

Racial disparity persists in National Football League promotion practices, according to research

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The lack of people of color in organizational leadership positions in the National Football League persists due to "valuative bias"—a difference in rewards for equivalent performance on the basis of social identity, according to a University of Michigan researcher and others.

The study, "Racial Disparity in Leadership: Evidence of Valuative Bias in the Promotions of National Football League Coaches," explores the connection between valuative [bias](#) and the racial representation of high-level coaches in the NFL. It was recently published in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Co-author Chris Rider, an entrepreneurial studies professor at University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, previously researched racial disparities and employment practices in the corporate law sector after the financial crisis of 2008–09.

After being introduced to the data on NFL coaches collected by his former colleagues at Emory University, Rider joined the research team of Jim Wade of George Washington University, Anand Swaminathan of Emory and Andreas Schwab of Iowa State University, and developed an equity analytics framework for documenting racial disparity in promotion rates and understanding its root causes.

In the research, Rider and co-authors express the elements that create racial disparities and present frameworks for analyzing and categorizing them. In analyzing the factors behind [racial disparities](#), the researchers distinguished between allocative and valuative biases: biases affecting who works in which job and how they are rewarded for their contributions.

"I think a big challenge that organizations are still grappling with is they know they have a gap, but they're not sure what is the appropriate solution given the nature of the gap they have," Rider said. "For

example, in the NFL you can generate a gap in multiple ways. One of which is tracking coaches of color into positions with lesser upward mobility prospects, running backs coach as opposed to quarterbacks coach. You could also get coaches in the same position who are promoted at different rates despite equivalent performance.

"It turns out that organizations face two different kinds of challenges: One is the allocation of personnel to the position and the other is how their contributions are valued."

The research's distinction between allocative and valuative bias allows organizations, particularly the NFL, to address unique challenges within employment practices with more targeted strategies. In the case of the NFL, the researchers had access to make it particularly straightforward to evaluate career data and distinguish between the biases in promotion practices.

"We're not introducing a new type of bias to the literature; we're systematically evaluating valuative bias' influence on the gap in ways that's never been done before," Rider said.

In their examination of all 32 NFL teams between 1985 and 2015, the researchers show that although allocative bias was prevalent and a significant challenge to the successful placement of coaches of color in high-trajectory roles, valuative bias had a substantial effect on the coaches of color's ability to successfully attain high-level positions, such as offensive/defensive coordinator and head coach.

Due to their unique use of data and career history analyses, Rider and colleagues challenged many common misconceptions in the NFL. One common presumption that awareness of valuative bias challenges is the idea of meritocracy.

The NFL often promotes itself as a meritocratic employment market in which coaches' individual career ascension is entirely based on performance and success. However, the analysis indicates that coaches who perform equivalently—on many performance metrics—nevertheless differ in their promotion rates on the basis of racial identity. Although the goal is meritocracy and there are performance indicators, they may be applied subjectively.

The study, Rider says, simulates various gap-closing interventions and identifies what must be done to achieve parity in representation at the head coach level and, consequently, maintain notions of meritocratic promotions in the NFL. Only if coaches with observationally equivalent performance are promoted at the same rate from lower-level positions can the league achieve parity in representation at the head [coach](#) level.

The researchers had access to data before and after the addition of the Rooney Rule in NFL promotion practices. The Rooney Rule, implemented in 2003, dictates that NFL decision-makers must interview at least one woman and one member of a marginalized group for every high-level position search.

The Rooney Rule has faced its critics, primarily that it hasn't affected the representation of coaches of color in leadership positions, particularly as the talent pool of coaches has become more diversified. In the case of Rider's research, the equity analytics framework can be used to advocate for policies to make the Rooney rule more effective.

"From our perspective, the most important insight is not whether or not we can definitively answer if the Rooney Rule was effective," he said.

"Rather, what we can say is that both before and after the Rooney Rule, there has been a major advantage for white coaches in getting promoted to the coordinator position."

The researchers shared their equity analytics with the Fritz Pollard Alliance to inform changes to the Rooney Rule. One advocate was Cyrus Mehri, a legendary civil rights attorney who worked with the NFL to adopt the Rooney Rule in 2003.

The researchers' position is that the Rooney Rule will have the highest impact when applied as early as possible in the coaching hierarchy. Focusing on roles where coaches build the credentials for career ascension has more long-term opportunities to reduce future racial disparity in high-level positions.

Besides the implications on NFL hiring and promotion practices, Rider and colleagues say their framework can be used in any industry where allocative and valiative biases are present.

"As much as our research focuses on the NFL and shows there's a pretty strong and persistent racial disparity there, I think we also have to give the NFL credit: At any given point in time, you typically have more head coaches of color among the 32 teams in the NFL than you have CEOs of color among the Fortune 500," Rider said. "When we think about that comparison, it tells us there's probably a lot that can be done in large multinational corporations to really affect the prevalent disparities at all career stages.

"My co-authors and I are really looking to work with organizations that want to analyze the data, use equity analytics to identify gaps, understand what causes them, and start designing interventions to close them."

More information: Christopher I. Rider et al, Racial Disparity in Leadership: Evidence of Valiative Bias in the Promotions of National Football League Coaches, *American Journal of Sociology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/725389](https://doi.org/10.1086/725389)

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