The Tenure-Track Life: Experiences of New Faculty in Tenure-Track Positions

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Abstract

This study details the experiences of new faculty in tenure-track positions without prior experience in academia beyond the post-doctoral level. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted using phenomenological methodology with six faculty members meeting the criteria at a mid-sized, public institution in the southeastern United States with a reputation for academic excellence and a Research 2 (R2) Carnegie classification. Findings highlight the tension found between subcomponents of professorial life and the continued struggles of minority faculty. Implications for future research are given, to include the need for a deep exploration of the rhyme and reasons of the tenure process.

Keywords: tenure-track, new faculty, phenomenology, qualitative, tokenization

The road toward academic tenure is a complex experience for new faculty members (Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Trower & Gallagher, 2008, 2010; Youn & Price, 2009). After graduating from a doctoral program, those entering the academy, or careers in academia, may or may not understand the culture and expectations of their prospective employers (Chase & Thiele, 2015; Levitt & Hermon, 2009). Achieving tenure is considered

ideal by graduate students and highly valued among academic faculty. However, the tenure-track experience is often fraught with feelings of being overwhelmed as well as underprepared for certain responsibilities and institutional dynamics (Gappa & Austin, 2010; Greene et al., 2008). In recent years, the number of new tenure track faculty has significantly increased (Clayton, 2007). According to a report by the Teacher Insurance and Annuity Association of America (TIAA), "Between 2000 to 2010, the proportion of all professors over the age of 65 doubled, and now the median age of the professoriate surpasses all other occupational groups" (TIAA, 2012, p. 2). As new faculty enter higher education and intermingle with veteran faculty who will exit the profession in the coming years, it is increasingly important to understand and support new faculty members' transitions as well as their longevity and resilience to continue in the academy.

Based on survey data by The Collaborative on Academic Careers on Higher Education (COACHE), most pre-tenure faculty indicated feeling somewhat satisfied with their institutions but dissatisfied with their work-life balance (COACHE, 2008). Pre-tenure faculty also reported feeling most clear about the process for tenure and least clear about standards for tenure (COACHE, 2008). Pre-tenure faculty reported positive feelings of collegiality with other pre-tenure faculty, but they were least satisfied with the intellectual vitality of tenured faculty in their departments (COACHE, 2008). Conversely, the transition of new Generation X (i.e., birth years from the early and mid-1960s to early 1980s) faculty members in academia will contribute positively to the future of higher education because of their desire for collaboration, mentorship, and collegiality (Helms, 2010).

Research has continued to show that the tenure-track experience can be demanding yet rewarding (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). New faculty learn to juggle the various demands of a new institutional culture, while gaining clarity about tenure, establishing meaningful relationships, and working toward a sustainable research agenda (McCormick & Barnes, 2008). It is understandably difficult and overwhelming to undergo the tenure-track experience while also maintaining personal balance and self-care (Levitt & Hermon, 2009; Merlo, 2016). To attract and retain new

faculty to successfully pursue tenure-track positions, the steps to achieve tenure should be transparent and equitable (Trower & Gallagher, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand the current experiences of new tenure-track faculty to ensure that supportive and equitable practices are being upheld to support this transition.

Success for Pre-Tenure Faculty

For pre-tenure faculty to be successful, they need to understand the expectations for tenure and enter an environment that supports personal and professional needs. Pre-tenure faculty reported the following were important factors for success and satisfaction in early career academic life: clarity of tenure policies; resources for professional development; a culture of community, collaboration, and collegiality; and a realistic work-life balance (Bode, 1999; Ponjuan et al, 2011; Trower & Gallagher, 2010). By understanding tenure policies, pre-tenure faculty can proactively plan for the steps and processes required to achieve tenure, and seek or access collegial networks (Fleming et al., 2016; Greene et al., 2008; Walzer & Trower, 2010). Studies have shown that formal mentorship (i.e., matching new faculty with experienced faculty who formally coach and guide new faculty) and informal mentorship (i.e., organic matching, which may not necessarily require formal matching) can contribute to pre-tenure faculty success, especially for female pre-tenure faculty (Trower, 2010). Pre-tenure faculty felt satisfied when receiving mentorship from senior faculty (e.g., receiving feedback about and validation for their scholarly work), and positive experiences in connecting with other pre-tenure faculty (Ponjuan et al., 2011; Trower & Gallagher, 2010). Moreover, mentoring groups, especially for women and traditionally underrepresented faculty, positively impacted pre-tenure faculty members' adjustment to a tenure-track position, contributing to a sense of community, belonging, and emotional support, while also increasing productivity related to scholarly activities and goals (Gallagher et al., 2011; Gillespie et al., 2015; Magaldi-Dopman et al., 2015; Rees & Shaw, 2014).

