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Employer Decision Making

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Abstract

The decisions employers make are of critical importance to sociological understandings of labor market stratification. While contemporary research documents employment outcomes with ever-growing precision, far less work examines how employers actually make decisions. In this article, I review research on the process of employer decision making, focusing on how employers evaluate, compare, and select workers in personnel decisions. I begin by summarizing the most prevalent theories of employer decision making in sociology, grouping them into competency-based, status-based, and social closure–based approaches. A common thread underlying much of this work is the assumption that employers are utility maximizers who base decisions on systematic, even if flawed, cognitive calculations of worker skill and workforce productivity. I then turn to recent research from sociology and beyond that challenges this notion and highlights the importance of understanding how employers themselves—their emotions, identities, and environments—affect decisions. I conclude by suggesting directions for future research.

EMPLOYERS AS GATEKEEPERS

The decisions employers make are of critical importance to sociological understandings of inequality. Employers wield tremendous influence over workers' lives and life chances; they are gatekeepers who govern access to not only jobs but also occupations and incomes (Bills 2003). Consequently, their choices about whom to hire, promote, and reward play important roles in shaping individuals' economic trajectories and influencing broader social inequalities.

Despite progress over the past half century, substantial employment inequalities by gender, race, and social class persist. Women, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds remain underrepresented in higher paying and more prestigious jobs and overrepresented in less lucrative and more precarious work (Friedman & Laurison 2019, Kalleberg & Vallas 2018). Within a given occupation or organization, members of historically underrepresented groups are disproportionately concentrated in lower status and less lucrative roles; they also tend to be paid less and are less likely to be promoted within a given job, even when controlling for work hours and performance (see DiTomaso et al. 2007, Heilman 2001, Ridgeway 2011 for reviews).

While sociologists have historically focused on understanding supply-side contributors to such disparities, including differences in education, skills, or aspirations, Baron & Bielby's (1980) now-famous call for attention to demand-side factors inspired a surge of research on employers as agents of inequality. A robust body of scholarship now shows that employers directly contribute to employment disparities by gender, race, social class, and other status characteristics through the personnel decisions they make (see Bills et al. 2017, Pager & Shepherd 2008 for reviews). The advent of field (e.g., audit studies) and laboratory experiments in sociology and related disciplines has enabled scholars to both quantify the effect of employers' preferences and isolate them from workers' skills, qualifications, and behaviors (see Baert 2018, Heilman 2001 for reviews).

While recent scholarship shows, with ever-increasing clarity and precision, the bases and extent of group-based inequalities in personnel decisions, many of the mechanisms driving these effects are less clear (Castilla 2011, Reskin 2003). This may be due to methodology. The bulk of sociological research on employers' decisions focuses on outcomes, such as who is ultimately invited to interview or who is or promoted, rather than evaluative processes; the latter are typically inferred rather than studied directly. As a result, it is often unclear how decisions are actually made (Fernandez & Weinberg 1997). Yet, to truly understand the sources of labor market outcomes and inequalities, it is also necessary to understand the process of decision making itself, specifically, how employers evaluate, compare, and select between workers in personnel decisions.

Perhaps due to this focus on employment outcomes, the underlying theoretical model of employer decision making popular in sociological research on labor markets has changed surprisingly little in the 40 years since Baron & Bielby (1980). Employers are still depicted as basing decisions primarily on estimates of workers' relative stocks of human capital, social capital, and demographic characteristics; the residual is typically attributed to error or discrimination (Pager & Shepherd 2008).

This classic model of decision making, while parsimonious, suffers from two fundamental weaknesses. First, employers are conspicuously absent from it. Decisions are assumed to be driven by the characteristics of workers, rather than those of evaluators, or an interplay of the two (Rivera 2015b). Second, employers' motives and preferences are undertheorized; employers are typically portrayed as utility maximizers who are driven primarily by concerns about productivity and profit (Tilly & Tilly 1998).

However, basic research on judgment and decision making, as well as a growing number of studies in sociology, psychology, and organizational behavior, challenge these assumptions. As with other types of judgments, evaluators—their emotions, identities, and environments—are central to the decisions they make (Castilla 2011, Fox & Spector 2000, Goldberg 2005, Kahneman 2011, Staw et al. 1994, Tsui & Gutek 1999). And employers' motives are less economically rational than commonly assumed (or desired) (Iyengar 2010, Rivera 2012).

