Understanding the Impacts of Two Pandemics on Tenure-Track Faculty Advancement Using Epistemic Exclusion Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Many faculty from marginalization groups, such as faculty of color[1] and women, are underrepresented among faculty, yet they are overrepresented at the lowest faculty ranks (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). For instance, faculty of color represent a mere 24.4 percent of tenure-track faculty and are disproportionately represented among assistant professors, lecturers, and instructors. The underrepresentation of faculty of color has been linked to a number of barriers, including cultural mismatch between faculty and their institution (Jacob, 2012; Sadao, 2003; Segura, 2003), lack of effective mentoring (Davis et al., 2021; Thorne et al., 2021), and multiple forms of pervasive identity-based mistreatment (e.g., racial harassment and discrimination; Kim et al., 2014; Parsons et al., 2018). In addition to these interpersonal barriers, we suggest that there are barriers and biases built into seemingly neutral evaluation standards and norms that govern faculty hiring, annual review, tenure, promotion, and other evaluation processes. We term this *epistemic exclusion*, and argue that it is more likely to be experienced by faculty from marginalized groups, thereby operating as a barrier to the goal of faculty diversity and inclusion. The two pandemics of 2020, COVID-19 and racial injustice, have made some of the biases in evaluation processes more visible but also have exacerbated the demands on marginalized faculty. In this brief report, we discuss how these factors are challenging institutional goals of faculty diversification and offer some potential strategies for more inclusive evaluation practices.

Epistemic exclusion is a type of scholarly devaluation, more often experienced by scholars from marginalized groups (e.g., women faculty and faculty of color), that is rooted in invisible biases built into formal systems of evaluation and reflected in informal faculty interactions (Settles et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). This form of scholarly exclusion is shaped by two types of bias—disciplinary and identity-based. Disciplinary norms determine what qualities contribute to research being defined as rigorous or "good" scholarship. In many STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, disciplinary assessments of good scholarship are rooted in beliefs that (1) there is a "truth" that can be discovered with well-designed research; (2) "high-quality" scholarship is objective, generalizable, and often quantitative; and (3) the

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[1] We use the term faculty of color to refer to faculty who racially self-identify as African American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, or Native American.

researcher's identity, experiences, and beliefs should be kept separate and are not relevant to the scientific process. Research with these qualities tends to be considered a part of the mainstream or dominant within a given discipline. However, the theory of epistemic exclusion argues that there is bias in these disciplinary norms, which contribute to narrow definitions of rigor and consequently the systematic exclusion of research theories, topics, and methods more often utilized by scholars from marginalized groups.

For example, scholars from marginalized groups are often likely to engage in research "on the margins," or beyond the disciplinary mainstream, by focusing on marginalized populations or problems relevant to them (e.g., racism or poverty), engaging with community organizations as partners in research endeavors, developing scholarly approaches rooted in their observations and life experiences, and using methods outside of the disciplinary mainstream (e.g., qualitative methods) (Bernal and Villalpando, 2002; Gonzales, 2018). As a result, scholars from marginalized groups are more likely to have their research devalued and seen as "me-search" (De la Luz Reyes and Halcon, 1988, 302). The expectation that legitimate scholars will engage in research that is traditionally mainstream creates bias within academic systems of evaluation by rewarding and advancing only those scholars who adhere to those norms. Considering that scholars from marginalized groups are more likely to engage in research on the margins, systems of evaluation with disciplinary bias also create disparities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities.

Also, these disciplinary notions of quality scholarship and the legitimacy of scholars combine with identity-based stereotypes about scholars from marginalized groups to exacerbate their epistemic exclusion. For example, there are societal stereotypes about women as less capable at math and science (Heilman, 2001) and people of color as lacking work ethic (e.g., Ghavami and Peplau, 2013; Sue, 2010). Negative stereotypes about their groups (e.g., women and people of color) are applied to marginalized scholars and used to undermine their credibility as experts in a field. Furthermore, the discounting and devaluation of research on the margins of a discipline is partly because scholars from marginalized groups are engaging in the work. Negative beliefs about marginalized scholars' competence and ability spillover to stain assessments of the type of scholarly work they engage in and are used to justify the devaluation of that work (e.g., if marginalized scholars lack intellectual rigor and they use nontraditional methods, then those methods must be lacking in intellectual rigor).

