How Vulnerable Am I? An Experiential Discussion of Tenure Rhetoric for New Faculty

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ABSTRACT: Attaining tenure is a significant stress and source of motivation for tenure-track new faculty. A process that is misconstrued, misrepresented, and rife with rumour. To make matters worse, the process varies with institution, candidate, and year. This article uses a narrative-auto-ethnographic approach to unpack the concerns and questions about tenure that I, as a tenure-track new faculty member, have experienced. The literature is used to contextualize these issues within the experiences of other new faculty reported in the research – seeking the truth behind the stories. The article concludes with focused reflections on White's (2008) list of strategies to help navigate the complexities of the tenure process, as well as recommendations for how to approach the tenure-track process.

RESUMÉ: Le nouvel enseignant en voie de titularisation doit encaisser une bonne dose de stress et posséder une grande motivation. C'est un processus qui est mal interprété, mal représenté et qui est connu par ouïe dire. Pour noircir le tableau, le processus varie selon l'établissement, le candidat et l'année. Cet article se sert d'une approche narrative auto ethnographique pour mettre à jour les inquiétudes et les questions concernant la titularisation que j'ai moi-même expérimentées en tant que nouveau professeur titulaire de poste. La littérature est utilisée ici pour remettre dans le contexte les questions qui sont tirées d'expériences vécues par d'autres nouveaux enseignants et qui ont été rapportées dans la recherche. C'est la recherche de la vérité à travers des histoires vécues. En conclusion, l'article met l'accent sur des remarques tirées de la liste de stratégies de White (2008) afin d'aider à mieux appréhender les complexités de la procédure à suivre en vue d'obtenir un poste permanent. L'article met aussi l'accent sur des conseils pratiques à appliquer pour aborder la procédure de titularisation.

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Overview

I recently met a number of university faculty who shared a ride with me from the Toronto airport to our conference in Kingston – a few hours away. The conversation eventually turned to tenure, and I learned that each colleague in the van was tenured. In the course of the conversation that followed it became apparent the tenure requirements of the Canadian universities represented by the faculty in the van were being described as appreciably different. As one colleague from a western university remarked, "*most people at other institutions would not be granted tenure at my institution – the requirements for research and publication are considerably higher than at any other university I am aware of.*" Interestingly, this was said with pride, as a badge, that she had met the requirements, and that was a significant accomplishment – which I believe it was. This conversation left me wondering, where do new faculty gain a specific awareness of this expected production at their institution so that they may successfully attain tenure?

I am an Assistant Professor in my second year of a tenure-track position and I have been a participant in a number of conversations focused on the tenure process. There is a rhetoric that surrounds tenure, originating partly from the experiences of tenured colleagues, but more often these tenure stories are propagated by untenured faculty who feel vulnerable and are uncertain of tenure expectations.

This article uses a narrative-auto-ethnographic approach to unpack the concerns and questions about tenure that I, as a tenure-track new faculty member, have experienced. The literature is used to contextualize these issues within the experiences of other new faculty reported in the research – seeking the *truth* behind the beliefs and stories. No specific theoretical framework guides this work, although the article concludes with focused reflections on White's (2008) list of tenure strategies which are used as a reference frame to discuss the complexities of the tenure process, and as a basis for my recommendations on how to approach the tenure-track process.

Job Security

Tenure is regarded as a form of security. Like many people (particularly during a recession), tenure-track faculty question what sorts of circumstances might result in cut-backs or lay-offs. By accepting my current tenure-track position and the imagined future it represented, my wife and I each took a pay-cut in addition to moving across the country,

leaving our friends, our home, and our families behind. Thus, I wanted to know if I was vulnerable as a tenure-track professor before committing to these personal and financial sacrifices. For instance, during the hiring process, I asked my Dean, "if enrolments in a particular program decline are tenure-track faculty more apt to be dismissed than their tenured colleagues?" I was assured at the time that as long as my scholarly production was up to standard, I had nothing to worry about. Establishing the standard has become a priority for me since that conversation.

The job security associated with tenure can be seen in the following policy statement issued by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT):

> The word tenure and its derivatives mean that such an appointment can only be terminated for just and sufficient reasons, which are limited to the areas of financial exigency or of grave misconduct, and which must be proved through procedures that ensure fairness before a properly constituted and independent tribunal. The phasing out of courses or programs by the university or college is not a reason for terminating a tenured appointment. (CAUT Council, 2005)

Risbey (2002) argues, however, that despite tenure in North America being historically grounded in assuring academic freedom and providing reward for productive faculty, Canadian tenure has become an assurance of job security that breeds complacency in tenured faculty. By definition, tenure-track faculty do not share this security. What vulnerabilities then do tenure-track faculty have that their tenured colleagues avoid?

