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“If I don't laugh, I'm going to cry”: Meaning Making in the Promotion, Tenure, and Retention Process: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

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Keywords

Pretenured Faculty, University Faculty, Faculty Promotion, Academic Tenure, Faculty Retention, Collaborative Autoethnography

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Utilizing Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez’s (2013) collaborative autoethnographic research approach, we investigated our experiences as pre-tenured junior faculty progressing through the tenure and promotion process within a college of education at one public university in the southeastern United States. The review of the data (transcripts and photographs) revealed challenges and stressors common to junior faculty. Data analysis yielded four emergent themes centered around demonstrations of self-care and resiliency including community, balance, coping strategies, and process. Through data analysis, these major themes and their sub-themes were explored in depth. Recommendations and implications for personnel navigating the academic tenure process (i.e., new faculty, tenured faculty, and administrators) are presented. Keywords: Pretenured Faculty, University Faculty, Faculty Promotion, Academic Tenure, Faculty Retention, Collaborative Autoethnography

Introduction and Literature Review

Tenure-track faculty at higher education institutions are expected to teach, conduct research, and be actively engaged in service as part of the promotion and tenure process. The expectation for each requirement is often unclear. Faculty members who understand the tenure process may have more positive attitudes while progressing through the pre-tenure pathway, thus, higher education leaders and tenured faculty members need to clarify and improve the transparency of the tenure process for pre-tenure faculty members (Ponjuan, Conley, & Trower, 2011). In addition, for some faculty there is limited guidance and support outside of the formal tenure process. In turn, faculty members who seek tenure may face challenges advocating for their performance by addressing how their scholarship, service, and teaching aligns with institutional requirements for tenure. Some of these challenges include understanding the process to achieve clarity and transparency about expected performance expectations, achieving an attainable workload, reducing stress factors that occur during the pre-tenure phase, and maintaining a healthy balance of work and everyday life often referred to as work-life balance. Pre-tenure faculty, also referred to as nontenured faculty or junior faculty, struggle with assimilation, work-life balance, and unclear tenure requirements (Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000). Lawrence, Celis, and Ott (2014), described: “A common faculty misgiving about tenure decision-making is the lack of process clarity and transparency” (p. 161). The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of pre-tenure faculty in an effort to provide support to other nontenured peers, and to provide insight into the pre-tenure pathway.

Li, Wei, Ren, and Di (2015) examined the psychological mechanism through which empowerment affects work performance and determined that performance is contingent upon an individual’s locus of control. According to Rotter (as cited in Li, Wei, & Di, 2015) locus of control is defined as “an individual’s belief or perception about the source of consequences in

life” (p. 425). Perceptions of pre-tenure faculty work identify in terms of what is an attainable workload that also is sufficient to ensure performance success. These aforementioned perceptions are developed during the initial understanding of the job requirements and are subsequently shaped as one progresses on the tenure pathway (Lawrence et al., 2014). In Ransome’s (2007) study focused on balancing work, life, and the strategies adopted to cope with imbalance, *work* was defined as formal paid employment, and *life* as everything outside of this. Academics may experience problems in maintaining an effective work–life balance. Additionally, work–life imbalance is among the most frequently reported stressors for academics, which may be attributed to the open-ended nature of academic work and growing, often conflicting, expectations, pressures, and demands (Ren & Caudle, 2016).

Lower academic rank was associated with high stress on a number of stress factors, which suggested that assistant-level untenured faculty may be a high-risk population for work stress and related strain reactions, specifically due to engagement in role overload and using avoidance coping mechanisms to avoid dealing with said stressors (Lease, 1999). The notion of control (i.e., the belief that one can do something about a stressful event or experience) may be impacted by coping strategies, such as avoidance or the coping strategy of changing the situation (Bennett & Rigby, 1997). In their 2016 study, Ren and Caudle noted faculty utilized a range of techniques to balance work and life that were broken into three categories of coping strategies: behavioral, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. The behavioral category includes practical techniques related to creating boundaries and frameworks within which work is conducted. The interpersonal category describes how individuals draw on social networks and external support physically and emotionally. The intrapersonal category describes the psychological approaches that individuals adopt to shape their attitudes and perceptions (Ren & Caudle, 2016).

