Performance appraisal: an experience between recognition and contempt

La evaluación del desempeño: una experiencia entre el reconocimiento y el menosprecio

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the experiences of recognition or contempt displayed by workers' discourse after they have undergone a performance appraisal designed under the Strategic Human Resources Management (SHRM) logic. A case study was designed to approach the issue; the fieldwork of which consisted of qualitative interviews aimed at workers from different levels in a large Colombian company in the energy production and marketing sector. We found that although workers sometimes feel recognized as a result of performance appraisal, there was a preponderance of those accounting for contempt. This study's main contribution is to show some effects of this managerial practice on the workers' symbolic world and their possible consequences on the results the administration is expecting.

Keywords: Strategic human resources management, Performance appraisal, Valuation, Recognition, Contempt.

Resumen

El propósito del artículo es examinar las experiencias de reconocimiento o de menosprecio que se evidencian en el discurso de los trabajadores luego de haber sido sujetos de una práctica de evaluación del desempeño diseñada bajo la lógica de la Administración Estratégica de Recursos Humanos (AERH). Para estudiar este problema, se diseñó un estudio de caso cuyo trabajo de campo consistió en un conjunto de entrevistas cualitativas poco dirigidas a un grupo de trabajadores de distintos niveles en una gran empresa colombiana del sector de la generación y comercialización de energía. Se encontró que, aunque los trabajadores en algunas ocasiones se sienten reconocidos como consecuencia de la evaluación del desempeño, hubo mayor preponderancia de testimonios haciendo referencia al menosprecio. La principal contribución del estudio es mostrar algunos efectos en el mundo simbólico de los trabajadores de esta práctica managerial y sus posibles consecuencias en los resultados previstos por la administración.

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Palabras clave: Administración estratégica de recursos humanos, Evaluación del desempeño, Valoración, Reconocimiento, Menosprecio.

1. Introduction

In the second story of Doctor Brodie's Report, Jorge Luis Borges (1974) recalls that we all look like the image that others hold of ourselves. His character, Don Santiago Fischbein, was unworthy: "Feeling people despised me, I despised myself as well. At that time, and above all in that neighborhood, you had to be tough. I knew I was a coward." (Borges, 1974, p. 1030). When a person feels that others despise him —perceived as being assigned less value than he thinks he deserves— human beings end up, like Don Santiago, deeming themselves unworthy. This type of sentiment is usually due to the Performance Appraisal (PA) processes proposed from the logic of Human Resources Management "Strategic Models," which is paradoxical because from both the SHRM-specialized literature and the accounts of those in charge of management was inferred that PAs are designed with respect for workers in mind. The studying of this contradiction is the main objective of this paper.

Thus, the research set out to study the appraisal of work from a perspective other than that accounted for in the review of the literature on Performance Appraisal (Murphy, 2020; Grabner, Künneke, and Moers, 2020; Soltani and Wilkinson, 2020; Mitropoulos and Mitropoulos, 2020; Speer, Tenbrink, and Schwendeman, 2020; Sareen, 2018; Roine, 2018; Miller, Xu, and Mehrotra, 2015; Alagaraja, 2012; Wilson, 2010). The notion of "recognition" was then resorted to, a category of enormous explanatory abilities thanks to its great philosophical richness. One way to exploit that richness is to study it with regards to the tension that arises when contrasted with a counter notion like "contempt" (Honneth, 1997, 2010).

However, recognition and contempt are existential acts. At least in the field that studies the direction of organized work, it is impossible to study the conceptual pair of "recognization/contempt" without fully contextualizing it in a portion of empirical reality. The first delimitation emerges when admitting the evidence that both recognition and contempt occur in the course of social life, in the universe of human interactions, and Performance Appraisal is undoubtedly an interaction exercise.

