Navigating the Potholes and Speed Bumps: Three Female Perspectives on Tenure and Promotion

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents an auto-ethnographic exploration of three women's experiences of the journey to tenure. Individual stories and composite themes were generated through reflexive writing and focused conversations about our experiences as women navigating the challenges and rewards of the tenure and promotion process between 2003 and 2009. Results are discussed with reference to resiliency theory and future practice in our new roles as tenured and promoted faculty.

RESUMÉ: A la lecture de ce papier, nous découvrons l'analyse auto ethnographique de l'expérience de trois femmes lors de leur parcours menant à la titularisation. Des histoires individuelles et des thèmes composés ont été fournis au travers d'écrits réfléchis et axés sur des conversations tournant autour de nos expériences en tant que femmes, louvoyant entre les difficultés et les reconnaissances de la titularisation, et le processus de promotion entre 2003 et 2009. Les résultats discutés sont appuyés de la théorie de l'endurance et d'un apprentissage pour les étapes suivantes dans nos nouveaux rôles à tenir en tant que titulaires de postes et promues de faculté.

Introduction

In the nearly 20 years since Caplan (1993) explored women academics' experiences at Canadian universities, the systemic challenges she identified remain issues for women interested in academic careers. Despite academe's poor reputation of unrelenting work hours (Mason, Goulden, & Frasch, 2009), new professors begin their careers enthusiastically with idealistic expectations (Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000). However, new faculty quickly discover that the road to tenure and promotion can be lonely, isolating, competitive, and even lead to

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 44, No. 1, 2010, 99-115.

unbalanced lives (Greene, et al., 2008; Hamilton, 2005; Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006; Rice et al., 2000). New faculty may also become dissatisfied, overworked, stressed, and physically ill (Hill, 2004) as they attempt to meet the often unwieldy, vague (Clay, 2008), and increasing tenure and promotion requirements (i.e., publication standards for tenure are now more than triple the standards of the 1970s; Schuster & Finklestein, 2006). Not only do the negative effects of the tenure and promotion process persist after the first year of appointment, stress levels may increase throughout the pre-tenure period (Sorcinelli, 1994).

Research has also shown the academic workplace, and the need to achieve tenure within the first six years, is designed in ways that discriminate against women (Halpern, 2008; Park, 1996; Schultz, 2008). As Jane Roland Martin (2000) stated, "I came to see that the academy charges an exorbitant admission for those women who wish to belong" (p. x). The resulting gender disparities (e.g., salary, merit pay, etc.) only grow when universities place more emphasis on research relative to teaching and service (Mason & Goulden, 2002). Factors which contribute to difficulties for women in academic settings include networking that excludes women, general environmental inequalities, and work-family conflicts (Bassett, 2005; Foster, McMurray Linzer, et al., 2000). Female faculty members may go to great lengths to avoid being seen as in need of extra assistance during their tenure-track journeys, sometimes at the expense of taking maternity leave and stopping the tenure clock or even having a child in the first place (Blackburn & Hollenshead, 1999; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). Women may resist altering the tenure-track path in case they are perceived as being less serious about their careers (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). Men and women experience the tenure path differently (August, 2006; Wright et al., 2003). Therefore, women's perspectives on the challenges they face when taking on an academic career warrants further exploration (Martin, 2000).

Methodology

We conducted an auto-ethnographic study of our experiences as women seeking tenure and promotion between 2003 and 2009. Auto-ethnography is a form of narrative inquiry that legitimatizes the researcher's use of her own experience and requires that the researcher write themselves into the account of a phenomenon. The defining feature of auto-ethnography is that it emphasizes subjectivity, and requires the researcher to perform a narrative analysis pertaining to herself and intimately related to a particular social phenomenon. Therefore, the

written outcomes are as individual as its authors, taking a variety of different forms (Ellis, 1999). However, regardless of written form, the auto-ethnographic representation conveys meaning attached to an experience. The goal of auto-ethnography is "to tell a story that readers can enter and feel a part of" (Ellis, 1999, p. 674).