Academia allows for a large amount of flexibility and autonomy; academics have freedom to decide where, how, and even when to work. Pre-tenure faculty are exposed to intense scrutiny, by peers and administrators making the review process one of the least autonomous experiences in a highly autonomous profession (Altbach & Finkelstein, 1997). In addition, while academics have a high level of flexibility at work, they also have to deal with an intensification of their workload and long working hours (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). A recent study revealed four prominent themes affecting new faculty members including: expectations, collegiality, balance, and location (Stupnisky, Weaver-Hightower, & Kartoshkina, 2015). Stupnisky et al. (2015) concluded that forming positive collegial relationships and attaining balance, professionally and personally, are key factors in navigating the pre-tenure process. Clearly, pre-tenure faculty are vulnerable to additional stressors due to the ambiguous nature of the tenure process combined with low levels of perceived control. Thus, the goal of this study was to better understand the pre-tenure process and the factors that support navigating this pathway, specifically focusing on self-care and resiliency, as well as factors that may hinder these outcomes.

Research Questions

As four pre-tenure colleagues in a college of education, we informally shared our successes and struggles with each other about the tenure and promotion process. Through these reflective conversations, we decided to more formally document our pre-tenure experiences. We wanted to search for meaning and understanding in our individual and collective experiences and share what we revealed with others who may be navigating or be involved in the pre-tenure process. A collaborative autoethnography was utilized to answer the primary research question: *What are the lived experiences of full-time graduate faculty undergoing the pre-tenure process?* We developed a secondary research question around the practices of self-

care and perceived factors that bolster resiliency. Our secondary question was: *How do we participate in self-care activities and develop resiliency during the pre-tenure process?* Our goal was to add to the literature by providing a voice for junior faculty to convey the intricacies of the tenure and promotion process so others going through similar situations or those who may be involved in decision-making better understand the challenges faced when navigating this pathway.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method where the researcher is also the participant. In an autoethnography, the researcher/participant engages in reflection to explore personal meaning in a cultural milieu. Autoethnography is further described by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) as “epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being a part of a culture” (p. 4). In addition, data analysis by trained researchers is vital; it is what transforms a *story* to *research*. Collaborative autoethnography emerged from the original practice of autoethnography and describes the qualitative approach of a multi-member research team “[working] in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 24).

When exploring autoethnography, we recognized the importance of employing interactive interviews. Interactive interviewing is an interpretive practice for drawing meaning from people’s lived experiences both healthy and adverse (Given, 2008). This form of autoethnography method affords researcher/participants the opportunity to have an “in depth and intimate understanding of people’s experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics” (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997, p. 121). For some pre-tenure faculty, the tenure and promotion process may be an experience that is *emotionally charged* and quite *sensitive* because the outcome of being unsuccessful in the attainment of tenure and promotion negatively impacts ones’ career trajectory. In addition, we experienced a sense of not knowing, imposter syndrome as we doubted our accomplishments, and periods of isolation feeling like we were operating in silos due to the competitive nature of the tenure process, often keeping our accomplishments to ourselves. In order to best acknowledge and honor these emotionally charged and sensitive topics of tenure and promotion, we chose to engage in autoethnography to carefully explore our lived experiences.

We also chose to use Photovoice, which is a qualitative action research method that encourages participants to highlight strengths and opportunities in communities. Photovoice was developed by Wang and Burris (1997), to give voice to community members who may not have a voice or need a more powerful voice. With Photovoice, participants use photographs they have taken as data points to help answer a research question. Photovoice has been successfully utilized in a variety of disciplines, including public health (Wang & Burris, 1997), counselor education, (Koltz, Odegard, Provost, Smith, & Kleist, 2010), and health promotion (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). By merging collaborative autoethnography and photovoice, we intended to ensure a rich set of data with both photographs and the analysis of our focus group discussions, as well as elicit data to gather knowledge and information from the voice of junior faculty. The goal of our study was to add to the literature on the tenure and promotion practices academics encounter. Ellis (1993) encouraged autoethnographers to “experience an experience”—showing the thoughts and emotions behind the story (p. 711) and we believe this study will show the emotions behind our story of navigating the tenure and promotion pathway.

