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# The Facade of Fit in Faculty Search Processes

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## ABSTRACT

Various concerns regarding the vitality and racial/ethnic composition of the academic profession have prompted new study of faculty search committees and hiring paradigms, most notably examining the term “fit” in candidate appraisals. Yet no study utilizes a candidate evaluation framework to investigate whether or not faculty members truly assess for fit, or if these assessments stifle diversification processes, especially in light of pervasive institutional efforts to reform faculty hiring. This study uses a critical person-environment fit framework and multiple case study methods to investigate how faculty search committee members individually evaluate and collectively select prospective early-career faculty. Results indicate that fit, as system of assumptions, practices, and tactics designed to evaluate and select candidates based on organizational needs, was minimal in faculty searches. Instead, faculty relied heavily on idiosyncratic preferences to evaluate research, teaching, and service credentials, which also contained criterion that directly and indirectly averted diversity. Findings reveal how the review and selection of candidates is as much, if not more, about individual committee preferences than organizational demands or congruence.

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Higher education; faculty hiring; racial equity; person-environment fit; organizational behavior; multiple case study

## Introduction

Faculty search committees hold an established tradition as the primary conduits of academic hiring at American colleges and universities, yet have recently garnered amplified attention in both research (Griffin, 2020; Liera, 2019; O’Meara et al., 2020; Posselt et al., 2020; Rivera, 2017; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Wright & Vanderford, 2017) and practice (Becker, 2016; Flaherty, 2017; Gasman, 2016) due to several concerns. First, reports of dwindling tenure-track jobs across disciplines (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2018) have prompted many faculty-hopefuls to inquire about the “secret formula” to candidate evaluation. In a study of postdoctoral candidates and employers, 70% of candidates indicated having zero insight as to what search committees expected, while employers believed that “a vast majority of applicants did not sell their skills effectively” (Henderson & Syed, 2016, p. 1). Additionally, a strong diversity imperative

undergirds faculty hiring; data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show persistent disparities across racial and ethnic lines, with all minoritized groups representing approximately one in every four full-time instructional faculty across institutions nationwide (Snyder et al., 2018). Both rationales have placed faculty hiring squarely alongside the study of other covert selection processes, such as undergraduate admissions (Karabel, 2005) and graduate admissions (Posselt, 2015, 2016).

The key to unraveling faculty search processes is likely imbedded in the complex machinations of candidate appraisal. Most notable in the research and practice on faculty evaluation is the term “fit.” This is no small term or trifle, as it has been repeatedly identified as the covert channel of racial bias in faculty hiring (Liera & Ching, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Tuitt et al., 2007), administrative hiring (Reece et al., 2019; Danowitz Sagaria, 2002), and in faculty hiring best practices guidebooks (Fine & Handelsman, 2012; Lee, 2014; Moody, 2015). For instance, Danowitz Sagaria (2002) found that fit was code for determining if candidates had the appropriate cultural capital, including language, presentation, and style of social interaction that were palatable to predominantly white search committees. Moody (2015) labeled “good fit/bad fit” as a cognitive shortcut in candidate evaluation, meant to assess a candidate’s collegiality or uniformity, rather than their academic qualifications or congruence with the department’s needs. Even in non-critical quantitative survey studies of which factors faculty members considered most important during candidate selection, “fit” was at the top of their lists (Landrum & Clump, 2004; Sheehan et al., 1998; Wright & Vanderford, 2017). For better or worse, the term has found a comfortable but controversial home in faculty-hiring research and practice.

Yet for how important fit has become—whether in critical studies, survey studies, or faculty guidebooks—no study provides an empirical definition or framework of fit, leaving the term as amorphous and poorly articulated as originally critiqued. Despite its enduring longevity within the fields of management and organizational behavior, higher education studies only critique the liberal use of the singular term, rather than the larger evaluation procedures it indicates. Put otherwise, the term fit is often invoked to imply a detailed schematic of how candidates are screened, evaluated, and selected. But critiquing faculty hiring without these foundational evaluation principles does little to contest fit, and simultaneously under-identifies the complex array of racial biases that manifest throughout the entire pursuit of fit in candidate evaluations.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how faculty search committee members individually evaluate and collectively select prospective early-career faculty. Using a critical person-environment fit theory specifies an empirically tested model of employee selection, providing an organizing framework and architecture to investigate how, when, and why different biases emerge when

evaluating for candidate fit. This study examines whether or not faculty search committees actually screen for fit during selection processes, and how its varying assessment parameters (i.e. type, characteristics, and weight) impact racial equity<sup>1</sup> in hiring settings. The specific research questions this study seeks to address are:

- (1) Do faculty members consider organizational fit in candidate evaluation? If so, what are the different dimensions (i.e. type, characteristics, weight) of fit?
- (2) How is racial equity prioritized and/or averted in candidate evaluation?
- (3) How does candidate evaluation vary by selection stage within a single committee, and/or vary across discipline-specific committees?

### **Theoretical framework: person-environment (P-E) fit**

P-E fit scholars acknowledge the pervasive yet elusive nature of fit within organizations (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Judge & Ferris, 1992). P-E fit is commonly defined as the extent to which an individual and their environment match on important characteristics (Werbel & Gilliland, 1999). Research suggests that employees that experience fit—whether perceived or actual (Cable & Judge, 1997)—exhibit a host of positive outcomes, such as increased workplace satisfaction and organizational attachment, and reduced likelihood of departure (Chatman, 1991). Although fit has been commonly understood as a post-hire outcome, many studies extend the construct into employment decision-making prior to workplace entry (see, for example, Adkins et al., 1994; Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019; Bretz et al., 1993; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, 2000; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990; Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011). The primary topics in this field of research most germane to the current study are (1) whether employers actually assess organizational fit during candidate selection, and (2) dimensions of fit (i.e. type, criterion, weight, and temporality of evaluative judgments). Jointly considered, these questions create a model of candidate selection that potentially frames faculty search processes to better detect inequities.

