

Women's Experiences of the Tenure Process: A Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explored women's experiences during the tenure process, the challenges they encountered, and ways they overcame those challenges. **Design:** Using a qualitative case study approach, women who had been tenured within the last five years were interviewed. **Methods:** Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to identify patterns of meaning, understandings, and definitions of the tenure experience. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which recommends a sample between three and six participants, was used to identify meaningful differences and similarities between participants. **Findings:** Four themes emerged from the study: just stressed out, someone could do you in, the criteria were not clear, and find a mentor and start early. **Conclusions:** Commonalities among these participants included concern about lack of information regarding the tenure process; the fact that the process required a lot of hard work beyond that anticipated; women had to do more work than men; the subtle nuanced ways in which gender shapes the academy; and the need for effective guidance and mentoring. **Conclusion:** The findings of this study can guide the professional socialization of women seeking tenure and help to ensure a more positive experience of the tenure process.

Keywords: Tenure, institutionalized power, gender

1. Introduction

Historically, higher education, in the United States (U.S.), has been structured to reflect the power of traditional patriarchal practices that have been in place for decades (Bensimon & Marshall, 2000; Clifford, 1989; Dzuback, 2003; Freeman, 1977). Barriers for women have existed ever since they first attempted to enter the post-secondary teaching profession. Still today, women are underrepresented in the rank of tenure in the academy even though they have made great strides attaining doctoral degrees in the last several decades (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, Table 278; U.S. Department of Education, 2012, Table 278). For example, in 2009-2010, a total of 158,558 doctoral degrees were conferred, and 52% of those who earned the degree were women (81,953) compared to 76,605 men (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, Table 306). In 2011-2012, 51% of doctoral degrees were earned by women (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, Table 318.30). Social, political, and economic factors affect the process of achieving tenure, and these challenges are especially challenging for women (Bonawitz & Andel, 2009; Davis, T., Levitt, D., McGlothlin, J., & Hill, N., 2006; Ponjuan, Conley, & Trower, 2011; Reimer, 2009; Schoening, 2009). Studies by Vanda (1989), Jacobs (1996), Helvie-Mason (2007), and Reimer (2009) point out how academic institutions are structured based on gender, how such structure is reinforced, and how women's interests are devalued. The organization and structure of the academy appear to promote advancement for some faculty members while marginalizing others (Crocco & Waite, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2012, Table 306; Eliou, 1991). White women and minorities are the groups that have been most marginalized (Griffin, Bennett, & Harris, 2013; Haag, 2005; Perna, 2005).

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However, even minority males enjoy more recognition and rank, and are treated with more respect than women (Crocco & Waite, 2007; Fairweather, 2002; Premeaux & Mondy, 2002; Rossiter, 1993; Schoening, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2010, Table 264). Thus, while the intersection of race and gender is important, in the academy, gender appears to have a greater influence on tenure success than race (Cody, 2012). Recent data show that at public four year higher education institutions in the U.S., in 2009-2010 and 2011-2012, the majority of tenured faculty members were male (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, Table 278; U.S. Department of Education, 2012, Table 278). Women experience multiple challenges as they navigate the tenure process (Bonawitz & Andel, 2009; Clark & Corcoran, 1986; Hancock, Baum, & Breuning, 2013; Schoening, 2009; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Umbach, 2007). The literature to date includes research conducted at mostly larger research universities, but offers little to inform our understanding of women's experiences with the tenure process in a small public university. Focusing on the realities of women in the specific context of a small public university can provide a glimpse into issues at a more broad, societal and institutional level (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Yin, 2009).

2. Method

In this study (Cody, 2012), a qualitative, approach was used to explore how women experienced the tenure process. The data for this study were collected by conducting two semi-structured interviews with three recently tenured female faculty members at a small public comprehensive university. The university began as a junior college in the late 1960s and is a relatively young institution of higher education located in a suburban community in the southeastern United States. The first graduate students were admitted in 2006, and a terminal or doctoral degree then became the requirement for promotion and tenure. At the time the research was conducted, there were 90 tenured faculty members (including administrators), and of that number 46.7% (42) were women and 53.3% (48) were men. The total number of tenured administrators was 21; 33.3% (7) were women while 66.7% (14) were men.

2.1 Sample

A list of tenured faculty members was obtained from the Office of Academic Affairs. Because the aim was to examine different perspectives of women on the experiences of the tenure process, women who were tenured within the last five years were selected from different academic departments, using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998) to gain the perspectives in the early part of their tenured careers in higher education. There were 42 tenured women on the faculty and six of those had been tenured within the last five years. The author sent emails directly to the six professors, describing the study and inviting their participation. Three women volunteered to participate in the study. At the time of the interviews, all were employed as tenured faculty members at the university. The participants' academic disciplines were arts and sciences, business management, and nursing.