The reader will find a brief review of the specialized literature in order to interpret the definitions proposed by the authors from the field of Strategic Human Resources Management, pursuant to the purposes of the research. Secondly, the "recognization/contempt" conceptual pair mentioned above will be contextualized based on the Hegelian heritage of a contemporary representative from the Frankfurt School, as is Axel Honneth. Thirdly, there will be a very brief characterization of the methodology employed throughout the study, and the notions will be discussed based on the evidence obtained from the interviewees' accounts. The paper will conclude by synthesizing the above-outlined contradiction while announcing some research opportunities.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Performance Appraisal

Performance Appraisal is a concept from the Human Resource Management slang that defines the rating assigned to an employee's work's quantity and quality at a given time. The genesis of industrial work systematic appraisal dates back to textile factories' early days during the late 18th and early nineteenth century in Scotland (Owen, 1857). Similarly, when investigating the origins of the theoretical grounds for PA, it is possible to find some influences from both military and mechanistic ideas. In the United States, appraisals first appeared in 1813 (Wiese and Buckley, 1998), when individual appraisals of officers were sent to the War Department containing subjective descriptors of what was perceived of the officers' behavior. The records these authors examined indicate that the system called "valuation of merits" was implemented by the United States federal civil service in 1842.

Subsequently, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the industrial sector is observed to have adopted varied labor

appraisal practices; however, clear-cut growth occurred only after the Second World War. Thus, the National Industrial Conference Board reported in 1954 that about half of the employees under its control used these appraisal schemes. By 1962, it noted that 61% of organizations were using some tool for evaluation (Wiese and Buckley, 1998).

At the beginning of the 1950s, a strongly mechanistic version prevailed among management specialists and industrialists of the time (Coens and Jenkins, 2000). What was known as "performance assessment" became common in organizations following the "machine model," as this type of evaluation offered managers "a comforting sense of responsibility and control":

> Evaluations created the illusion that each part (the employee) of the machine (the organization) operated efficiently and effectively. If all the parts worked well, the same was the case with the machine. The vertical organization chart became the mechanistic organizational model's plane by aligning people as billiard balls to create the illusion of a predictable chain of reactions (Coens and Jenkins, 2000, p. 53).

A decade later, a new "administrative philosophy" called Management by Objectives emerged (Drucker, 1964; Odiorne, 1965). This one was based on the idea of assigning workers numerical targets that corresponded to the organization's fundamental objectives. A new evaluation model thus emerged. Individual performance was measured by a worker's success in achieving different goals, most of which were assessed quantitatively. Thus, performance appraisals became management's scorecard to ensure individual responsibility in attaining the objectives set out.

Among the most influential theoretical influences on Performance Appraisal is the so-called theory of organizational competencies proposed by David C. McClelland (1973) and developed by its continuers (E.g., Milkovich, 1997; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990).

Regarding the contemporary manuals on Performance Appraisal, our review of that literature showed that the most common names assigned to this activity are "performance assessment," "performance studies," "annual evaluation," and "evaluation of performance"

and "individual valuation" (Guillot-Soulez, 2017; Lethielleux, 2017; Berger and Berger, 2011). It should be noted that in English-speaking literature —which is, in fact, predominant in the field of Strategic Human Resources Management— it is common to see the terms "evaluation," "appraisal," or "assessment" used as synonyms if associated to the word "performance."

Performance Appraisal is also understood as the process whereby workers' performance at work, particular behaviors or traits are assessed for a specific period and judged or described individually by a person other than the worker himself, and it was proposed that the organization retain these results. Coens and Jenkins (2000) point out that an extrinsic incentive makes the process mandatory or induces it instead of a purely voluntary or by-choice process.

PA is understood as the process whereby individual performance is judged, wherefore it should not be mixed with organizational performance, as the latter alludes to the company's financial returns. Moreover, performance appraisal is referred to in this literature as the role of the Human Resource Management, whose purpose is to assess, through performance and result indicators, how an organization can harness its "talents." In other words, it is a question of how SHRM contributes to increasing what these authors call synergy between the organization and people to develop organizational competencies and deliver results (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Nord and Fox, 2004). According to these authors, performance means work capabilities whose driving objectives are to ensure business growth, increased profits, and sustainability, the measurement parameters of which include turnover per "employee," return on "human capital" and "human capital" expenditure per "employee" (Chiavenato, 2009).

HRM authors who have dealt with the Performance Appraisal agree on the importance of primarily evaluating "employee" behavior, compliance with the proposed profile, results, or compliance with performance standards. Nevertheless, such worker assessment strategies seek to influence the company-employee relationship,

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i.e., to manage wages, and retain or dismiss them, make promotion- and transfer-related decisions, design career, and training schemes, adapting staff to the job, and, as a corollary, increase productivity and improve company performance, as well as determine people's future actions (Murphy, 2020; Grabner *et al.,* 2020).