#### ***Is organizational fit considered?***

The first study of fit within selection decisions examined if recruiters actually considered *firm-specific fit*: evaluations of candidates that included something more than just determining their *general employability* for any organization or job, and/or personally held *idiosyncratic preferences* (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). The authors argue that if assessments were general and/or idiosyncratic rather than firm-specific, then “the concept of fit may be more a comforting fiction than a strategically based reality” (p. 16). Rather, individually held preferences

that are not stable across raters within the same organization would suggest a lack of cohesive, higher-order organizational alignment. However, researchers found that employers evaluated applicants on the basis of firm-specific fit, and their evaluative judgments were more stable between raters of the same organization than of different ones, signifying mutually held organizational values that impacted selection.

However, later evidence suggested the contrary: that recruiters most often used non-firm specific characteristics when describing candidate fit parameters (Bretz et al., 1993), and that P-O fit was largely idiosyncratic and had a minor relationship with an organization's selection decisions (Adkins et al., 1994). Reconciling these findings, Cable and Judge (1997) attributed divergent results to measurement differences—whereas Adkins and colleagues studied *actual* fit, prior studies measured *perceived* fit. Employer's perceived fit—or the observed congruence between an interviewer's perceptions of their organization and applicant's values—and not actual fit (i.e. statistically derived congruence between an applicant's and organization's values) contributed to interviewers' selection decisions.

### ***Dimensions of perceived fit in candidate evaluation***

With P-E fit in candidate evaluation established, studies have also considered how candidate evaluation differs by type, criterion, and temporality (e.g., Chen et al., 2008; Chuang & Sackett, 2005; Kristof-Brown, 2000; Piasentin & Chapman, 2006; Sekiguchi, 2004, 2007; Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011). First, studies indicate that employers differentiate between perceived person-job (P-J) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit assessments during selection, and that assessments of both are dependent on different applicant characteristics (Barrick & Parks-Leduc, 2019; Kristof-Brown, 2000; Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011) and selection stage (Chuang & Sackett, 2005). Kristof-Brown (2000) found that perceived P-J fit was informed by recruiters' sense of an applicant's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), while their perceived P-O fit was more closely related to applicant's personality and values, with the latter being less associated with hiring outcomes.

Temporal dimensions also bind perceived assessments of fit (Chuang & Sackett, 2005; Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011). Chuang and Sackett (2005) found evidence for different effects dependent on selection stage: while perceived P-J fit was more important during earlier stages of the search (e.g., perceived ability to perform job duties), P-O fit took greater precedence as the search continued into later stages (e.g., performing duties while maximizing organizational values). This aligns with previous literature on candidate evaluation—that characteristics such as personal values, political orientation, and personality traits “become particularly important once preliminary screening

establishes that all (remaining) candidates meet minimal job requirements” (Ricklefs, 1979, as cited in Rynes & Gerhart, 1990).

### ***Critical perspectives on fit in faculty hiring***

The P-E fit literature provides an important theoretical architecture to a construct previously underexplored. However, critical perspectives on faculty careers and faculty hiring call into question whether faculty search committees strictly adhere to this linear evaluation model, or even evaluate for empirical fit at all. First, Sekiguchi and Huber (2011) advanced a less-linear model, hypothesizing that task elements (i.e. managerial tasks vs. knowledge-intensive tasks) affected how candidates were evaluated. Results indicated that P-O fit was weighted more heavily for managerial positions, likely because those jobs required greater levels of work interdependence and adherence to organizational values. Conversely, P-J fit was more relevant for knowledge-intensive jobs, where shared organizational values are generally less pervasive due to the higher levels of professional autonomy.

As a knowledge-intensive vocation, the differences between faculty careers and other professions may warp the P-O/P-J binary, and yield greater reliance on idiosyncratic preferences. Faculty members are afforded high levels of autonomy, and there is minimal interconnectedness amongst them in their primary task elements (i.e. research and teaching). Moreover, faculty receive minimal training on how to conduct actual hiring procedures (Moody, 2015), are greatly differentiated by disciplinary cultures (Clark, 1987) and logics (Posselt, 2015), and make decisions on personnel who could reasonably be their colleague for life—increasing the perceived pressure to “get it right.” Thus, from a structural career perspective, faculty hiring may have less to do with the organization, and more to do with the faculty’s high degree of independence to enact their own biases of candidate credentials.

From a critical hiring perspective, the consequences of idiosyncratic preferences cannot be overstated. In larger society, aversive racism explains how white evaluators with self-reported egalitarian beliefs nevertheless exhibit negative appraisals of minoritized populations through mechanisms of rationalization, avoidance, and shifting preferences (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Evidence of aversive racism has been demonstrated in numerous decision-making contexts, such as emergency interventions, policy support, and hiring (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Especially in hiring settings, aversive racism operates through individuals justifying their negative evaluations through rationalizations “on the basis of some factor other than race” (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000, p. 315). Given that higher education institutions reflect the broader society they occupy, it is unsurprising that selection biases and shifting preferences impede equity across numerous university personnel selection settings (Golden, 2006; Karabel, 2005; Posselt, 2016).

Faculty careers are no exception—especially given faculty member’s far-reaching evaluation responsibilities (e.g., tenure case reviews, manuscript reviews, graduate student selection, etc.), which have significant implications for equity and inclusion (Posselt et al., 2020). Although postsecondary institutions and foundations have put forth consistent effort to improve hiring equity, problems still persist. For instance, research shows evidence of cultural-matching biases that privilege certain appearances, languages, leisure-pursuits, and self-presentation styles (Rivera, 2012; Danowitz Sagaria, 2002; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), and gender biases that disproportionately perceive women candidates as being “immovable” due to their relationship status (Rivera, 2017). Liera and Ching (2019) ascribe these race- and gender-based inequities to social constructions of merit, fit, and culture that value Eurocentric epistemologies. Ultimately, faculty deem who are “movable” or have “respected research” based on purportedly egalitarian principles—a display of aversive racism—founded on a predominantly white male professoriate that “holds up a mirror” (Posselt, 2016).