New faculty with postdoctoral experience also felt better about their transition into an

academic position. They demonstrated better time management, were better able to manage professional priorities, and felt less stressful when compared to faculty without postdoctoral experience (Olsen & Crawford, 1998). For example, a faculty development program at Northwestern University focused on teaching practices and student conceptualization, which contributed to positive change in pre-tenure faculty members' teaching practices (Light et al., 2009). Although research has shown these factors important for pre-tenure faculty success, it is difficult and rare for an institution to have all success factors present to support pre-tenure faculty in their transition into the institution, and thus, toward tenure.

Challenges Experienced by Pre-Tenure Faculty

Pre-tenure faculty experience several challenges that impact their transition into and decision to remain at the institution of hire. Perry et al. (1997) found new faculty adjustment declined as they progressed through early career, and negative career experiences had long-term impacts, especially when experiences did not match expectations of the profession. For example, despite teaching being a majorresponsibility for new faculty, graduate students are often untrained and unprepared to teach as new faculty (Conway, 2006). Specifically, new faculty were intimidated by the process and act of teaching, lacked self-confidence in their teaching abilities, and did not have access to training in teaching while in the tenure-track position (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). In addition, in a study of U.S. pre-tenure geography faculty, instructors reported experiencing various classroom incivilities, including inattentiveness, disrespectful behaviors, and hostility from college students, with women reporting more experiences of gender-based hostilities compared to other groups (Alberts et al., 2010), reflecting a need for pedagogical training and support for new faculty.

Work-life balance was another common challenge, which was one of the lowest rated items on the COACHE survey (Trower, 2010). Pre-tenure faculty often felt their professional responsibilities and work dominated their personal lives—feeling that time was a limited commodity, especially when prioritizing research and teachingin

addition to service-related tasks or additional duties (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Trower, 2010). While male faculty with children reported that academic life was liberating and included more family time, female faculty reported feeling pressured by the imbalances of work and home, resulting in a productivity discrepancy (Creamer, 1995; Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Wolf- Wendel & Ward, 2006). Wolf- Wendel and Ward (2006) found pre-tenure faculty who doubled as parents, especially females, felt less supported, had limited role models in the field who were also parents, and remained disadvantaged by the demands of academia and parenthood.

Pre-tenure faculty reported feeling stressed with faculty life, such as navigating the unclear expectations of their new professional roles and responsibilities (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Greene et al., 2008). Faculty with greater work stress early in their careers experienced lower job satisfaction and negative tenure reviews within the first five years of employment (Olsen & Crawford, 1998). The type of institution also impacted adjustment for new faculty. Perry et al. (1997)suggested that community colleges and R1 and institutions may put less pressure on faculty due to the singularly-focused nature of these institutions (i.e., teaching and research, respectively), whereas the dual focus on teaching and research in liberal arts colleges and comprehensive I colleges can be a challenging balance for faculty, though the authors note the generalizability of such findings. In addition, graduate students had unequal experiences of socialization into academia; some were privileged with access to resources and mentorship while others sought their own professional development (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Levitt & Hermon, 2009; Olsen & Crawford, 1998).

Collegiality and positive faculty dynamics are important factors of success. When pre-tenure faculty lacked guidance and connections or had unclear expectations of tenure, they felt isolated7especiallyfemales, facultyof color, and international faculty (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Thomas & Johnson, 2004). Female faculty experienced less favorable collegial relationships with senior faculty compared to male faculty, and without positive connections, they were less likely to experience role clarity, self-efficacy, and social

acceptance (Ponjuan et al., 2011). Female faculty, compared to male faculty, expressed lower satisfaction with their institutional workplace (Trower & Bleak, 2004).

There is a greater likelihood of attrition for faculty of color compared to White faculty (Thompson, 2008). African American and Asian/Pacific Islander faculty report feeling less satisfied in regard to their vertical relationships (i.e., connections with senior faculty) and horizontal relationships (i.e., peer relationships with other pre-tenure faculty; Ponjuan et al., 2011).
Faculty of color were often discriminated against and tokenized, tasked with multiple committee roles as the only or one of few diverse representatives, and experienced tangential time commitments (e.g., mentoring students of color and performing specific community functions) directly related to their minority status (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008; Kelly & McCann, 2014; Ponjuan et al., 2011). International pre-tenure faculty also experienced greater workload and stress compared to their domestic counterparts and reported experiences of prejudice and indifference from their colleagues and institution (Thomas & Johnson, 2004).