Participants and Procedures

We are four pre-tenure junior faculty members in the same department and college at the same institution. We are three women and one man between the ages of 32 and 46 (mean age = 41.5), all identifying our ethnicities as White. Two of us were in the process of completing our third pre-tenure year at the institution, one was completing their second year, and the final member was completing her first year. Three of us taught within the same graduate program while our fourth member taught in a separate graduate program within the same department. Two of our group had previously worked at different institutions prior to working at our current university; however, none of us had completed the tenure process at any institution at the time this study was conducted. We created written informed consent outlining the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, significance of the study, and information regarding the format and recording of the focus groups. All members had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Autoethnographic researchers commonly engage in data collection by recording memories from previous experiences or by gathering physical objects together (Chang et al., 2013). Our data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes were informed by Chang et al.'s (2013) collaborative autoethnographic data organization and analysis procedures. As individuals who made up a collaborative autoethnographic research team, we independently spent six weeks taking photographs to represent our experiences with self-care and resiliency while undergoing the pre-tenure process. The photographs had to be original and were uploaded to a protected file folder to which only we had access.

We engaged in data organization and analysis during two structured focus group meetings. Both meetings were held in private rooms held on our campus, and were audio recorded. The first meeting lasted two hours and was dedicated to sharing photographs and our corresponding narratives describing the photographs to each other. The guiding question was, "How do the photographs represent your self-care practices and sense of resilience during the pre-tenure process?" The SHOWeD reflection model (Powers, Friedman, & Pitner, 2012) was used to guide our focus group discussions. The photographer asked other participants what they see in each photo. After the discussion, the photographer then explained their intentionality, leading to the prompt: What is *Happening* here? Then the photographer shared what the photo shows about life in their community- specifically, we answered the question how does the photo and corresponding narrative relate to *Our lives*? We then had the opportunity to all share our perspectives on life in our community. For this project, we defined "community" as both the personal and professional lives we live. With this prompt about community, we considered "why are things this way?" Finally, we shared our thoughts on self-care, resilience, and challenges within our community and answer the questions, How can we use this photo to educate others? (Why this photo?) and what can we *do* about it? The recording was transcribed verbatim by one participant, who subsequently shared the transcript with the rest of the participants. We individually reviewed the transcript for potential themes that we planned to discuss in the second focus group session.

The second focus group was scheduled after we reviewed the transcript from the first group meeting and centered on collaborative theme identification and analysis. We followed Chang et al.'s (2013) suggested three data analysis activities for collaborative autoethnographic research: "(1) reviewing data; (2) segmenting, categorizing, and regrouping data; and (3) finding themes and reconnecting with data" (p. 102). It's important to note that although Chang et al. (2013) identified three phases of data analysis, the authors acknowledged that the

activities are fluid rather than separate steps. When reviewing the data, we coded the data at micro- and macro- levels. First, we coded the sections pertaining to each separate photograph presentation (micro-level), and subsequently looked for overarching theme categories. We continued this process for each of our photograph presentations, careful to not overuse the same codes and themes. Once individual overarching themes were created, we wrote them on a dry erase board and began searching for overarching themes that connected each story (macro-level). As we progressed with our data reviews, we engaged in what Chang et al. (2013) labeled “segmenting/fragmenting” the data.

Successful collaborative autoethnography research occurs when research participants establish an atmosphere of trust that allows members to be honest and vulnerable about their individual experiences (Chang et al., 2013). Because we already had collegial professional and personal relationships, trust was established prior to data collection, and was maintained throughout the research process. To optimize the trustworthiness of the data, we maintained an audit trail and conducted member-checking through an ongoing dialogue regarding our interpretations of meaning to ensure the true value of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Audit trails allow for researchers to retrace their steps and verify that the processes and procedures they used were methodical and valid (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail consisted of all participants’ photographs and labeled themes, the transcript from the first focus group meeting, an overview of theme development to identify the trends and patterns in the data that were repeatedly noted, and a summary of all findings.

We also kept field notes that included individual journals to reflect on our journey and track personal experiences and wrote memos that detailed our coding and data analysis processes. Duncan (2004) stressed the importance of keeping a reflective journal and other forms of data (e.g., coding notes) in order to support reliability, in accordance with suggestions made by Yin (1989). As Strauss and Corbin (2008) noted, “Writing memos should begin with the first analytic session and continue throughout the analytic process” (p. 119). We conducted member-checking by engaging in ongoing dialogue about our photograph presentations, reviewing the transcript from the initial focus group post-transcription, and the initial coding and thematic development during the second focus group meeting (at the micro- and macro-levels). Throughout these processes, we provided opportunities to clarify or edit our narratives prior to final data analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Results

The two-step process of thematic development and subsequent analysis produced four overarching themes which were used to answer the research questions. Themes were developed and identified through dialogue at the two meetings, as well as the photographs we took throughout data collection. Each major theme contained multiple sub-themes, for which various photos and quotes were chosen as thematic representations. In this study, the four major themes were *community*, *balance*, *coping strategies*, and *process*.

