A Substantive Model of Canadian Tenure-Track Experiences

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Abstract

This paper presents a substantive model derived from the experiences of faculty members during their years in tenure-track positions. The findings arose from the editorial development of contributed chapters to a book exploring tenure-track experiences and subsequent synthesis of the narrative accounts. Using a multiple case-study approach we were immersed in the development of individual chapters contributed by tenure-track professors in education faculties from across Canada. Collectively, the chapter authors had varying lengths of time in the tenure-track and had different backgrounds prior to joining the academy. The development of narratives considered multiple interpretations, but it was subsequent to the completion of the structural elements of the manuscript that a synthesis of the cross-case details led to the development of a substantive model of the tenure-track experience. The model uses self-determination theory and augments it with the Kubler-Ross model of grief.

Keywords: Tenure-track, Tenure model, Tenure experience, Self-determination theory.

Introduction

Understanding the tenure-track experience is important for those becoming permanent tripartite faculty members in higher education. It is also important to those who are considering moving into the academy as they identify the pros and cons of academia, relative to their current position. In education, this is particularly important as JK-12 educators can complete master and doctoral degrees while teaching. This results in a circumstance where one is considering relinquishing security and seniority as a schoolteacher or leader within a school or district, for what seems an insecure and low seniority tenure-track role. It is also incumbent on those who oversee tenure-track positions to be cognizant of the challenges their

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newest faculty members face, to address aspects that can improve the experience, and to understand and support individuals as they retool for higher education.

In addition, with the very existence of tenure being questioned in some quarters (Flaherty, 2017), it is important to consider what the "tenure" construct means. The American Association of University Professors (1940/1970) defined the purpose of tenure in terms of ensuring academic freedom and providing financial security. All tenure-track professors discussed in this paper were subject to tenure review according to this traditional definition and none were under review using newer efforts to redefine or alter the meaning of tenure (Ragoonaden, 2015).

We consider the lived experience within the transition to be about more than academic freedom; in particular, we feel that tenure and promotion are specifically evaluative of the tenure-track period and that the evaluative components constrain academic freedom. Tenure-track is a transformational rite of passage into the academy that could be lost if tenure itself was eliminated. While the process has been described (see Kawalilak & Groen, 2010) and the evaluation process examined (Gardner & Veliz, 2014), there are few examinations of the transformation of the academic during the tenure-track stage. Gibbs (2014) considers the notion of *currere* in terms of professional practice, while Davies and Bansel (2010) consider neoliberalist influences of government and market orientation. The small number of examinations suggests that the diminishing of tenure could be misguided because it could be inappropriately based on some less relevant aspects of the role. For example, difficulties removing tenured faculty (Walton, 2017) could overshadow other aspects, such as professional growth and depth of knowledge within a discipline, where tenure facilitates so many research options that one is effectively self-directed.

The purpose of this paper is to present a substantive model of the transition faculty members experience within the tenure-track. The model was developed using education as a microcosm with the expectation that the substantive model would be found to be applicable in other disciplinary faculties. Faculty in education generally, have some instructional experience prior to entering the tenure-track. They are also likely to have service or administrative experience that will bear some similarity to those aspects of the tenure-track role. Educators who move to higher education are perceived as having transferable skills in teaching and service. The research component, the third part of the tenure-trifecta, often has minimal transferable experience; educators are practitioners, even when they have completed doctoral work. The

struggles with the research component may, in fact, be the largest issue tenure-track education specialists face.

The overlap of experience in two of three required tenure domains makes education an opportune faculty to consider for developing a model of the tenure-track transition. In particular, we wish to have an overarching substantive model that relates the teaching, service, and research structure to the lived experiences of tripartite tenure-track faculty. It is intended that the substantive model will be suitable for other disciplinary faculties because of the common tripartite structure and use of peer review in many processes such as tenure and promotion decisions. The model is also intended to benefit the examination of distinctive experiences of particular groups or circumstances that exist among faculty members, such as have been described by Acker, Webber, and Smyth (2012).