In this article, I review theory and research across disciplines on how employers make personnel decisions. Before proceeding, it is important to lay out several scope conditions. First, I focus on scholarship that addresses decision processes rather than outcomes; the latter has been excellently reviewed elsewhere (e.g., Bills et al. 2017, Heilman 2001, Pager & Shepherd 2008). Second, I focus exclusively on personnel decisions, and within that broad category, how employers evaluate, compare, and select between workers in hiring and promotion decisions as well as performance reviews. There are additional types of employer decisions that matter greatly for both individuals' lives and macrolevel inequalities, such as where to locate, how to structure work, how to organize workers, or how to select organizational practices, but these are outside of the bounds of my review.

I begin by summarizing the most commonly discussed theories of employer decision making in sociology, which I group into three main categories: competency-based, status-based, and social closure–based. I highlight key commonalities and weaknesses of these perspectives before turning to three bases of decision making that have received less attention in the sociological literature: employers' emotions, identities, and evaluative contexts.

CLASSICAL APPROACHES

As noted earlier, most research on employer decision making in the discipline focuses on outcomes rather mechanisms. However, when discussing how employers assess workers, sociologists most commonly draw from the following perspectives.

Competency-Based Perspectives

Competency-based perspectives portray estimates of worker and workplace productivity as driving decisions.

Human capital theory. Human capital theory (HCT) is the starting point for most models of employer decision making across disciplines. According to this perspective, which is most closely associated with neoclassical economics, employers evaluate and reward workers based primarily on assessments of workers' abilities. These may include specific skills that are directly relevant to a job, as well as more general, transferrable skills (e.g., time management, ability to learn).[1] A parallel tenet of HCT is that workers also invest in educational and labor market experiences that reflect their underlying skills and preferences (known as their productive capacities). As a result, inequalities that emerge between groups are primarily the result of mismatches between the skills or traits required by jobs and those possessed by workers (Becker 1971, Heckman 1998, Mincer 1958). For example, HCT might explain women's underrepresentation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields as the result of a relative lack of interest in these types of careers and/or poorer preparation or training (e.g., lower grades or fewer or lower quality courses in school). Although average differences in abilities, preferences, or experiences

[1]While human capital research traditionally operationalized skill in terms of cognitive capacity, as measured by education and work experience, more recent work includes discussions of noncognitive traits, such as personality, social skills, and work commitment (see Farkas 2003).

between groups may exist, statistical models have shown that human capital alone does not adequately account for group-based differences in employment outcomes. The source of this residual variation remains an open debate among scholars (Arrow 1998, Sunstein 1991).

Most notably from a sociological perspective, it is difficult—if not impossible—to parse ability from opportunity or to separate estimates of skill from social structure. For example, individuals pursue educational and labor market experiences based on not only their underlying skills and preferences but also social and material constraints. As Tomaskovic-Devey et al. (2005, p. 61) summarize, "Human capital investment is often not a voluntary and almost never an individual choice. Human capital acquisition is a social process." For example, obtaining a four-year college degree requires substantial time, money, and cultural knowledge from not only individuals but also their parents (Lareau 2003, Stevens 2007). Or, to return to the STEM example, qualified and interested women may ultimately choose not to pursue STEM careers because of group-based stereotypes, hostile or chilly organizational climates, or anticipated discrimination (Correll 2004, Seron et al. 2016).

In addition, HCT is premised on the idea that employers can and do judge workers' underlying productivity in a relatively accurate—although not perfect—manner. However, sociologists have shown that constructions of merit are socially situated and are systematically biased against members of particular groups (Karabel 2005, Rivera 2015b, Stevens 2007). Consequently, while HCT is often the starting point for sociological research on labor market inequalities, scholars typically invoke additional perspectives to explain employers' decisions.

Signaling theory. HCT argues that employers base decisions on workers' productive capacities. However, the theory does not specify how employers measure these underlying qualities. That is the domain of signaling theory. Taking conditions of limited information and bounded rationality (Simon 1957) as points of departure, signaling theory acknowledges that employers rarely have the time or capacity to measure worker productivity directly, especially in situations where there is a high degree of uncertainty, such as hiring. To save time and money, employers rely instead on observable characteristics as proxies or signals of productive capacities. The signals they chose tend to be those that (*a*) are inexpensive for employers to obtain but (*b*) are costly (in terms of time, opportunities, or finances) for individuals without the desired underlying capabilities to obtain, thus yielding greater signal reliability, and (*c*) employers believe are positively correlated with job performance based on their prior experience with the market (Spence 1974, 2002). For example, employers may use the possession of a four-year college degree as a signal of underlying cognitive skill because information about schooling is relatively cheap and easy for them to obtain (e.g., it is standard on a résumé), yet obtaining this type of degree requires extensive time and resource investments by individuals. Employers may also believe that workers who have four-year college degrees have better job-specific or general skills than those who do not. However, according to signaling theory, the value of a signal lies in its proxy power; thus, the value of a college degree is its perceived correlation with ability rather than skills or knowledge acquired through schooling. In this respect, signaling theory resembles credentialism (Collins 1979).