Recommendations to Address the Needs of New Faculty

Researchers have identified needs and made recommendations for new faculty. Regarding the wants of pre-tenure faculty, participants desired: time and money, clear and transparent tenure process and expectations, support for professional development, a climate of collegiality and collaboration, quality of life to balance work and home life, and workplace diversity (Trower & Gallagher, 2008). Based on a review of the recent literature, little seems to have changed in the last decade among institutions to address the desires and needs of pre-tenure faculty, especially for female faculty and faculty ofcolor.

Trower (2010) proposed changes to the one-size-fits-all nature of tenure track life, such as increasing flexibility, improving work-family balance and options for dual-academic policies, increasing faculty mentoring practices, increasing collaborative research and teaching opportunities among faculty, and offering rewards for interdisciplinary research or research with students. Faculty networks can also connect new faculty with senior peers to facilitate transitions

(Fleming et al., 2016). Specific to Schools of Education, Santo et al. (2009) advocated for transforming service and teaching cultures to those prioritizing research and scholarship. Santo et al. (2009) also recommended: offering a school- wide mentoring process; providing funding opportunities; encouraging independent writing; having an accessible resource hub (i.e., a website); holding writing groups; offering research assistants; rewarding accomplishments; and clarifying a balance with service and researching/teaching or conducting service-basedresearch.

To address and improve the needs and experiences of new faculty of color, Cole et al. (2017) emphasized an institution's responsibility to acknowledge and rectify barriers that people of color face in higher education, such as service and advising commitments. Institutions can create support structures within and outside institutions to help faculty of color cope with the tenure process, such as peer mentorship groups for personal and professional support and consultation and collaboration opportunities (Cole et al., 2017; Magaldi-Dopman et al., 2015). Whether via in-person or online connections, pre-tenure faculty of color, especially females, can benefit from safe spaces to express their voices, assert their identities, and exert their agency asacademics to resist experiences of isolation and discrimination within academic life (Chang et al., 2013; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017).

There is much work to be done, systemically and systematically, to support pre-tenure faculty, especially for females and those historically underrepresented.

Understanding the many facets leading to successful (or unsuccessful) tenure-track work and appreciating the need for continuity among faculty members during a period of significant transition between generations of institutional representation (TIAA, 2012), the overarching purpose of this study was to delve deeper into the experiences of new faculty members. For instance, if it remains true that greater work stress leads to lower job satisfaction and negative tenure reviews (Olsen & Crawford, 1998) and female faculty and faculty of color experience less guidance, role clarity, acceptance, and workplace satisfaction compared to their White, male counterparts (Ponjuan, et al., 2011; Tower & Bleak, 2004), then an intersectional examination of these concerns is warranted.

If predominantly white (PWI) institutions fail to recognize the ways in which they perpetuate marginalization through (seemingly) benign policies and procedures normed on a White, male population, then continued research is needed to point out the particularities of these methods and their results according to the voices of marginalized faculty themselves. In this present study, a key element of its design is the inclusion of three women and four racial or ethnic minorities among six total participants, allowing for a thorough examination of differences between genders and races as currently constituted among academia. While questions asked of these faculty remained purposefully broad, the answers given were in specifics related to the lived experiences as individuals who often viewed themselves as looking in from being on the margins, or outside of academia.

Further, because teachers and faculty members make up the core educational system of higher education, more research is required to examine why and how such faculty remain content, employed, and productive in their work to reach the next generation of students and leaders. This study represents a step toward understanding the challenges, obstacles, motivations, and rewards facing pre-tenure-track faculty in academia.

Method

This study sought to understand the experiences of early-career faculty. A qualitative research method is appropriate for an intricate, thorough understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2007). Further, a qualitative research method allows the researchers to elucidate the narratives behind the experience through rich data collection and analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012). We, as researchers, wanted to understand the phenomena surrounding the lived experiences of early-career faculty. A phenomenological exploration was the most appropriate methodof studying what it means to behuman in a lived experience (van Manen, 1990, 2007).

Participants

Using a collaborative process, the researchers identified participant selection criteria. Participant eligibility was limited to tenure-track faculty with less than five years of tenure-track employment, no prior full-time teaching employment before their

current placement, and without pending tenure recommendation or promotion. Initial participant selection limited participants to the fields of Counseling or Education, but the researchers expanded solicitation of participants to other academic fields when the sample size was deemed insufficient.