Our aim was to illuminate and examine our experience of being women in tenure-track positions. To generate data, we each constructed a detailed written account of our personal journey towards tenure and promotion which served as an entry-point for three focused, digitally recorded conversations. Together, we reviewed each story and conversation and identified shared themes. Resiliency theory forms the framework for our discussion of the tenure-track journey. Resiliency is the ability to make positive adaptations in spite of serious threats or significant adversity to adaptation or development (e.g., Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001). The construct of resilience results from the operation of basic human adaptational systems, such as attachment, extended families, mastery motivation, and self-regulation (Masten, 2001). If these basic systems are functioning, then development in the face of adversity may be robust. If these systems are weakened, then the risk for developing problems is much greater. Using this framework we asked ourselves, what factors in our lives made it possible for us to successfully navigate our tenure-track journeys?

Personal Stories

Context

Our faculty load is 40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service. Tenure and promotion standards involve meeting established standards for academic credentials, administration, teaching, knowledge of the discipline, and research and scholarly work. Faculty can apply for both tenure and promotion in the same year, but tenure/promotion are considered as separate cases (University of Saskatchewan, 2002). Teaching accountability is a focus of our college. However, there is an underlying belief among many junior faculty that research productivity is the major factor in determining final tenure decisions. Despite clearly articulated tenure and promotion standards, meeting the standard in research (i.e., being productive enough) has not been quantified in terms of a required number of publications or the number, type, and amount of research grants received.

Our department has seen numerous changes over the past six years. In response to the departure and retirement of four senior faculty members (including the female Department Head), leadership roles were transferred from senior tenured faculty to junior tenure-track faculty. We were, therefore, required to assume committee work and departmental duties beyond what was expected at our level of appointment. Our stories highlight the challenges each of us experienced on our tenure and promotion journey.

Laurie's Story

Why become an academic? Truth be told, I took the job (without a completed dissertation; ABD) for the flexibility it provided. Just after taking the position, I found out we were expecting. Calamity! I had been advised by faculty of both genders not to have children until I received tenure. But life happens. Unfortunately, I experienced health complications following the birth of my child. My health problems seemed to linger along with my ABD status. In the meantime, no one counselled me regarding the pros and cons of stopping the clock. I was suddenly forced to choose when administration contacted me about missing paperwork. I chose to stop the clock – it seemed like the safest spur of the moment decision – but I had no idea about how that choice could affect my tenure process.

I had imagined working on my dissertation while on maternity leave, but due to my health issues that was no longer an option. With my dissertation hanging over my head, I returned to work while my husband took paternity leave. I scheduled office hours with my students but worked almost exclusively from home. And then I was blindsided by an annual review stating that I needed to "have more of a presence" and "be at the university more." Taking what I thought was a big risk, I ignored the warning and continued to work from home (I later found out that I had made a good decision as faculty are not accountable for where they work). Although I successfully defended my dissertation, the job demands seemed to increase exponentially when I could no longer use the dissertation as a shield. So I started to work more. Being competitive, part of me wanted to show them all how high I really could jump.

In truth, the toll on the road to tenure was high. The never ending chase of funds, the adrenalin-surged late night deadlines, the constant overlap of work and home. What I remember most are the disappointments and frustrations I experienced (or with hindsight,

perceived) rather than the successes I achieved. When my work was not considered meritorious enough despite receiving two tri-council grants in one year – I responded by writing more grants for more money. My being "judged" as not worthy enough for not having a B.Ed. – I completed a teaching practicum in the schools. Feeling inadequate as I tried to balance my roles as mother, wife, and academic and thinking that I wasn't doing a good enough job at any one of those things. And repeated health problems stemming in part from the stress of working at breakneck speed for prolonged periods of time with a spouse who tried (but really couldn't) understand ... I now realize that I am responsible for some of this toll – instead of focusing on the negatives and pushing myself harder, I should have stopped to celebrate the completion of my dissertation, being awarded tri-council funds, publishing documents, and being granted tenure and promotion. But this is easy to say and not so easy to do. The structure of academia means that you can never take too long a time-out to celebrate the now, the next competition, submission, promotion is always just around the corner.