Major Theme 1: Community

The theme of *community* resulted from our interpretation of the data produced from the collective demonstration of self-care and resiliency. Community is further defined by us as the importance of being with and experiencing with others who are going through like experiences or have gone through similar experiences with the tenure and promotion process. We acknowledged the importance of sharing space, time, connection, and experiences with people dealing with the same issues and struggles. We also discussed our perception of community in academia. This discussion was important for us as we sensed community in academia is not

often valued because of the competitive nature of the tenure and promotion process. This theme of community included the sub-themes of *finding support* and *sense of humor*.



Figure 1: Finding support. This photo represents receiving support and validation of emotions and experiences. The photo was taken by a participant at a local restaurant after spending time with another pre-tenure faculty member.

All participants disclosed their self-described need to *find support*. We saw support as knowing other people or our spiritual faith will bolster us in difficult and trying times. Finding and accepting support was challenging for us; however, we all agreed that it was important for us to accept support when it was offered. Some participants identified sources of support as family members, friends, significant others, colleagues at other institutions, and their personal faiths (and corresponding higher powers).

Participants R2 and P1 described their regular practice of meeting on Friday afternoons to share a cocktail and share about their triumphs and trials during the week (see Figure 1). They noted the importance of providing support without trying to solve any problems or feelings of discomfort they were experiencing. Participant R2 stated:

The support piece is so important...because I knew that it would be even if we're all sitting around like this sucks yeah me too I've been in the same thing like I feel depleted. It's like I think of Yalom's principle of universality with like group counseling. And the me too is very powerful in the sense of community and it's not like we sit around the whole time and complain. It's like sometimes you need to complain.

Acknowledging the importance of spirituality, or a higher power, as a way of finding support, was also empowering for us and increased resiliency. Some participants shared pictures of friends, family, and photos related to their spiritual beliefs as evidence of support (see Figure 2). We also shared photos of loved ones, family members, and other advocates who we considered to be supportive through this journey. Participant R3 stated:

And even if I don't feel like I am resilient, I know I have embossed on the literature like pieces in place that support me and promote resiliency. And so I

know that like even like, you know I'll get to the picture in a minute but like related to like my faith and spiritual practices.

At times we felt that we missed opportunities to improve our mutual support. This occurred in part because it was difficult to share our individual successes due to the atmosphere of competition around the tenure and promotion process at our university. While we acknowledge that the work we do is collaborative in nature, which is a positive aspect of the pre-tenure pathway, we realized that we tend to keep our overall accomplishments to ourselves. Furthermore, as junior faculty, we go up for tenure in what feels like a competitive environment and one must outshine the other. Thus, we were able to see how vital it has been for us to find and accept multiple sources of support.



Figure 2: This photo was taken by a participant in the St. Louis Cathedral. The participant remarked this photo inspired her to acknowledge the importance of her faith and how it is a way she finds support.

We also individually identified the importance and regular practice of maintaining our *senses of humor*. Participant R1 shared:

It's funny cause when [a different participant] said "I'm physically going to have a nervous breakdown" and then you started laughing...I totally get it...it

goes back to that if I don't laugh I am literally going to take that box of tissues and shove it in my nostrils.

Participant P1 shared: "I have to find something to laugh at or...I will just never stop crying...And I cannot live a life where there's no laughter and there's no fun."

A sense of humor was seen as vital for connecting as members of a community, as well as allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and transparent about our struggles. Our senses of humor also were a way we highlighted our self-care and resiliency. Engaging in laughter was an important way for us to connect with each other in community and take care of our mental and physical health.

Major Theme 2: Balance

One question that emerged in our focus group discussion was: how do we find the balance of taking this kind of work and making it a support system? This question highlighted the second major theme, *balance*, which included the sub-themes of: *maintaining one's values* and *perspective versus perception*.

Balance, we determined, was a sense of acknowledging professional life and personal life as equally important. As academics, we struggled with the concept of balance for ourselves and the expectations of each other. We wanted to support each other and our individual choices, and yet we also wanted to maintain a lack of judgment for each other and our personal and professional choices.

Balance, we also recognize, is a buzzword of sorts. Work-life balance is a term that was popularized in the 1990s, and we were intentional about choosing the word balance and not work-life balance. We, as we assume most people do, cannot separate work and life because as academics, our work and life are often intermingled. Therefore, the dichotomy of work-life balance can be problematic. We chose to focus on balance. Balance, for us, was the recognition of work tasks and life tasks as equally vital to our well-being and contentment. Spending too much energy on work tasks could be as depleting as spending too much energy on life tasks. We wanted to have energy for our life tasks and our work tasks.

