Through the Looking Glass: An Autoethnographic View of the Perceptions of Race and Institutional Support in the Tenure Process

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Abstract

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Keywords

Women Faculty, Tenure, Race, Ethnicity, Environmental Barriers, Career Advancement, Social Cognitive Career Theory

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This autoethnography study reflects on the experiences of three assistant professors of different races of the tenure process at a large public research university. The study was framed by social cognitive career theory (SCCT), which is often used to describe career interest and career choice in a variety of professional domains, considering cognitive-personal, environmental, and experiential factors (Lent, 2005; Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008). Despite the commonality of the journey through the tenure process, everyone's path looks different. Isolation, collegial relationships, and for some, unusually high service commitments and family responsibilities, whether because of gender or race, have provided a backdrop for the lives of women in academe and have, in large part, defined their experiences on the tenure track. The results of the reflections of our experiences identify that environmental variables are important to the success of tenure seeking faculty. Keywords: Women Faculty, Tenure, Race, Ethnicity, Environmental Barriers, Career Advancement, Social Cognitive Career Theory

I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then…

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and through the Looking Glass*

Many of us are familiar with Alice's adventures in Wonderland (Carroll, 1971), viewed through the aid of a looking glass. Alice's through the looking glass experience has similarities to the tenure process - one that holds the perspectives of the individuals making the journey. The reflection of the looking glass changes as the perceptions of those daring to take the journey undertake it. The looking glass, or higher education in this case and Wonderland for tenure-track faculty, seems the same for everyone. But with a closer examination, every trip is different. One's reaction to the tenure process integrates perspectives gained from individual experiences within the higher education environment. "Education is the great equalizer, opening doors of opportunity for all" (Roekel, 2010, para. 3). If this statement is true, one has to wonder about the actual behaviors demonstrated by universities in the treatment of faculty on the tenure track. If education is the great equalizer, why do colleges and universities continue to behave in manners that contribute to the perception that not all races and genders have equal opportunities to attain tenure? Why does current research on women and minorities seeking tenure continue to identify struggles and barriers that seem to keep many from achieving tenure? In other words, why does one's individual journey through the looking glass look so different?

Several female researchers have provided autoethnographic perspectives of their experiences in the tenure process (Bailey & Helvie-Mason, 2011; Hellsten, Martin, McIntyre, & Kinzel, 2011); exploring varying institutional processes, culture, as well as how they negotiated their personal journeys. The search for answers to the proposed questions is

complicated by the way in which opportunity and a successful tenure process have different narratives for different people; it means different things to one person at the same time. Dillow (2009) claims that "narratives form a structure within which to think about our daily lives and about the magic and mess of human possibilities" (p. 1344). Autoethnographic narratives make sense of individual lives.

Trying to make sense of our individual experiences, we had analytical conversations processing each of our individual experiences in the tenure process. During these discussions, a reoccurring point surfaced, which was the support systems that each of us have had access to within our college and university. It became apparent that each of us had different start up support packages, as well as both formal and informal systems of support through the years. As conversations continued, it was determined that our contributions to the literature of women in the tenure track process, of how support systems are different and how race may have an impact on the support systems that an institution provides to women tenure track faculty, is necessary.

By considering race, ethnicity, and gender identity of tenure-track faculty and institutional culture, this study explored how and what kind of environmental supports may lead to or hinder one's career success. The results illuminate different types of interventions that can facilitate career success in the tenure process. Our exploration is framed by social cognitive career theory. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) has emerged as a prominent framework for describing career interest and career choice in a variety of professional domains (Lent, 2005; Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008). The theory is also used to explain why there are such gender or race differences in different careers. As an extension of Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory, SCCT emphasizes the interplay among personal, environmental, and experiential factors. The theory emphasizes social cognitive variables that may be relevant to career development, including cognitive-personal (self-efficacy, outcome-expectancy, and goals), environmental (social barriers and social support), and experiential factors (past academic achievement and learning experiences).