Stephanie's Story

I did not pursue an academic position immediately following my Doctoral degree. Instead, I focused on fulfilling the requirements for licensure within my discipline, gaining practical experience, and raising our family. The decision to pursue an academic position was prompted by a move to a new city, which forced a career transition.

I knew negotiating a balance between family and work would continue to be a challenge as I navigated the tenure-track. I also knew I was one of the few junior faculty that came to the position with a large family. Based on my experience as a doctoral student with four young children, I also knew it would be unlikely that I would find a mentor who would be able to support me in staying true to all of the important aspects of my life.

As a mother and a junior academic, I was concerned about others' judgments of my ability to meet the demands of an academic position. I was struck by the number of senior male faculty in roles of power and influence. I knew I needed to find my own way to identify and navigate the challenges that lie ahead.

In the absence of a mentor or role model, I only very gradually came to recognize the meaning of tenure. For five years, I have been under the watchful eyes of others; others who have passed the magic line but who

do not know me, my background, or the unique demands of my academic position. I have been particularly challenged by the notion of productivity, particularly what this is and how it is measured. I have worked extremely hard to maintain my commitments to community and profession, which profoundly inform my teaching, research, and service. However, these activities are not easily quantified and have not been recognized as meritorious. I have experienced an overwhelming workload in terms of teaching and committee work within a workplace culture that overloads junior faculty. I also lost my father, my main supporter, early in the second year of my appointment, and my children have experienced many crises that have demanded my full attention. I have also experienced an insidious erosion of basic self-care practices and sense of well being in order to maintain time for academic demands and students' needs.

After spending a full summer preparing my tenure application, and nine months waiting for my case to be reviewed by my colleagues, I was granted tenure. During the waiting period, I experienced significant self-doubt and emotional and physical depletion.

Receiving tenure is touted as a pivotal event in an academic's life, worthy of recognition and celebration. Although I succeeded, I paid a price, especially in terms of my health and time lost with cherished family and friends.

As I reflect on the resources that facilitated my journey to tenure, I believe my greatest asset was my colleagues; this paper is a testament to how we have supported and understood one another over the past half a decade, despite our varied backgrounds and life circumstances. I value my tenacity and vision; without these, I would not have stayed the course in my academic or personal life. Finally, I also value basic health practices and investing in positive personal and professional relationships – these are the things that will help me find myself again, as they always have before.

Laureen's Story

I was recruited and hired into a tenure-track assistant professor position while I was in the second full-time year of my doctoral studies. I was initially flattered a university wanted to hire me while I was still completing my doctorate. However, shortly after starting my employment my feeling of flattery turned to self-doubt. Would I be able to navigate and balance all of my expected duties? Even though I received a teaching offload in my first year of employment, it was hectic to plan and teach

new classes, attempt to start a research program, attend numerous committee meetings, and complete my data collection and revisions to my dissertation. I was able to complete my dissertation in the first ten months of my employment, but it was a challenge trying to balance its completion with the expectations of my new job. As soon as I was done, instead of offering words of encouragement, a senior administrator indicated now I had better start preparing for tenure and promotion. It seems in academia we cannot take a moment to celebrate reaching a destination or milestone – we are instead expected to immediately jump back on the road for another destination.

The expectations of a new faculty member seemed to exponentially increase each week. There was always a new committee to sit on, additional administrative duties to complete, or new courses to be developed. As a single woman with no children, and someone who was fairly competent in the jobs I was being asked to take on, I was expected to continue to take on more and more collegial duties. The bar was continually being raised. It became increasingly difficult to be productive in any one area when I was taking on more and more duties and roles. The continual underlying threat from senior administrators and faculty was all of these areas would be looked at for tenure and promotion, and refusing to do your part would be taken into consideration. I did not realize how stressed out I was until all of my off campus time was spent in different doctor's offices trying to treat my numerous medical maladies. Due to staffing changes, there were no senior faculty members in our department to approach and question workload expectations. No mentor or support networks were in place for new faculty to consult. We were left to figure things out on our own. Of course, work concerns were not the only ones I had during this time. The summer before I handed in my tenure and promotion package, my father became very ill. Needless to say, my tenure and promotion package had to take a back seat to my family commitments. However, I still had to meet the department, college, and university deadlines or delay my tenure and promotion another year. I needed some support and guidance to figure out this process, and finding support in academia had already been a challenge for me during less trying times. If it weren't for my close colleagues, my friends, I would not have met my tenure and promotion deadlines. I was left to forge supportive relationships with other new faculty unfamiliar with the tenure and promotion process. The relationships with these women are what helped me through the twists and turns, potholes, and speed bumps on my seemingly unending road to tenure and promotion.