Perspective

The perspective taken treats the lived tenure-track experience as a period where individual experiences share commonalities. To understand the experiences, we began by crafting autobiographical accounts of our own experiences to explore the depth of commonalities and diversity of our own experiences. This served to bracket (Merriam, 2009) our own experience and our views. The approach highlighted distinctive elements in the backgrounds of the two authors within the field of education; one pursued leadership while the other developed expertise within a particular subject domain. These accounts were used, along with a literature review, as part of a successful book proposal.

Following the autobiographical exploration, an open call for chapter abstracts about Canadian tenure-track experiences within faculties of education was made. The origin of the individual case studies was the process of co-editing book chapters contributed by tenure-track education faculty members from across Canada (Sibbald & Handford, 2017). As chapter narratives were submitted, the co-editors were immersed in the revision and editorial process, particularly seeking clarity and asking questions of the authors in order to create rich and thick descriptions of each contributor's experience. Regular discussions between the two editors about their ongoing experiences within the tenure-track and about similarities and differences of their experiences and those of the authors of the chapters occurred, providing the editors with a growing holistic sense of the developing collection of chapters (Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016). We argue that this process of making sense of individual chapters was analogous to the constant comparative method.

The resulting narratives informed individual cases of experiences, while immersed in the tenure-track structure. The collection of narratives informed a qualitative multi-case study. The individuals who wrote narrative accounts had seven months to five years of experience in the tenure-track at the time of writing them. Like the autobiographical accounts, editorial feedback and revisions were conducted in a manner that allowed the editors to develop an understanding of each narrative.

As development of the book proceeded, the focus moved from chapter editing to the development of four prefaces addressing distinct sections of the book. These sections were three time intervals: early-, mid-, and late- tenure-track, as well as a preface for collaborative efforts among tenure-track faculty. The four sections provided a categorization that began the cross-case analysis. In addition, a further analysis of issues (Handford & Sibbald, 2016) raised by the authors, informed the cross-case analysis. These structural elements were developed for the book, but reflect the differing perspectives that were explored during the development of the book.

Following the completion of the book manuscript, the two authors continued to synthesize their understandings. Discussions about alternative interpretations and follow up discussions focused on the commonalities and distinctions between multiple cases. Distinctions between individuals or particular groups were evident, which is consistent with Acker, Webber, and Smyth (2012). It was the stark commonality of experience, however, that led to emergence of a substantive model.

The structural discussions for the development of the book and the early cross-case analysis led to the conclusion that we were developing a case survey. The narratives had a lot in common in multiple dimensions and we found case survey helped draw together the diversity. The collection of narrative cases was brought together to "arrive at structural descriptions of an experience (i.e., transition in tenure-track), the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced" (Moustakas as cited by Merriam, 2009, p. 199). Specifically, by recognizing that the multitude of facets aligned with existing theoretical models our substantive model then became the combination of existing theories. While we did not observe all the facets of the theories we used to make our substantive model, we found a very strong sense of internal validity.

Methodology

The development of this research was prompted by the development of a book about tenure-track experiences (Sibbald & Handford, 2017). The research process included a focus on understanding as narrative chapters were edited (to generate an audit trail and constant comparison within cases), the categorization of features during the development of section introductions (a first effort at triangulating across cases) and a continuation of the research beyond the production of the book (further triangulation and category development). The focus of the methodology is development of a substantive model, subsequent to the development of the book. That effort became a case-survey that was found to align with two existing theories that were then used to develop a substantive theory that combines two theories.

The ethical considerations for this research entailed consultation with Research Ethics Boards to determine if a review was required. It was determined that the research is fundamentally based on the publicly available text of the book and did not require ethics approval for this reason. The editors had a detailed understanding of the book having seen its development, however, the specific details from individual authors during the developmental stages were not used to develop the model.