Participant R3 described balance in this way: "I just I feel as if I'm searching and more now of you know what, I've decided these other aspects of my life; even though the balance isn't there, I know where the lines are." She expounded on her experiences and stated, "I feel like I'm searching, but I know what I'm not going to give up." Specifically, "but I know what I'm not going to give up" identifies the importance of balance, values, and perception. Participant R3 was intentional about recognizing the importance of searching for her own sense of balance.

We recognized the importance of *maintaining one's values* throughout the tenure and promotion process. In conversation with each other and through the process of taking photographs, we recognized the importance of connecting with our personal values. We identified our values and spoke about how we lived our values. As a group, we identified that we valued family, friends, spirituality, health, and wellness. We each also acknowledged we have personal values we strive to honor in our professional and personal lives.



Figure 3: This photo represents the major theme of balance and further highlights the sub-theme of maintaining one's values. The participant described the importance of spending time with family as a primary value.

Participant R3 identified hiking with his family as a combination of his values: family, health, and wellness. He described maintaining one's values this way:

Whenever we go out on hikes, I'm the one carrying the pack with everything including toiletries...they have their own packs...Metaphorically I'm carrying more weight, but I'm doing it so that they...don't have to worry...just...be with each other.

Spending time in nature with his spouse and children helped him balance out the pressures from work. He recognized that he still carried a heavy load while hiking; however, he embraced the time spent with his family in a meaningful way, despite the weight. Comparatively, his desire to be successful in the promotion and tenure process felt like carrying a heavy load, but his purpose in doing so was ultimately to provide for his family. Hiking trips were his way of balancing out work pressures and reconnecting with his values.

Through our discussions and sharing our photographs, we were able to talk openly about our values, how we live our values, and how our values occasionally bump up against our perception of the tenure and promotion process.

Woven throughout our photos and focus group session regarding balance was our never-ending dialogue about *perspective versus perception*. Were these pressures and stressors external or internal? Were we authentically and genuinely evaluating the tenure and promotion process or were we allowing negative perceptions to color our thought process?

Participant P1 described perspective versus perception in this way:

That is the problem. We are a teaching college, we are supposed to be educating people and providing them with tools and strategies to be successful, but what the message is (about promotion and tenure) is not about making our students better. It's, you want me to write a freaking article and submit it into a journal and you want me to have 10 of them. The hell's that going to do to help anybody?! I mean I'll do it. I understand and all those things will happen, but

like that's been the hardest thing, listening to what comes out of people's mouths. And you're like "listen, go home and listen to yourself. Look yourself in the mirror and have a conversation with yourself."

Major Theme 3: Coping Strategies

The theme of *coping strategies* emerged through participants narratives as a common thread when we described our attempts to engage in self-care practices. We shared photos of myriad ways to handle the various stressors they experienced in their roles as pre-tenure faculty; some pictures featured exercise equipment, spending time in nature, and bedding. We discussed the differences between healthy or adaptive coping strategies versus unhealthy or maladaptive coping strategies. Participant R1 included a photo of the inside of her car that she related to unhealthy coping strategies (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: This photo represents the major theme of coping strategies. The participant recognized the chaos in the car as a metaphor for her maladaptive coping strategies during the pre-tenure process.

Participant R1 stated:

This is the inside of my car. And it's just total chaos and every time I look at it I get really anxious, because, I'm like, I've often referred to my car as like a 16,000 dollar trash can. Like I'll just throw shit in it and forget about it. However, I've been very good about like once a week I hoe all this crap out of it. Doing that is important to me. It helps me maintain my sanity to have a clean car, even if it's only once a week. I haven't done that yet this semester so I just have like this growing ridiculousness, and I'm going to get swallowed by this chaos in my car.

Participant R1 continued: “When I thought about the pictures that I took, I’m realizing that my pictures really are that I’m not taking care of myself.” Participant R3 shared a photo of the musical instruments in his home that he and his family members play together. R1 stated:

The guitars are in the background. It’s just sort of this nice way to vent for self-care, also for us to check in with each other. We do it at night and have these couple of songs that we always play together. We’ll turn off the lights so we can’t even see, just to really just focus on listening to each other.