In sociology, signaling theory is frequently invoked as a potential explanation for observed inequalities in personnel decisions, especially preferences for workers with specific types of educational credentials (e.g., Deterding & Pedulla 2016, Rosenbaum et al. 1990). In economics, researchers have focused more on understanding the properties of reliable signals as well as conditions under which honest signaling can occur (see Riley 2001 for a review). Across disciplines, however, there has been less work analyzing how employers actually interpret and weigh various signals in personnel decisions (Reskin 2003). Moreover, classic iterations of signaling theory take the construct of signal reliability at face value, while cultural sociologists have shown that the process of signal selection is socially embedded, interpersonally variable, and biased against particular groups (Gambetta & Hamill 2005, Rivera 2010).

Social capital. Social capital theories of employment focus on one category of signals employers use to make decisions: workers' social connections. Research shows that employers prefer to hire employees who have existing ties to an organization and who are referred by employees or clients (Fernandez & Galperin 2014, Fernandez & Weinberg 1997). Interestingly, prehire referrals provide benefits beyond the point of hire; they are associated with an increased likelihood of promotion, especially for racial minorities, for whom referrals may counterbalance negative performance stereotypes (Merluzzi & Sterling 2016). Developing ties to influential or high-status employees once on the job who can serve as mentors or sponsors can also create advantages in obtaining promotions (Ibarra 1997, Wilkins & Gulati 1996).

Most research focuses on the value of social capital from the perspective of the worker or referrer, analyzing whether and what types of ties are most beneficial in particular contexts (e.g., Granovetter 1995, Mouw 2003, Obukhova & Lan 2013, Yakubovich 2005), or why people do or do not recommend certain groups of workers (e.g., Smith 2005). Studies that focus on employers tend to analyze the aggregate effect of the presence or absence of a tie on the likelihood of hire, promotion, or exit rather than how or why employers use social connections when making decisions (Fernandez et al. 2000).

There are several theories regarding why employers use workers' social networks when making personnel decisions. Social capital can be a signal of underlying human capital. For example, connected individuals may know more about the formal and informal demands of jobs and bring forward workers who are a better match with job requirements. Similarly, relying on social connections may produce a richer pool by identifying workers who are more appropriate in terms of easy-to-screen-for formal requirements, such as education. Employers may also believe that selecting individuals with existing social ties may foster social enrichment by enhancing on-the-job training, satisfaction, or mentoring (see Fernandez et al. 2000 for a discussion of these perspectives). However, using social capital as a screening device may also serve a practical purpose. When employers have more candidates than they have the capacity to review, giving preference to workers with personal connections may be a way of narrowing down the consideration set to a more manageable size (Rivera 2015b).

In each of these cases, screening on social capital is portrayed as something employers do to enhance worker or workforce productivity. However, because a person's social capital is intimately intertwined with their power and status in society more broadly, doing so can bias personnel decisions in favor of members of dominant groups (see Lin 1999, Petersen et al. 2000).[2]

Statistical discrimination. Research on statistical discrimination hones in on a different signal of worker productivity: group membership. According to this perspective, employers infer the ability of a specific individual based on their perceptions of the average ability of the social group(s) to which that person belongs (Aigner & Cain 1977, Arrow 1972, Bielby & Baron 1986, Phelps 1972, Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs 1999). In making these judgments, they typically rely on easily observable, socially meaningful categories (e.g., gender, race, or age) or locally meaningful delineations (e.g., political, departmental, or institutional affiliations) that they believe, from experience, are correlated with real skill or productivity differences. For example, if employers believe that Ivy League college graduates are on average smarter than those from other types of

[2]However, Fernandez & Fernandez-Mateo (2006) find that when members of lower status groups refer in-group members, this can actually contribute to the diversity of organizations.

institutions, they may assume a given Princeton graduate is smarter than a given Purdue graduate and favor the former person in evaluation (Rivera 2011).

In statistical discrimination, perceptions of group averages are derived primarily through direct experiences in the labor market. Because mistakes are costly, employers are motivated to update their perceptions of group averages based on new information and local realities; therefore, market competition should serve as somewhat of a check to bias (see Pager & Karafin 2009 for a discussion). As a result, while statistical discrimination acknowledges that relying on group averages is never perfect and will necessarily exclude some workers who are indeed capable, doing so is presented as a fair and efficient means of judging workers (Altonji & Pierret 2001, Bertrand & Duflo 2016). Status-based theories, discussed below, challenge these assumptions.