Linking Our Stories to the Literature

Although our paths to tenure and promotion differ, our stories share more commonalities than points of diversion. Our academic lives are shaped by social and institutional relations we have trouble seeing but that characterize our everyday lives (Smith, 1987). On our journeys, we seem to have been "learning the simplest things last, and missing the important news" (Butterwick, Dawson, & Munro, 2007, para. 5). However, we now recognize we are part of a patriarchal institution (Bruner, 1990), and it is possible we will experience a glass ceiling or "gender specific obstacles to advancement into top positions" (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, Neuschatz, & Uzzi, 1994, para. 5). Our identities shift as our naive perceptions of academia are discredited. Our stories and conversations highlighted shared themes of balancing multiple roles, health issues, and the degree and quality of support received during our tenure and promotion journeys.

We, as female faculty, are constantly feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the profession. Academic life is a unique challenge because many jobs are subsumed under the title of professor. Although research and publishing are valued by academe more than other responsibilities, we find ourselves burdened by mundane tasks like committee work, paperwork, and meetings. Our job descriptions expand exponentially with "little room leftover for thought, reading, and writing" (Butterwick et al., 2007, para. 22). Ironically, women are initially more attracted to the academy than men by the possibility of leading *balanced lives*. Yet, working women continually struggle to balance multiple roles, while striving to move ahead in the academic world (Riger, Stokes, Raja, & Sullivan, 1998). There is "potential conflict between a professional academic life and a personal life" (Women on the Faculty, 1995, p. 16). As a speech-language pathologist, professor, and single woman with no children, Laureen experienced pressure within the University community to take on more teaching and administrative duties because of her perceived lack of family commitments:

> *In my first three years of employment I was always given one or two night classes to teach. When I asked why others weren't assigned night classes, my department head indicated I had more flexibility because I was not married and had no children. I was being penalized for not being married and having kids, and I resented it.*

On the other hand, parenting in the academy may be a professional liability for female academics (Yoest & Rhoads, 2002). Pregnancy prior

to tenure may negatively impact women's careers (Etzkowitz et al., 1994). The time demands of parenting may result in a "parent and perish" situation for tenure-track mothers (Yoest & Rhoads, 2002, p. 1). Despite the availability of parental leave policies, not all women choose to request them, believing such leaves can hurt them professionally (Finkel, Olswang, & She, 1994; Schultz, 2008). Decisions such as these support the fallacy that female academics who are mothers are not productive (Etzkowitz et al., 1994). Although both male and female academics have trouble balancing work and family, female academics with children have been found to have significantly more home and childcare responsibilities and less time for research than their male counterparts (Yoest & Rhoads, 2002).

Laurie's roles of working mother and working woman overlapped, but not necessarily to her advantage (Boren, 2008):

> *I juggle so many balls and I am constantly multi-tasking. I feel as if I am never good enough – not a good enough teacher, researcher, mom, and not a good enough wife.*

Stephanie works to navigate her roles as a psychologist, professor, wife, and mother of four teenagers, and has also experienced pressure to take on more despite her many family commitments. She has been particularly challenged by role conflict:

> *I find it so hard to reconcile what is expected of me in my role as faculty member in a new program and as a professional psychologist and parent. I've felt so burdened by the demands of academic life that I have nothing left over at the end of the day... I haven't always felt able to say "No" over the past five years.*