Within formal systems of evaluation, epistemic exclusion can take different forms. Epistemic exclusion could occur if some aspect of a scholar's work is not considered relevant in evaluations. For example, in a field where peer-reviewed journal articles are the norm, books or book chapters may be discounted, even if they are also peer reviewed or published by prestigious presses. Also, because of an emphasis on what may be considered traditional mainstream research, formal evaluations may not include an assessment of faculty sharing their scholarly expertise in the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion work. In another instance, departments may identify "top-tier" journals that scholars are expected to publish in for a successful faculty review. However, doing so often excludes specialty journals that focus on topics outside of the disciplinary mainstream (e.g., marginalized populations). In addition, traditional evaluation standards often count the "products" (e.g., papers), but do not take into account the effort involved to get there (Buchanan et al., in press). For instance, community-based research that is more likely to be conducted by marginalized scholars involves building trust and rapport with the communities and often includes a reciprocal relationship in which the scholar provides something back to the community in recognition of their critical role in the research (e.g., research findings or services); the time it takes to produce this research may lead to faculty having fewer products relative to others not engaged in this work. Therefore, scholars who produce scholarship outside of narrow norms will find themselves disadvantaged at points of evaluation.

Moreover, in research institutions, scholarly work is weighted more heavily than teaching and service in evaluations. Therefore, a scholar who engages in high-quality, innovative teaching or engages in a significant amount of mentoring and service, may find those activities to have only a limited impact in whether they are viewed as productive. A faculty member who invests heavily in relatively unrecognized teaching, mentoring, or service activities must also meet research standards. This creates a heavier workload for that individual compared with a colleague who focuses mainly on meeting research goals and doing the minimum expected teaching and service. Moreover, if faculty from marginalized groups do not engage in such expected "caretaking" activities, they may be punished for not engaging in stereotype-consistent behaviors (Thomas et al., 2013). Given that marginalized faculty may be likely to work outside the center of a discipline, engage in heavy service, and face high expectations around teaching, such biases in systems of evaluation produce identity-based differences in faculty advancement.

Though epistemic exclusion is systemic in nature, thereby reflecting larger societal biases about who may be considered a credible scholar and disciplinary norms about what may be deemed legitimate scholarship, this system is maintained and reinforced by powerful individuals who engage in faculty evaluations. Senior scholars are likely to have been trained and socialized in "traditional" and mainstream forms of scholarship. As a result, they may be quick to dismiss scholarship that does not fit into disciplinary norms, and they may be unable to judge the work of their colleagues working on the margins. Furthermore, because senior faculty have also been successful within the existing system, they may be unable to see biases clearly or may be unwilling to challenge a system that benefits them. In this way, senior faculty may act as gatekeepers, maintaining the status quo, but could opt to change the system in a way that would foster greater inclusion of scholars working in new and innovative ways.

The start of 2020 and onset of both the COVID-19 and racial pandemics brought greater awareness to the biases and disparate ways institutions evaluate scholarship. Institutions and their faculty were forced to reevaluate *what* they consider scholarship and how it may be reenvisioned in a post-pandemic society, as well as *how* they engage equitable evaluation standards for faculty. In the sections below, we detail the limitations made apparent in faculty evaluation standards and the ways institutions sought to intervene.