Status-Based Theories

Research on status characteristics and stereotyping share similar starting points as statistical discrimination: Employers use group membership as a signal of underlying quality. Whereas statistical discrimination portrays the use of group membership as a relatively efficient and effective means of judging workers, research in the latter traditions highlights the potential for distortions and bias. According to these perspectives, employers view workers through the lens of status beliefs about the competence and worth of particular groups (Ridgeway 2001) as well as stereotypes of what particular groups of people are like (descriptive stereotypes) or should be like (prescriptive stereotypes) (Heilman 2001; for a detailed discussion of the differences between status beliefs and stereotypes, see Ridgeway 2001). Stereotypes tend to fall into two major categories: those pertaining to competence (e.g., skills and abilities) and those pertaining to warmth (e.g., niceness, communality) (Cuddy et al. 2008). Moreover, they may be explicit or implicit in nature (Greenwald & Banaji 2017). Status beliefs and stereotypes influence employers' expectations and evaluations of performance as well as how they distribute valued material and social rewards (see Ridgeway 2006).

The main difference between statistical discrimination and status-based perspectives is that statistical discrimination treats perceptions of groups as malleable, experience-derived, and tied to real productivity differences, while the latter present these judgments as driven by widely shared cultural beliefs and cognitive associations that are durable, resistant to change, and often decoupled from real group differences (Pager & Karafin 2009, Ridgeway 2006). Consequently, while relying on status characteristics and their associated stereotypes might make evaluation faster or easier for employers in the short term, in the end it can also result in distorted perceptions of workers that compromise both the efficacy and equity of decision making.

Numerous studies show that even when workers display identical qualifications, performance, or behaviors, employers perceive them in terms of group-based status beliefs and stereotypes and rate them differently (for a review, see Heilman 2001). Employers hold members of low status or negatively stereotyped groups to higher evaluative standards and more heavily scrutinize their performances for errors (Biernat et al. 2012, Foschi 1996, Lyness & Heilman 2006); they also reward them less for equal performance (Castilla 2008, Correll et al. 2007). In addition, employers penalize workers who violate prescriptive stereotypes. For example, Rudman (1998) finds that employers display a backlash effect against female (but not male) job applicants who violate feminine prescriptions of warmth and communality by speaking confidently about their achievements in job interviews (see also Benard & Correll 2010). Likewise, Brescoll & Uhlmann (2008) find that expressing anger increases ratings of competence and results in increased salary for male leaders but does the opposite for female leaders.

While much of the work in this vein focuses on perceptions of a specific group, workers have multiple identities that shape both their experience in organizations and how others perceive them

(Collins 2000). Recently scholars have paid more attention to how employers interpret multiple, overlapping, or conflicting status characteristics and stereotypes. New empirical work shows that sometimes negative stereotypes amplify one another, and other times they attenuate one another (Martin et al. 2018, Pedulla 2018, Rivera & Tilcsik 2016). More work is needed to understand how stereotypes and statuses combine with one another in employment decisions.

Social Closure–Based

A final group of perspectives presents employers' decisions as driven by social closure: desires to preserve advantages via exclusion (Parkin 1974, Weber 1968).

Overt discrimination. The most blatant form is overt discrimination, in which employers actively refuse to work with members of particular social categories, often due to feelings of aversion or animus (Allport 1954). They may also have a preference—or taste—for discrimination (Becker 1971). Some scholars have argued that since the passage of equal employment legislation, overt discrimination has become more difficult to study or more subtle in nature (Feagin & Sikes 1994). For example, employers may refuse to hire or promote members of particular groups but provide alternative justifications for their decisions—such as invoking group-based stereotypes of ability or statistical discrimination—in order to avoid legal and/or social sanctions (Neckerman & Kirschenman 1991, Waldinger & Lichter 2003).

Opportunity hoarding and preservation. Another type of social closure is opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998), when employers actively exclude out-group members based on fears of competition and desires to keep opportunities within their own social circle rather than prejudice per se. Conversely, token minority group members may engage in opportunity preservation, where they seek to block new in-group members from joining or advancing due to fears of losing special privileges or being seen in stereotypical rather than individual terms should more members enter the group (Duguid 2011, Kanter 1977, Lewis & Sherman 2003).