2.2 Data Collection

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in order to identify patterns of meaning, understandings, and definitions of the situation from each of the women. Each participant was asked for permission to tape-record the interviews for verbatim transcription at a later time. The focus of the interviews was on the participants' experiences, perceptions, feelings, and actions related to the process of becoming tenured. Participants were asked about their reason for seeking tenure; preparation related to expectations and criteria for tenure; their experiences during the tenure process; their perceptions of the role that power played in the tenure process; the role that gender played in the process; differences or similarities in how others progressed through the tenure process; political, social, and economic effects or issues related to the tenure process; the effects of the process on them personally and professionally; and suggestions for improving the tenure process for women. Audio tapes were used to record the interviews, they were transcribed verbatim, and participants verified the transcriptions for accuracy. Transcripts were reviewed for common patterns of meaning through preliminary data analysis and thematic analysis. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality.

2.3 Data Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used for data analysis (Smith, et al., 2009). The six steps of IPA analysis include 1) reading and re-reading; 2) initial noting; 3) developing identified themes; 4) searching for connections across identified themes; 5) moving to the next case (participant); and 6) looking for patterns across cases (Smith, et al., 2009). The recommended sample size for IPA is between three and six participants. The three participants used in this study provided sufficient cases for development of meaningful points of difference and similarity between participants, but not so many that the amount of data generated would be overwhelming (Smith et al., 2009).

3. Findings and Discussion

Each participant had her own reasons for seeking tenure, and during the tenure process each woman encountered challenges that were similar to those of the others, yet unique to her experience and discipline. While each participant identified stressors particular to her situation, institutionalized power and gender were significant issues for each participant. The four themes identified were just stressed out; someone could do you in; the criteria were not clear; and find a mentor and start early. These themes are elaborated on below.

3.1 Just Stressed Out

All three of the participants revealed situations that caused them to feel stressed out during their tenure experience, but the causes were specific to each woman's situation. One participant cited preparation of the portfolio and the number of hours it took to prepare it as a major cause of frustration. She explained how she tried to use other tenured professors' portfolios as examples but found that they did not make sense to her, so she basically redid her portfolio notebook. Reviewing the portfolios of other tenured professors helped another participant understand what the expectations were, but also created more work for her. She stated: At about 128 hours in the process, I stopped counting the hours. I was very curious about how long it really took –but when I really began in earnest putting that book together and I got to 128 hours, I stopped counting. One participant noted that preparation involved not just a lot of work, but also a lot of time. In order to have adequate time to prepare, she did not teach one summer semester and, although she did not mention it, this had an economic effect, causing a decrease in the salary she was accustomed to having. She also talked about the impact that the time required to prepare had on her family and gave examples of informing the family that she was having a "T Day" (tenure day) when she was not available for them. She indicated that she had so much information in her portfolio that she had to reduce it and this was extremely frustrating for her since she was unsure what could be omitted. One participant felt under pressure and took time from other areas in her life in order to be productive. She emphasized that women should educate themselves regarding the requirements of the tenure process before they actually begin the process. Her concern was that since women have so many things to juggle, they should understand that they are not going to be great at all things at all times, especially when seeking tenure.

Having a mentor also added to one participant's stress. She recounted that she was assigned a mentor but felt like the mentor was very busy, was not really engaged with her, and did not care about her at all. The participant noted, "I realized that anything that I did, I was going to have to find it out on my own." Additionally, she stated, "I just think it's stressful and the thing I worried about was the articles – publications. That was very, very stressful." For one participant stress was related to her lack of awareness of the need to begin preparations early, and to the unclear and inconsistent expectations across disciplines. She commented on how the expectations of the institution were not really communicated to her when she was hired and she found herself playing catch up. This participant's perception was that colleagues in other schools on campus might have received more support and this caused some frustration and stress for her. She mentioned gender issues in relation to her lack of support during the tenure process. There are more tenured men than women at the university and this point was made by one participant who said she asked for mentorship from men because only men, not women, were on the Promotion and Tenure Committees, and they were in the "in" group which held institutionalized power. There were no other women that she could ask for help. Thus, all participants were stressed out by the tenure process, and their views point out the subtle intersection of institutionalized power and gender in the academy.