SHIFTS IN SCHOLARSHIP AND PRODUCTIVITY

The two pandemics led to greater realization of epistemic exclusion and forced a reconsideration and discussion of the nature of scholarship and the definition of productivity. One area that the pandemics brought attention to is inequality in faculty service and leadership, teaching, and mentoring. Traditionally, women faculty and faculty of color have carried the burdens of additional, often unrecognized and uncompensated, service in the academy (Baez, 2000; Turner et al., 2008), but these demands have been greatly exacerbated during the pandemics (NASEM, 2021). In response to the transition from face-to-face to online learning, faculty and students had to navigate a new landscape; faculty, in particular women faculty and faculty of color, have had to shift their pedagogical and mentoring strategies and focus, thereby not only supporting students in learning but also attending to their basic needs, such as shelter,

food/water, and even internet access. The emergence of racial tensions in the United States also prompted many faculty of color to serve as the primary support for students of color as they processed racial trauma (e.g., taking class time to discuss current events and hosting town halls to support students' processing of recent events).

Moreover, many faculty, because of their marginalized identities, have been deemed in-house diversity experts at their institutions. This too has come with additional service responsibilities, such as educating faculty, staff, and students on systemic racism; developing anti-racism and inclusive programming; and even crafting statements and public announcements denouncing racism and other forms of oppression. Beyond these institutional responsibilities, faculty of color have been called upon to serve as reviewers for grant panels and academic journals that were (now) quickly attempting to prioritize scholarship relevant to race, and racism, and other social issues and to increase the representation of marginalized voices as reviewers. Although these activities—supporting students, engaging in anti-racism pedagogy, and working toward equity and inclusion in academic structures—are appropriate, necessary, and important, they have contributed to greater service responsibilities among marginalized scholars, especially those at the highest ranks. When these activities are not recognized as forms of meritorious productivity, this constitutes epistemic exclusion, which inevitably and disproportionately harms marginalized scholars in evaluation.

Second, the pandemics contributed to many scholars feeling the critical need for them to share their expertise with the public. Expertise on issues such as racism and discrimination, criminal justice reform, public health communication, virology, global politics, democracy, and election reform have become urgently needed, and many scholars have met this need. They have increasingly shared their work in widely read magazines and newspapers, discussed social issues on national television shows, or disseminated their work throughout social media outlets, such as Twitter and Instagram. Some scholars have created new programming and developed communities around important social issues (e.g., #BlackInTheIvory, n.d.), such as how to be an ally to people of color and how to combat misinformation. Yet, as scholars have worked to meet the goal of using knowledge for the public good, evaluation standards have remained relatively unchanged; at many institutions, these types of public dissemination activities would not be considered scholarly work nor would they count toward a positive review, unless traditional productivity standards were also met. Faculty, especially those from marginalized groups, have

become increasingly disenchanted with research dissemination that only reaches academic audiences and instead feel compelled to engage in more scholarly activism and public dissemination of their scholarship. It is unlikely that faculty will want to convert back to academic practices that exclude activism and public dissemination as a central component of their work. Given that these trends are likely to persist, academic institutions will need to reconsider how these types of activities will be evaluated for their scholarly contributions and significance to the field.

At the same time that scholars, especially those from marginalized groups, have felt the importance of service, leadership, mentoring, and public engagement, traditional forms of research and scholarly work have become more difficult. At many universities, the COVID-19 pandemic led labs to close temporarily, research funds were frozen, collaborative and supportive networks were lost, and research relying on external organizations (e.g., libraries, archives), fieldwork, or community-partners became difficult or impossible to conduct. Further, many faculty parents lost childcare or became co-teachers of their children who attended school remotely; for some, these responsibilities were coupled with increasing concerns and care for older adult family members. Thus, the time, resources, and infrastructure required for traditional forms of scholarly work diminished for most faculty. However, the loss of productivity was felt especially by women, faculty of color, and faculty from other marginalized groups (De Gruyter, 2020; Myers et al., 2020; NASEM, 2021; Shillington et al., 2020).

PANDEMIC-RELATED INSTITUTIONAL SHIFTS IN FACULTY EVALUATION

In addition to highlighting the limitations of current evaluation standards, the impacts of the health and racial pandemics of 2020 pushed institutions to consider how they may engage in equitable evaluations of faculty work that is diverse and ever-changing. In the following sections, we detail current interventions used to create equitable evaluation processes and put forth additional recommendations for institutions invested in developing more unbiased evaluation practices over the long term.