It was important for us to see the different ways we were choosing to cope with the stressors of the pre-tenure experience. For example, as illustrated above, some of us engaged in maladaptive coping strategies while others engaged in adaptive coping strategies. We were able to explore the issues around selecting maladaptive coping strategies rather than healthier, adaptive coping strategies.

Major Theme 4: Process

The theme of *process* resulted from our interpretation of the data produced from our collective demonstration of self-care and resiliency. The analysis produced the three sub-themes: *true versus professional selves*, *mixed messages*, and *moving target*.

Multiple times we referred to tenure and promotion activities and experiences explicitly using the word *process*. We used *process* to acknowledge specific procedures and processes sanctioned by the institution, while at other times using *process* to point to participants’ experiential journey during the time of seeking tenure and promotion. Discussing different departmental requirements for tenure, P1 stated:

I think it’s interesting to have a conversation across departments, like I was in something the other day where one of the people from [college department] have has tenure laid out the tenure process for their department, and it made perfect sense.

Participant R1 discussed a hope to bring about systemic change after successfully securing tenure, stating, “When we are in charge of this process, we are going to be transparent with people, of like, we know that this process is scary. We know that this process feels really ambiguous.” The participant continued further:

So I was thinking about this in like two different lenses of like globally I have to be this change that I am calling on the world to be, and locally like I need to be this change of what other people are coming up behind me in this tenure and promotion process. I need to be that change.

Discussing the more personalized, experiential aspect of tenure and promotion, we used *process* when acknowledging emotional responses and perceptions. Example quotes include: “that’s how this process feels, right? This process feels like nonsense to me” and, “The tenure process is you just cycle through all of these emotions. We have fear, we have sadness, we have anger, we have disgust, and we have joy.” Participant R2 aligned tenure and promotion with past traumatic experiences:

“So I’ve had some pretty significant traumas in my life. So when I think of - this process, it’s really - I’m like at the end of the day, if I’m not retained, like okay, because I’ve lost people. I’ve seen people die.”

Participants in the current study acknowledged the *true* (i.e., personal) *self*, the *professional self*, and the resulting tension that can be felt from navigating these domains. Participants’ quotes similar to, “I teach at a university, oh right, and it’s like that is a huge part of who I am” point to the true self, while others such as, “I am a worker and I have high expectations for myself. I’m not going to do half-assed work. I’m not going to be that person” reference the professional self. Additionally, participants alluded to the tension that can result from the interdependency of true and professional selves with comments such as: “And that’s what I think I have to keep remembering is, I wanna remind myself that this is a job because it does feel like my identity,” and

It’s so wrapped up in my identity that when I say to myself, “[Name], like it truly doesn’t matter if these people reject you.” It truly, you know, when I remind myself of that it’s like a punch in my stomach or my face.

Describing aspects of the tenure and promotion process, we highlighted an aspect of the professional selves domain which was identified as the sub-theme *mixed messages*. Review of the data suggested we perceive mixed messages pertaining to tenure and promotion from various institutional parties (e.g., university leadership, college administration, senior faculty). Quotes represented a range of mixed messages, centering around central elements such as tenure and promotion requirements:

And then I come here and it’s just, “Give me some clear guidance.” Give me something; anything. And exactly, it’s like whatever. Here it’s clear as mud. And when I was at [other institution], it was like you need to go up for tenure and promotion. You need this and this, and you need this.

Additionally, quotes centered around more overarching aspects of new faculty members’ journey such as mixed messages from leadership regarding vision and mission: “...I just met [with an administrator], and [the administrator] was like, ‘You know, teaching is important but that’s not really important. Your research is important.’ And I’m like, why [am I expected to] do 3:3 teaching?” As pre-tenure faculty, we felt confused and scared when we received what we perceived as mixed messages about what is important for us to focus on in our pre-tenure years. For example, Participant P1 stated: “We are a teaching college. We are supposed to be educating people and providing them with tools and strategies to be successful.” She continued to describe how the conflicting foci of the promotion and tenure requirements did not always seem aligned with her pedagogical stance.

We struggle with messages from administrators and tenured faculty. Both of these stakeholders seemed to share different perspectives on what was “important.” Participant P1 continued with:

I think that for me it’s such a mixed message. Like we’re a college of education and teaching is really important, and by the way, we are not going to hire professionals to do all this other nonsense so you have to do it so here’s all the service you have to do, plus oh! by the way: churn out some articles.