Participants were solicited from one medium-sized, public institution, in the southeastern United States. A list of qualified participants was compiled using institutional data and was used to solicit participants based upon the set criteria. We contacted a total of twelve individuals of which six faculty agreed to participate in the study. The participants included three men and three women. Significantly, four participants identified as ethnic or racial minorities (one South American, one Asian, one Middle Eastern, and one African American). The two remaining participants identified as White Americans. All participants were between the ages of 35 and 45 years. All participants had a terminal degree in their respective academic disciplines. Three participants were from education disciplines, and three were from the social sciences.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study sought to answer the overarching research question: What are the unique experiences of tenure-track faculty with less than five years at their current institution? To answer this question, we conducted a phenomenological inquiry guided by Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological research tradition. Each participant participated in one semi-structured interview for approximately 60 minutes. The researchers used an interview protocol of ten open-ended questions (see Appendix A) to sufficiently allow the interviewer to probe for additional depth (Moustakas, 1994).

The interviews resulted in six transcripts with rich textual descriptions of participants' lived experiences as early career tenure-track faculty. These transcripts began the fruitful process of phenomenological data analysis (Hycner, 1985). We followed Moustakas's (1994) adaptation of van Kamm's analytical method for the transcript analysis. Data analysis began by returning to epoche, in which the researchers bracketed their judgments and biases of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The researchers discussed our understandings of tenure, tenure-track experiences, and higher education, with special care to note bias. Further, we discussed our positions as doctoral students enrolled in a program that trains individuals for academia.

Next, the researchers individually reviewed and coded the same participant transcript. Once coded, the researchers met together to ensure everything the participant described had been given equal value (i.e., horizontalization) and to begin the process of reaching consensus (Moustakas, 1994). Each code was explored, and expanded, reduced, or eliminated when necessary. The researchers discussed differences in codes until consensus was reached (Moustakas, 1994). This exercise served to ensure that each researcher was sufficiently abstracting the experienceconsistent with Moustakas (1994). The final product of consensus building was a transcript to use as a guidepost for coding the five remaining transcripts. Two researchers independently coded the remaining transcripts to reach consensus. Upon completion, preliminary codes were listed and grouped into a master codebook.

The research team met twice to refine the master codebook. During the first meeting, the team clustered similar experiences into relational categories and reached consensus on constituent membership within each category (Moustakas, 1994).In the second meeting, the research team further refined each category into themes of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Each theme of meaning was reviewed to ensure its compatibility with the participants' expressions (Moustakas, 1994). A third meeting was held two weeks after the second meeting, allowing us to distance ourselves from the data and visit the phenomena again from a different angle–a method of adding rigor to our data analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). After these three meetings, the researchers felt the themes of meaning efficiently described the essence of the participants' experiences with the phenomena.

Researcher as Instrument

In qualitative research, the researchers are instruments in the research process (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). In phenomenological research, semi-structured interviews are used by the interviewer (researcher) to guide the collection of data (Moustakas, 1994; Pezalla et al., 2012). At the time of data collection, the research team

consisted of three first-year doctoral students in a CACREP- accredited counselor education and supervision program at a predominantly White institution.

The team included two White men and one Asian-American woman. All researchers were previously employed in professional counseling positions and were currently employed as graduate assistants at the institution of study during data collection. Two of the three members of the research team plan to pursue tenure-track faculty positions at the completion of their doctoral program.

Trustworthiness

We recognize that qualitative research and qualitative analytic process inherently include elements of subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). The research team took care to ensure epoche was brought into all corners of this research. The research team also bracketed preconceived biases throughout the research process. Each researcher maintained a reflective journal, and routine research group processing also encouraged individual recognition and suspension of judgments. An audit trail was maintained to track key steps within the decision-making process. Contact summary sheets were completed by each researcher following participant interviews to ensure visible, non-verbal data was collected. Each interview was transcribed completely and verbatim to ensure all important aspects were captured (Tilley & Powick, 2002). Moreover, toensure credibility of data, an expert review was conducted. The expertreviewer was enlisted to verify the accuracy of the themes and subthemes and ensure the qualitative exploration was of substance. The expert reviewer was chosen based upon her prolific experience as a qualitative researcher, where she has acted as the methodologist and lead researcher on numerous phenomenological studies and published in top-tier research journals.