While discussing blended theoretical frameworks, Pfeffer (1981) imparts: “insight can be gained from the application of all the frameworks in the same situation. This statement is true, but only within limits. At some point, the various perspectives will begin to make different predictions about what will occur, and will generate different recommendations concerning the strategy and tactics to be followed” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 30). Although P-E fit provides an important context to candidate evaluation, it, like many other organizational theories, lacks an explicit focus on racial equity—a criticism levied by many organizational theorists (see, for example, Liera, 2019; Nkomo, 1992; Ray, 2019). Although P-E fit suggests that faculty precisely gauge fit, critical perspectives depict a less-linear process, lending more credence to idiosyncratic preferences, which in a higher education context—consistently reveal aversive racism and bias against marginalized candidates. Blending both perspectives, this study aims to identify inequities within the entire candidate evaluation process of early-career faculty candidates.

## Methods

### *Multiple case study design*

I employed a multiple embedded case study approach in order to document social attitudes and behaviors within an organizational phenomenon (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2017). Case study research is a predominantly qualitative technique in which a bounded system (a “case”) or multiple-bounded systems are studied at length in their real-life context(s) (Yin, 2017). This design strengthens the traditional single case approach by examining multiple cases, which increases internal validity and provides greater stability of findings (Miles et al., 2014;



Stake, 2006; Yin, 2017). In multiple case study research, it is important to explicate the units of analysis, given the abundance of cases, embedded cases, and contexts under investigation.

In the current study, the cases were four faculty search committees from the same public, research-intensive institution. Replication of these cases was sought so that with enough replications, converging and diverging areas emerge that more fundamentally approach the *quintain*, or the umbrella of collective cases that most fully capture the phenomenon under study. Stake (2006) explains, “multicase research starts with the quintain. To understand it better, we study some of its single cases—its sites or manifestations. We study what is similar and different about the cases in order to understand the quintain better” (p. 6). Thus, using *theoretical* replication techniques (Yin, 2017), four search committees were studied to understand the different dimensions used in candidate evaluation. Prior research recommends between four to ten cases, since fewer than four does not show enough interactivity between the phenomena and their contexts (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2017).

Understanding the different dimensions of candidate evaluation through examining the cases alone would be insufficient, since certain components exist within each case (embedded subunits), while other features exist outside of the cases (the context). In other words, faculty searches are not monolithic, yet consist of different stages (embedded subunits), and occur differently between departments within the same university (their departmental contexts). Concerning the inside, the embedded subunits are the two most prominent stages of selection: the first stage when the committee determines the “long short-list” and “short-list,” and the second stage when faculty conduct on-campus interviews to determine the final hire(s). This was intentionally designed since candidate evaluation markedly differs by stage of selection (Chuang & Sackett, 2005). Since these factors may also vary by department within a single university, I clarify both the embedded subunits and contexts in this study in order to fully understand the quintain of faculty search processes.

### ***Site selection rationale and description***

The context is expected to influence the cases’ activities and functions (Stake, 2006), thus warranting description. The primary contexts were the academic departments the searches resided in, rather than the overall institution. Higher education literature demonstrates how departments have a significant degree of variation (Clark, 1987; Kezar et al., 2015), and considerable influence on personnel selection procedures (Gasman et al., 2011; Posselt, 2015). Because all searches still come from the same institution, I briefly highlight pertinent features of the university’s functions and history related to faculty diversity.



The institutional site is fictitiously named Northfield University, a large, research-intensive institution located in the western region of the United States. This site was selected based on its similarities to other large, research-intensive institutions, namely the racial demographics of the faculty and the institution's history with racial incidences. The representation of faculty of color has yet to reach comparable levels to its student diversity, and resemble national statistics on full-time, tenure-track faculty. Yet the institution has marginally worse representation of Black faculty, marginally better representation of Latinx faculty, and a notably higher percentage of Asian/Asian-American faculty.

Several years ago, a string of racial discrimination incidents among faculty prompted an external investigation of the university. The final report revealed several troubling indictments of the university's racial climate and mishandlings of grievance processes. In response, the institution developed an office akin to a chief diversity officer's suite, focused on diminishing bias and using evidence-based research to promote diversity widely. Prior to the office, there was a faculty diversity officer that worked with departments to clarify affirmative action guidelines. Now, a prominent central administrator oversees the office that now has a broader array of duties, and employs several strategies to increase faculty diversity. Most notably these include institutionalized search trainings requiring certification of all search committee members, checks at several search stages to ensure that the racial and gender demography of the pool matches national availability statistics, and resources to subsidize a select number of FTEs per year to aid departments in their recruitment efforts. All applicants are also required to compose a diversity statement in their application.

### ***Committee and department selection rationale and descriptions***

Selection of the search committees was based on purposive sampling. Several criteria were used during case selection to ensure that cases were chosen in accordance with typical case study selection procedures (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2017). First, only committees that were searching for an early-career professor (i.e. assistant and early/associate) were considered for participation. Moreover, I limited access to tenure-track searches, to ensure some level of uniformity across cases while allowing them to vary on characteristics of interest to the study, such as selection stage and discipline. Gaining access to each search required a prolonged engagement with different deans, department chairs, academic personnel staff, search chairs, and finally committee members. After receiving the necessary approvals, I gained access to one committee each under the direction of four divisional deans: social sciences, humanities, life/behavioral sciences, and physical sciences. For anonymity purposes to secure buy-in and participation, each department is described by its division title rather than its specific

discipline. Despite administrative approval and strict anonymity procedures, only four of the nearly ten eligible searches participated.