Participants referenced this aspect of tenure and promotion existing as a *moving target* with quotes such as, “whatever your shifting, moving target, I’ll try my best to hit it.” Participants’ data also illustrated the aspect of such changes in tenure and promotion as being explicit, sanctioned, or official. Example quotes include:

When we came in, there were no external letters and then we show up and it’s like, “Well, you guys are the first guinea pigs for letters and that’s not what the document says.” Like to me, I’m like, we hold students accountable for that, right? Like, here’s your catalog that you [enrolled] in under.

and

My model has been roughly ten articles [by the time you submit your final promotion and tenure materials]. I was like, [colleague] does [academic college on campus], and they aren’t doing ten articles over there—I mean somebody just went up for tenure over there and [they] had like two. And so I guess mine is a moving target; just tell me what to do and I’ll do it but my fear is if you tell me it’s five or you tell me it’s ten, and this person leaves and this person leaves, and somebody else comes in, am I gonna go up for—and I don’t have any clear guidance, somebody doesn’t write it down, I can find myself in three years, four years, under a different guideline?

Discussion

Our research on the tenure and promotion process both mirrors the current literature and also provides new perspectives. For example, the aspects of process as a theme of tenure and promotion (i.e., formalized activities and personalized experience) appear aligned with the literature. Viewing faculty acculturation to joining academia through a family systems perspective, Hooper, Wright, and Burnham (2012) explicitly refer to institutional tenure processes (e.g., formalized activities) and how the influence of such activities manifest (e.g., personalized experience) upon faculty member’s individual, family, and professional lives. Similarly, Pavel, Legier, and Ruiz (2012) referred to the process of tenure and promotion describing it as a challenging time of critical examination of one’s career commonly eliciting an emotional response of fearfulness or fright. No doubt many aspects of tenure and promotion may contribute to this conceptualization of process, and indeed as participants of this study discussed the theme of process, the data converged into additional sub-themes. As previously mentioned, further analysis of the data yielded the three sub-themes of true versus mixed messages, moving target, and professional selves. These three sub-themes are further explored next.

The sub-theme of mixed messages is clearly aligned with literature asserting that contradictions regarding tenure and promotion are not merely perceived by new faculty, but *rightly* perceived due to mixed messages sent by colleges and universities (Barat & Harvey, 2015; Jones, Loya, & Furman, 2009; Knight, 2010; Lawrence et al., 2014). The breadth of such conflicting expectations may include faculty responsibilities (Stupnisky et al., 2015), value or weight attributed to scholarly publications (Jones et al., 2009), and time management guidelines (Stupnisky et al., 2015). In addition to mixed messages serving as a prominent factor, we as participants in this current study also referred to the tenure and promotion process as a moving target. The prominent distinction between the two sub-themes of mixed messages and moving target seemed to be explicitness. While both factors contribute to new faculty members’ frustration and overall confusion, where mixed messages seemed to focus on

contradictions between official and unofficial sources, the sub-theme of moving target referenced situations and experiences where institutional leadership explicitly (i.e., officially) change tenure and promotion expectations.

The sub-theme of moving target mirrors similar references to tenure and promotion in the literature (Stupnisky et al., 2015) acknowledging the continually evolving and expanding standards for junior faculty (Jones et al., 2009; Youn & Price, 2009). This evolution has placed increased rigor of scholarship (both in terms of quantity and quality), while expanding new faculty members' roles and responsibilities to include business development, program enhancement, and community relations (Barat & Harvey, 2015). Barat and Harvey (2015) pointed out that such changes impacting new faculty members' tenure and promotion may originate from multiple systemic levels whether pursuing institutional repositioning (e.g., transitioning from traditional teaching-oriented to research-oriented), or more personal whim (e.g., newly-hired leadership preferring a different vision).

In our discussion of process, we talked about tension between their true versus professional selves. These comments resonated with Stupnisky et al.'s (2015) mixed methods study of new faculty in that exploring the commonly cited theme of balance, discovering balance was highlighted both within and between the domains of personal and professional lives. Furthermore, we reference the interdependency of these two aspects pointing out that while many new faculty may try to separate and compartmentalize the pursuit of balance within each distinct domain, doing so ignores that success in one (e.g., professional) may be impossible without success in the other (e.g., personal). Hooper et al. (2012) also referred to the interconnectedness of faculty personal (or "true") selves and their professional selves. We reference how social interactions, behaviors, and other manifestations of the true self may have negative repercussions if perceived as negative by senior faculty colleagues. Recognizing the influence such perceptions may have upon tenure and promotion, Hooper et al. (2012) suggested new faculty practice differentiation of self when navigating the milieu of personal and professional selves.

