



Meritocratically Unequal: Commensuration, Hierarchy Reification, and the Size of “Fair” Inequality

by Prof. Fabien ACCOMINOTTI
Associate Professor
Department of Sociology
University of Wisconsin–Madison



HKT

Tuesday, February 3 2026
09:00 a.m.- 10:30 a.m.



Scan to register

Webinar via



In a variety of social contexts, commensurating merit is a crucial step toward identifying merit differences that enable a fair, meritocratic allocation of rewards. Yet commensuration also has a tendency to obfuscate the empirical complexity of merit and to reify merit hierarchies into artificially crisp and clear-cut constructs. In this talk, we show that commensuration’s reification of merit hierarchies fuels inequality in the rewards received by the winners and losers of meritocratic contests, net of the effect of commensuration’s indication of merit differences between them. Specifically, we report the findings of a pre-registered experiment asking participants to divide a year-end bonus among a set of three employees based on the reading of their annual performance reviews. In the experiment’s *low-reification* condition, reviews are narrative evaluations. In the *medium-* and *high-reification* conditions, the same narrative evaluations are accompanied by summary verbal ratings and by numerical ratings, respectively. We find that participants reward employees more unequally when the performance hierarchy is more reified, even though the experiment’s design ensures that employees’ perceived levels of performance and relative performance do not vary across experimental conditions. Further analyses suggest that the reification of merit hierarchies does not fuel inequality by reinforcing the trustworthiness of evaluation, but by making participants understand merit in more *hierarchical* terms. More broadly, these findings demonstrate that the characteristics of merit hierarchies as hierarchies matter in determining the level of inequality that will arise from merit-based allocation processes.



Fabien Accominotti is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His research explores how status hierarchies are made, unmade, and how they sustain inequality in society. His work has appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *American Sociological Review*, and the *British Journal of Sociology*, among other outlets. His latest article, to be published in the *Annual Review of Sociology* and coauthored with Michael Sauder, theorizes the forms and consequences of meritocracy as the construction of merit-based status hierarchies.