### ***Data collection & sample***

A major strength of case study research is that it calls for triangulating multiple sources of data to construct findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2017). In a constructivist approach, triangulation is not necessarily about finding a singular reality, but ensuring that descriptions are accurate and participant's perceptions are captured with precision to minimize potential misunderstandings. For this study, I relied on semi-structured interviews of four different stakeholder groups and document data. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 participants: four deans, four administrators, four department chairs (who also participated in search committee deliberations), and 11 faculty members across the different search committees. A majority of the search committee members were interviewed twice in accordance with this study's embedded subunit design, bringing the total to 31 semi-structured interviews. The current study primarily uses a subsection of this data of faculty search committee members and department chairs focused on discussions of evaluative judgments.

Semi-structured faculty interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes and occurred between fall 2018 and winter 2019. Participants were interviewed twice during the search process: once after the formation of the short-list, and once again after on-campus job talks, candidate selection, and the departmental vote. Questions pertained to (1) essential features of the department, (2) candidate judgments based on characteristics they believe made applicants highly fit, poorly fit, and borderline, and (3) considerations of racial/ethnic diversity in hiring. To corroborate interview data, I also collected select documents related to search committee activity. These were documents that search members felt comfortable sharing, such as candidate evaluation rubrics, job ads, and select e-mail correspondences. Interview and document data were compiled into a case study database—a compilation of all the data and analytic memos from each case study organized by department in preparation for conducting within-case and between-case analyses.

### ***Data analysis***

#### ***Coding***

After the interviews and documents were collected and compiled, I engaged in a multi-step coding procedure to organize the data. Before coding, I created analytic memos to capture ideas after each interview, which provided me with a first glimpse of the coding architecture. Data were input, sorted, and coded in Dedoose, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). I

first conducted *open coding* (Saldaña, 2016), which led to the broad coding domains closely related to the theoretical constructs, such as “person-job fit,” “perceived supports/barriers of diversity,” and “selection characteristics.” As codes within these broad categories began to diverge amongst each other, I transitioned into first-level coding, using *attribute*, *structural*, and *magnitude* techniques to create more stable categories (Saldaña, 2016). For instance, the “selection characteristics” code, which was used to document what characteristics participants considered when evaluating candidates, later transformed into a parent code when more nuanced excerpts on topics such as subject expertise, grant funding, and teaching record materialized through structural coding. Magnitude and attribute codes were also used to document the frequency of such codes and the demographics characteristics of those participants (e.g., race, gender, and rank), respectively. Finally, I engaged in second-level coding using a *pattern* approach, pulling together the material from first-level codes into more parsimonious units in preparation for analyses<sup>2</sup> (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Analysis**

Once the data were coded, I began to answer the research questions through qualitative data analysis. A routine mistake in multiple case study analysis is to immediately conduct a cross-case analysis on prematurely devised case studies (Stake, 2006). However, case development was imperative before conducting cross-case analyses, as each case contributed unique facets to the quintain. Thus, data analysis was conducted in two phases: within-case analyses using the *constant-comparative method*, and between-case analyses using *cross-case analysis*. The constant-comparative method involves using inductive and deductive reasoning to compare clusters of data to determine their similarities and differences, bringing them closer toward fully answering the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I applied the same codebook to all cases, yet also allowed room for potential divergences, which are examined in the “departmental criterion” results. Once the case-level themes were generated, I created a matrix to investigate their relation amongst each other. This formed the basis of the cross-case analysis to identify aggregated assertions related to the quintain. Cross-case analysis incorporated the individual case findings, along with their embedded subunits and contexts, and bound them together to create larger assertions to answer the research questions across cases. These quintain-level assertions became the basis for this study’s findings.

### **Limitations**

The current study is limited in a few ways. This study would have greatly benefited from observing actual search committee deliberations. At the onset of this study, I attempted to observe these meetings to better understand their

procedures. No committee allowed me into the room despite administrative support, IRB approval, and multi-level confidentiality and anonymity assurances. In order to account for this limitation, I collected interview and document data to create the most robust depiction of search committee procedures as possible, which were also bound by the same confidentiality and anonymity procedures. Yet these precautions also limited the extent to which I was able to describe each search committee's context in depth. Thus, the university is described in general terms lacking sophisticated detail, and the departments are not described by their specific field, but through their general disciplinary context and division.

## Findings

Results from participants' interviews demonstrate significant discrepancies between the employee selection literature and faculty search committee processes. Compared to the normative model of selection, screening for fit in faculty searches—whether for the job or the organization—was significantly limited. Instead, faculty's espoused evaluative frameworks were far more driven by idiosyncratic preferences than actual perceived fit assessments. In the first stage of selection, participants narrowed the list of hundreds of applicants in the general pool, down to three to seven candidates for the short-list. Faculty first screened for minimum qualification by determining candidate's subject expertise alignment with the position description—a form of person-job fit. After that initial consideration, participants attempted to maximize status and candidate credentials by using their own devised preferences, primarily by measuring research activity and grappling with diversity statements, with minimal measurement or consensus to solidify the short-list. Short-listed candidates were then invited onto campus to deliver job talks, and meet with the committee, departmental colleagues, and administrators. In this stage, faculty first screened for subject expertise alignment within the department's existing research infrastructure—a form of person-organization fit. After, they used a combination of individual preferences related to research expertise (and some consideration for teaching expertise), and unique departmental criterion to inform final candidate selection.

Otherwise stated, idiosyncratic preferences largely governed the evaluative stages of faculty searches, whereas empirically supported fit assessments were limited to subject expertise agreement in small aspects of the search. Fit evaluations roughly explained 20% to 25% of candidate eliminations, whereas individual faculty preferences regarding predominantly research and few teaching parameters constituted the remaining 75% to 80%. Rynes and Gerhart (1990) explain that fit for the organizational unit and individual preferences are not mutually exclusive, stating, "the existence of certain idiosyncratic interpretations does not rule out the simultaneous coexistence of

other shared perceptions due to common organizational membership” (p. 17). The primary issue herein is that idiosyncratic preferences were masqueraded as fit assessments, which directly and indirectly disadvantaged minoritized candidates in the hiring process.