Philosophically, the development of narrative accounts was ontological (Creswell, 2007). It was assumed that participants would articulate their lived experience in their own words. It was assumed there would be multiple interpretations of individual tenure-track realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) and our focus, as editors, was on revealing, with the authors, details of perspectives and clarifications so that chapters provided rich and revealing individual narratives of their journeys.

The paradigm for the development of a theory derived from social constructivism. We consider all facets of tenure as a social construct along with the transitional tenure-track period. In addition to being a social construct, related processes and perceptions of those in the process were also viewed as being socially constructed. In particular, the principle of peer-review and its implementation is considered to be based on social norms within the research community of peers.

The interpretive community for the research is an over-arching framework that is not specific to any particular issue within tenure. The intention is to provide a substantive theory for tenure-track experiences, as a whole, so that comparisons within particular tenure-track issues

can be addressed from both the grassroots where the issue is evident, and from a broadly applicable theory. We feel that such a broad based theory is necessary to avoid having a patchwork of theories based on particular issues. It is our interpretative community that the substantive theory we are developing will serve as a comparator for future work regarding particular groups of academics.

Data sources

The data source is a publicly available edited book (Sibbald & Handford, 2017). This includes both authors of this paper and 11 other authors as well as three co-authoring groups, all of whom contributed chapters. An additional data source was reflections, by the editors, regarding the process itself. Throughout the editorial process we were intrinsically involved and reflections about the development of individual chapters and our own thinking were available as reflections. It was not simply working with the final product. We were informed by the development of chapters from proposals and communications through to the final product with the authors and with each other. For simplicity, all quotations from the book (Sibbald & Handford, 2017) that are used in the results section do not include the reference.

Results

The substantive model is a structural theory in the sense that it finds tenure-track experiences can be interpreted within Self-Determination Theory (SDT)(Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Broeck et al., 2016) with an augmentation made to account for cultural losses during the transition. The cultural loss is particularly pronounced when workplace changes are combined with lifestyle changes associated with the new role. The augmentation of SDT is made within the area of relatedness that addresses interconnectedness, by drawing on the Kubler-Ross model of grieving.

In self-determination theory, tenure-track individuals have demonstrated effort ("I spent many hours prepping, creating materials, grading, and reflecting, while also working on my own graduate studies."). Agency is also present ("…my graduate student experiences offered valuable lessons in grant acquisition and effective research"), as is commitment during graduate studies ("…a path that often curved where I thought it ran straight, or forced me to climb hills steeper than I imagined.", "…I was driven onward by my personal need to succeed; I was also drawn towards the notion of new experiences and a chance to begin life anew."). The movement from their prior role to a position in the tenure-track is a journey of

changes within the SDT constructs of *competence*, *relatedness*, and *autonomy*, which necessitate additional theoretical components.

Competence is primarily grounded within subject expertise, supported by personal graduate studies and thesis work, and while it may diminish temporarily because of new aspects in the tenure-track role it remains relatively strong through the process ("The continuity between graduate studies and employment as a professor has contributed to a greater sense of comfort in tackling the demands of the tenure-track experience"). It is fundamentally supported by prior experience, subject expertise, and has considerable *identified or intrinsic motivation* (Broeck et al., 2016) meaning it is internally motivated and, in the former case, a response to task demands or, in the latter case, personal enjoyment.

Relatedness is one's interconnectedness within the environment. This is significantly diminished as one moves into a tenure-track role ("…as I started my new job I realized that there were many unwritten rules in a system that seemed more hierarchical and structured than I had experienced before.", "Upon assuming a position at a university, it became difficult to maintain work-life balance"). The university was viewed as an isolating experience, with loss of collegial workplace ties ("a welling of emotions from the impending departure from the current workplace and colleagues. There were various concerns such as missing the youthful high school students and their remarkable knack for challenging me with new ideas."). Connections within the university environment were tenuous and generally less frequent, providing far less support ("With feedback drawn mainly from undergraduate students, journal editors, and a one-page review of my annual progress report, the track to tenure lacks tangible boundaries."). The theoretical aspect of relatedness is addressed by applying the Kubler-Ross model of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) to cultural loss (Levy-Warren, 1987).

