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Dianne Ramdeholl

Empire State College, dianne.ramdeholl@esc.edu

Mervin Chisholm

University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, mervin.chisholm02@uwimona.edu.jm

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The Times They Are a Changing (Or Are They?): Exploring the Impact of the Tenure Process on Racialized Faculty at a US and an Anglophone Caribbean Institution

Dianne Ramdeholl Ed. D
SUNY Empire State College, New York City

Mervin E. Chisholm, Ed. D
The University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica

Abstract: This paper unpacks the negative impact of student evaluations for faculty of color in a Caribbean and North American context.

Keywords: student evaluations, faculty of color

Introduction

The two studies (one conducted at an institution in the Anglophone Caribbean and the other at a State University in the United States) examine the impact of student evaluations in the tenure process and career for faculty of color and the ways that faculty perceive this aspect of their tenure process. The studies also unpack barriers for faculty of color and the ways in which structural racism and the manifestations of those histories/legacies get played in this context. The studies also explore how racial and other tensions manifest in this process in the US context and also the Anglophone Caribbean context.

It is generally agreed that Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) is one of the primary methods used in institutions of higher education to gather information relating to the experiences of students with a course and to evaluate the teaching of the course instructor (Borkan, 2017; Chan Yin Fah, 2011; Spooren, Brockx & Mortelmans, 2013; Wolbring & Treischl, 2015). This information is used in various ways, for instance, for teaching improvement, personnel decisions, including tenure and promotion, for teaching awards especially when incorporated into a teaching portfolio and as evidence for institutional accountability (Seldin, Miller & Seldin, 2010; Spooren, Brock & Mortelmans, 2013).

Faculty have responded both positively and negatively to SET. It must be noted that these evaluations can be oftentimes experienced as validating and unsettling by faculty. Fink

(2008) has stated that the widespread use of SET in institutions of higher education is fraught with difficulties since it is not driving instructional improvement, but instead creating widespread cynicism about teaching evaluations. The quality and legitimacy of SET scores are often called into question (Beran & Rokosh, 2009; Chisholm, Hayes, LaBrecque & Smith, 2011). This study investigated the use of SET in a large Caribbean research university and particularly, faculty perspectives on the use of SET. It was noted that SET at this Caribbean university is definitely problematic. Responses of some faculty to the process range between acceptance and contestation. There is a fair bit of skepticism, distrust and at times hostility to the process especially when summative decisions are to be made because of the distrust of the process.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the Caribbean qualitative research study was to investigate the perspectives of the faculty in an Anglophone Caribbean university on SET and the tenure process. The study provided a unique perspective since it was conducted in the Caribbean and there was no known research of this nature in the Anglophone Caribbean. The main research question for this study was: How do lecturers/faculty understand and respond to the policy, processes and practices associated with SET? The second study in a North American context builds upon an auto-ethnography where one adult education faculty member of color critically reflects on her own tenure process, exploring implications for other scholars of color. Building on that study, the faculty member interviewed three other faculty of color in US institutions who have recently been reviewed for tenure. By focusing on the role student evaluations have played, the authors hope to contribute to a larger dialogue centered around race and racism in academia.

The questions guiding this study were:

- How do faculty understand and respond to the policy, processes and practices associated with student evaluations of teaching (SET)?
- To what extent do student evaluation results impact faculty teaching?
- What role do student evaluations play in the tenure process?
- How do lecturers/faculty of color experience the tenure process?

Literature Review

Generally, the literature on SET indicates unresolved issues in relation to both theoretical and psychometric issues (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). Borkan (2017) found that the severity of students rating differed in marked ways, nevertheless consistency was maintained in their ratings. Concerns about the whether the scores obtained from student evaluations are

valid and really measure teaching effectiveness continue to abound. In addition, concerns about the potential bias undercuts the validity and reliability of the measure (Gursoy & Umbreit 2005). Generally, there are studies claiming that SET provides valid data. However, other studies caution against this viewpoint and are reporting bias in the data and hence, expressing concerns about the validity of the data (e.g. Centra, 1993; Marsh & Roche, 2000). Penny (2003) suggested that the results should not be used singly for major decision making purposes such as promotion and tenure or even retention of faculty.