Individual, marital, and family strain are the result of long working hours and demanding positions (Martha, Shelley, & Lynn, 2005). It is obvious that something needs to give, but what do you say *no* to? What are the true implications of *saying no*? This leaves one to wonder, "Do women more easily respond to the demands of students and colleagues and committees and reports to be written, while the time and energy for research and publishing is what gets done 'after work'?" (Butterwick et al., 2007, para. 32). In a resilience framework, internal assets (i.e., assertiveness, communication, and/or negotiation skills) and external resources (i.e., mentorship, faculty development, faculty peer groups) can assist faculty members to experience success and advancement in their careers "in spite of [being in] a high-risk environment" (Cora-Bramble, 2006, p. 253). Our self-created peer support group allowed us

to openly communicate our hopes, fears, and concerns during our tenure and promotion journey. We were able to rely on each other for nonjudgmental, unconditional support when we were feeling the pressures of deadlines and work and family commitments. However, working to balance our roles as female academics required an intensity of work that greatly affected our health and well-being.

Through our discussion of our tenure and promotion journeys, health issues emerged as a major factor in shaping our experiences. Most research supports these findings. Almost half of women surveyed at research institutions reported feeling extreme stress as compared to only a quarter of the men (Etzkowitz et al., 1994; Finkel, Olswang, & She, 1994; Schultz, 2008). "Are women the canaries in the mines of academia? Are their symptoms of fatigue, even illness, something to be taken very seriously as evidence of a poisonous environment?" (Butterwick et al., 2007, para. 55). By expending all of her energy on work, Laureen found herself starting to feel tired and ill all of the time:

> *In my first year of employment, I was working all day, in the evening, and on weekends to finish my dissertation data collection and write. I wasn't taking care of myself and I started to feel ill. I was making myself sick trying to stay ahead of deadlines and meet my job expectations. I had no balance – everything was about work.*

Even after being granted tenure and promotion, Laurie also found work to be overtaking all the other aspects of her life:

> *Three years into this professor thing I had to undergo a 24 hour blood pressure monitoring. Sure I have a family history, but at my age? It's definitely due to stress.*

Stephanie's health concerns have intensified since taking on an academic appointment:

> *I've had a terrible time with my health over the past five years. I have been in pain and extremely exhausted by the early afternoon every day, and am now on the waiting list for surgery. I've always been one to watch my health practices – I try to get enough sleep, I exercise at least three times a week – I guess my body has spoken.*

Intuitively we are all aware our health is one of the most important things to monitor and take care of in our lives. However, it seems to be the area most easily compromised, even though without it we cannot function effectively.

A pervasive theme across our stories was our questioning the degree and quality of support we have received throughout our tenure and promotion journey. The development of the tenure case itself is a "time consuming, paper-wasting, nerve-wracking experience" (Butterwick et al., 2007, para. 22). We find ourselves lost in confusion regarding definitions of productivity and vague expectations. When faced with a lack of quality support from experienced colleagues, tenure-track faculty are often left to sort out performance expectations on their own, and self-doubt flourishes:

> *Even after a great Ph.D. experience and almost a decade of on the job experience, when I started my job I felt like a fraud. I always perceived a professor as being all knowing. I've come to the realization that we are all life-long learners. Fake it until you make it was my resiliency strategy.*

Due to the realities of departmental compliments, the expectations of new faculty members seemed to increase each week:

> *As assistant professors we were heavily involved in administrative work – we were being held to the expectations of senior faculty. There was always the underlying threat you could not say no ... if you are not involved people will see that and it will affect your tenure and promotion case.*

Support from experienced colleagues is desirable but not necessarily available. Administration expected our department head, who had only just received tenure and promotion the year before, to mentor us through the tenure and promotion process:

> *There was no one senior person in our department to help with our tenure and promotion case. I found a senior faculty member who agreed to help me with my case. I was not going to rely on the expertise of someone who had just gone through the process.*

Our solution to these issues was to form our own support network:

> *Those of us going through the tenure and promotion process in our department began sharing what we were including in our case and what we weren't, what we were having trouble with, and how hard it was to "toot your own horn." We became our own support system.*

A 2006 study considered how success can be defined, navigated, and negotiated in a group of scholarly women. Success for this group of female academics was related to "their ability to attain and maintain personal and professional balance" (Kalet, Fletcher, Ferdman, & Bickell,

2006, p. 921). At the end of our tenure and promotion journey, we have started to implement strategies to better balance our personal and professional lives (i.e., saying *no* more often, taking time for ourselves). Our resiliency strategy has been to make ourselves accountable, to ourselves and each other, for the healthy and unhealthy choices we are making.