The Kubler-Ross model provides five emotional stages originally associated with loss when an individual is grieving a loss of life. In our application, we envision moving one's career to higher education as potentially involving a process of grieving the loss of one's cultural connections to what has been a familiar community. For example, a teacher who has been engaged with a school community may be expected to grieve the loss of that cultural connection if they move to a distant city to pursue a role in higher education. The Kubler-Ross model suits the potential cultural loss in terms of all five stages:

Denial arises because, while the roles have substantial overlap, there is a drastic adjustment to a new workplace ("In my new surroundings—living alone for the first time in 29 years,

feeling lost and lonely, and having left family and friends behind—I began to seriously doubt my ability to cope.", and "I was not prepared to sell the house, serving as further evidence of my uncertainty about the wisdom of this move").

Anger arose as a result of finding minimal support for increased multi-tasking in an uncertain new environment ("I arrived in what is now my home away from home with no furniture, no car, no friends and no idea what the job was, beyond course outlines that were problematic.").

Bargaining occurred in the sense of trying to leverage prior work experience to inform the new role ("…the residue of my work as a graduate student has prevented embarking on new research projects, contributing to a sense of falling behind and not exploiting opportunities available.").

Depression arose because there are aspects of the new role that simply do not fit the old role ("The hope, and belief, that I could succeed as an academic vanished, whisked away by the shifting winds of depression.", "I came precipitously close to resigning and moving back home with my tail tucked between my legs.").

Acceptance is the final model component and arose as events slowly unfold and one's perception of competence improves or they realize their viability for other roles ("My colleagues opened doors just a crack and invited me in. It was up to me if I wanted to walk through those doors.").

Two clarifications are required about the use of the Kubler-Ross theory. First, there is no requirement for the stages to necessarily follow linear sequencing or that all stages are evident in every case. Second, that grieving associated with different cultural losses may vary. One may be in a bargaining stage with one task while in the acceptance stage for another task. Since cultural losses associated with moving into higher education may be multi-faceted and entail changes related to both work and life-style, it is to be understood as a complex process.

The autonomous aspect of self-determination theory arises because tenure-track faculty need to establish themselves with little guidance ("…was course development valued when you would primarily be evaluated on your peer-reviewed publications?", "…extensive reading facilitated by my graduate course work and interest in expanding my knowledge base."). Tenure-track professors are autonomous but often find that they have too much choice (Ivengar & Lepper, 2002) ("an academic position is not just a career choice but also a lifestyle choice, affecting all aspects of one's life"). Feedback is infrequent, or indirect ("In the spirit of collegiality and program consistency, teacher educators are encouraged to share materials

and collaborate. While this creates a supportive environment, it also creates pressure to adhere to institutional norms. Navigating these norms has presented a challenge for me."). Ultimately the requirement of evaluative peer-review after several years work does not provide much guidance. Within this context, the tenure-track faculty member is more autonomous but receives fewer cues because the tenured faculty role is primarily grounded in the autonomy aspect of self-determination.

Discussion

The process of entering a tenure-track position entails a vetting process, interview, and often a site visit. The initial components demonstrating an internal locus of control are perhaps the most important elements that are sought. This is reflected by evidence that the individual who is suited to the tenure-track role has the ability to exert effort, agency, and commitment. These characteristics essentially ensure that the prerequisite requirements for developing self-determination within the professorial role have been met. It also implies that one's higher functioning attributes within self-determination theory that contribute to entering the academy.

Within the tenure-track, new faculty members experienced a significant transition that impacted all aspects of their career as well as their daily life. In some cases, the role was defined as a life-style, while others actively engaged in developing a work-life balance or restoring a balance after having been in the tenure-track for some time. What is clear is that boundaries between career and life are subject to change as the tenure-track experience evolves. The evolution is a process and the transition is essentially how that process changes over the course of time. Using SDT the process is separable into competence, relatedness, and autonomy where the progression of each allows different lenses to be applied when looking at the role.

