

SUBFIELD BIAS IN FACULTY HIRING DECISIONS

SUBFIELD BIAS IN FACULTY HIRING DECISIONS

What is Subfield Bias?

Subfield bias is when scholarship *in the center* of the field is seen as more valuable and important than research in subfields that are considered to be *on the margins*. What areas or types of scholarship are considered to be in the center vs. the margins varies in different fields. However, research suggests that subfield bias is more likely for scholarship with certain qualities or characteristics¹:

- **The topic.** For example, scholarship on marginalized groups is considered to be less important in many social science disciplines whereas the study of exoplanets is on the margins in astronomy.
- **The approach.** In many fields, scholarship that is basic or theoretical is considered to be more important than applied scholarship.
- **The method.** In some fields, scholarship using qualitative methods is considered less valuable and rigorous than scholarship using quantitative methods. In other fields, scholarship using digital archives is considered less important than work using paper archives.
- **The population.** Scholarship with an international or community focus is considered to be on the margins in some fields, in contrast to scholarship focused on WEIRD populations (*Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic*), which includes the U.S.
- **The disciplinary breadth.** Scholarship in the center of the field often draws mainly from that discipline, whereas scholarship on the margins is more likely to be interdisciplinary and boundary-spanning.

Why Does Subfield Bias Matter for Faculty Diversity?

Scholars from marginalized groups, such as women and people of color, are more likely to engage in work on the margins.²⁻³ Their social identities and personal experiences may lead them to be interested in certain topics and populations, and to see the contributions of less traditional disciplinary methods and approaches. Scholars working on the margins can make important contributions to your department by broadening its scholarship, mentoring, and teaching capacity; many scholars working on the margins can teach about the discipline's center (because they were trained in this area as students) as well as their area of expertise.

Research finds that women and faculty of color report more subfield bias, and that experiences of subfield bias are related to negative perceptions of the department climate, lower job

satisfaction, and more thoughts of leaving the university.⁴ Other research on bias in NIH grant funding found that Black scientists were funded at lower rates, even after adjusting for their level of experience, because they were more likely to study certain topics including research at the community and population level, and issues related to socio-economic status and disparities.⁵ Therefore, subfield bias is likely to reduce your pool of excellent scholars from marginalized groups.

Why Does Subfield Bias Occur?

Subfield bias is theorized to reflect a mix of disciplinary bias regarding the qualities of “good” scholarship and prejudice towards marginalized groups who are more likely to work on the margins.^{1,6} Part of the reason that scholarship on the margins is devalued is because marginalized groups are engaged in the work, and negative stereotypes about their competence and legitimacy spill-over to affect perceptions of their work. As such, subfield bias is a form of academic gatekeeping that disproportionately affects marginalized groups and therefore works against efforts to diversify the faculty.

How Does Subfield Bias Affect the Search Process?

Subfield bias affects the search process in several ways.

1. **Problem:** Scholars working on the margins may not see themselves represented in narrow job ads. Women and people of color are less likely to apply for positions unless they feel they meet all the requirements, whereas White men are more likely to apply if they fit just some of the requirements. Therefore, narrow job ads, especially those seeking to hire a scholar working in the center of the field, may result in a less diverse and excellent applicant pool.

Solution: Consider open searches in which the area of expertise is not specified or consider searching in subfields where there are more scholars from marginalized groups. Job ads noting openness to interdisciplinary approaches may also appeal to applicants working on the margins.

2. **Problem:** Scholars working on the margins may publish in specialized journals, which are the appropriate outlets for their work. Search committee members may be less familiar with such outlets, some of which may be newer to the field. Because of subfield bias, scholars working on the margins may have fewer publications than those working on mainstream topics. As a result, committee members may question the legitimacy of publications in specialty outlets or discount their record as less competitive even when it meets the threshold for a strong record.

Solution: Do not over-rely on metrics, like journal impact factors, which favor scholarship published in mainstream outlets, or discount scholarship in outlets you are unfamiliar with. Instead, read and evaluate the quality of the scholarship yourself and consider the applicant holistically, not only based on numerical data (e.g., quantity).

3. **Problem:** Scholars working on the margins may be overlooked by traditional metrics of academic impact, such as journal impact factors or awards for scholarship or teaching.

Solution: Consider both traditional and alternative metrics of success. Alternative metrics include indicators of broad, societal impact such as the use of their scholarship to inform public policy, general readership or class adoption of their work, technological advances or development related to their scholarship, or improvements in community outcomes tied to their work.

