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Epistemic Exclusion in Promotion and Tenure Processes: Implications for Diversity and Inclusion in Academia

Ebenezer Edema-Sillo
University of Houston, bensillo1@hotmail.com

Francisco Torres
University of Houston, frankiejtorres3@gmail.com

Helen Gu
University of Houston, wenyihgu@gmail.com

Carolla Belle
University of Houston, cbelle3@central.uh.edu

Christiane Spitzmueller
University of Houston, cspitzmu@central.uh.edu

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Inclusion in Academia

Historically, women and people of color have been exposed to tokenism and

marginalization within academic contexts (Turner, 2003; Fotaki, 2013; Griffin et al., 2013;

Niemann, 2016). Gender and racial inequality have persisted in academia, in that university

administrators have focused on superficial representations of equality without directly addressing

the root causes of issues in diversity and inclusion (Monroe et al., 2008; Dupree & Boykin,

2021). Additionally, limited research has been conducted on gatekeeping processes in academia

that contribute to the devaluation of women and people of color. Epistemic exclusion is a

theoretical gatekeeping process which involves the discreditation of the research and scholarship

of female faculty and faculty of color due to stereotypes against marginalized communities in

academic contexts (Settles et al., 2020; Settles et al., 2021). These stereotypes perpetuate

negative perspectives toward the competence of women and underrepresented minorities in

academia. Furthermore, biases arise against members of these marginalized communities that

devalue diverse approaches to research, which deviate from the norms of scholarship, where

female faculty and faculty of color are concerned (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Gonzales,

2018).

Promotion and tenure (P&T) are administrative processes which involve faculty

evaluation and review of scholarly output to substantiate reasons for promotion to a new level of

professorship. Within the framework of P&T, external review letters are commonly used for

institutional peer reviews (Schlozman, 1998; Rhoades-Catanach & Stout, 2000). Epistemic

exclusion influences P&T processes through language use in external review letters (ERLs),

which involves the literary devaluation of a candidate's scholarship. Promotion and tenure voting

committees may be deterred from promoting female faculty or faculty of color due to this unfavorable language which discredits their scholarly output. Thus, the existence of epistemic exclusion language in ERLs functions as a deterrent to the advancement of the academic careers of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Our expectations for the epistemic exclusion criterion are centered around its prevalence in ERLs and role in P&T voting outcomes. The devaluation of the scholarly works of female faculty and faculty of color has the potential to discourage voting committees from positively evaluating the scholarship of members of these marginalized communities, resulting in unfavorable voting outcomes. Thus, we hypothesize that epistemic exclusion mediates the relationship between gender and voting outcomes in the P&T process. Additionally, we predict that epistemic exclusion mediates the relationship between URM status and voting outcomes. Due to the scholarly devaluation of diverse faculty, we expect to see greater prevalence of epistemic exclusion language for female candidates and URMs compared to men and majority individuals (White and Asian). Finally, epistemic exclusion involves the rise of disciplinary biases which affects interpretations of the types of research that should be credited and valued in academia (Settles et al, 2021). As a result, the prevalence of epistemic exclusion language is expected to be higher in ERLs written for candidates whose primary areas of research are rooted in diversity or advancing the livelihood of marginalized communities.

For this study, 1453 ERLs for 293 P&T candidates were collected from a large, public, research (R1) university. Demographic information was collected for the promotion candidates to include gender and ethnicity. Voting committee decisions such as yes/no votes, abstentions, and reconsiderations were recorded for each candidate. The existence of epistemic exclusion language in ERLs will be evaluated utilizing Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)

software. Data will be analyzed using multi-level modeling at the department level, college level, and university level.

This research contributes to the theory of epistemic oppression, which addresses exclusionary behaviors that detract from an individual's scholarly contributions and production of knowledge (Dotson, 2014). Particularly, the existence of epistemic exclusion language in ERLs causes epistemic oppression to persist in academia where perceptions of a scholar's production of knowledge is weighted in decisions for promotion to higher levels of professorship. To resolve this issue, changes should be made to institutional P&T policies to diminish the impact of gatekeeping processes on the promotion of diverse faculty. Voting committee members can be trained to identify epistemic exclusion language in ERLs. As a result, this language can be disregarded in the interpretation of the scholarly output of diverse faculty, resulting in more valid decisions regarding a candidate's qualification for promotion. Additionally, heightened awareness of these unfavorable perceptions regarding the competence and scholarship of diverse faculty will augment current research on gender and racial inequality in academia. Consequently, further steps can be taken towards fostering a more inclusive environment within academic contexts.