Mechanisms of employer exclusion: summary and limitations. The aforementioned theories present different perspectives on how employers make decisions. **Table 1** summarizes key differences between approaches in (*a*) how employers evaluate workers and (*b*) how inequalities between groups can emerge. It is important to note that these and other mechanisms of selection are not mutually exclusive; they likely work together in employer decision making. As such, they may serve to produce patterns of cumulative advantage and disadvantage for underrepresented workers.

A commonality of these approaches is that, with the exception of social closure theories, they portray employers as human capital maximizers who base personnel decisions on systematic—albeit often flawed—cognitive calculations of the match between workers' skills and those required by jobs. Decisions are focused on perceptions of productivity and are divorced from employers' emotions, identities, and environments; the latter are considered to be nonproductive and are excluded from analysis (Tilly & Tilly 1998). Consequently, despite typical critiques of economics, the dominant model of employer decision making in sociology bears a striking resemblance to *homo economicus*, albeit with a larger error term.

However, robust literatures in sociology and anthropology have shown that evaluative processes are fundamentally cultural and social in nature (Lamont 2012). Definitions of skill and ability cannot be divorced from structures of power, and the way that gatekeepers evaluate quality tends to reproduce advantages for dominant groups (Alon 2009, Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, evaluation is inherently subjective and varies by the social position of the person making decisions; it

Table 1 Comparison of employer screening theories

Name of theory	Employers select workers based on	They use the following constructs to do so	Unequal outcomes between groups are the result of
Human capital theory	Competence	Educational and labor market experiences	Mismatches in skills between particular groups and those required by jobs
Signaling theory	Competence	Status signals	Workers not exhibiting the appropriate signals of competence desired by employers
Social capital	Competence	Social ties	Workers not having the right types of organizational ties, which serve as proxies for quality or can increase evaluative efficiency
Statistical discrimination	Competence	Perceptions of average group performance	Workers belonging to a group that is perceived as being—on average—lower performing and being judged as such
Status characteristics and stereotyping	Status beliefs and stereotypes	Explicit and implicit beliefs about the competence, warmth, and worth of different groups	Workers' abilities and behaviors being perceived through biased filters that advantage high status groups and disadvantage low status groups
Overt discrimination	Social closure	Feelings of animus, aversion, or dislike for particular groups	Employers actively discriminating against certain groups of workers
Opportunity hoarding or preservation	Social closure	Desires to preserve or block opportunities and resources based on group membership	Employers restricting opportunities based on group membership to preserve advantages for in-groups or themselves

also varies by local, institutional, and national contexts (Espeland & Sauder 2016; Lamont 1992, 2012; Knorr-Cetina 1999).

Furthermore, it is crucial to remember that employers' decisions are just that: decisions. Over the past 30 years, research in the field of judgment and decision making has shown that decision making is far less instrumentally rational and utility driven than is typically depicted in the literature on employment. Factors in addition to perceived quality or organizational goals play vital roles in how people evaluate and select between alternatives (see Dijksterhuis 2010, Kahneman 2011).

In the remainder of this article, I bridge research on evaluative processes from sociology, psychology, behavioral economics, and organizational behavior to highlight several important but understudied types of processes that affect employer decision making. It is important to note that I am not proposing an alternate theory of employer decision making; the factors described below work in tandem with selection on human capital, social capital, status signals, and discrimination. Rather, my goal is to highlight factors that influence evaluation processes that have received less attention in sociological research on employment.

BRINGING EMPLOYERS BACK IN

Personnel decisions are, at their core, interpersonal evaluations. Yet, sociological research has disproportionately analyzed workplace evaluations from the perspective of workers rather than the perspective of employers. When employers are discussed, it is usually in terms of their demographic characteristics (Castilla 2011) or their direct labor market experiences regarding the relative skill levels of different groups (Leung 2017, Pager & Karafin 2009, Waldinger & Lichter 2003). Below, I discuss two important but less-discussed aspects of employers that influence decision making—their emotions and identities—before turning to their evaluative contexts.

Employers' Emotions

As noted previously, dominant theories of employer decision making are very cognitively driven and focus on estimates of worker and workplace productivity. Employers' emotions are conspicuously absent from these perspectives. When mentioned, they are typically portrayed as undesirable intrusions into systematic estimates of productivity, in the form of error, noise, or discrimination via racial animus (see Bandelj 2009, Fernandez & Greenberg 2013).