Findings

The data collected, codified, and analyzed by the research team resulted in four major themes, each with its own categorical considerations. In relation to the initial research question regarding the specific experiences of pre-tenure faculty, the themes that emerged through the data were: (a) *Preparation for the Academy*; (b) *Transition to Faculty*; (c) *Challenges of Institutional Politics*; and (d) *Freedom and Constriction*.

Preparation for the Academy

All participants voiced thoughts related to preparation for and movement into the academic world. Hiring practices, components of institutional selection, PhD program training and socialization, and postdoctoral experiences were the most common targets of reflection. In relation to hiring, uncertainty in negotiation was a common thread: "But it's your first job, you know, I feel like it's normal not to push too hard [in negotiation]." While new faculty expressed relief at finding a position, most recognized they could have pushed for increased accommodations, such as salary, course exemptions, and academic spousal accommodations. One participant was initially hired as a Non-Tenure Eligible (NTE) employee before the position changed to a tenure-track position: "I didn't know that this line was going to change into a tenure-line. I just took it because it felt right and having worked with so many amazing students in the past two years, I know this is where I'm supposed to be." Thus, initially moving into academia with tenure as the goal was not necessarily the case for all members.

Participants spoke at length on why they selected their current institution. Along with the promise of a good offer, the academic reputation of the university, research expectations and support, and the overall environment of their respective departments, participants also talked about ways in which they could impact their fields through the opportunities afforded at the school. One minority female faculty, for instance, chose to work in the rural south because she recognized it was less diverse than other areas of the country:

> *"California, they know what they are doing, they have researchers doing the work and I talk to them… but if we keep concentrating toward those areas where diversity is there, is tangible, and we just keep ourselves in those sectors, nothing is going to happen on the other side… where those discourses have to open up."*

Several other participants voiced similar sentiments. They desired the opportunity to make an outsized impact within their fields of research and expertise and saw their current positions as a means to turn those dreams into reality.

Doctoral-level training, socialization, and

postdoctoral opportunities played an integral role in the formation of participants' professional identities. Participants were quick to point out ways in which their doctoral training prepared them for academia: "*I was blessed to join an amazing doctoral program so I was involved in different research efforts*…"; "*... I had a lot of experience doing smaller scale stuff.*" However, the participants also clarified ways in which their training was insufficient: "*You are just teaching what someone's telling you to teach.*" In addition, postdoctoral training—when available—proved to be a valuable experience for participants to hone their researching and teaching skills and develop their professional selves without the added pressure of tenure expectations. As one person noted of her postdoctoral experience: "*With that teaching, I was able to kind of see the highs and lows, how I can improve my skills, kind of know where my strengths were, where my weaknesses were so again, coming in, teaching graduate courses, that wasn't stressful either because I had that preparation.*" Collectively, it was clear from the data that participants moved into academia with differing levels of preparation and familiarity with academic life.

Transition to Faculty: A Balancing Act

The second theme of the study was the multifaceted experience of transitioning into a faculty role, with an emphasis on achieving a balance between the many demands of the role. *A Balancing Act* encompasses the challenge of learning the academic ropes while also finding what weight to give each major component of faculty life (i.e. research, teaching, service, etc.). This balancing act ultimately demanded the use of certain personal qualities (e.g. ambition, motivation, self-promotion, etc.) to achieve success. For instance, becoming a *self-starter* was highly touted: "*You have to want it, like go big or go home. And I think that's why there's so many people running around these halls [i.e. working hard, etc.].*" In terms of counter-balancing the impact of the new job expectations, two of the participants spoke about their choice tostockpile data during their doctoral and post-doctoral training to then use it while gaining their feet as new employees. As one participant noted, "*It was very helpful, extremely helpful to come in with things and data and so forth so that I didn't have to spend my first year trying to start new things or try to figure out how I'm going to get it done.*" Foresight into the expectant chaos of the junior faculty experience led to stockpiling data with the knowledge that no new projects may be forthcoming during the first semesters of faculty life.