2.2. The "recognization/contempt" dialectic

Recognition as the fundamental condition of human subjectivity is a philosophical, moral, and political category of the utmost interest for classic Greek and Latin thinkers and scholastics of the Middle Ages. Similarly, this notion became of interest for German idealism philosophers, such as Kant (2003), Fichte (1994), or Hegel (1993). It has also been at the center of a tradition such as the Frankfurt School's, especially for its last generations (Habermas, 1990, 1997; Honneth, 1997, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012). Other authors from different backgrounds, such as Paul Ricœur (2005) and Charles Taylor (1994), have also shown interest in this category.

Recognition means to admit something or someone; it also means expressing gratitude. That implies that individuals need each other to build a stable and full identity. From that point of view, the purpose of human life would be self-realization, understood as establishing a particular type of relationship with oneself, consisting of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem (Honneth, 1997). Therefore, it refers to the valuation of the sum of intrinsic characteristics inherent to the individual's singularity; it seeks to strengthen identity, recognize freedom, uniqueness, honor, subjectivity, rights, and dignity.

The term contempt comes from the Latin minus and pretium (price), wherefore it literally means "to attribute less price." It is a negative attitude towards a thing or person, which consists of awarding them less value than they are supposed to deserve; that is, to assign something or someone little appreciation, little esteem (Real Academia Española, 2020). Thus, contempt is the absence of recognition, indifference, even indolence, towards the singular universality of a fellow human being. It is means denying the possibility of building intersubjective relationships of value; it is an omission of the ethical essence and dignity of the other, which makes the opportunity of a binding relationship impossible.

At the same time, recognition is rooted in the given realization, in affirming the other's personality and identity as a universe, as a totality of life and a unique whole; in short, in accepting the other as an ethical essence. However, Hegelian currents ascertain that the foregoing is achieved by struggling with the opposite; that is, in dialectical tension with the contempt offered to the subject, which symbolizes recognition's opposite. Therefore, the struggle for recognition is understood as the phenomenon belonging to the powers of natural ethicity in which singularity is the dominant principle. In this context, "struggle" means the search for the affirmation of singularity in its entirety, "not only of the extrinsic determinations of natural law (such as property and the enjoyment of it), but also the intrinsic determinations of personality as a whole" (Rendón, 2010, pp. 82-83).

Based on Hegel, Honneth (1997) argues that individuals' struggle for mutual recognition of their identity leads to an internal social need to accept the institutions that guarantee freedom. Individuals' desire for intersubjective recognition of their identity is lodged in social life from the beginning and as a moral tension, overcoming the institutionalized measure. Thus, along the path of a repeated conflict of echelons, it leads to the freedom lived communicatively.

After that, Honneth examined the formal conditions of interaction relations whereby human beings can be guaranteed their dignity and integrity. He further points out that there is "contempt" in opposition to and tension with the "struggle for recognition." Hence, the foregoing becomes a "reification" form or "omission of recognition" mode, which refers to the process whereby in knowing about other people —and in the knowledge about them— consciousness is lost regarding the extent to which both are due to prior involvement and recognition (Honneth, 2012).

Among the categories discussed by Honneth in this recognization/contempt dialectic, the "formal-cognitive recognition of rights" and "institutional, ideological recognition" will be outlined herein and, succinctly, their interest in recognition as examined from solidarity will also be discussed.

Regarding formal-cognitive recognition, Honneth starts by defining law as "the relation of persons, in their conduct, to others," and Law as "the universal element of their free being or the determination, the limitation of their empty freedom" (Honneth, 1997, p. 58). The human being necessarily is a recognizing and recognized being. If all society members respect each other's legitimate claims, they can refer to each other in a less conflictive manner. According to Honneth, the recognition of rights implies attributing to the other the ability to fulfill certain fundamental obligations to construct the normative dimension of subjectivity. The denial of this form of recognition is dispossession, which entails the exclusion of certain privileges and leads the individual to be perceived as someone without moral capabilities and autonomy. This is precisely why the individual gets treated with contempt.