However, research in psychology and behavioral economics shows that emotion is a fundamental basis of decision making.[3] How we choose romantic partners, financial investments, and even consumer products is intimately intertwined with not only how we believe these entities perform but also how they make us feel (Lerner & Tiedens 2006). Emotion does not simply make us feel good after we have made a decision; it serves as a fundamental basis by which we compare, evaluate, and select among alternatives in nearly all domains of social life (Keltner & Lerner 2010). It is important to emphasize that emotion and cognition are not orthogonal (Gordon 1981, Turner & Stets 2006). They are two interrelated processes that are essential for decision making. Without emotion, individuals tend to suffer decrements in decision-making quality and vice versa (Damasio 1994).

Likewise, emotion plays an important role in employers' decisions. While sociologists of emotion have highlighted the importance of workers' emotions and emotional displays (Hochschild 1983), less has been written in the discipline about employers' emotions. Yet, research outside of sociology shows that, controlling for workers' skills and qualifications, employers' emotional reactions to workers—responses that are not reducible to skill differences—play significant roles in personnel decisions (for reviews, see Fox & Spector 2000, Staw et al. 1994). While many emotions influence employers' decisions (see Rivera 2015a), two stand out in the literature as particularly powerful drivers of interpersonal evaluation in general and employer decision making in particular: liking and excitement (Byrne 1971, Collins 2004).

Liking is a powerful driver of interpersonal attraction. Employers rate workers they like more favorably, net of qualifications, performance, or behavior (Dipboye et al. 1994). The emphasis on likeability makes sense in many ways. The workplace is a site not only of task execution and skills application but also socioemotional experience and intimacy (Hochschild 1983). Many people spend the bulk of their waking lives at work, and positive emotional connections with coworkers can provide employees with enhanced job satisfaction, organizational attachment, and meaning in their lives (Chatman 1991, Hodson 2001).

However, liking can also be a source of bias that distorts perceptions of workers and reproduces advantages for members of dominant groups. This is because liking casts a halo effect on quality evaluations (Clore & Storbeck 2006). It is not just that employers want to be around people they like; they also rate those they like as more competent, holding constant actual skill (e.g., Cardy & Dobbins 1986, Dipboye 1985, Tsui & Barry 1986, Sutton et al. 2013). In addition, managers give more opportunities for advancement to subordinates they like (Turban et al. 1990).

[3] For a discussion of different types of emotional states, including the differences between emotion, mood, and affect, see Thoits (1989).

Liking can stem from numerous bases; some of these may be job relevant, such as a shared passion for the work required or an organization's mission, while others may be less relevant. For example, interest in and knowledge of professional sports are major sources of coworker attraction in male-dominated industries in North America; in most cases, these bear little relevance to the actual work performed in an organization and systematically disadvantage women (Erickson 1996, Rivera 2015b, Roth 2004, Turco 2010). Conversely, employers report disliking (and penalizing) workers who violate prescriptive stereotypes, such as women who behave assertively or mothers who succeed in the workplace, even when these employees are perceived as being exceptionally competent (Benard & Correll 2010, Heilman & Wallen 2004, Rudman 1998).

A related emotion that employers use when making personnel decisions is excitement. Excitement and liking are distinct emotions; the former is a high-arousal, forward-looking state in which one anticipates receiving future social or material rewards (Johnson et al. 2000), whereas liking is a lower-arousal, more generalized positive evaluative sentiment (Thoits 1989, Turner & Stets 2006). The anticipatory nature of excitement may explain why it seems to be a particularly powerful factor in hiring, when employers attempt to forecast how a candidate might behave on the job. Research shows that employers actively select new workers on the basis of feelings of spark, excitement, and chemistry in addition to estimates of skill (Bills 1988, Godart & Mears 2009; for an in-depth analysis of what produces excitement in hiring, see Rivera 2015a). Whereas liking is a more universal basis of interpersonal evaluation, excitement seems to be more culturally variable and is an especially strong basis of decision making in the United States (Bencharit et al. 2018, Sharone 2013).

Similarity

Similarity is one of the strongest predictors of liking (Byrne 1971) and excitement (Rivera 2015a) and substantially influences employers' ratings of workers. As with liking, similarity has direct and indirect effects on decision making. Employers actively choose to hire and promote workers who are similar to themselves and to existing employees. A growing number of organizations encourage or require evaluators to measure a worker's degree of cultural or organizational fit in hiring and promotion decisions (Cubiks 2013). Purposefully selecting workers who are similar to other employees in terms of values, personalities, and behavioral styles relevant to the job, or what is known as person-organization (P-O) fit, can indeed result in more productive and profitable workforces (see Chatman 1991). Yet, while many organizations ask managers to assess fit in hiring and promotion decisions, far fewer specify which types of similarities to use in selection and how to measure fit (Cubiks 2013). As a result, employers often measure P-O fit through similarity to the self, especially via similarities in backgrounds, hobbies, and self-presentation styles only tangentially related to the job (Rivera 2012), especially when evaluation is unstructured (Adkins et al. 1994, Cable & Judge 1997). In addition, individuals may favor workers who are similar to themselves to satisfy personal rather than organizational goals, such as making friends (Rivera 2015a) or enhancing social power (Cohen et al. 1998, Greenberg & Mollick 2017).