For the purposes of this paper, the study in the US context focused on the literature around student evaluations, highlighting ways they're used as a sword to penalize faculty of color and the ways whiteness continues to be deeply worshipped in the academy (Lazos, 2012). In 2013, 84% of full time professors were White with 58% being male and 26% female, 4% are Black, 3% Hispanic, and 9% Asian or Pacific Islander. (NCES, 2015). According to Smith (2016), the academy remains starkly White at 81% and male at 66%. Regarding leadership, universities continue to have all White leadership teams at 73%. So when faculty of color find themselves in the academy, it's often in an environment that is filled with microaggressions, unspoken hostility, and a landscape where the odds are stacked against them Johnson- Bailey (2012). Frankenberg (1997) describes Whiteness as multidimensional: "It is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege; a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. "Thus, to name Whiteness is to refer to a set of relations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of White racial domination (Frankenberg, 1997; Roediger, 2007). This is important in this study because higher education institutions in North America are essentially white spaces with faculty and students of color continuing to be interlopers. Bonilla-Silva (2015) explains, White-oriented institutions reproduce whiteness in a vast array of ways; curriculum, readings, culture, traditions, etc. It is not questioned but is the order of the day; the "correct" way of doing things. Also, it is important to actually consider what student evaluations exactly measure. There has been much critique over over-reliance of standardized assessments both of students and of faculty. Faculty of color are rated less highly than white faculty (Lazos, 2013) and courses that are focused on race are rated more negatively (Lazos, 2013; Ahmed, 2012). In addition, there is a wide belief that faculty of color are less qualified (or can only teach courses about race). Interestingly, though not surprisingly, when faculty of color mention race their student evaluations are negatively impacted (Lazos, 2012).

Tagamori and Bishop (1995) have determined that the questions on evaluations are too ambiguous so one can't determine exactly what is being asked. Also, 76% of them contained subjective terms and over 90% of them didn't correlate with classroom teaching behavior. These

evaluations, in other words, measure students' subjective reactions at a particular moment they're being polled (Feldman, 1989). Yet, these subjective measures can be/are used to make or break people's careers as they are used in the tenure process to determine teaching effectiveness. This is especially true at teaching institutions. In addition, unconscious bias, stereotypes, and assumptions impact the ways women and minority faculty are perceived. Hamermesh and Parker (2003) found that measures of perceived beauty matters in student evaluations of minority women professors. This study also found that faculty with accents were generally penalized. In addition, something that can be termed charisma or likeability also impacts student ratings. That is, what students believe they are learning from a professor but not what they actually learn (Williams and Ceci, 1997). In various studies, being described as an extrovert (McCroskey, Valenic & Richmond, 2004) has shown to positively impact student evaluations. This has led to a concern that student perceptions of teaching effectiveness is basically a personality contest (McCroskey, 2004).

For women faculty of color who labor in roles that are perceived as male, they must counter stereotypical assumptions that they are not competent, authoritative, or charismatic leaders (Valian, 1998). However, the double edged sword is that when women attempt to make up for these perceptions, they can be viewed as more incompetent or insecure (Lazos, 2013). Women have to navigate within narrow boundaries set by cultural stenotopic expectations. In workplace settings they must be sufficiently assertive but not too much so or their evaluations will suffer (Lazos, 2013). Research shows that minorities and women are presumed incompetent from the minute they the space/place (Lazos, 2012). Students also tend to challenge their female and minority instructors more. According to (Statham, 1991) students have less fear of and respect for women of color faculty. According to a study by Harlow (2003), minority faculty face racial performance burdens in the classroom that white professors do not encounter. Because minority professors fear their competence will be undermined, 69% of black women and 44% of black men choose an authoritative demeanor, which in turn, may turn off students who reward likeable professors. In addition, the study found that white students are not able to accurately perceive the emotions behind the facial expressions of minorities, so misunderstandings about intentions, emotional warmth, etc. are very likely to occur. Troublingly, white students perceive faculty with African American features as less attractive, which in turn negatively impacts student evaluations.

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

Much has been written about the ways in which different standards exist for racialized and non-racialized faculty and also the ways in which racialized faculty have had their credibility

questioned (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Sheared, 2001). Critical Race Theory (CRT) acknowledges racism as being a toxic condition in the social fabric of our society, challenging concepts such as color blindness and neutrality (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Bell (1992) points out that racial inequalities are only addressed to the extent that white interests are also served. CRT acknowledges that the insidious nature of racism can only be addressed when people of color share their experiences through counter-narratives (Peterson, 2008). CRT is critical in this study because issues of racism emerged repeatedly in these studies in academia. This study also drew on Schein's (1992) theory of organizational culture as well as the work of Kuh and Whitt's (1988) in applying cultural theory to higher education landscapes. For Schein, culture was understood in terms of a conceptual hierarchy manifesting itself in discernible layers. These layers were namely, artifacts, values and beliefs, and basic assumptions.

Research Design

For the study in the Anglophone Caribbean, an exploratory inquiry into the perceptions of university faculty members about SET and the tenure process was done. A qualitative methodology was chosen since most studies investigating SET were quantitative. The qualitative approach allowed for new ideas to be heard and enabled broader interpretations of individual perceptions. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten faculty members across the various faculties. The interview process commenced and continued as was necessary until considerable redundancy was found in the responses of the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. For the study in the US context, semi structured interviews were used with each interview being recorded and transcribed. In addition, a daily journal was kept documenting reflections on policies regarding the tenure process and informal conversations amongst faculty about these policies. Reading the literature around student evaluations and the tenure process regarding faculty of color also supported a clarity and understanding of the ways in which faculty of color were at a tremendous disadvantage in this landscape.