The most obvious vulnerability is the right of the university to deny tenure and subsequently dismiss the tenure-track faculty member. In a compelling article written by Verrier (1992), he shares many stories from American tenure-track faculty, who after spectacular amounts of work and stress leading up to their tenure deadline, were summarily dismissed; the university had reached its quota for tenure appointments, and their application was not as good for the university as their colleagues who were granted tenure. Contrary to these tales of dramatic dismissal, however, my experience has been that Deans employ "tenure coaching" to minimize the chances of tenure rejection by recommending when to apply for tenure and what the tenure candidate can do to augment their application in the interim.

Verrier (1992) discusses other forms of vulnerability that are not as contractually overt as dismissal on the basis of failing to meet subjective

tenure requirements. He identifies insidious pressures that result from tenure-track faculty feeling the need to do anything and accept everything so as to minimize the chances that they may irritate the wrong people, or perhaps be perceived as not doing enough.

Don't Make Waves

Relationships with "others" at the university is also of primary concern. Specifically, a question posed by some tenure-track faculty is how their relationships with tenured faculty who assess their work, the Dean, and even the greater university administration, influence the likelihood they will be granted tenure? Do we need to do what we are told and not irritate anyone who potentially could review our promotion or tenure applications? I asked a recently tenured friend and colleague if he had any insights now that he had obtained tenure. He responded, "*I didn't aggravate any of the wrong people.*" Yet, in a conversation with the Dean, she commented how she has recommended granting tenure on more than one occasion regardless of her personal opinion of the individual and believes the faculty who make up tenure committees do the same. Although, she did mention the criteria used to judge the quality of the tenure applications are not static, nor are they self-evident, and thus she is not surprised that applicants are suspicious of the process.

Another related concern of tenure-track faculty is that they should avoid contentious teaching, service, and research pursuits until their academic freedom has been ensured by tenure. The following statement from the CAUT Council (2005, para. 1) identifies the pressures faculty experience and how tenure protects them from these pressures; "tenure ... is the means by which academic staff are protected against personal malice or political coercion." I personally have not felt my academic freedom being challenged as I teach courses and choose the research and writing projects that I am passionate about. However, given the number of warnings by tenured colleagues not to take on contentious issues because of my tenure-track vulnerability, others seemingly have not shared this same freedom. In my review of the literature, there is documentation of dismissals of tenure-track faculty due to not meeting tenure requirements. However, I was unable to find any recent examples in which a tenure-track faculty member was dismissed as a result of teaching / researching contentious issues; issues that tenure would otherwise have enabled them to pursue. In other words, the severity of the faculty members' actions, not tenure status, seems to be the primary criteria that determines if universities are to take punitive actions.

However, there are expectations of new faculty that come with a tenure-track position which effectively control what these faculty are free to do. Shapiro (2006), for example, describes being frustrated by the bias toward research that most universities perpetuate through the tenure process:

> The energetic people we hire into tenure-track positions at research universities are smart – that's why we hire them. And they realize right away that their time is finite and that it's a zero-sum game. When it comes down to writing one more journal article or grant proposal or joining in an innovative curriculum project in their discipline, why take a chance? It's always better to have one or two more journal articles on one's disciplinary research. These bright people know that they are putting themselves at risk if they make the other choice, whatever the institutional rhetoric about teaching and learning. (p. 42)

Thus, although we are technically free to pursue research, teaching, and service interests of our choosing, we are effectively limited by the scholarly activities that will "look good" to the tenure review committees. Worth (1999) refers to these functional expectations of new faculty as velvet prisons and summarizes his experience with the research/teaching/service workload proportions as 90/5/5, even though it is promoted as 40/40/20.

I have discovered a more subtle form of influence that motivates me to maintain positive relationships with my colleagues within the academic communities I work, even though these relationships, ultimately, do not jeopardize my job. As a faculty member, I am motivated to work with my colleagues on collaborative initiatives so that I can carry my share and increase my scholarship in areas where experienced faculty have expertise. This inadvertently creates opportunities for being mentored, and begins the process of establishing my own relationships with the members of the community within which I work – improving my chances to practice the "Scholarship of Application" (Boyer, 1997). Word of mouth by trusted and respected colleagues carries a lot of weight in the small academic communities that professors work. If you are not respected by these colleagues, the capacity for new faculty to make a positive name for themselves in the local, national, and international forums we work is significantly hindered.