In recognizing how the two pandemics negatively affected faculty's productivity and emotional health, many institutions requested that faculty submit *COVID-19 impact statements*,

alongside their annual review materials. These statements offer faculty the opportunity to describe the ways they may have been affected by the pandemic (e.g., decreased productivity due to 24-hour childcare responsibilities and remote learning for their children; grief and sadness due to pandemic-related death of a family member). A second intervention included *1-year tenure clock extensions* for pre-tenure faculty, which allowed faculty additional time to make up for pandemic-related losses in productivity due to challenges, such as limited access to campus libraries and lab spaces, inability to collect data face-to-face, and challenges maintaining scholarly collaborations.

Though evaluation shifts in response to the pandemics are laudable, each of these interventions has limitations that may hinder the development of long-term equitable evaluation processes for faculty. For instance, faculty, in particular women and faculty of color, may be hesitant to fully disclose the challenges they are experiencing in a statement or to request a tenure-clock extension for fear that what they disclose may cohere with the stereotypes others hold about their marginalized group, which in turn may shape future evaluations. Additionally, because of narrow definitions of what may be considered scholarly work, some faculty may be hesitant to report how the pandemic influenced their teaching and service responsibilities, which often are not considered legitimate aspects of their scholarly work. Moreover, extending the tenure clock will inevitably contribute to delays in job security and promotion-related salary increases, which may be particularly detrimental for faculty from marginalized backgrounds. Notably, these strategies are most beneficial for pre-tenure faculty, and there have been few strategies to ease the burdens on marginalized mid-career faculty seeking promotion or later-career faculty that may choose to retire rather than persist in an increasingly stressful academic environment.

Importantly, both COVID-19 impact statements and 1-year tenure-clock extensions falsely represent the depth and scope of the pandemic. In the United States, the pandemic is approaching 18 months in duration, and the effects of the Delta variant and the fact that children under 12 years of age are still not eligible to get vaccinated mean that the COVID-19 pandemic will actively be with us for another 6–12 months, at a minimum (Charumilind et al., 2021; IHME, 2021). A single-year extension in the context of a health pandemic that is still actively ongoing will do little to address the consequences of the pandemic and will be ineffective at addressing the long-standing and pervasive inequalities that were already present prior to the

pandemic. In truth, these solutions reflect a lack of vision on the extent of the preexisting challenges and the long-term impact of the current pandemic. More innovative strategies that recognize both that inequality was present prior to the pandemics and that the effects of the pandemics will persist for multiple years will lead to more effective solutions with lasting impact. Below, we offer recommendations for more inclusive evaluation processes, addressing the epistemic exclusion highlighted by the pandemics.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REENVISIONING SCHOLARSHIP AND ENGAGING IN EQUITABLE EVALUATION

Building upon theory and empirical work on epistemic exclusion, we offer four recommendations for institutions invested in reenvisioning scholarship and engaging in equitable evaluation standards now and post-pandemics. Although the pandemics have made some problems in evaluation processes more visible, these issues are not new. For decades, scholars have noted that the academy is an inhospitable and inequitable place, especially for marginalized scholars (Aguirre et al., 1993; Holcomb-McCoy and Addison-Bradley, 2005; Parsons et al., 2018; Turner, 1994). As such, the disparities unearthed by the pandemics are manifestations of long-standing systemic issues, especially in the formal evaluation of faculty. The suggestions to follow are not exhaustive, but rather are a starting point for institutions interested in making progress toward equitable work environments for their faculty.