In a meta-analytic review of SCCT, Lent (2005) concluded self-efficacy and outcome expectations predict career-related choices largely because of their linkage to interest. Self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3), therefore, self-efficacy should not be confused with other self-concepts or self-esteem. While self-concepts and self-esteem are global perceptions of oneself, self-efficacy is context specific (Bong, 2006). Self-efficacy, in this context, is the perception of confidence of ability in performing a specific faculty-related task such as lecturing in front of a class.

Lent (2005) stated that self-efficacy is mostly shaped from past performance accomplishments, as well as vicarious learning, social encouragement and discouragement, and affective and physiological states. He further cautioned that a person's career aspirations might become restricted because of the lack of exposure to efficacy-building experiences (e.g., few opportunities to succeed at tenure-track position), or because of inaccurate self-efficacy or occupational outcome expectations, which are related to environmental factors.

SCCT partitions its environmental factors into two components, *objective* and *perceived factors*. Objective environmental factors include one's financial support, resources, family or peer influences, and the qualities of one's educational experiences. According to SCCT, these objective factors have a great impact on career development, as well as how individuals interpret and appraise these environmental factors, which are referred to as the perceived environmental component (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). This idea of *perceived* environmental factors provided reasons for us to study the support of assistant professors from an autoethnography lens. We examined how the perceived environmental factors may

affect the self-efficacy of female assistant professors, through the lens of different races, in their pursuit of tenure.

Through the looking glass, we see similar assistant professors who appear to be on similar journeys, yet our reflections from the mirror are slightly different. We are three female assistant professors from different races. We are all mothers who have been or are currently married. Our career pathways to academe varied. Two of us have had careers solely in academia, while one of us is in her third career, with academe being the latest. We are all on the tenure track at a large, public emerging research university located in the southern region of the United States, and we are all impacted by similar environmental factors. Two of us have completed our third year in the tenure process, and one her second. The culture and climate of our college and university are under reform, creating changes to an environment that is heavily research based, as well as focused on external grant funding. In addition, as the research clearly shows, the requirements to attain tenure tend to be ambiguous and vague (Hardrè & Cox, 2009; Luchs, Saunders, & Smith, 2004), and our experiences have been no different.

Autoethnography is a research method where authors can link their personal selves to their cultural self in an effort to examine individual experiences (Ellis, 2004). This collaborative autoethnography is our personal experiences of navigating the tenure process within our college and university, based on the resources and support we have received - our perceived environmental components - as individuals of different races. We wrote each of our narratives separately, then invited commentary from each other overtly as part of the ethnographic text as it developed. We used narrative inquiry to explore where and how our individual beliefs related to the tenure process developed, as well as how they had been reinforced and challenged. By sharing our findings in the context of a community of tenure-track faculty who had committed this type of approach, we put our understanding into social context. This added a collaborative element to the study exploring what elements in our past experiences enabled us to value collaborative inquiry into the tenure process. As one of us expressed, "I wonder if there is anyone else that feels the same way I do?"

Our Experiences

Stephanie

I am White. I am a graduate of the university in which I now hold a tenure-track position. My loyalty and commitment to the university appear different from those who are graduates from other universities who later are hired as professors. I have no doubt that my view of the expectations and support that I should receive as a tenure-track assistant professor is clouded by my prior relationship with the university as a student. Though research shows that women in academe do not reach the highest rank of professor at the same rate as men (Denker, 2009; Williams, 2000), it also supports that more White women achieve tenure than faculty of color, and specifically female faculty of color (Antonio, 2002; Blackburn, Wenzel, & Bieber, 1994; Ruffins, 1997). It seems I am considered privileged because I am White. Though I am in a privileged class, I am considered unknowledgeable because I am a junior faculty member. With 20 years of corporate and administrative experience, I find this difficult to accept.