When we consider the differences, however, we see the importance of using a collaborative autoethnography infused with photovoice and this is a positive outcome of collaborating in the arena of higher education. One theme we identified that was not as evident in the previous studies, is community. We identified community as a vital, critical theme for highlighting resiliency. This theme may not have been as apparent without the use of photographs and focus groups.

Community and its impact on resiliency is an area for further research engagement. We see the social support of community as a protective factor for our resilience in the pre-tenure process. The social support we found in each other, and the understanding that we essentially had allies in the pre-tenure process was vital for our success. The level of community and social support were important for us in our desire to make meaning in often difficult and trying times. It is our hope future researchers will engage in additional collaborative autoethnography and photovoice studies to highlight strengths and opportunities in the pre-tenure process.

Limitations

As with all research studies, our study has limitations. One limitation of this study is common in qualitative research. It is challenging for us to explore causality. Was our stress and struggle about the tenure and promotion process an internal or external struggle? Were we internalizing our fears in an irrational way? Was there help available and we were not willing to embrace it?

Another potential limitation to collaborative autoethnographies is the potential for mistrust and fear of judgement in sharing authentically. Several times during our process, we

chose to take time and personally reflect on how honest and vulnerable we were willing to be in this process. While we believe we were as honest and vulnerable as possible, there is also the possibility that we unintentionally withheld personal details or observations.

Implications

The tenure process can be seen as a scary, intimidating process. As pre-tenure faculty, we acknowledge our many privileges (e.g., educational privilege, current socio-economic status, White privilege). Yet we also acknowledge our lack of privilege in academia in the sense that being non-tenured makes us feel vulnerable in that our opinions may be judged and used against us if they are not in alignment with tenured faculty and administration.

When we consider the implications for academia, we identified three groups of stakeholders including pre-tenure faculty, tenured faculty, and university administrators that would benefit from the findings of this study. Each of these groups are directly involved in the tenure and promotion process. We recommend pre-tenure faculty may improve their experience by findings ways to connect with each other. It is common for new faculty to feel disempowered and isolated. However, we found much support and community in completing this research and we recommend others engage in collaborative efforts to attaining a professional support system with your colleagues. It strengthened our professional relationships, encouraged vulnerability, allowed for creativity, and forced us to be reflective: Did we want to lead unbalanced lives? By participating in this research, we also acknowledged our own decisions to participate in this process. As faculty, we may feel like “victims” at different times in the pre-tenure process; however, we also acknowledged to each other and ourselves that we were choosing to be in academia, and we needed to find a way to better navigate the pathway to tenure and promotion. We believe the findings from this study may help in the navigation efforts during the tenure and promotion process.

Tenured faculty may not remember the trials and tribulations of their own pre-tenure experience. The expectations for tenure and promotion may also have changed in recent years. Pre-tenure faculty may be dealing with very different set of circumstances than their more seasoned colleagues. Pre-tenure faculty may also not be encouraged to voice opinions in meetings or have ownership in group decisions. We encourage tenured faculty to be as genuinely supportive as they are able to their less seasoned colleagues and share with their colleagues “the ropes” —the unspoken “rules” of the department, college, and university. Pre-tenure faculty may unwittingly make errors because they are not informed of the mores of the organization.

University administrators have a vital role to play in the support of pre-tenure faculty members and their developmental process. We encourage administrators to consider providing increased clarity about the promotion and tenure process for new faculty during their formative pre-tenure years. Perhaps additional information and support could be provided in formal (or informal) mentorship programs, handbooks, and ongoing pre-tenure faculty meetings during which tenured faculty offer constructive feedback and information about how to be successful. Equally important is to proactively engage in conversations with pre-tenure faculty about the realistic struggles of being pre-tenure, and in said conversations, seek ways to provide validation and/or support.

Conclusion

The tenure and promotion process can be challenging for pre-tenure faculty. We hope pre-tenure faculty will find validation and support for their experiences when reading this study. We also hope tenured faculty and university administrators acknowledge the power and

privilege they have in the tenure and promotion process and strive to give clear and meaningful guidelines for pre-tenure faculty. As researchers and now a professional support team, we can say that through our collaboration we feel less alone in the navigation of our pre-tenure journeys and this in turn, has made us focus on helping each other to be successful in their individuals endeavors, and focus less on the competitive nature that lends itself to academia.

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