Within competence, there is perhaps the least upheaval because teaching and research are fundamentally founded in the area of expertise of the individual. There are changes and transitions, particularly with learning institutional norms that may differ considerably from prior experiences. Many find teaching high achieving adult teacher candidates and graduate students is informed by, but quite different from, teaching in an elementary or secondary school. While there are many significant milestones in the process, a characterizing feature is that in the early phases of tenure-track, while institutional norms are being learned, one is primarily experiencing identified motivation. They are cognizant of the need to earn tenure and want to perform in a manner conducive to success.

As the process moves along the individual becomes more familiar with the institutional norms and naturally gains increased awareness of how their courses and field of research fit with other courses and research in the overall program. They also gain confidence in terms of their position relative to their application for tenure. While they remain cognizant of the need to meet tenure criterion, their experience regains the positive feelings that led them to pursue graduate school. They increasingly swing the balance between identified motivation and intrinsic motivation.

Relatedness may be the most profound aspect of SDT when it is applied to understanding the tenure-track. In higher education, it is not unusual to move between countries and provinces, or travel long distances, to take on a tenure-track role. It is a major upheaval in most cases and affects all aspects of one's lifestyle and both institutional and community knowledge for getting even the most basic tasks completed. The importance of this particular component of SDT requires an additional model to provide a framework for the transition process. This led to the use of a grief model because the upheaval, that is so common, constitutes a loss of the community in which one has been embedded.

The use of the grief model appeared to be universally meaningful as a way to address the sense of loss of prior workplaces, colleagues, and living spaces. Kubler-Ross stated that experience of stages and duration in them is individualized, and that was our interpretation of the chapter authors. In some cases, the upheaval did not seem as severe as others. Some individuals did not have to relocate and, not surprisingly, while the grief model appears to remain appropriate, it is not nearly as relevant as it was for those who had significant geographical changes. Important stages within tenure-track at the new institution, with respect to the relatedness transitions, were experiences in developing new connections within the higher education context. For some, well-being was maintained by relying on relations that remained throughout the transition ("I have also remained engaged with family and friends who are the fabric of my life and who supported my academic career."). In other cases it was particular relationships with select colleagues ("We began our tenure-track positions within three years of each other and therefore are sharing the journey of striving for tenure, offering each other collegial support along the way."). The scenario that reflected the least evidence of a grief process was a writing group that established a social environment to support academic writing for new faculty members ("By joining together and sharing our knowledge, we found collegiality, companionship but, most importantly, a safe borderland where we could mesh who we were, with who we are becoming.").

Autonomy has been clarified as often being mistaken as independence, where it is intended to be a matter of having choice and a degree of freedom of choice (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This arises within the tenure-track primarily in the research component but also within service and, to a lesser extent, teaching. Service highlights the process in terms of SDT. New faculty members make choices within the confines of roles that are available and their personal familiarity with the type of service. As they gain experience within the institution their familiarity increases, new opportunities arise, and their ability to fit new roles within their workload arises as they gain efficiencies across all aspects of their role.

Research is often leveraged initially using prior experience, particularly the person's graduate studies and theses experiences. There is identified motivation to generate a research program to address the tenure requirement. As time passes, the process of research gains a foundation and most faculty continue with the program of research while realizing new opportunities that can be facilitated by the flexibility they find in having a large part of their role defined as research. The autonomy of research moves from being seen to be generating research to increasingly being able to tailor the direction of research. In some cases this may be responsive to funding, and in other cases is directed by working with graduate students. In time, tenure-track faculty narrow who they agree to supervise as graduate students, focusing on those who propose research related in a focal manner to their own research. Regardless of these influences, autonomy applies because the tenure-track faculty member drafts, or collaborates on, funding proposals or negotiating the role of a graduate student. In the absence of either of these, tenure-track faculty make choices that suit individual research—much like they did with their graduate theses.