Similarity also has more subtle effects on evaluation. People define merit in their own image. When asked what constitutes a good student, driver, or parent, people generally describe the kind of student, driver, or parent they are (Brown 1986, Kruger & Dunning 1999). The same is true of employers. For example, those who believe their strengths are analytical versus social in nature weigh the former more heavily when evaluating workers and vice versa (Rivera 2015b). Together with explicit selection on fit, biases in favor of similar workers can result in homosocial reproduction (Kanter 1977, Rivera 2012) in organizations.

Many types of similarities affect interpersonal attraction in employment and beyond, including shared demography, culture, and experiences (Lazarsfeld & Merton 1954). While there is growing interest in the role of cultural similarities (e.g., Goldberg et al. 2016, Koppman 2016, Rivera 2012), most research focuses on demographic similarities (Castilla 2011). For example, studies have found that women and minorities are more likely to be hired, promoted, or evaluated favorably when there are more women and minorities in positions of power in an organization or industry (Cohen et al. 1998, DiTomaso et al. 2007, Gorman 2005, McGinn & Milkman 2013, Roth 2004, Tsui & Gutek 1999). However, it is important to note that these studies often look at the relative representation of workers versus gatekeepers in the aggregate and lack data on who is evaluating whom in a given employment decision (Maume 2011). Research that looks specifically at purely demographic similarity between workers and evaluators at the dyadic level reveals a more complex picture; in some cases employers favor members of demographic in-groups in personnel decisions, and in others they do not (see Castilla 2011, Foschi & Valenzuela 2008, Goldberg 2005, Huffcutt 2011, Srivastava & Sherman 2016, Stainback et al. 2010 for reviews).

This is because perceptions of similarity play a vital role in explaining the relationship between similarity and attraction (Byrne 1971), and perceptions of similarity do not neatly correspond to shared demography (Montoya et al. 2008, Orpen 1984). For example, in a study of MBA (master of business administration) hiring, Graves & Powell (1996) found that female evaluators perceived themselves to be more similar to male (versus female) job candidates and favored men in job interviews.

In addition, factors including whether the reference group is high or low status (Benard & Correll 2010, Goldberg & Riordan 2008, Tajfel & Turner 1986) as well as in the numeric majority or minority (Duguid 2011, Kanter 1977), whether decisions are made by individuals versus groups (Dovidio 2010), and the degree to which an individual identifies with a demographic membership group (Leszczensky & Pink 2019) seem to matter for explaining patterns of in-group and out-group preference in decision making. More research is needed to better understand the drivers of perceived similarity as well as the conditions under which different types of similarities result in more favorable workplace evaluations.

EVALUATIVE CONTEXTS AND PROCEDURES

Finally, evaluation is a highly contextual phenomenon (Lamont 2012). The particular criteria and procedures that employers use to evaluate workers vary by national context. For example, Sharone (2013) finds that managers in the United States emphasize personal connections and unstructured interviews in hiring decisions, whereas those in Israel rely more heavily on the results of standardized job and personality tests. These differences encourage an emphasis on chemistry as an evaluative criterion in the United States versus technical specifications in Israel; it also orients the search behavior of job seekers. Similarity, industry, field, and even disciplinary factors influence constructions and interpretations of merit (Koppman 2016, Lamont 2009, Posselt 2016).

However, the immediate context of evaluation also matters. While seemingly mundane, the logistics of evaluation, such as the processes and procedures put in place to evaluate workers, also shape how employers make decisions (Knorr-Cetina 1999). Classic psychological work on message framing shows that the way information is presented and communicated can dramatically alter how people view reality (Cialdini 2009). Likewise, the particular evaluative structures or systems chosen can have far-reaching effects on how decision makers distribute attention and resources (Bowers & Prato 2018, Espeland & Sauder 2016). A number of disparate studies in sociology, psychology, and behavioral economics show that seemingly minor aspects of the design of tools used to judge merit, or what Rivera & Tilcsik (2019) term the architecture of evaluation, can have major effects on assessments of workers.