Findings and Conclusions

For those outside (and inside) of academia, tenure and promotion are mysterious processes, arbitrary (though disguised as objective) and deeply politicized. Though the literature has warned against the very limited nature of student evaluations, this is the way teaching effectiveness is mainly assessed in many institutions. The literature discusses ways student evaluations are potentially retaliatory and offer an inaccurate snapshot of one's practice. It was clear faculty of color tended to receive lower scores than non-racialized faculty for a variety of

complex reasons. (Lazos, 2012). Regarding the study from the Anglophone Caribbean University, the findings indicated that SET and the tenure process were indeed a part of the cultural norm of the university but they were essentially problematic since they had spawned sub cultures that needed to be continually engaged. The values of the faculty and the values of the institution often collided. The use of the SET in summative ways was often punitive and tenure decisions seemed arbitrary and lacked objectivity. The institution's claim of being committed to teaching was questioned even though this was a stated value of the institution. The congruence of the institutional value and that of the individual values that is, of faculty committed to teaching was oftentimes at odds. Faculty was suspicious at times of the system and could not readily see how many of the institutional practices were advantageous to them.

In a North American context, Sensoy and Ozlem (2017) point out the ways in which the qualifications for candidates of color are over-scrutinized. Simultaneously, what is on their CV isn't counted (mentoring students of color, supporting student activist organizations etc.).

The findings indicated that SET and the tenure process were multifaceted. In response to the questions on the views of the lecturers, there were those who benefited from the SET. There were those participants who readily affirmed the benefits. Others pointed out what they considered gaping holes or flaws with the instrument and hence, declared it to be unreliable and lacking validity. There was even the suggestion that the SET provided very little information that was helpful or that would assist a university teacher in meaningful ways to really take stock of one's pedagogy and engage in corrective action, if ones pedagogy was problematic and mired in acts that were anti-productive.

Other respondents indicated that the SET was characterised with problems and there were mounting levels of dissatisfaction and suspiciousness associated with its use as a summative instrument used to make high stakes decisions such as tenure and promotion, albeit with other assessment instruments and strategies for research and service. Anna, a lecturer stated: *"There was very little from the SET that could help a lecturer to know how she was really doing. The comments from the students do not indicate what was problematic about a course or the teacher. They just state that the teaching was poor or something of the sort.* Another finding suggested that the lecturers understood the process but their experiences were fraught with difficulties. Marva indicated that the *"lecturers understood that SET had to be carried out but the instrument might be at fault and students oftentimes made inaccurate statements on the questionnaires especially if they received low grades in a particular course. It was always the lecturers fault."* The values of the faculty and the values of the institution often collided. The use of the SET in summative ways was interpreted as punitive and even though SET was used in tenure decisions, poor SET scores would

definitely result in disqualification from tenure. It was felt that there was the need for systemic change to ensure reliability and validity in terms of the process.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Institutional culture and sub cultures impact the life of almost everything in institutions. Educators in higher education and adult educators need to be aware of this and ensure that they are cognizant of the institutional culture and sub cultures and how they inform decision making. Further, there is need for vigilance to ensure that they do not adversely affect professional life. It is essential not to use teaching evaluations as a weapon and instead take into account multiple sources (testimonials from students, research with students, peer and self-evaluations, etc.). There are numerous institutionalized barriers that work against faculty of color within the academy. Untenured faculty of color are the most vulnerable in this landscape. Academia needs to systemically make changes to take into account the factors that systemically impact both women and minority professors regarding student evaluations. This is a systemic problem not an individual one. Institutions need to think about teaching and the evaluative process more creatively. Essentially, this might mean doing evaluations, however it doesn't mean doing it less often but more deeply and this would entail getting students to think not react. Teaching should be thought of as an ongoing process not an end product (Merritt, 2008). Only if academia adopts the responsibility to support women and minority faculty more will a profoundly unfair playing field begin to be minimally leveled.

Despite decades of studies on student evaluations, it continues to remain a controversial topic in terms of whether there are systemic biases that negatively impact minority professors. There clearly needs to be more research done though one only needs to ask a minority faculty and their answer will more than likely be a resounding yes. In this study, there were clear indications that faculty evaluation is a practice and process that is fraught with difficulties. There must be a commitment to an ongoing dialogue on good teaching in adult and higher education in every age and in various cultural realities. Respecting the process is important from both the faculty and the students' perspective and there must be continuous interrogation of the process to determine how it is going and how it might be improved to serve the needs of the students, teachers, the institution and especially to respond to the various cultural realities on campus.

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