Having prior experience in the business sector gave me a competitive advantage in negotiating my entering salary as an assistant professor. I was able to do reasonably well in negotiating my salary in comparison to other assistant professors in the college, though I later found out that an individual with no work experience, but the same title of assistant professor was hired at twice my salary in the business college at my university. I did take a salary

reduction when moving to my position as an assistant professor, but perceived that the flexibility in work schedule and opportunities to conduct research in areas of interest to me would counterbalance the reduction. In addition to salary, new professors receive a start-up research package - supposedly to provide a foundation for a successful career in research. My start up package consisted of some software and an audio digital recorder. I received no additional research monies, though I later learned that faculty of color who began at the same time and later than I, did. Looking back on the limited resources I received to support my future successful career as a professor - compared to faculty of color around me - it leaves me to consider that when trying to help resolve perceived inequities, discriminatory practices occur regardless of what race one is - it seems to be assumed that since I am White, I may not need monetary and/or resource support to be successful.

My appointment at the college began at the same time as 12 other individuals, 10 of whom were on the tenure track. A sense of camaraderie was established among the group, and a solid support system was developed during the first year - due mainly to none of us truly understanding what to expect and seeking comfort from each other since we were experiencing similar aspects of dysfunction. So, though a support system was in place, it consisted of a group of individuals that all had the same questions and no answers relative to the tenure process. To be fair, our college provided a two-day orientation for new faculty that introduced us to various constituents and services at the college and university. After the two-day orientation, we were sent on our way to begin our roles as teachers, researchers, and contributors of service. The tenure process was seldom discussed during the orientation - the start of several years of ambiguous expectations, but each year our university holds a tenure academy. I have learned valuable information at these sessions, but unfortunately, what is discussed at the academy does not always align with the discussions within our college.

My perceptions of the tenure process are evaluated through the lens of my prior experiences. This is supported through SCCT, and its emphasis on personal, environmental, and experiential factors. I did not arrive at my tenure position through the traditional pathways that many university professors do. I had no prior experience in research outside of my dissertation. The college and university do not have formal or informal mentoring programs so this service was not available to me. I was expected to know how to regulate my time among teaching, research, and service, with no guidance. There was not a support system of *White* colleagues who surrounded me to ensure I got off on the right foot. No faculty of color did either. Reflecting on this now, I can only assume that I am expected to be successful because of my race - that I do not need the support systems that others of color are assumed to need. No one asked or took into consideration that I had no prior experience in research, and that I lacked sufficient skills and knowledge to figure out how to begin to learn to be a researcher, much less understand the publishing process. I would like to assume that this was because everyone is aware of my prior experience in industry and as a prior college administrator and they perceive I understand the process, but the evidence shows that they are unaware of this due to their perceptions that as a junior faculty member, I do not necessarily have the knowledge of or the experience to be a contributing voice in the college.

A reflection of my experiences on the tenure track over my three years paints a picture of numerous amounts of time spent preparing new courses, many of them for online delivery, developing a new online program for a doctorate of education, as well as administrative and program functions. A large amount of my time has been spent on program administrative work due to taking a position within a program that had lacked sufficient staffing and leadership for several years. This left little time to *write and research* - the mainstay of tenure. Though I am told that the program work will be specifically acknowledged in the tenure process, there is no statement in the current tenure and promotion policy at the college or university level that accounts for it. I am also told when I mention that I need to be

focusing on what is required to achieve tenure, that there is "no one else to do the program work." I can only hope that the continual statement of "we recognize the work you are doing in your program" will equate to positive credits in the evaluation of tenure.

I was able to make some progress in research and writing during my second year. Since I was not receiving support from my college, I proceeded to self-teach myself through reading books and articles on getting published, and through an extensive amount of rejection. I know that others have had to do the same. My two colleagues in this article have expressed the same learning process. Thinking back on the support I received from my college or colleagues relative to writing, researching, and publishing, no one at the college took me under his or her wing or offered to help me get that first article successfully published.