Thus, such a formal-cognitive recognition of rights, or denial thereof, can occur in the organizational arena, for organizations operate as an institutionalized space governed by internal and the environment's rules, which shelter the logic of work. Paradoxically, instead of it being a workers' rights assuring scenario, it may end up limiting individual action and predetermining collective interactions, conditioning workers' freedoms and possibilities for recognition and coexistence, with obvious forms of contempt emerging thereby.

Concerning institutional, ideological recognition (which aims at reification), this is, according to Honneth, the form of recognition that seeks in most cases to achieve an ideal form of behavior or influence as an enhancer of expected attitudes for coexistence, in this case, within the framework of an institution. In this sense, recognition is construed as a mechanism that enhances alienating actions (Honneth, 2005). According to the above-mentioned author, this type of publicly displayed recognition is purely rhetorical and constitutes an instrument of symbolic policy, whereas its function to integrate individuals or groups into the dominant social order by suggesting a positive self-image themselves (Honneth, 2006).

Regarding recognition or contempt as approached from solidarity, these can be understood as linked to social valuation. Thus, recognition allows individuals to refer positively to their specific qualities and capabilities, fostering self-esteem, and others' self-esteem. Individuals perceive certain qualities of theirs as valuable as collective objectives regarded as relevant are achieved.

In short, recognition as valuation takes place in interpersonal relations and is mediated by subjectivities; the latter is understood as that which makes an individual unique, as possessing intimacy and singularity. From these characteristics, both the recognized and recognizing parties' subjectivity are affirmed within an intersubjective relation.

3. Methodology

The research was designed as a case study such as those that Eisenhardt (1991), Stake (2007), or Galeano (2004) classify as "intrinsic cases" or "single cases." These attempts to unravel the problem in a single scenario understood as the "terrain" in which the study is conducted based on a "sample" of some social actors considered representative. Two clarifications prevail. The first has to do with the word "sample," which, as is known, is mostly used in quantitative research. In a slight contradiction, here we use it to refer to a group of 22 people whose representativeness is not numerical but of relevance. In other words, this is a "non-probabilistic sampling" (Salkind, 1998).

The second clarification has to do with the notion of "social actor" because this study understands the actor within the binary condition of the human being: as the protagonist of the act of working, to wit, as responsible for the action understood as "not only a response to a social scenario but especially as creating and attributing meaning" (Touraine, 1965). Secondly, the actor is regarded here as playing a social

role framed in his time thanks to his representation of the time itself and himself (Goffman, 1973).

This study's fieldwork consisted of a series of "non-leading qualitative interviews" with the aforementioned group of workers belonging to a large Colombian company in the energy generation and marketing sector. Some of these interviews construed the kind of encounter that specialists in qualitative methodologies call "in-depth interviews" (Beaud, 2018; Beaud and Weber, 2010; Serrano et al., 2020). Among the main criteria for selecting these participants stands out that they should be either senior or subordinate staff. Nevertheless, in all cases, they had to have undergone the company's formal performance appraisal process.

The "non-leading" interview was born out of Carl Rogers's psychotherapy (Rogers and Kinget, 1966), who proposed several types of interviews during his clinical practice. Marie-France Castarède (1983) refers to these as "free-answer interviews" in her classification of different types of research interviews that also includes in-depth interviews, structured interviews, and closed or structured questionnaires. Colette Chiland (2013) also contemplates them in her clinical interview manual. As the name suggests, this is an "actor-centric" interview where the researcher should have "a flexible guideline of previously unasked questions" for which an answer from the interviewee is expected (Castarède, 1983, p. 119).

The "flexible guideline" designed for this particular study contains its theoretical clues at three levels: a) those inherent to the categories of recognition and contempt; b) those pertaining to the main dimensions of recognition examined in this research (formal-cognitive, ideological, and solidarity-determined); and c) those of certain emerging specific "sub-dimensions" (dignity legitimization, the affirmation of the other's worth, limitation of freedom of action, objectification, etc.).