### ***Forming the short-list: subject expertise and idiosyncratic preferences***

#### ***Person-job fit—subject expertise alignment***

Most analogous to the normative model of personnel selection, faculty members across all four search committees first screened for candidates’ minimal qualifications before assessing other materials in the files. Minimal qualification meant that candidates’ research and teaching materials reflected the subject expertise requested in the job call. Since each committee received a significant amount of applications, this was seen as an important first step to remove candidates who—regardless of their qualifications—were not seen as viable for the position.

The first pass was to kick anybody out who did not meet the research area or background. Writing the ad was really important because even things like, “Do we want to say PhD in [*life sciences*]? What if someone has a PhD in public health?” That was really the first cut. It was mainly because either they had a PhD in something that was totally not germane, like pharmacology, or because their research clearly did not fit with what the very short description of it was in the ad. (**Dr. Williams, Asian American male Search Committee Member [SCM]—Life Sciences**)

This exemplified person-job fit based on the definition of the term: matching candidate characteristics with the stipulated requirements of the job, an explicit measurement of that characteristic, and had a strong consensus between committee members within the same search. Across the different departments, committee members engaged in little debate as to what constituted subject expertise alignment. In the eyes of one faculty member, subject expertise was so important that he unyieldingly declined a highly qualified candidate with otherwise favorable characteristics. He explained,

There was one extremely good woman who’s Korean, and who’s won all sorts of prizes. And as I said, if the search had been open, she would’ve [hand gestures suggest “progressed further”]. She doesn’t 100% tick the diversity box, but pretty much, because she’s a woman, and she’s Asian. So it was that, and she had these wonderful research proposals. But it wasn’t comparative, and our colleagues said, “But look, she doesn’t fit what’s on the post.” And we have to say, “Well, I’m afraid that’s the case.” And I’m very sorry we can’t have her, but for this position, she doesn’t fit the bill. (**Dr. Reynolds, White male SCM—Social Sciences**)

Despite “ticking the diversity box” as a woman of color, and having a strong track record of research proposals and awards, the candidate was still unable to advance further into the search due to her misalignment with the position description. The emphasis of “we” and “colleagues” further highlights its close

resemblance to fit, and exemplifies the steadfast nature of subject expertise as an early winnowing agent in faculty search processes.

### *Idiosyncratic preferences in research impact and identity*

Assessing subject expertise agreement was important, yet many faculty members considered it a mundane step in order to examine more important details that separated viable from non-viable candidates. Even after this first pass, there were still many candidates who were considered appropriate for the job and could have “fit” through deliberations, yet were not extended an interview. Thus, screening for subject expertise agreement still did not completely satisfy the minimum qualifications portion of the normative selection model, leaving behind a large chasm between the general pool and the short-list. This void—which constituted a greater portion of the first selection stage—was filled by assessing what nearly all faculty deemed as the most important criteria in faculty selection at a large research university: research activity, measured by perceived impact, productivity, and funding. These criteria were predominantly driven by individual preferences, rather than any semblance of organizational or departmental fit. It was also at this stage that faculty had to grapple with candidates’ identities, which was overwhelmingly driven by ideals of administrative compliance to avoid search delay. In what proceeds, I illustrate how the parameters of (1) impactful research and (2) identity lacked detailed articulation or moderate consensus between faculty, demonstrating the fluidity of fit and different evaluation standards for marginalized candidates.

Determining research impact in the first stage of selection was the most notable research parameter, since demonstrable scholarly impact is a criterion for achieving promotion and tenure at any large, research-intensive university. Across departments, faculty members unevenly applied phrases such as “stand out,” “impactful,” and “interesting” to describe what constituted original research that merited hiring.

If I really understood the stakes of the [applicant’s] project, if that came across then I wanted to pursue that person’s candidacy. The same was true with this, where it’s much closer to my own field, but if they could convey a sense of excitement and importance about the work that they were doing, and difference, right? So it’s somebody who’s not working sort of on trend, you know, but is actually going outside the box a little bit in terms of their thought. That’s for me where the main burden of proof was. (**Dr. Jones, White woman SCM—Humanities**)

This suggests that candidates that could situate their research in larger contexts of significance and timeliness—otherwise known as “the stakes”—activated a sense of importance to them. Yet the stakes were often a moving target, since this participant had also forwarded a candidate onto the long short-list that had no alignment with the position description. The candidate—from Harvard—“had the wackiest project [they] thought was amazing” on an unrelated

topic, which prompted Dr. Jones to elevate her onto the long short-list. Dr. Tidwell (White male SCM) in the life sciences was the closest to operationalizing these stakes, admitting that there were “varying views on what the impact of someone’s research program ... if it’s not on the top three list or top five list of chronic illnesses that are causing people to die in the US, then that got a bit less of [impact] ... that was sort of more borderline.” Dr. Tidwell’s measurement seemed more personally contrived and arbitrary, and was also dissimilar to other committee members’ definition of impactful research, contributing to zero racially minoritized candidates on their short-list.

Preferences were particularly divided on identity-based scholarship, which was predominantly conducted by candidates of color and other marginalized groups. Several committee members seemed to define “impact” as perceived generalizability, and studies that were focused on specific communities were seen as less impactful. In the social science committee, Dr. Frazier believed that another’s research was topically “narrow,” despite having what he described as a novel dataset.