3.2 Someone Could Do You In

When discussing the role that institutionalized power played in the tenure process, the three participants gave similar responses. They were all cognizant of how others could affect the outcome of their tenure aspirations. One participant seemed adept in seeking out individuals to assist her in the process. She was keenly aware of the power and authority held by professors who were not in administrative positions but could influence her outcome. She pointed out how men could help her learn the game, how to be politically correct, and not ruffle any feathers. Her comment about not wanting to ruffle any feathers indicates that she accepted and used male norms and aspired to present her information in a way that was non-threatening to those (men) who might be reviewing her portfolio.

As noted above, the individuals available to help one participant navigate the tenure process were all men. One participant explained this by stating that there were no other tenured women in her department to ask for help. Further, there were no women on the Promotion and Tenure Committees campus-wide. Clearly, men held the institutionalized power in this situation (Haag, 2005; Kelly & Slaughter, 1991; Schoening, 2009). Another participant's experience caused her anxiety and fear; she was fearful of losing her job and felt that one person could prevent her from achieving tenure. She also felt she had little control over the outcome of her tenure experience. Others held the power and control over the outcome of her future, and they were all men. This mobilized her to work hard at scholarly productivity to ensure that she met the tenure criteria. Her comments regarding gender included the fact that a female coworker was not given credit for tenure when she arrived at the university, and the same female colleague was not given a promotion that a male colleague in another department had received. Another participant's comments about working hard to publish, but not having control over time lines and acceptance of articles made it clear that lack of control was a serious concern for her. She also talked about the evaluative power held by the Promotion and Tenure Committees, unclear standards, and lack of guidance by her supervisor. As Tierney and Bensimon (1996) have pointed out, tenure candidates need to be active in the tenure process so that they feel a sense of control and less frustration. One participant experienced frustration at the hands of a particular tenured male colleague who made what she thought were inappropriate, passive-aggressive jokes about her tenure experience, and what he would do if he were on the committee and reviewing her documents. She felt she could not confront him, and so she just ignored him and his comments. She spoke about how her faith played a big part in how she handled the tenure process, just as she would any challenge. She reported that she decided to worry less, work harder, and pray more, and declared that by doing so her faith was strengthened. Perhaps, because of her faith, she felt less anxious about other individuals having institutionalized power and control over her tenure outcome. Clearly, these women felt fear, anxiety, lack of control, and lack of power in the tenure process, as political agendas and decision-making were intertwined and tenure was either granted or denied.

3.3 The Criteria Were Not Clear

An issue mentioned early in the interviews by each of the women, but not elaborated on, was lack of clarity and standardization of the criteria for tenure. This seemed to be consistent in all disciplines at the university. At the time of the participants' tenure applications, the university was undergoing change in several ways, one of which involved revisions in promotion and tenure criteria. As the university began to focus more on research and scholarly productivity, one participant expressed her concerns. Well, it's up or out...so, if I want to keep my job, which I do very much because I like what I do, then I needed to make sure I checked all the blocks that were necessary to keep my job, and one of those was to complete all the promotion and tenure requirements. All participants emphasized the need to be fair and consistent with tenure criteria and expectations. During the interviews, they discussed the issue of unclear criteria even though they came from different academic disciplines.

3.4 Find a Mentor and Start Early

When presented with the question, "What advice would you give to women who are seeking tenure?", all of the participants mentioned getting an early start and being aware of available guidance and mentors. One participant also indicated that having incentives and awards might assist in motivating candidates to begin preparing early. Gender was an issue for this participant, who was particularly concerned about the need for women to ask for help and for others to tell women to ask for help. The participants also noted that women should be represented at all levels of the university and compared women's lack of representation to lack of women in higher education. The need for mentorship was a strong theme throughout all of the interviews. One participant strongly stated, "Find a mentor. Be sure that you can focus entirely on the process when it's time." Another participant felt that information about the tenure process should be given to faculty members early, during orientation to the university. She summarized her advice to women who seek tenure commenting: I think they need to find a mentor...maybe someone they admire and they want to be like them. Or maybe somebody you know that knows the system and can guide them. I think that's really, really important. Another participant noted how some colleagues seemed to have supportive mentors and said that she planned to be helpful to future tenure candidates, especially women, now that she had achieved tenure status.

One participant said:

I asked for mentorship from men and that is not because I wouldn't have asked it from women but only men had been on the Tenure and Promotion committees - and who were in the "in" group, the "institutionalized power" group in the university and the college.