Furthermore, the prioritization of teaching over other categories (i.e., research, service,

clinical work) was a major part of new faculty's balancing act. As one participant put it: "*That was I think the biggest time suck of my first year, was teaching.*" Given the relevance of a successful research agenda in achieving tenure, the burden put on new faculty to create their own coursework ("*one of the things about starting a new position is that you may have to teach a new course that you hadn't taught before*"), adjust to continuous student needs ("*a lot of my time in the beginning was just figuring that out [student needs]*"), and find their own teaching rhythm, increased anxiety to allocate time for the research that would enable them to reach tenure. Some participants advocated for a course release during the first semester or academic year to lift the burden off junior faculty and allow them to establish their research agendas. Others simply thought it was a good idea to focus on teaching and not even attempt new research during the first semester of work: "*I would say maybe don't worry about first semester, you know, it's an adjustment, and so I wouldn't worry too much about trying to do a lot...*". A few members even advocated for limiting teaching preparation time to make space for research elsewhere: "*I basically decided that because this is my last best chance at getting myself launched in research, I have limited my course prep time to a very small percentage of my week.*" Clearly, the transition into junior faculty work involves a large portion of time allocatedtoward teaching preparation and delivery, even though Research 2 (R2) institutions (as in this study) require significant research accomplishment where tenure consideration is due. This reality is a significant factor in the overall stress that junior faculty in tenure-track positions experience when transitioning into academic life.

As a counterbalance to the many demands of academic life, participants often voiced a reliance on connections to rebalance and reprioritize their lives. This included all the ways new faculty remained grounded in the moment—family, friends, culture, mentorship, personal values, and former work/life experiences ("*It's helpful to have a supportive family that understands the process and then staying in constant communication as well*"). In addition, many members were actively pursuing connection in the present, through collaboration with colleagues, community partnerships, peer support, networking, student interaction, and teaching ("*Providing support for students and then for teachers, that is a way of counteracting all the nonsense*"). Overall, participants expressed a deep and abiding desire to not only remain connected to others through their work, but to expand those connections as much as possible without losing their sense of self along the way. This sense of connectivity appears tantamount for new faculty in

achieving an appropriatework-life balance.

Challenges of Institutional Politics

Participants voiced several common challenges throughout their time as faculty that were connected to academic relations and the invisible hierarchy of academia. These included: issues for dual academic couples; the so-called *hamster wheel* of never-ending work; personality challenges with other faculty members; departmental politics, and the marginalization of minority faculty members.

Two participants had academic partners, and outlined the struggle to obtain dual positions in the competitive academic market: "*That's where the source of stress is, I think the challenge, and I think a more common challenge, but it's hard enough to get one tenure track job, getting two in one area is tough.*" Of the two couples, one managed to find dual positions, while the other did not. However, both couples remained on the job market as a matter of course, impacting their respective timelines for publishing, while also forcing them to obtain leverage in their current positions by bringing outside offers to the table. As one participant said, "*the message I've gotten is the only way to solve a problem [re: dual spousal employment] is to get an outside offer to force the administration to counter.*"

For minority female faculty, there was a felt sense that they were fighting an uphill battle against stigmatization, tokenism, and prejudice. Some referenced the arbitrary power of those in positions to influence tenure decisions ("*Because you never know again the power people hold, especially when you think about tenure, right?*") and the diminishing returns on a perfectionist attitude toward research ("*Constantly feeling like I'm not doing enough and I want to do more and that's because I'm a perfectionist*"). While there were some positives mentioned in relation to faculty dynamics, such as protecting junior faculty from over-commitment ("*...protecting junior faculty from service because they know that you've got this kind of long term task of trying to get tenure*"), the majority of experiences detailed were negative.

Another major challenge for participants was learning how departmental decisions were made or who they remained accountable to when beginning their work. Most members reported mixed feelings on the lack of structure and awareness regarding their roles: "*You're like, 'What am I supposed to do?' Like it's not concrete. How do I know I'm right? There's no real metric for it, there's no way to measure it.*" Others reported that structure was only apparent when a

problem arose or disciplinary action was required in some capacity: "*The hierarchy only kind of is clear if there's a problem or something, in which case probably talk to the chair who would kick it to the dean.*" Most faculty reported a desire for more structure in relation to their own responsibilities and duties.

Freedom and Constriction

Relatedly, the fourth theme encompasses the freedoms and limitations of academic life. The authors organized all comments under two broad domains of *Time* and *Tenure*. As a counter to the negative aspects of unstructured faculty life, comments under *Time* often represented the positive components found within the freedom of the profession: "*I like my current lifestyle, quite free. I can do whatever I want to do. I don't have to go to an office every 9:00 AM and leave at 5:00 PM. It's eventually you're choosing a style.*" Time also influenced the way that faculty viewed their long-term goals and plans: "*You think in those six-year increment, because that's the goal, is to just not want to leave before and start over. That clock is like what drives your career.*" To some, the tenure timeline served as a stressor, while to others it was simply what needed to be done: "*The knowing that a peer reviewed chapter, or journal is going to take probably a year. And that is part of the job...it's things that you do, you just do, you get it done and you learn in the process.*"