It really was pretty narrow. But it was on a big subject: immigration. Which wasn’t his only subject, he had a lot of other papers. So what was narrow about it? He was interested in immigrant incorporation into the society and he had gotten US census data. And, [*historical event*] had resulted in a bunch of immigrants, a bunch of people, but including immigrants being drafted into the army and serving in that institution. As opposed to being left in their home communities, which were usually ethnic communities. So he had the names of people ... like who they had married, they had the last name of the person they had married so they could get the ethnicity from that. So he was able to tell who had married in their ethnic group. So that was his research ... and that was really cool what he did, but it was also very narrow. (Dr. Frazier, White male SCM—Social Sciences)

Across every search, research was considered narrow if any aspect of the study or research agenda—topic, sample, theory, or implications—was purposefully constricted to attune to a certain population, region, or form of identity. In the life sciences committee, a candidate conducting research on anti-gay bias was critiqued for not being “as much of a scientist as some of the others [conducting] basic science,” despite that candidate having an “amazing long track record and [being] really very influential.” Nearly each time the issue of being too narrow was directed toward research on marginalized communities.

Assessing the research contributions of marginalized candidates indirectly implicated race, but racial equity was also averted more directly by considering candidates’ identities. Participants primarily espoused a “color-convenience” perspective, different from complete color-blindness, rooted in ideals of administrative compliance and egalitarianism. Prior to the search, considering identity was convenient and widely seen as permissible, since “casting the widest net possible” complied with administrative oversight, evaded search delay, and propagated the egalitarian principles of equality of opportunity. However, social identity transformed from a competitive advantage to a non-



factor when reviewing candidates, with many faculty having different—albeit still color-blind—perspectives on considering identity. For one participant in the social sciences, racial identity “wasn’t anybody’s criterion at all, it just showed up,” while another in the life sciences “wasn’t thinking too much about that [identity] when I was looking at the files, I wasn’t thinking about that at all actually.” In the physical sciences, racial equity was often seen as subsidiary and/or antagonistic to gender equity, with the latter being substituted to validate the lack of racial diversity. Dr. Reeves best exemplified the color-convenience evaluation perspective: in describing a two-pane graphic distributed by the institution’s equity office illustrating how children of different heights require differently sized boxes to view the baseball game (equity) vs. receiving the same boxes (equality), she mistakenly applied the equality perspective to candidate review. She states,

It’s not this kid’s fault that he’s not tall enough to see over this fence. He didn’t build the fence. He didn’t decide how tall he was gonna be. That’s one of the things that, for me, are really important: that every file gets the same kind of evaluation. You start in the same place. You work it, every file, through the same way. Each file’s gonna get a half hour, so no matter what you’re doing, you’re spending a half hour with every file. But whatever that process is for you, every file is getting it.

Despite initially recognizing that immutable social characteristics and circumstances affect individual’s life chances, she failed to carry this approach over into hiring. A more accurate interpretation of the graphic would recognize that marginalized candidates in particular face numerous career hurdles, which evaluation should account for. However, few participants across disciplines held a view that considered how identity affected the files and materials within them, shaping opportunities for marginalized candidates. In line with the espoused color-convenience ideology, diversity continued to devolve as searches progressed. Once considered a competitive advantage and then a non-factor, identity turned into a competitive disadvantage in recommending the final hire.

### ***Recommending the final hire: preferences and unique departmental criterion***

After the formation of the short-list, between three to six candidates were invited to campus to deliver job-talks and participate in on-campus interviews. At the conclusion of the visits, search committee members reconvened to determine which candidate(s) they would recommend to the department for hire. In the normative model of selection, this stage occurs once all candidates have been deemed highly qualified, and have exhibited some level of talent that warranted further investigation. Indeed, in faculty members’ recollection of search procedures, all candidates brought for campus interviews achieved some level of high baseline qualification, and

many faculty expressed that they could reasonably see any of the interviewed candidates as viable colleagues.

This begs the question: how do faculty make selection decisions between very capable candidates in the second round of selection, and does it differ significantly from forming the short-list? In the normative model of selection, employers begin to screen for value-congruence beyond candidates' KSAs—otherwise known as person-organization fit. In this stage, employers attempt to ascertain if candidates can perform the job *and* perform in such a way that also maximizes organizational values. In faculty hiring, this was primarily achieved by revisiting subject expertise to ensure that a candidate's research agenda was not too similar to those already within the department. Although many participants saw this as a reasonable level of screening so as to not replicate efforts within the department, this too was intertwined with individual preferences regarding methods, impact, and status.

That could be someone who, “We have five of you already.” [*Social science*] has a lot of different methods. Some people do experiments. Some people do surveys. Some people do archival work. Since we are a PhD program that's producing PhDs that compete for top jobs, we've got to be able to train people across all those methods. If we have five people who are great at experiments and someone rolls along and they're extremely talented and they do experiments and we don't have anyone who does surveys, we're gonna need to make a hire in the survey area. Something like that. We load up on that. I would say that's not a default for us that we wouldn't hire that [experimental] person. The department's MO has typically been always to privilege talent. (**Dr. Reeves, White woman SCM—Social Sciences**)

This example provides additional evidence for subject expertise fit during selection. Despite experiments being perceived as more rigorous in the social sciences, adequate experimental representation in the department would lead the committee to consider a survey methods expert. However, she still leaves room for the possibility of still pursuing that hire, which suggests that exceptions to the rule are present if the perceived status of the applicant was high enough. This speaks to a reoccurring theme across the four committees, especially among evaluating finalists: status maximization was the priority once candidates matched the position description. The pursuit of status had unclear rules and boundaries, and was primarily driven by each participant's personal preferences regarding biased research parameters and select teaching qualifications. Dr. Williams shared in their discussion of short-listed candidates:

And so, it all sort of came back to this criterion of who's got the most impactful, exciting [research] ... would really add something to our department. Those kinds of evaluations on a kind of ... I mean, certainly on an individual basis, but we did have to compare people against each other. But it was always about that criteria, as opposed to simple numbers, so to speak.” (**Dr. Williams, Asian American male SCM—Life Sciences**)

