TITLE:

Older, but Wiser? “The Matthew Effect” at 50: Introduction to the Dialog

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Each author’s complete name and institutional affiliation(s):

Sarah M. G. Otner, Imperial College Business School

Author Biography:

Sarah M. G. Otner is part of the Department of Management at Imperial College Business School. She holds a Ph.D. in Management (Organizational Behavior) from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Sarah’s research examines reputation in networks, expertise, and social status in contexts featuring either high-prestige prizes or new awards.

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Corresponding author (name, address, phone/fax, e-mail):

Imperial College Business School
South Kensington Campus
London SW7 2AZ
UNITED KINGDOM

Phone: +44-207-594-2683
Fax: +44-207-823-7685
E-mail: s.otner@imperial.ac.uk
Abstract
Merton’s famous essay on recognition and rewards in scientific careers, “The Matthew Effect in Science”, has reached middle age. This Dialog reflects on established research that separates the origins and the consequences of status, and recent contributions regarding the constraints of status advantages. In doing so, this collection responds to a growing scholarly debate about the returns to high status. The authors engage with Merton’s cumulative status advantage, and go further to identify downsides of increased recognition both for individuals and for the status system itself. The six articles in this Dialog evaluate the progress made towards Merton’s proposed research agenda and highlight opportunities for its extension.

Keywords
status; Matthew Effect; competition; recognition; boundary effects; uncertainty

Article
Merton (1968) published “The Matthew Effect in Science” as a comment on how scientific leadership is recognized, how scientific outputs are rewarded, and how those two diverge. The paper followed an initial essay (Merton, 1949) and longer treatise (Merton, 1967) on referencing practices and the currency of citation on which research depends, and particularly when those processes broke down and harmed scientific careers and science overall. The Science (1968) article proposed two prongs of a theory that have enjoyed different degrees of popularity. The more influential strand of research – concerning the “rich-get-richer” phenomenon of positive feedback – has become synonymous with “The Matthew Effect”. A corollary to this proposition (i.e., “The Ratchet Effect”) explained how initial rank set a floor below which an individual’s status never again fell. Despite the significant attention received and the research traction generated (Allison, Long, & Krauze, 1982; Allison & Stewart, 1974; J. R. Cole & Cole, 1973; S. Cole & Cole, 1968;
DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Zuckerman, 1970), Merton considered the problem of cumulative advantage so unsolved that he reiterated his “call to arms” on the article’s twentieth anniversary (Merton, 1988).

Since then, “The Matthew Effect” has inspired research in economics (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Azoulay, Ganguli, & Graff Zivin, 2016; Bothner, Podolny, & Smith, 2011; Connelly, Tihanyi, Crook, & Gangloff, 2014); psychology (Bendersky & Shah, 2012; Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Marr & Thau, 2014; Pettit, Sivanathan, Gladstone, & Marr, 2013); and sociology (Azoulay, Liu, & Stuart, 2016; Bothner, Haynes, Lee, & Smith, 2010; Ertug & Castellucci, 2012; Gould, 2002; Podolny & Phillips, 1996) intended to understand the complex social mechanisms that underpin inequality and (undue) influence. In organization science, research has clustered around the potential for (i.e., asset) or limits to (i.e., liability) status-based advantages (Askin & Bothner, 2016; Bothner, Kim, & Smith, 2012; Kim & King, 2014; Reschke, Azoulay, & Stuart, 2017; Simcoe & Waguespack, 2011). Indeed, (unintended) negative consequences – or “dark sides” – are an important and fertile trend in social evaluations research (George, Dahlander, Graffin, & Sim, 2016), including status (Chan, Gleeson, & Torgler, 2014; Charness, Masclet, & Villeval, 2014; Graffin, Bundy, Porac, Wade, & Quinn, 2013; Jensen & Kim, 2015).

However, there was a second theme to Merton’s theory which has been understudied significantly. Named “The Phenomenon of the 41st Chair”, this proposition argued that the artificial boundaries that identify the gatekeepers of recognition – and by extension, the recognized from the forgotten – have undue influence on both individuals’ success and the development of a field. In other words, organizational structures and processes have long-range impact on individuals who had no input into that decision-making, and yet this detachment is not transparent.
Merton’s second proposition provides interesting avenues for future research that by and large have not yet been explored.

On the fiftieth anniversary of “The Matthew Effect in Science” (Merton, 1968), the authors in this conversation review the history of the article, evaluate the relevant research, and propose an agenda for research to explore the unanswered questions and forgotten threads of this social science phenomenon. Four broad themes emerge. First, Sauder examines whether the Matthew Effect operates not through resource allocation but through recognition. Second, King & Carberry, Sharkey, and Reschke & Stuart evaluate effects on the system; Piezunka et al. discuss implications of the system for individual behavior, focusing on escalations of competition into conflict; and I consider legitimacy and power. Third, Reschke & Stuart, Piezunka et al., and Sauder engage with the uncertainty inherent in contexts of status judgments. Fourth, I evaluate deservingness, joined by Sauder’s and Piezunka et al.’s treatments of worth and (in)justice. Each essay generates lines of inquiry for status research that are as yet underdeveloped, despite 50 years since Merton’s attempt to set a research agenda.

REFERENCES