Tenure comprised those elements of *Freedom and Constriction* related to the particularities of the tenure-track job, to include autonomy/freedom, big-picture-thinking, pursuing interests, service as a secondary consideration, and tenure benefits and expectations. The autonomy and freedom of academic life were highly touted by a number of participants:

> *"The job's actually really beautiful: you get to write what you want to write, you get to really sit down, understand interactions, making sense of different constructs, you get to teach and work with absolutely fabulous students and then with school districts ...and that's amazing."*

Other positives included the luxury of thinking and acting on big picture concepts and pursuing one's own interests rather than the research lines of others. Tenure itself was highly prized by individuals for offering long-term stability and the opportunity to explore controversial topics without fear of reprisal: "*A lot of the way people frame it is ...around academic freedom and being able to sort of teach the way you want, you know, sort of political opinions, and not worried about backlash or being fired*".

Amongst the loose restraints of professorship, however, many participants spoke of service turning

into a secondary (or tertiary) consideration: "*Service is like 10%. Many places you'll go, they'll tell you to de-emphasize service*"; "*It's not the great human thing to do [i.e. minimizing service], but most people do it to the point and it's been baked into a lot of department rules and expectations*". The devaluation of service seemed to come from within departments that focused heavily on research, and to a lesser degree, teaching. Thus, service was minimized or, in some cases, viewed through the lens of something accomplished by virtue of simply being educators (thereby serving the public), rather than as a person performing *specific* service-related duties like committee work or journal editing.

Discussion

In this study we sought to illuminate and elucidate the experiences of early-career tenure-track faculty. The research question that guided this study was: *What are the unique experiences of tenure-track faculty with less than five years at their current institution?* The researchers recognized the objective and subjective positionalities present within the researchers and participants connected to this study. To honor the relational nature of this research and of the participants' experiences, we utilized a conceptual framework outlined by Casanave and Li (2015) in which we became aware of the framework of the study.

The participants in this study seek promising futures in academia to pursue research lines that align with their passions and impact students and communities; however, training and preparation experiences in advance of pursuing a tenure-line position varied. Findings support earlier research that emphasized the significance of socialization within academia as a major component of success (Austin, 2002; Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner, 2010; Lester, 2008). Through doctoral training programs, students were given direct and indirect socialization into the expectations, requirements and prized nature of tenure track positions within the professoriate, though these socialization opportunities were inequitable (Austin, 2002; Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). Our research confirms these inequities, pointing out the ways in which female and minority participants were tokenized within their respective departments. Examples included disbelief and experiences of micro- and macro-aggressions that a young woman professor who received constant requests from minority members to join or head minority-related groups and was assumed that minority members would mentor and guide students from marginalized communities and cultures, no matter the relevancy to their own

backgrounds. In particular, minority female faculty reported feeling uncomfortable about the power dynamics involved in institutional politics, having to be wary of those in senior positions who influence tenure decisions. Additionally, the data suggest that not all new faculty move into the professorial world with the same level of preparation or comfort within academia, with some members going so far as to stockpile data ahead of time—a distinct advantage toward publishing amidst the hectic pace of a first-year faculty member teaching at university. When departments and institutions can provide mentorship and both formal and informal supports for new pre-tenure faculty members (Trower, 2010), especially for those from marginalized backgrounds, such guidance may help to close some gaps in new faculty members' training and preparation levels.

To that end, the results suggest a continuous tension among participants between the major subcomponents of professorship. While participants acknowledged that research publication was the major driver of tenure achievement, they were also adamant that teaching courses and meeting with students hampered their ability to establish successful research agendas. Participants felt tensions between achievement of success and adjusting to the needs of students, all the while attempting to learn the ropes of new faculty life and its expected and unexpected expectations. While some participants found teaching the most enjoyable part of their work, they were nonetheless concerned with the lack of time and space allowed for research. Unique to our study is the notion that junior faculty, in essence, *buckle-down* for the first semester or year of their work, attempting to adjust to the teaching demands brought on by new material, unknown students, and—in most cases—a lack of extended teaching experience or expertise. Again, this may connect to how mentorship and guidance from colleagues inside and outside of their institution of hire can help to normalize such anxieties of achieving a balancing act as faculty members (Trower & Gallagher, 2010). Mentorship from experienced faculty may help new faculty, especially those from underrepresented groups, to smoothly transition into their professional roles while also providing guidance about counterbalancing personal priorities and needs. Knowing that the participants reported a desire to remain connected to others without losing their sense of selves, departments and universities can capitalize on this need by offering needed support systems and resources to model an appropriate

work-life balance that still permits success with balance.