Status maximization was very typical during the final stages, when nearly all candidates were considered comparably competitive. Additionally, each committee invoked department-specific criterion items that were informed by disciplinary logics and/or departmental politics, most of which had little to do about the candidates themselves. Participants on the physical sciences committee considered subject expertise beyond verifying minimal qualification; one participant shared:

We do the candidates in different fields also because this search is reasonably broad. And so, it's different areas within this broader area. So, then, you're partially using the saying "What area of [physical sciences] do I think is promising, and exciting, and important," and so on. And then different people just have different tastes on that, and it's probably driven by what directions they themselves work on because everybody thinks their area is the most important, and that's probably why they're working on it in the first place. (Dr. Martin, White woman SCM—Physical Sciences)

This quote suggests the presence of a cloning bias (Moody, 2015) and homophily (Posselt, 2016)—the desire to hire similarly minded peers with matching areas and/or qualifications, above and beyond consideration for departmental demands. The cloning bias may be an artifact of departmental history regarding how the search was formed. Interviews with the search chair and department chair reveal that the search was not top in the queue until the department received a significant donor gift. As Dr. Kelly (White male SCM—Physical Sciences) indicated, it required "some arguing ... a lot of effort, and a lot of grief in this" until the department complied. Faculty who were not originally animated by the prospects of an unanticipated search may have seen that search as an opportunity to converge their own interests with the momentum of the new hire, highlighting the importance of departmental politics in faculty hiring.

Similar departmental factors infiltrated the criterion considered in the social science and humanities committees. In the former, participants were keenly aware of a candidate's recruitability—or likelihood that they would accept the institution's offer of employment. Although there were some minimal considerations of recruitability while forming the short-list, it was most prominent in the second stage of selection.

Also, I believe in what I call "bottom fishing." Like [*Northfield University*] cannot get the best graduate students and it can't usually hire the best faculty. It does a better job with hiring the best faculty, but try to go for the hottest hotshot in the market I think is just a waste of our time. We're not going to get that person. If Harvard and Princeton and [*Institution*] are bidding on that person, I'd rather try to find somebody that I think is almost as good, that we could get. That's how I think. (Dr. Frazier, White male SCM — Social Sciences)

This also highlights the importance of context in understanding faculty hiring. Simply rank-ordering how faculty weigh traditional factors such as research impact or research novelty neglects the practical importance of securing the hire. The social science department had a "perennial problem" of candidates

being “picked off by a high ranking university unless they have some other reason they want to be in [Northfield’s city]” (Dr. Perry, White Male SCM—Social Sciences). As such, decisions were split regarding one of the finalists, a candidate of color, to such a point where Dr. Frazier said he “wouldn’t have gone for him. I would have gone for somebody that I thought was just almost as good and that we would have had a better chance for.” This resembles previously documented myths about capable candidates of color being considered too risky or highly sought after, which can result in them not being offered the position (Smith, Wolf, & Busenberg, 1996).

## Discussion

In 1964, United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart uttered the phrase “I know it when I see it,” in his attempt to describe what legally constituted obscenity in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. This now-famous phrase was originally used when the Justice was unable to describe the legal threshold of what constituted hard-core pornography, opting instead for a “common sense test.” It is now ubiquitously used to describe orders of phenomena that are difficult to categorize yet many are supposedly familiar with. The term fit in faculty searches seems to have reached a similar level of “I know it when I see it”: used to evoke some semblance of shared understanding, yet lacking specific parameters and measurements. This single concept has provoked many scholars into unraveling its mysteries (Liera & Ching, 2019; Reece et al., 2019; Danowitz Sagaria, 2002; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), yet with limited success. These studies fall short because they do not use an empirical definition of fit, or support conclusions with literature on candidate evaluation and selection, doing little to disprove fit or influence institutional behavior and decision-making. Thus, this study was originally motivated by a very simple question: using empirical literature on personnel selection, do faculty members actually consider fit in their own selection of candidates?

Regarding the first and third research questions, this study did find evidence of fit assessments across all disciplines, yet these were limited to initial considerations of subject expertise alignment with the position description and the department’s research infrastructure. These criteria only eliminated a fraction of the general pool across all searches; nearly all other filter criterion used to winnow candidates lacked sufficient measurement, consensus, and/or relationship to the department, making them idiosyncratic preferences rather than criteria-based fit. Thus, the use of the term fit is problematic for two reasons: (1) its application to understanding and justifying hiring decisions is severely overstated, and (2) it obscures the abundance of idiosyncratic preferences throughout the entire hiring process, which perpetuate racial aversion, neutrality, and convenience. Racially averse faculty constructed new standards such as “impactful” and “narrow” to evaluate and demerit research

credentials, while integrating identity when it was most convenient and least impactful to do so. Together, these results illustrate how searches are as much about the department and faculty than the candidates themselves, casting doubt on meritocracy and demonstrating how searches are far less about fit than they are about elevating status, minimizing identity, and mitigating perceived risk for the department.

In truth, fit in a theoretical sense is not nefarious. The discourse surrounding fit began as many critiqued the term as code to exclude marginalized candidates in hiring procedures. Yet *P-E* fit scholars have found that fit *does* exist in other industries and settings. Optimal job- and organizational-fit in hiring is built on consensus, measurement, and factors related to the job and/or organization, all desirable features of personnel selection. This begs several important questions: *can* and *should* we be assessing for fit in academic careers, how can racial equity be integrated in such a perspective, and are academic careers even designed in ways to promote these aspirations at all?

In regards to the latter question, this study's findings are unsurprising when placed in context, since neither the design of academic careers nor the racialized system of higher education they inhabit support such standards. First, committees are designed in ways that do not maximally consider or calibrate faculty members' unique preferences. At minimum, many committees are assembled due to service gaps in the department, with some consideration of diversity. Once placed on the committee, high faculty autonomy allows faculty to impose their own standards and preferences as to what constitutes quality research, sound teaching, and collegial dynamics. Despite the abundance of research demonstrating racial inequities in all three career domains, faculty still evaluate candidates with an "anything but race" mentality, sustaining existing inequities into faculty hiring and beyond. This leads back to the former questions: how can institutions create the capacity for criterion-based fit, or simply more equity-driven evaluation procedures, within academic search and selection procedures? Based on the results of this study, I outline a few practical implications to improve hiring processes and enhance hiring equity.