Expectations of Academic Production – How Long Do I Have?

The tenure-track process has a defined time-frame, although that time-frame, and whether it is tied to promotion, varies from institution to institution. At my university the time frame ranges from four to six years.

This often gets muddled with the promotion process which operates on a similar basis, but can be on a different time frame. The "catch" written into my tenure-track contract is that if I do not achieve tenure within the maximum 6-year period, the university has the right to dismiss me. Perhaps my biggest fear is that I am going to arrive at the tenure deadline and be told that I have not been publishing enough, or serving on enough committees to be granted tenure – a point at which it will be too late to do anything. As a result, I apply for every grant funding opportunity that is even peripherally related to my work, commit to an overwhelming number of research/writing ventures, have joined several committees, and have volunteered to review for journals I have no time to read, all to hedge my bets against the perception that I may not have done enough. This apparently is not a motivation unique to me.

Verrier (1992) reports that the "fourth-year review" is the hard deadline for many American tenure-track faculty to prove they should be awarded tenure, and that in the period leading up to this summative assessment, the willingness of tenure-track cohort members to out-compete their colleagues for the limited number of tenured positions results in a ridiculous willingness to take on work. My tenure-track colleagues here at UNB claim a similar pressure, but direct their stress at determining what the criteria are, not who they are competing against. Thus, it is the Norm (American) vs. Criterion (Canadian) referenced nature of the tenure evaluation that is different, not the pressure on faculty to take on extravagant amounts of work in response.

This process does seem to be mitigated by a couple of factors. First of all, most faculties have some variation of an annual review process. In some cases, this determines merit pay (what a colleague at recent conference referred to as a "Meritocracy"), in other instances it is a way for the Dean to monitor the work of the faculty and offer constructive feedback. However, Whitt (1991) describes the annual review process to be quite cryptic with tenure-track faculty often misinterpreting the written feedback they are given. On the other hand, my most recent annual review assured me that the work I am doing meets the expected

standard of scholarly production with some suggestions for how I can continue to augment my work. Assuming I do not disregard this process or misinterpret the feedback I receive, I should arrive at the tenure deadline confidant that on an annual basis I have been judged to be an effective scholar. The second factor that mitigates the abrupt tenure deadline can be found in the experiences of a current colleague who was informed by the Dean that her academic production did not meet the tenure standard. She was granted an extension of a year to work toward meeting the requirements, and was given a specific list of why her tenure application had not passed. Even though this year was described as "extremely stressful," she had a specific plan and believed she would be granted tenure if she could stick to her plan.

Variability of Institution

As the van ride example in the introduction describes, each institution maintains a different expectation regarding what is required of their tenure-track faculty in order to be granted tenure. This variability of institutional specific tenure requirements (Greene, O'Connor, Good, Lefford, Peel, & Zhang, 2008), along with these requirements changing from year to year and from candidate to candidate (Shapiro, 2006; Verrier, 1992), is well described in the literature. This is a significant source of stress for new faculty as this quote from Greene et al. (2008) indicates: "One of the single most stressful factors for new faculty is unclear or changing tenure expectations" (p. 439).

Virtually every university has an expectation for faculty to do research, teach, and perform service with workload allocations that match the priority of the university (Premeaux & Mondy, 2002). However, each university's tenure requirements are potentially different and difficult to quantify due to a number of factors. A university's research rank (and priority), its reputation, the number of tenure-track candidates applying for tenure, the collective bargaining agreements, how tight the budget is, and even how difficult it is for an institution to attract and retain faculty all influence tenure requirements (Israel & Baird, 1988; DeSpain, 2006). Interestingly, Greene et al. (2008) do not decry that different universities have different expectations or even that these expectations may change from year to year, they simply recommend that the university make its priorities clear to new faculty, and that they have in place (and communicate) a tenure, reward, and promotion structure that matches those priorities.

Idiosyncratic tenure practices may be the least of the concerns for future new faculty however. Kezar (2000), after reviewing five years of ERIC publications, discovered a significant increase in part-time faculty and decline in tenure-track appointments being reported in the research literature; Premeaux and Mondy (2002) state that tenure track appointments are becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon due to the financial commitment this requires universities to make; and Hum (1998) explains tenure alternatives on the basis of managerial flexibility and fiscal restraint. In a climate such as this, and given the long-term financial commitment by the university that tenure represents, I believe that tenure applications will be scrutinized even more closely than they might have been in the past. This, however, is the point – this is an educated guess, and I do not actually know if the tenure review process has changed. To make matters even more opaque, when I have pushed for specific details regarding tenure expectations, I get some variation of "depends, but do not worry about it, you seem to be doing enough" as the response. In short, if each institution does have different expectations, and not just different perceived expectations, how do new faculty gain any sense of them?