Further, participants' experiences of having autonomy yet feeling restricted by tenure expectations seemed confusing and stressful. An additional finding of this study is the decreased allotment of time and energy given to service among new faculty, as they remain preoccupied with their teaching responsibilities and the need to conduct research during their first years of work. Furthermore, this devaluation appears to be supported by some departments, as senior faculty understand what steps must be taken to reach tenure and support their junior members accordingly. Service was also seen by some as an item already accomplished by virtue of being educators within an institution of higher learning, thus justifying a lack of formal service within the larger community. Among our participants, the trend to devalue service was a major component of early academic life and may reflect its comparatively small impact on tenure decisions at the university in question.

Limitations

This study was conducted at a single, mid-size, public ivy university in the southeastern United States with six participants. Limitations include: (a) the findings are unique to the institution in question and may simply reflect the institutional culture of this particular school; and (b) the findings are unique to the participants, not to the larger body of junior faculty at the institution. In addition, minority faculty were overrepresented in our sample size (four of six) in relation to the actual representation in academia, which may have led to certain categorical ideas (e.g., marginalization) receiving more notice than they otherwise would. In addition, research was conducted by three current doctoral students with varied aspirations to achieve tenure-track employment, and although the research team bracketed personal biases and reservations via reflexive journaling and group reflections, some subjective interpretation of the data is inevitable (and desired) and could have impacted our ability to convey accurate results if not appropriately bracketed.

Implications for Future Research

As noted, prior research now a decade old (Trower and Gallagher, 2008; Trower, 2010) warned us that changes needed to be made within academia to accommodate a better work/life balance and create a healthier, fulfilling experience for faculty members. Specifically, our findings suggest the need for greater analysis of the minority faculty experience,

especially among the female gender, as trends of tokenization and marginalization appear to be continuing among that group of educators.

Findings also highlight the tension between components of professorship. Further research is encouraged to explore the intricacy between research, teaching, and service. From a practical perspective, further research in this area may elucidate the true need for service among junior faculty, as it already appears to be minimized at this particular university. A deep exploration of the purpose and processes of tenure may benefit our institutions of higher learning, as certain requirements may be revised in order to accommodate the heavy teaching loads many new faculty members experience upon employment.

Lastly, a deep exploration of the freedoms and constrictions of early academic life is warranted. While most participants lauded the lack of restraints within their work, they were also concerned with a comparative dearth of guidance and structure. As academics, they learned that they often have little to no oversight from their senior peers or from administrative staff. This can be interpreted as both positive and negative, as more freedom often implies less guidance, a truism among our participants. Without concrete guidelines concerningthe tenure process and the balancing act of an academic life, it appears that many new faculty are being done a disservice by their institution by allowing them the proverbial length of rope with which to hang themselves. A deep dive on the meaning and modality of tenure is highly encouraged.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of junior faculty in tenure-track positions with no prior experience beyond the postdoctoral level in their professional field. Through a qualitative phenomenological method, the interviews presented through the process of data collection provided rich and deep material to add to the professional opus on faculty experiences amidst the particularities of academic life. Special consideration was given to the subordination of service and teaching to research, and implications for future research were drawn from author observations and analysis. With any luck, another decade will not elapse before proactive steps are taken to correct the many imbalances found in the tenure system, where faculty and students alike will be better served by a process that gives equal voice to the many components of academic achievement and virtue.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your experience as a new faculty member in a tenure track position as it relates to:
    a) Teaching
    b) Research
    c) Service
    d) Advising students and other student interactions
    e) Your own professional mentoring and emerging professional identity
    f) Faculty dynamics, institutional culture, program/department expectations
    g) Any other aspects of being a faculty member that is applicable/relevant here?

2. What led to your decision to select this institution as your current workplace?

3. What led to your decision to pursue a tenure-track position?

4. What are some of the challenges as a new faculty member in a tenure-track position? What are the successes/positives?

5. What are the components of the job that are most stressful and most rewarding?

6. How has your experience as a faculty member thus far influenced your conception of what it is like to seek tenure? How have others impacted this?

7. How do you feel about being here at [Institution Name]?
    a) What are some lessons learned?
    b) If you could provide any tips to another new faculty member, what would they be?

8. What could help in enhancing your experience here? Or, if you've completed your first year here, what would have been helpful? What are your channels of support?