The tenure-track experience is challenging to many because the autonomy of the position allows choice but also requires that choices be made. This leads to diversity of activities within the academy but also diminishes the comparative benchmarks that might give a sense of progress toward tenure. Deci and Ryan (2000) address the diversity of activities:

> According to SDT [Self-Determination Theory], these three needs [competence, relatedness, and autonomy] can be satisfied while engaging in a wide variety of behaviors that may differ among individuals and be differentially manifest in different cultures, but in any case their satisfaction is essential for the healthy development and well-being of all individuals regardless of culture. (p. 231)

The degree of autonomy is a pivotal feature of the professorial role. While there are concerns about some individuals taking advantage, or not fulfilling their duties within the academy

(Acker, Webber, & Smyth, 2012), the alternative is problematic. Specifically, Deci and Ryan (2000) summarized that evaluations, rewards, and choice, affect intrinsic motivation by decreasing creativity, complex problem solving and conceptual processing of information. In this respect, autonomy is not simply a benefit of the professorial position. It is a necessity for being effective within the position.

Conclusions and Limitations

The substantive model provides a framework for understanding the transition that takes place within the tenure-track. It requires augmentation to address change features that impact the personal experiences that extend beyond the tenure-track role. In particular, where daily life and one's personal social fabric, beyond the workplace, are impacted, the use of a grief model is effective in highlighting the experience of losing one's community (while a new one develops).

While the substantive model presented here was developed using a national sample of Canadian tenure-track faculty, it is specific to education faculty. Faculty members outside of education may need the framework altered because the roles they held prior to joining the academy may not have as much overlap, or the overlap may be different, as roles in education typically have. For example, Franz (2016) indicates that agriculture educators "often teach in ways they prefer to learn rather than ways that meet learners' needs" (p. 206). It may be that additional considerations are necessary when the instructional role holds more novelty than it does for most education professors. Similarly, if someone arrives at a university from a role as a researcher, different considerations may be relevant.

Similarly, we have only worked with experiences recounted by professors pursuing the traditional version of tenure. While we recognize there are variants of this (Ragoonaden, 2015), it is our feeling that a model based on the most prevalent and time-tested definition can serve to inform newer approaches. However, it has been pointed out that time-tested may ignore changes in the experience of tenure-track from bygone years because of changes in the university environment, such as increased number of part-time faculty members. The development of models for other forms of tenure-track experiences would be beneficial, however, looking for the theoretical elements established here may provide a theoretical lens to explore the distinct aspects of other forms of tenure.

The current work sought a substantive model for understanding the transition as a lived experience. This is distinct from the evaluative process that is known to vary through time,

institution, and discipline (Gardner & Veliz, 2014), but ultimately decides whether to grant tenure. We did not concern ourselves with the ultimate outcome of the process, as our primary concern was what was experienced. We looked to model the overall process and anticipate the model will serve as a backbone for furthering the analysis of issues that arise for particular groups of faculty (Acker, Webber, & Smyth, 2012) within the academy.

The model does provide insight for addressing the change process that tenure-track faculty experience. It also provides a lens for understanding why tenure is important. Specifically, it embeds the role in autonomy and implies that this embedding is a major aspect of graduate studies. In this way the model is useful for furthering our understanding of how to support the development of tenure from graduate experiences through to the end of the tenure-track. It also speaks to the characteristics that may inform the benefits of graduate studies for roles outside of the academy. Most importantly, it provides a lens for developing a deeper understanding of the role tenure plays within the academy and a lens for considering alternative approaches to defining scholarship (Franz, 2016). Consider, for example, the issue of potential racial bias within the academy (Jones, Hwang, & Bustamante, 2015) that identifies the need to be more explicit about the requirements of tenure. This is a reasonable demand to address, however, the present theory suggests it needs to be nuanced to respect that autonomy requires a level of attainment but may lack specificity. The theory then points to the need to define autonomy in a way that provides a necessary level of clarity to those in the tenure-track but respects their freedom to choose the details of how they act within that clarity.

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