A chance event did occur in my second year, which helped me to begin to make sense of the tenure process. It was through participation in a research study with an associate professor from another university. We hit it off immediately and this individual has become a mentor to me. Without her, I would have continued to feel moments of frustration, concern, psychosis, as well as simply failure. She helps me to see that much of what I am experiencing is just part of the process - many faculty go through some type of trauma (whether actual or perceived) in the tenure process. In addition to her support, one of my colleagues and I developed our own support system for the first couple of years of our tenure process that enabled us to figure out the *game of tenure* and work through our deficiencies and celebrate our triumphs together. I did not realize how important it was to have a support system - until I had one.

At the end of my third year, my productivity seems to be where it should be. I am feeling more confident about my abilities to manage all that it takes to be successful in the tenure process. I cannot say that it is because of the support I have received from the college or university, but more based on my self-efficacy. As the work of Bandura (1986) supports, though the environment has a role in how we perceive a situation, he argues that it is our self-efficacy that determines how we respond. Though I like to work independently, I feel isolated most of the time. I perceive there is no viable help available to me, as I am not categorized into a group that has been historically identified as needing additional support. I have resolved to myself that the tenure process is lonely, isolated, and competitive. I am also resolved to feeling that I am the only person that can ensure my success. The literature on tenure is rich in discussion of barriers that women face, specifically women of color. I do not wish to focus on these barriers as reasons for my possible tenure failure. Knowing what the barriers and challenges are is actually the most positive aspect of seeking tenure I have experienced at this point. My experience also supports that perhaps White women faculty receive fewer resources and support than other classes of individuals in academe - due to being female and in a class that is considered privilege. All I can do is utilize the skills I have learned through life and work, as well as my prior experiences to overcome the barriers that are presented to me. If I continue to expect support - I will be disappointed. If I continue to acknowledge the comments I hear that, "I do not have to work as hard to attain tenure as my colored female colleagues," I will simply be offended as I know I work every bit as hard - if not more so, than anyone else at my institution. I even reach out and try to help others along, even when I know it will affect my own productivity. If I am not successful in attaining tenure, then perhaps I am not at the right institution. Though I would like to blame the lack of development and support available for new junior faculty at my college and university to be a reason as to why I may not attain tenure, it has not been my work ethic or goal expectancy to *let a system beat me*. In the end, though, I am responsible for what I make of this experience, and I have worked too hard not to continue down this path - failure is not an option.

Colette

I am African American. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain "everything we experience grows out of prior experience and enters into new experience" (p. 318). This is true as I reflect upon my experiences as an assistant professor on the tenure track.

I began my academic professional career late in my life. I joined the faculty after spending 14 years in student affairs administration at predominately White institutions. My experience in higher education, including my undergraduate and graduate school experiences and administrative experiences were wonderfully challenging. My transition to a faculty member has been interesting. Over my past 17 years in the academy, I have had several friends and colleagues who have contributed to my professional growth. At each school, I made valuable contributions not only to the institution, but to the students I served as one of the few African American staff members who could and would advocate for students of color. One would think those experiences would have prepared me to be an African American woman on the tenure track at yet another predominately White institution. I have been more than surprised by my experience.

Since my undergraduate days, I knew being a woman of color in higher education meant that I had to meet many unwritten expectations. The *double whammy* of my gender and race creates difficulties on both the professional and personal levels. A multitude of researchers report Black women in academics must contend with the professional pressures associated with working in a historically White, upper middle-class, male-dominated profession, while also attempting to balance the demands of life outside the professional domain. Mary Church Terrell (1940), the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, wrote, "Not only are colored women . . . handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women" (p. 292). As a woman of color, I often feel isolated, overwhelmed, overworked, and overlooked despite my contributions to the field and the institution.