Fortunately, some institutions and faculties are better at being up-front regarding tenure expectations than others, and there are national associations that publish broad-strokes guides for meeting tenure requirements. The University of Western Ontario, for example, presents clear guidelines regarding tenure and the preparation of teaching dossiers which reference the collective bargaining agreement and the experiences of tenure review committees to create a framework which new faculty can use as they work toward tenure (Office of UWO Faculty Relations, 2009). Other organizations, like the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT Council, 2005) publishes guides on the preparation of teaching dossiers as well as providing legal guidelines for what tenure means and what it ensures.

Do My Insights Carry the Same Weight as My Tenured Colleagues?

Do I have as much right to speak and raise questions/ideas in academic community forums? As a classroom teacher of ten years, I was witness to many unofficial instances in which new teachers were made to "pay their dues" before they were granted the same authority in staff meetings or before they were given the same consideration when course allocation decisions were made each year. When I have asked my "coffee

colleagues" whether I could expect a similar induction period cautiousness at the university level, the response has typically been "no." Despite these reassurances, I find myself asking if my contributions are accepted or scrutinized to the same extent as my tenured colleagues purely on the basis of my rank or tenure status. Have I paid my dues, and until I have, should my words and ideas be given the same consideration? This was a prevalent theme discussed by the new faculty participating in the research of Verrier (1992). As his participants were discussing "life on the tenure track," they described how office space allocation, merit pay distribution, assignment of graduate students and course loads, and even how the accomplishments of different faculty were announced, all ways that tenure-track faculty were reminded of their junior status. Some of his participants even described how tenured faculty resisted any form of relationship with their new colleagues; they did not want to invest themselves in building relationships with colleagues who might not even be colleagues a year later. There are faculty roles, that on the basis of my experience and rank, I would hesitate to pursue. However, I feel valued by my colleagues and institution, and through a review of the predominantly American literature on the topic, have come to realize that this may not be as common a phenomenon as a new faculty member might hope.

Navigating the Complexities

There are remarkable parallels in many professions regarding the hardships and stress associated with attaining the career security represented by things like tenure and permanent contracts. I want to be clear that I am not railing against the injustice of the tenure-track process; however, I do want to know what is real, what is rumour, and what I can do to potentiate my chances of not only surviving the tenure process, but also benefitting from it. In the sections above I have discussed the sorts of questions and experiences I have had on my journey toward tenure, along with the insights garnered from my colleagues and the literature regarding considerations and truths I need to take into account as I choose my actions over the next few years. I conclude with a focus on the strategies tenure-track faculty can use to navigate this often misrepresented tenure progression.

It is tempting to seek an academic version of "Tenure for Dummies" so that we can assure ourselves we are meeting the standard. Judging from the following quote this is a common focus of new faculty:

> Perhaps the most commonly mentioned behaviour in response to performance appraisal procedures is a preoccupation with "knowing" and – what one participant in this study referred to as – "pinning down" from authorities both what is expected and what will hold weight in tenure proceedings. (Verrier, 1992, pp. 17-18)

I have come to the conclusion that any "10 easy steps to tenure" type of documents would be inadequate as tenure guides since it would require an ignorance of the highly contextual nature of tenure from institution to institution. H.L Mencken (1920) is famous for saying that "there is always a well-known solution to every human problem – neat, plausible, and wrong." Perhaps that is the reason it has been difficult as a tenure-track faculty member to get straight answers regarding tenure requirements – the answer is complex, contextual, and varies from case to case.

However, I believe lists, such as the following paraphrased list of recommended actions leading to tenure from White (2008), can nudge us towards levels of reflection, action, or inquiry that in their absence keep us in secondary ignorance; that is, we don't know that we don't know. As I reflect on White's recommendations, I find myself asking if each suggested action is relevant to me, and how I might seek to apply it in my context. In the paragraphs that follow White's list, I will begin to use his recommendations as focal points for reflection and action, seeking to offer some additional discourse regarding how this list or lists like it may be used by other new faculty to construct their own tenure-track pathway:

- Establish a portfolio with sections labelled research, teaching, and service.
- Ask for help from Dean/Department Chair as needed.
- Publish 1-2 refereed articles a year.
- Be a member of national associations and present at them.
- Seek service opportunities that promote the university positively.
- Provide evidence of teaching competence.
- Apply for research grants.
- Review the faculty handbook and collective bargaining agreements thoroughly.
- Seek a trusted mentor.
- Be sensitive to the politics and personalities of your faculty/university. (White, 2008, pp. 12-13)

1.) As an education professor I have advocated portfolio construction to my undergraduate education students, yet it had not occurred to me to think of a tenure application as the presentation of a professional portfolio. Thus, while seeking ways to construct a portfolio for this process, I came across Boyer's "Model of Scholarship" (Boyer, 1997) which I believe may be an effective template for me to use as I seek to coalesce my thinking and work as a professor and also provide a framework and justification for why I value the "Scholarship of Teaching and Application." I recognize, however, that although I may place a greater emphasis on the "Scholarship of Teaching and Application," a colleague in the natural science may choose an emphasis more heavily weighted toward the "Scholarship of Discovery." Some institutions have created guides for constructing these types of portfolios and I have found the guides at the University of Western Ontario (Office of UWO Faculty Relations, 2009) and at other universities particularly helpful.

2.) (& 9.). My Dean has been a trusted mentor, advocate, and advisor for me, and has been quite instrumental in showing me how I could translate my own scholarship interests and strengths into legitimate and defensible research and service pursuits. It has been a real advantage as a beginning faculty member for me to be situated at a smaller institution where the Dean has such direct contact with faculty on a day-to-day basis. I encourage all new faculty to seek such a mentor in their own faculties.

3.) Greene et al. (2008) surveyed faculty from every university/college in their state that offered an undergraduate education program and asked them how many refereed publications they believed they needed to publish to meet tenure requirements. Although they qualified their results with institutional variability and the quality of the journal in which something is published, even the most rigorous Carnegie classed "Research Extensive" institutions reported 2-3/year while more teaching directed institutions tended to average a single publication per year.

4.) When I was a graduate student, a "full professorship" was described to me by a faculty member teaching one of my courses as "justifying to the university administration that you will make the university more money than you cost them." Thus, directing service activities towards promoting your institution makes sense to me. However, as an education professor I find that service is not just a requirement of tenure, it is necessary in building the relationships required of a professor. I am, for example, continually in schools and in meetings with department of education personnel, and hope that by demonstrating a willingness to

work with the educational community *at their convenience* (as much as I can), I am promoting myself and my university well – even if it is never an explicit goal of any of the interactions I initiate.

5.) I love to teach. In fact this has been a bit of a curse as I seek to strike a balance between my natural passion for teaching and my awareness of how much other scholarly production is required of me as a tenure-track faculty member. Greene et al. (2008) reported that 74% of new faculty similarly struggled to find balance in their workload (tending to bias teaching). However, I believe that "demonstrating my competence," as White (2008) suggests, falls short of the work and attention I pay toward teaching. It is my intent to include a robust teaching dossier with my tenure portfolio that demonstrates the research, writing, and course development I have done under the umbrella of the "Scholarship of Teaching" – far more than the suggested minimum of mandated course evaluations that most institutions require at the end of each course.

6.) A hallway conversation I had with a tenured colleague recently resulted in one clear recommendation based upon her own experiences getting tenure and after sitting on a number of tenure-review committees: "Get a SSHRC!" Yet, other colleagues have been given tenure without ever getting any large national grant money. Perhaps the secret is willingness and tenacity? I have also had it pointed out to me that collective bargaining agreements do not always list grant funding as a requirement for tenure, even though the hallway rhetoric seems to indicate that it is a requirement (ours does, but stipulates "where appropriate in relation to their principal duties"). Nonetheless, I do believe after reviewing the literature and talking to tenured colleagues that being given grant funding is looked upon very favourably by tenure review committees and thus I seek every opportunity I can to apply for research program funding.

I will leave it to the reader to continue to reflect on/critique the list on the basis of their own context, conversations, opinions, and research, but that is the point – to begin the critique and self-realization process in time to employ those opinions and reactions toward each person's own tenure journey. My only blanket recommendation is to seek the "Rules of the Game" at your institution and that you do not hesitate to borrow from the established norms of other universities in the absence of anything else. If other now-tenured faculty have successfully employed structural or theoretical models to attain tenure, chances are those are good starting points. I sincerely hope that by presenting some of my own tenure journey, I have perhaps provided alternatives that may not have

occurred to the reader, and at the very least, have offered some reassurance to my tenure-track colleagues that many of our experiences and concerns are shared by others who are also walking the same mile in their own shoes.

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