4. **Problem:** Applicants working on the margins may have fewer senior scholars who can knowledgeably evaluate their work, especially if the subfield is new and cutting-edge. In such a case, there may not be many scholars who have advanced to upper ranks with expertise in this area. As a result, in letters of recommendation by those lacking expertise, the contributions of the applicant may not be well-understood or articulated. Alternatively, those *with* the expertise to evaluate the applicant may be less senior than typical recommenders (e.g., associate or advanced assistant professors, rather than full professors), or may not be well known to the search committee.

Solution: Do not overestimate the importance of letters from prestigious and well-known recommenders or underestimate the value of those from less well-known and more junior recommenders. As with all letters of recommendation, consider whether any type of recommender bias (gender, racial, subfield, etc.) is present in the letter.

What About After Hiring?

When a faculty member working outside the center of the field is hired, the effects of subfield bias often continue. Scholars report being told to adjust their areas of work toward the center of the field to strengthen their case for tenure and promotion. Some describe that the contribution of their scholarship is minimized, and their legitimacy and expertise is questioned. It is important that the department faculty, mentors and evaluation committees understand subfield bias and actively work to support scholars working on the margins of their disciplines. For example, if there is no one in your department with expertise to mentor a new hire, you might provide resources to an external mentor to serve in this role. Such support for these scholars working on the margins may ultimately diversify your field, improve faculty retention, and expand the scope and impact of your discipline.

References Cited

- 1 Settles, I. H., Jones, M. K., Buchanan, N. T., & Dotson, K. (in press). Epistemic exclusion: Scholar(ly) devaluation that marginalizes faculty of color. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000174>
 - 2 Gonzales, L. D. (2018). Subverting and minding boundaries: The intellectual work of women. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 89(5), 677–701. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1434278>
 - 3 Bernal, D. D. & Villalpando, O. (2002). An apartheid of knowledge in academia: The struggle over the "legitimate" knowledge of faculty of color. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 35(2), 169–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713845282>
 - 4 Settles, I. H., Jones, M. K., Buchanan, N. T., & Brassel, S. T., (2020). Epistemic exclusion of women faculty and faculty of color: Understanding scholar(ly) devaluation as a predictor of turnover intentions. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2021.1914494>
 - 5 Hoppe, T. A., Litovitz, A., Willis, K. A., Meseroll, R. A., Perkins, M. J., Hutchins, B. I., Davis, A. F., Lauer, M. S., Valentine, H. A., Anderson, J. M., & Santangelo, G. M. (2019). Topic choice contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists. *Science Advances*, 5(10), eaaw7238. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw7238>
 - 6 Dotson, K. (2013). How is this paper philosophy? *Comparative Philosophy*, 3(1), 121-121. [https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014\(2012\).030105](https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2012).030105)
-

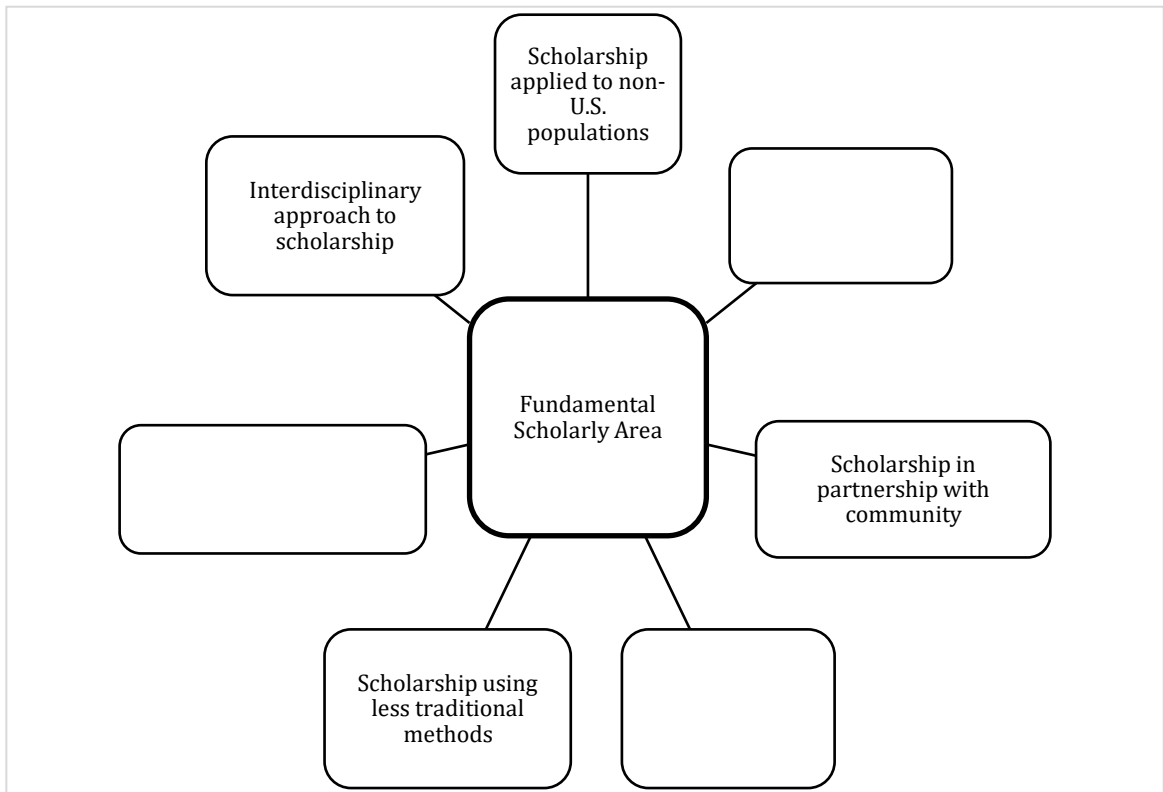
Suggested citation:

University of Michigan STRIDE Committee (2021, June 4). *Subfield Bias in Faculty Hiring Decisions*. University of Michigan ADVANCE Program. <https://advance.umich.edu/>

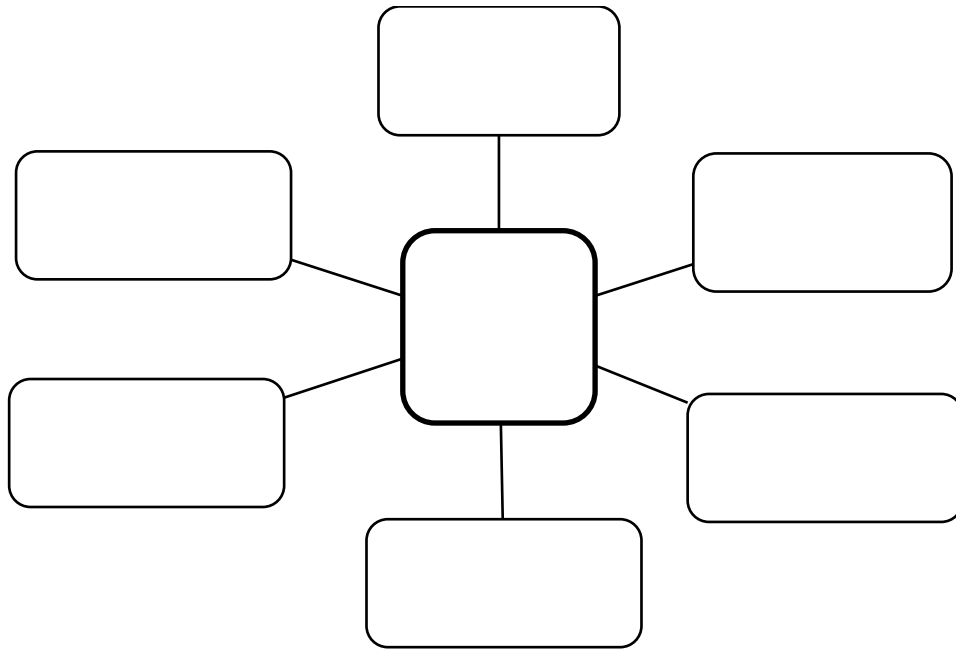
STRIDE Committee members: Settles, I. H. , Bergen E., Cortina L., Linderman J.J., Peters-Golden M., Pozzi S., Rivas-Drake D., Ruetsche L., Saville, J. Schloss P., Verhey K., Viswanath D.

An Exercise to Examine Subfield Bias in Your Field

Because subfield bias is a new topic that may be unfamiliar to many people, we have created a short activity to help you examine what types of scholarship are in the center vs. on the margins in your field. Complete the blank diagram by placing the most valued and central areas of scholarship in the center box. In the surrounding boxes, write-in the types of scholarship that are considered to be on the margins in your field. An example is provided here.



Complete the diagram for your field. Add more boxes as needed.



After completing the diagram, consider:

- Which of these areas are new to the field or attracting up-and-coming scholars?
- Which of these areas has more faculty from marginalized groups working in it?
- If you brought in scholars from an area *on the margins*, in what ways might they contribute to your department's research and/or teaching missions?
- What can you do in your search process to counter subfield bias?