Practical Implications

In order to foster understanding and change, we need to consider our stories of strategies for action and change. First and foremost, female academics need to provide each other with support. "We need to look at this [the effect of the tenure path] beyond the individual and recognize that many others are also struggling" (Butterwick et al., 2007, para. 95). We, as female faculty who have so recently crossed the tenure bar, need to resist any tendency to compete against each other in our attempts to break through the glass ceiling. We need to avoid "the enervating game of going every other woman one better" (Pogrebin, 1987, p. 13). Instead, we need to work toward being a support for other women academics.

Second, women academics should be role models for each other regardless of rank. This is especially true in situations where there may be a mentorship void. Lack of available female mentors for junior female faculty may be a result of the pipeline effect (Nonnemaker, 2000), where insufficient numbers of female faculty have been in academia long enough to have reached full professorship (Wright et al., 2003). Furthermore, female faculty are not always relevant role models for others (Etzkowitz et al., 1994). For example, senior female faculty may no longer be able to relate to junior female faculty as the culture of academia has shifted since their own experiences as junior faculty. "There are no real good role models to follow. ... You have trouble looking at them [senior faculty] and saying, 'I want to be like that'" (Etzkowitz et al., 1994, para. 55).

A similar situation exists for female graduate students, who have reported desiring "faculty who even vaguely resembled us" (Martin, 2000, p. 98). It is true that "female students stand to benefit directly from the presence of females in the professoriate" (p. 98). However, as female academics we need to carefully police ourselves to ensure that we truly support female students and are not just giving lip service to these ideas. Capitulating to the status values of academe denigrates what we as tenured female faculty have already experienced. We will only begin

to breakdown the myths and misconceptions surrounding females in academe if we provide each other, and our female students, true support.

Third, many working women, regardless of workplace, do not discuss private concerns at work due to fears of being labelled *weak* or *unmotivated* (Buzzanell, et al., 2005). We need to make a major change to the environment of the academy so female academics can openly discuss the stressors and realities of balancing their personal and work lives. Women who feel secure talking about their personal lives and family issues are more satisfied in their role as a faculty member (Schultz, 2008). However, "the currency of academia is status" (Butterwick et al., 2007, para. 42), and "it is risky to speak of troubles, uncertainties, or emotions in a status culture" (para. 43).

We have come to recognize our resiliency through our reflections of our experience as women in academe in the process of preparing this paper. We have negotiated the speed bumps and potholes of the tenure process, managed to adapt despite these challenges, and succeeded. We are now in a position to create change with our tenure and promotion behind us. "But to get to positions where we are successful at pushing alternatives to the current status currency, it seems like we need to play at the very game we want to dismantle" (Butterwick et al., 2007, para. 95). We have all quietly celebrated this mutual turning-point in our careers, and hope to move forward as role models and mentors for junior women faculty. We are prioritizing our health by considering and acting on what balance means at this stage in our lives. We are clarifying our priorities in terms of our families, research, teaching, and service. We are learning to say *yes* to those activities that promote our growth, and *no* to those that leave us feeling depleted and fragmented. Our families and friends deserve our attention and we need their support. As we progress in our academic careers, we will continue to value and support one another as this has been critical to our journeys toward tenure. We recognize the burdens of being on the tenure track have been largely influenced by gender. Now that we hold the privilege of tenure, we bear the responsibility of considering the impact we have on other women's journeys. A collective and sustained effort will need to be made by all female academics to make the changes that are needed.

NOTES

Authors are listed alphabetically; all three authors equally contributed to the writing of this paper.

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