1. **Identify biases and assumptions in evaluation processes** – Because the disciplinary biases built into systems of evaluation are often long-standing, norms and standards can seem natural and right. Thus, an important first step is to identify the places where seemingly neutral evaluation processes are built on bias. One way to make bias visible is to see where processes lead to inequitable outcomes and question critically why this is the case. For example, if scholars of color are publishing in high-impact but non-top-tier journals, discuss why certain journals have more prestige than others. Are the journals with more prestige really publishing higher-quality scholarship, or are they esteemed because they are more established (i.e., having produced

scholarship for a longer period of time) and mainstream? Such conversations allow institutions to reflect upon their current status quo in thoughtful ways.

2. **Examine scholarly values** – At a more basic level, departments can have conversations about their scholarly values and ensure that processes align with them. For example, if a unit values scholarship that is high impact and makes a significant contribution, then would publicly engaged scholarship be equally (if not more) meaningful compared with scholarship targeted to academics? And if so, should those forms of scholarship not be valued equally? Such conversations can help units to broaden the types of activities that are considered "scholarly," which will likely create a more diverse academy. Further, for those conversations to not simply reproduce existing biases, they must include the voices of faculty who have experienced epistemic exclusion the most; these faculty are most likely to have been harmed by existing processes and therefore most able to see the bias.

3. **Broaden the definition of scholarship to include diverse forms of scholarly work** – As the pandemics have clearly illustrated, many institutions define scholarship in a narrow way that excludes much of the work valued by faculty from marginalized groups. Therefore, institutions may consider broadening the definition of scholarship and scholarly work to include these innovative ways of working. More specifically, institutions may expand scholarly work to include work that is community based (e.g., community-based participatory action research), has public-facing dissemination (e.g., magazine and blog features, television interviews, and radio broadcasts), and has an activist focus on social change. Furthermore, it is important to consider not only scholarly output (e.g., journal publications) but also the unique demands inherent in different forms of scholarship; some research requires a great deal of time to build relationships before research can even begin, some research on hard-to-reach populations takes a long time to collect, and some research involves a great deal of emotional resources (e.g., sexual or police violence), which can require recovery time on the part of the research team. By recognizing different types of scholarship, institutions will be better able to attract and retain faculty from marginalized groups.

4. **Revise evaluation standards and processes** – With adequate discussion and re-definition of scholarly work, institutions may then begin to employ new evaluation policies and practices. One such change is to engage in more holistic evaluations that can fully recognize and value the range of activities a scholar engages in as a faculty member. One-size-fits-all expectations about what a productive faculty member looks like increases the likelihood that the professoriate will be homogenous as everyone works toward a single goal. Such narrow expectations may also lead to burnout and turnover of faculty from marginalized groups, who are striving to meet such expectations while also meeting their own personal scholarly goals. Another shift would be a change from viewing diversity, equity, and inclusion work and public scholarship as service to valuing them as scholarship. These changes could be facilitated by one-on-one interactions that help evaluators gain a better understanding of novel types of scholarly work. Finally, the pandemics illustrated the precarity of the academic system for many faculty members who saw dramatic declines in traditional forms of productivity when structural supports (e.g., childcare) disappeared. This suggests that the high levels of traditional productivity required for successful review, especially at research-intensive institutions, is unsustainable, inequitable, and disadvantageous for scientific innovation (which often requires time for reading, developing collaborations, engaging in deep thought, etc.) and individual psychological well-being and physical health.

CONCLUSION

For academic institutions in the United States, the two pandemics of 2020, COVID-19 and racial injustice, have magnified preexisting disparities in faculty experiences. In addition to heightening the demands on marginalized faculty, inequalities in faculty evaluation processes have also widened. The same faculty that are most harmed by COVID-19 and racial injustice are also negatively affected by epistemic exclusion and a decreased sense of belonging. This brief report offers strategies for more inclusive practices to promote faculty diversification and retention, and serves as a call to action for institutions to reenvision hiring and promotion

practices to focus on "evaluation for expansion not exclusion" (C. Grant, personal communication, September 27, 2021). Institutions will need to be aggressively creative in reenvisioning academic norms and productivity expectations in order to recruit and retain faculty talent, in particular marginalized scholars, in the post-pandemic future.

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