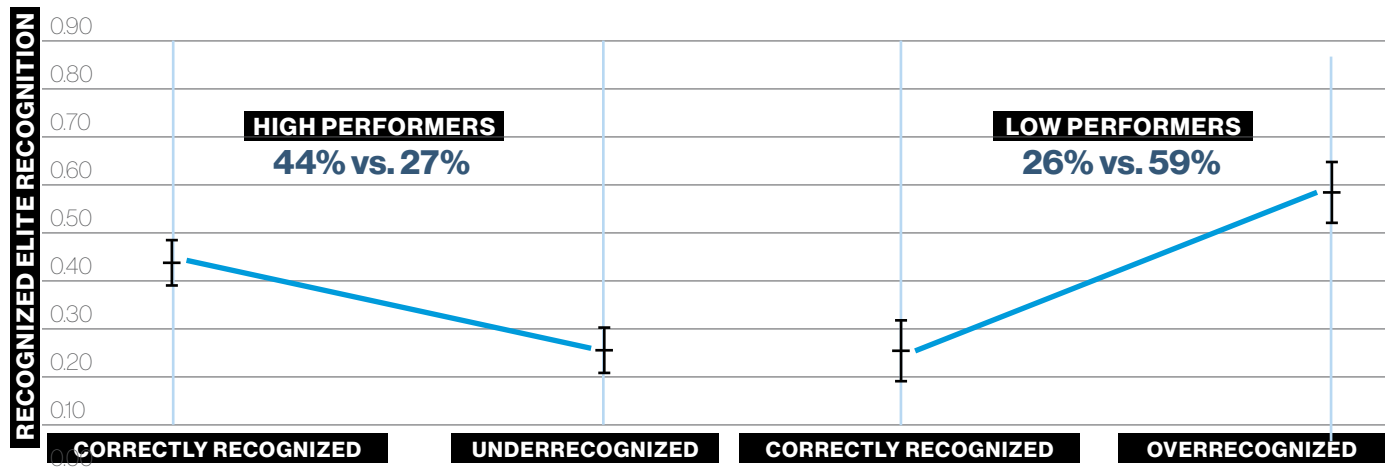
Identifying and recognizing top performers is the defining goal of meritocracy across organizations and industries. Past research has documented how getting it wrong can have lasting, negative effects on people's lives and careers. Now, new research affiliated with the Reuben Mark Initiative for Organizational Character and Leadership, under the auspices of the Bernstein Center for Leadership and Ethics at Columbia Business School, uncovers how misrecognition can endure in common evaluation processes.

In “(Not) Getting What You Deserve: How Misrecognized Evaluators Reproduce Misrecognition in Peer Evaluations,” Bernstein Faculty Leader and grant recipient Mabel Abraham and co-authors Tristan Botelho and James T. Carter show that people who are underrecognized or overrecognized for their work performances are much more likely to continue the same form of misrecognition when later serving as peer evaluators. In a series of studies, the authors identified separate causes for the downstream effects of misrecognition and found that one was easier to amend than the other.

Evaluating the Evaluators

To understand if and how misrecognition creates biases among peer evaluators, the researchers paired a quasi-natural field experiment with two carefully designed, online survey experiments. The field study analyzed ratings that investment professionals gave one another on a

Spillover Effects of Misrecognition



Underrecognized evaluators recommend elite recognition 39% less than similar high performers who were correctly recognized.
Overrecognized evaluators recommend elite recognition 136% more than similar low performers were correctly recognized.

private, digital platform focused on investment recommendations. Platform staff randomly highlighted top recommendations that received five-star peer ratings, while other recommendations that also received five-star ratings went unacknowledged. The researchers found the underrecognized professionals rated their peers significantly lower after their experiences of misrecognition than before.

The second study engaged hundreds of participants online to take a quick aptitude test, then score and rate the performance of someone else's similar test. Before serving as an evaluator, they were told whether their own performance had been acknowledged as "elite." The researchers manipulated the elite recognitions so that some high-performing participants were underrecognized, some low performers were overrecognized, and other control groups were acknowledged appropriately, based on their test scores. Like the field study, high performers who were underrecognized went on to recommend elite awards much less than the control group when serving as evaluators. A follow-up question about the fairness of the elite awards demonstrated that those who felt the recognition was unfair were substantially more likely to withhold elite recommendations. On the other hand, low performers who were overrecognized recreated their experiences, recommending elite recognitions more than twice as often as the control group, and the question of fairness did not appear to be a motivating factor.

Conclusions

From these studies, the researchers theorized that overrecognition continued because of information evaluators inferred from being overrecognized themselves. To test this, a third study was conducted to introduce an intervention that could curtail misrecognition. As participants prepared to evaluate, they were given additional, specific information about how to determine elite performance. The intervention decreased the continuation of overrecognition by 17 percent, but as expected, had no effect on underrecognition.

Across all three studies, the research found that a single experience with misrecognition is enough to distort subsequent evaluator behavior. The research contributes to a growing body of sociological research on the design implications of evaluation systems. Knowing that evaluators are most reactive to negative perceptions of fairness, organizations may consider tempering the language with which they assert the fairness of their evaluation processes. Acknowledging that misrecognition is at times unavoidable could not only lessen the intensity of negative perceptions, but also lead to useful discussions about who becomes evaluators and the risks of continuing misrecognition.

Read the full working paper:

(Not) Getting What You Deserve: How Misrecognized Evaluators Reproduce Misrecognition in Peer Evaluations

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