The interviews were analyzed using some ideas from Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (DCA) by NormanFairclough (Fairclough, 2008; Fairclough and Fairclough, 2018). Specifically,

the interviewees' account identified the "dominant discursive ideological formations associated with different groups within the institution," in order to detect those that appear "naturalized" in the structure of the discourse, that is, accepted as "common sense" (Fairclough, 1985, p. 739). The above is to examine them in light of concrete valuative expressions, such as institutional measures, affective expressions, doubts, gestures, etc.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Recognition experiences

The interviewees' accounts showed that they sometimes actually felt recognized, which we observed specifically when they claimed to appreciate feeling supported and accompanied. Our analysis of their responses makes it clear that they highlight trust and justice as axes of recognition. Furthermore, they eventually start to perceive a feeling of reciprocal valuation from their supervisor.

Those evaluated perceived recognition due to the experiences resulting from intersubjective relations with their chiefs, which the former define as useful, favorable, and fortunate. The majority expressed this kind of ideas specifically. They feel recognized when their supervisors "take them into account" and provide them with support, accompaniment, and teaching.

They also perceive recognition when their supervisor makes them feel "at the same level," that is, as co-workers, which —different from what the widespread prejudice dictates— does not make workers lose respect for the supervisor; on the contrary, it sometimes makes the junior staff feel tremendous admiration for their superiors. Such a supervisors' disposition validates and legitimizes their actions before their subordinates in general. In other words, mutual recognition is facilitated; both the supervisors' and the junior staff.

In the accounts of those who underwent a performance appraisal, their feeling recognized by demonstrations of support and equity from their chiefs stands out. It makes them feel that they "have a place" in

their workplace; they feel they are viewed, regarded, and recognized genuinely, fairly, and equitably: "I like to feel my boss's support —says one of the interviewees— to feel that there is some fairness and that we are all seen as equals and that we are all recognized as equals."

A more socially-oriented recognition was identified in the organization by spontaneous expressions of solidarity by colleagues and leaders; through their actions, they materialize and cultivate expressions of respect, cooperation, and mutual support. Another interviewee's account attests to that: "In general, the company has recognized the work I have done; moreover, I feel my work gets recognized just by being in the team."

Those who receive it are the ones who account for experiences of recognition (in this case the subordinates), thanks to favorable, unsuspecting, unconditional intersubjective relations, etc., with their bosses and colleagues, getting the work experience to end up vindicating and valuing individuals' uniqueness and that of their fellow men.

4.2. Contempt Experiences

In characterizing the unique experiences of recognition or contempt present in the Performance Appraisal discourse, the meaning workers assigned to it sheds light on their feelings of subjectivation, depersonalization, and objectivation (reification), the opposites of recognition that become expressions of contempt. In this particular case, there are ideological recognition and contempt experiences from different areas, such as rights and solidarity.

As far as ideological-institutional recog–nition is concerned, there were some subjectivizing worker expressions: "what we do is important' it is important for the company, and that is why we need to be more committed and pour our heart into it," warns an interviewee. See the objectification of the subject in the form of becoming further engaged, which supposes increased figures in the pursuit of higher organizational, economical performance. This kind of emotion —to commit to and to feel the company as one's own— includes genuine

voluntary consent of personal responsibility towards the company; it is effective blackmail meekly accepted and aimed at the company's growth goals through individual efforts. The subtlety of such phenomena is remarkable. The interviewee's account makes it possible to infer that "recognition" is not specifically towards his work (his actions understood as vital actions) and aimed at self-recognition and the rest doing well. The worker feels his commitment to the company's results is recognized, hence the importance of engagement therewith. There appears a kind of "naturalization" of appreciation for increased particular efforts so that this abstraction named "company" does well.

In the face of contempt, as an expression opposed to recognition, a particular form of labor violence was identified in some testimonies of those who feel "less valued," "little appreciated," or, simply put, "despised." Such narratives attest that it is common for these social actors to build depersonalized intersubjective relationships that lead them to feel less than the other, to feel that their human act of working has little to no value, thereby blurring these actors' "existential condition of dignity" (Honneth, 2012):

> You go to the PA with that feeling, feeling like not going, like not submitting that. Because it doesn't matter if you do not see results; it is rather about demoralizing or taking value away from one's work, and that is what hurts the most (Interviewee 15).

> Nobody considers extra participation or support provided during contingencies outside the work plan when they're grading you... And that is extra work that needs valuing (Interviewee 7).