Perhaps the most widely studied aspect of evaluative design is the degree to which assessments are open-ended versus structured. While standardization is far from a panacea when it comes to organizational inequalities (Dobbin et al. 2015), structured protocols and rubrics tend to keep employers' judgments more closely tied to job-relevant traits (whether decision makers like or trust their results is a different issue). Job interviews are a prime example. Unstructured, conversation-based interviews are the preferred hiring tool among US managers, but they are notoriously poor predictors of job performance. In fact, one study showed that when interviews were unstructured, employers actually preferred applicants who presented random answers to questions rather than ones that were relevant to the question (Dana et al. 2013). Likewise, without guidance about what to ask or how to evaluate criteria, employers are more likely to rely on their feelings of similarity and liking, invent criteria that support their preferred workers, and make decisions that are less tied to actual skill. Structured evaluative protocols seem to counteract some of these tendencies (see Huffcutt 2011, Uhlmann & Cohen 2005).

Other features of evaluative architecture also matter. Employers attune to different traits when making qualitative versus quantitative judgments (Biernat et al. 2012). They also differ when they are asked to rate objective (e.g., how many problems can you solve in five minutes) versus subjective (e.g., how fast of a problem solver are you) skill (Prendergast 1999). In addition, when making quantitative judgments, the specific numeric scale chosen also shapes perceptions of workers, especially the salience of different group-based stereotypes (Rivera & Tilcsik 2019). Finally, the number and speed of evaluations performed matter. When raters are experiencing high cognitive load (that is, they are distracted or charged with making large numbers of evaluations close together in time), they are more likely to rely on stereotypes and other types of cognitive heuristics and less likely to make accurate decisions (Kahneman 2011). Finally, whether evaluations are made by groups or individuals seems to matter (Dovidio 2010), as does whether workers are reviewed jointly or separately (Bohnet et al. 2015). While this is a relatively new area of research, it holds great potential as it not only calls attention to underappreciated aspects of employers' decisions but also suggests concrete interventions that can increase decision-making quality and equity (Williams 2014).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In sum, employers and their decisions—like people and decision making in general—are complicated and messy. While perceptions of skill are undoubtedly important drivers of employers' decisions, they are not the only considerations that influence how employers evaluate and select workers. The dominance of competency-based explanations of employer decision making may stem from ideological beliefs that employers should prioritize ability above other factors and/or the reality that information about factors other than worker skill can be difficult for scholars to obtain.

In this review, I have highlighted several processes in addition to estimates of skill that influence employer decision making. This list is not exhaustive. There is much more work to be done to understand how employers make decisions in practice rather than in theory (Reskin 2003). This will require qualitative observations of naturalistic processes as well as experimental and survey-based studies. In particular, future research would benefit from closer attention to variation between different types of employment decisions. Scholars, including myself in this review, often extrapolate findings from one type of employer decision (e.g., hiring) to other types of decisions (e.g., promotions), assuming that the evaluative processes are the same. However, a fundamental insight highlighted in this review is that context matters, and this practice may miss important sources of variation or nuances (see Bills 1988, Castilla 2008). Future research should examine which theories and evaluative processes are more or less dominant in different types of employer decisions.

In addition, sociological research on employer decision making disproportionately focuses on hiring decisions. Although hiring is a crucial step in the employment process and a key driver of occupational and economic sorting (Bills 2003), it is equally important to understand selection and filtering processes that happen once on the job. While there is growing interest among sociologists in understanding how employers rate workers in performance evaluations (e.g., Castilla 2011, Rivera & Tilcsik 2019), most research on the topic stems from psychology and management, where there has been a stronger emphasis on understanding the accuracy of various appraisal tools than on analyzing how employers make or use decisions (Cappelli & Conyon 2018). Likewise, there is a rich body of literature on wage gaps and macrolevel drivers of wage setting in sociology (e.g., DiPrete et al. 2010, England 2010), but less research on how employers decide to set salaries and award raises or bonuses to specific workers (Castilla 2008). There is even less written about termination decisions, which are vital drivers of stratification given the rising precariousness of work (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018).

Finally, technology is changing how employers make decisions. Given that the architecture of evaluation influences decision-making processes and outcomes, research would benefit from closer attention to the media through which decisions are made. The rise of new evaluative forms and formats such as online labor market platforms (Leung 2017) and virtual performance reviews that enable ratings of workers in real time (Cecchi-Dimeglio 2017) may create new types of decision-making processes as well as new advantages and disadvantages for various social groups. One could argue that such advances may potentially strip some of the more human elements of evaluation reviewed here from decision making and get us closer to a truly skill-based model of employment. But as long as people create the algorithms and procedures behind these technologies, they will likely import their emotions, identities, and environments with them.

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