### ***Recommendations for practice and future research***

Several empirical studies (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Posselt, 2016), and practical guidebooks (Fine & Handelsman, 2012; Lee, 2014; Moody, 2015) advocate for greater use of rubrics and standard criterion in faculty searches. Rubrics have been strongly promoted in the higher education selection discourse to standardize assessment and "decide what to value in the files" (Light, 1994, p. 173). While they hold much promise for more fair review standards, they still require a precise implementation to avoid equity pitfalls and yield maximum benefit (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). Moody (2015) explains that the

rush to candidates still “leads evaluators to prematurely state their position (*he’s clearly number one*); close their minds to new evidence; and then defend their stated position to the death” (p. 13). Results from this study help generate new insights into creating and applying rubrics.

First, using rubrics still did not preclude the preponderance of personal preferences found in this study. Faculty reviewed candidates in pairs or teams, and since no single committee member reviewed all files, unevenly applied preferences and unchecked biases could still contribute to minoritized candidates being more harshly critiqued, allowing them to slip through the evaluation cracks. Committees should convene prior to evaluating any candidate to create rubrics, and then apply those rubrics to exemplars to train raters and calibrate metrics (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). Jointly creating *and* calibrating rubrics allows faculty to explicitly state and defend their own leanings, expose their biases, and ensure that equal and fair criterion is applied consistently. Rubrics also must have explicit equity considerations to maximally consider diversity (for example, see Liera & Ching, 2019). Not only would explicit mention of identity and diversity challenge the status-quo of guarded discussions around racial equity (Liera, 2019), but could also convert biases related to engaged research, teaching, and service into competitive advantages necessary to support twenty-first century learners. These rubric-based recommendations aim to create more stable and equity-driven assessments between raters, and make candidate evaluation more substantively and procedurally fair.

Next, committees must define their search beyond simply subject expertise agreement with the position and department’s research layout. This begs a greater question that would strengthen rubrics and achieve fit: just what *is* the department and institution about? Is there a common bond that unites the department beyond simply wanting qualified researchers, and what are important institutional and departmental goals that candidates may also satisfy? Typically, there is a teaching and/or research hole the department needs to fill with the search for workload purposes, but surely departments are connected by more than just research and teaching qualifications. For instance, some departments are characterized by a strong social-justice emphasis, or the institution is attempting to improve its relationship with the surrounding community through engaged-scholarship. Although faculty in this study had a difficult time describing their departments, they still had tacit departmental assumptions that infiltrated candidate evaluation in the finalist stage. This would also give departments ample opportunity to put their purported desire for diversity into practice, which is rarely successfully enacted.

Institutional leaders must provide greater clarity on the importance of identity in faculty hiring. Despite the advent of diversity statements, faculty still espoused a color-convenience perspective: emphasizing identity in position advertisements, neglecting identity in evaluation, yet conveniently

invoking identity when making final offers to a candidate's detriment. This perspective has likely persisted due to a number of reasons: egalitarian principles of aversive racism, inadequate trainings, flexible administrators, and/or confusion regarding state- and federal-level equal opportunity laws. Equity trainings must reach beyond implicit bias, and toward systemic career inequities that manifest in the candidates' files themselves, such as how topic choice contributes to lower rates of NIH award attainment among Black scientists (Hoppe et al., 2019). This training may better equip faculty to adopt a more holistic approach to evaluation activities specifically, one that considers career barriers when evaluating marginalized candidates.

Finally, future research on faculty hiring should employ alternative frameworks to explore hiring patterns. Insights from the larger project reveal that personal preferences are only one piece of the larger faculty-hiring puzzle. Similar to how some have described racism as a project of racial prejudice and power (Operario & Fiske, 1998), faculty's evaluative judgments do not exist in isolation, yet are activated by actors with varying levels of power based on numerous identity and political factors. Future studies should explore these power dynamics by examining communication patterns within search committee meetings to understand whose preferences are elevated and whose are relegated in hiring efforts. This study also found traces of risk aversion in the finalist stage, a popular framework in behavioral economics. This suggests that selection characteristics alone cannot explain hiring trends, and underscores the significance of understanding departmental actors, contexts, and politics in faculty-hiring studies. Employing different theoretical frameworks in studying faculty hiring is important, as they reveal patterns in what search committees are assessing, which would not only shift search procedures toward equity and inclusion but aid faculty-hopefuls navigate a long-shrouded process.

## Notes

1. This study employs Posselt et al.'s (2020) definition of racial equity in academic evaluation settings: "a social-justice imperative that prioritizes institutional responsibility for transforming organizational practices, policies, and culture to support equality of educational outcomes, in particular by race." (p. 6).
2. *General employability, idiosyncratic preferences, person-job fit, and person-organization fit* from the literature formed the basis for the qualitative measures to determine fit. All four concepts share common traits: (1) matching candidate characteristics with the job or organization (or lack thereof), (2) explicit measures of these characteristics (or lack thereof), and (3) moderate to strong consensus between evaluators of the same organization on those characteristics (or lack thereof). Participant responses were coded as either person-job fit or person-organization fit if they satisfied all three conditions. Passages were coded as general employability if they lacked the first two conditions—with faculty describing qualities such as "strong researcher" or "exceptional teacher" as universally appealing, yet not matching measurable job and/or organizational requisites. Conversely, idiosyncratic preferences were characteristics that could be conceivably



important for success in the academic position and/or department, yet lacked specific measurement and consensus, indicating it was more reflective of participants' own conceptualization of what was needed for the job and/or department.

## Disclosure statement

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