These episodes, like many others, the interviewees regard as indolent practices, sometimes even as stigmatization or punishment, which threatens their integrity and, of course, end up opposing recognition. These feelings of the absence of recognition bring incredible frustration and demotivation.

There was a considerable number of complaints regarding violence —involuntary but persistent— fostered by the desire to boost competitiveness in obtaining the highest indicators, which encourages the individualistic spirit. By promoting

individualization to measure performance —contributions to the "value chain" by each worker individually— this appraisal model discourages solidarity and conviction towards group works. As a result, the worker experiences feelings of loneliness, and it is common for him to become despondent and discouraged by how the company regards his operational effectiveness.

The research found that those responsible for the "human resources" area, managers, and those in charge of performance appraisal in the organization, recognize little of these feelings of discomfort and disenchantment since many manifestations thereof are often untangible during the day-to-day.

The interviewees' testimonies account for their concern that these appraisals end up rating rather than appraising them. There is pervasive blindness of the ontological both in the literature and in HRM practices: how human beings are represented reduces the workers' whole to figures, which they regularly perceive as useless:

> [...] Is this performance appraisal useful? Because, sometimes, I feel that assigning a number to a person is very difficult, [...] it seems to me this is something that should go beyond; when you are not evaluated and valued, you feel very unmotivated (Interviewee 5).

The interviewees' accounts show their demand for other moments of recognition. In some way, they show their discontent towards performance appraisals, either due to the aforementioned ontological reification blindness or the application of an emerging ideological recognition of control devices supremacy, which obey management's instrumental rationality from its early days to the present.

The arguments put forward by Dejours (2014) are appropriate in that work appraisal through objective and quantitative measurement methods, which rests on erroneous scientific bases, is, therefore, false and shall always be false. That is why it fosters feelings of fear and injustice that also entail harmful effects on mental health.

Performance Appraisals, as control devices, on account of their instrumental essence, gives way to a self-destructive paradox, concerning both the workers' subjectivity and morality and the business objectives it pursues. Contrasting therewith is workers' evident struggle for recognition as a search for affirmation of singularity in its entirety and the recognition of work as an entirely social act (Mauss, 2012).

5. Conclusion

Much of the testimonies related to recognition come from supervisors performing the dual function of evaluating party and evaluated party, or from chiefs and subordinates who establish intersubjective relations that exceed the logic of power and subordination, privileging reciprocal encounters.

The above allowed us to confirm experiences of spontaneous worker recognition, which they value highly. They inform they feel supported, listened to, and accompanied; they are pleased with the possibilities of giving an opinion and being heard. They also appreciate the possibility of establishing respectful relations that reciprocally and ethically bind them with their bosses under the law.

On the other hand, we were able to record several accounts whereby workers doubt their recognitions as equals before their superiors and the company. Hence, there is no previous recognition of workers' rights, as their legitimate claim is to be regarded as having the capacity to meet a given objective while engaged in constructing their reality, for which they aspire to be recognized.

In the day-to-day work life, social actors demand a place in the existence of their congeners; they need to be heard, recognized; by failing to achieve it, they face feelings of contempt, such as abatement, damaged self-esteem, and demoralization.

Interviewees' narratives indicate that it is common for these appraisal processes to disregard performance. The recognition given is not always perceived as sincere, and it will hardly be for the actors involved, as long as appreciation for their work is not sought with boldness and determination, and the search to improve performance results is ever-privileged.

As such, an opportunity to continue research in other organizations and other sectors (public, service, other industries, etc.) has presented itself. Multiple case studies could be conducted to enrich further this type of analysis and research into the effects of Performance Appraisals on all types of workers' morale. Doing so will lead to demystifying the most used techniques and reconfiguring previous interpretations in order to propose perhaps new interventions that contribute to learning on the recognition of human affairs and the sensitiveness of life at work.

It is concluded that these Performance Appraisal practices based on the logic of the "Strategic Human Resources Administration" risk injuring workers' dignity because rather than recognizing their work, these practices, more often than not, end up belittling it unintentionally. Delving deeper into studies about recognition elicits strong criticism to alert SHRM experts that they are not achieving their purpose; and, on the other hand, denounce the profound ethical implications of these types of practices.

6. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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