There were no other women in this department, so it is not surprising that there were no women to ask for help. Although two participants were assigned a female mentor, one participant felt the assistance that she received was minimal and ineffective, and this caused her to seek guidance elsewhere: Well, it was scary and I had a colleague in another department who was hired at the same time that I was, and we kind of became support for each other. And I think that's the thing that was disturbing. No one really prepared me for what I was supposed to be doing. I had to depend on my friend, who knew more than I did about the process. So I think without someone working with you, like a mentor during that process, the results can sometimes be bad. Having an effective mentor throughout the tenure process is essential for women to be successful (Bonawitz & Ansel, 2009; Ponjuan, Conley, & Trower, 2011; Schoening, 2009). Each participant voiced concern about stress related to lack of clarity and consistency involving the portfolio, lack of standard tenure criteria, and lack of an effective mentor. Their experiences reflect both familiar dimensions found in the literature and some that were surprising.

Limitations

Generalizability is beyond the scope of this study and inconsistent with the principles of both phenomenology and IPA, which focus on reflection, making sense of personal experiences, and themes indicative of commonalities. This study represents the experiences of a specific group of tenured women at one university with institutional contexts that may be transferable to similar institutions, however, more investigation must be conducted to validate the consistency of these findings.

4. Commonalities and Conclusions

We continue to encounter institutionalized power and gender inequities in the academy. Women remain underrepresented, especially in the ranks of tenure, even though they have made great strides in attaining doctoral degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, Table 306; U.S. Department of Education, 2013, Table 318.30). Institutionalized power in academic institutions continues to be held by men. The structure of these institutions is based on gender, reinforcement of such structure, and devaluing of women's interests (Bensimon & Marshall, 2003; Helvie-Mason, 2007; Kelly & Slaughter, 1991; Reimer, 2009). The first commonality in these women's experiences included concern about lack of adequate information regarding the process, consistency, and standardization of criteria. These women's experiences suggested inconsistencies among disciplines even in the same institution. Like participants in this study, other women who seek tenure may encounter the same inconsistencies during the tenure process. Baez and Centra (1995) declare that tenure policies should be unambiguous, explicit, consistent, and clearly articulate how tenure is to be acquired. They also assert that the criteria for tenure should be specific enough to provide guidance to faculty members (Baez & Centra, 1995). A second commonality identified from interviews with participants was the hard work required beyond what they anticipated. This is consistent with the work of Tierney and Bensimon (1996) who reported long work hours by women faculty members. While the organizational structure of the academy appears to be geared toward the success of males rather than females (Kelly & Slaughter, 1991), administrators hold the power to make changes and implement policies that are fair and consistent. This raises the question of why women have heavier workloads than men in the academy. Future research needs to investigate the workloads of women and men, especially women seeking tenure.

Another commonality related to gender was associated with the subtle, nuanced ways in which gender shapes the academy. Each of the participants spoke about the "in" group, which was dominated by men, and they acknowledged that men also held institutionalized power and determined expectations and criteria related to tenure at the university. However, they did not seem to see gender as having a major influence on their tenure experience. For instance, one participant felt she was already part of the "in" group before she achieved tenure status, and gender did not appear to be an issue for her. She had already accepted and used male norms in her professional life, including the tenure process. All participants believed their experience was not that much different from anyone else's. The participants seem to have accepted the norms established by their male-dominated power structure. A further commonality identified was the need for effective guidance and mentoring. Because there were few tenured women in their disciplines, the women said they would have sought women for help if more women had been available. The lack of guidance and mentoring for women raises the question of why women do not have mentors in the academy, especially when seeking such an important and prestigious status as tenure.

The findings of this study suggest that the underrepresentation of women in higher education needs to be addressed in faculty hiring and retention policies. The majority of faculty members and tenured faculty members in the academy are men, and thus there are few tenured women faculty members to serve as mentors for other women faculty members. Future studies should investigate the effectiveness of mentoring for women in the academy, especially when seeking tenure. Institutionalized power and gender issues need to be studied in relation to the recognition that women and men receive for the same or similar scholarly activities. Finally, this study raises questions about whether existing policies related to tenure practices are applied equitably across and within disciplines, and whether there are differences in tenure experiences between women and men. Future research that compares the tenure experiences of women and men might yield more information related to institutionalized power, gender, and tenure challenges. In addition, the recommendations of The Modern Language Association of America (2007) which include a) practicing and promoting transparency throughout the tenuring process; b) devising a letter of understanding with explicit expectations for new faculty members; c) providing support commensurate with expectations for achieving tenure, including start-up funds and research leaves; and d) establishing mentoring structures that provide guidance to new faculty members on scholarship and the balance of teaching, publication, and service, should be implemented in all departments and institutions.

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