As an African American woman on the tenure track, I constantly have to validate that I have earned my current position. I will never forget the time when a student asked, "Are you even qualified to teach this course?" I simply replied, "Yes, here are my credentials. I spent over 14 years as a higher education administrator and received my doctorate. I think I am qualified to lead this course and give you a great educational experience." Knowing that those credentials will be doubly reviewed, I have realized that my competence not only has to be proven, but must exceed the level of expectations for my White female and male counterparts. I often wonder if it is the same for my other colleagues or is my experience based on a stereotype threat to my tenure process?

Steele (1997) noted, "For the domain-identified, the situational relevance of the stereotype is threatening because it threatens diminishment in a domain that is self-definitional" (p. 617). Having to prove myself as a capable African American faculty member is an issue of competence. Typically, an African American female faculty member has to outperform other (White) colleagues in the department just to maintain perceived equal standing. This was made quite clear during my first semester by other faculty of color in the college. I desperately wanted to disregard this notion and wanted to believe that it would not happen to me.

Ironically, I soon learned about an experience of a fellow African American faculty member, which demonstrated I could not ignore the reality of my environment. During my first three months at the college, one day several White colleagues asked me to join them for coffee. They seemed very excited about getting to me know me as a new colleague. But, appearances are deceptive. After several minutes of light conversation, they revealed that

they wanted to "warn" me about being mentored by the fellow African American now tenured faculty member. These colleagues explained to me that she should not have received tenure because she was not performing and I should not follow her example. The fact was that on paper and in publications, the African American faculty member outperformed these concerned colleagues. When I asked why they felt that way, these colleagues discounted her performance stating that they felt her contributions are not robust enough. Later, I took the opportunity to speak to this targeted fellow African American female faculty member about her experiences in the annual review process through the years. She stated that she often felt judged by the "isms," racism and sexism, because her race and gender colored her colleagues assessment of her performance and research agenda. I can still vividly recall the emotions on her face, an odd combination of mad and sad, when she told, "Be careful Colette and guard yourself, no matter how well you excel in research, teaching or service, it will never be good enough because of who you are."

In my three years, I have encountered my own "isms," which I believe can be explained by institutional culture. Even facing the routine challenges and pressures of the academic environment as an African American female faculty member, I often face racist and sexist behavior and attitudes of colleagues and students. In sum, the fact of the matter is, institutional racism is structured into political and social institutions and occurs when certain groups of people's rights are limited either deliberately or indirectly (Anderson & Taylor, 2006).

My first three years were focused on administrative and curriculum-related issues as the program I am in was out of date and had lacked leadership for several years. In addition, I was asked to *represent* the college on two search committees for key administrative roles in the college. Several of the faculty in the college felt I was chosen to serve on these committees because of my race, rather than my expertise, forcing me to deal with aggravating college politics. The additional work and cultural politics make my experience different from the other new tenure-track faculty who started at the institution at the same time I did. My personal experience validates several research studies of female faculty and faculty of color who rarely receive validation from their faculty peers in their gender or race-specific research work (August & Waltman, 2004; Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000; Valladares, 2007).

Like a multitude of other experiences, these have served as barriers framing not only my perception of my environment, but other's perceptions of me. Gee (2000) defines identity as "being recognized as a certain kind of person, 'in a given context'" (p. 99). The perceptions of my *identity* as an African American faculty member are sometimes problematic in my tenure journey. Faced with a growing sense that my professional identity was been shaped by others and not by myself, I sought the guidance from other African American women on the tenure-track outside of my institution for their perspectives. Many shared their stories, which were similar to mine. More often than not, they were able to offer many different angles to view the picture of myself being reflected in the mirror that is my institution.

One salient moment came when one mentor pointed out that what I was experiencing was a kind of *clash of identities*. After a particularly trying day, I broke down and called my mentor simply stating, "I can't do this anymore!" I proceeded to explain that this White colleague believed that she had to educate me on how the tenure and promotion committee would not perceive my recently published book on African Americans as a good thing for a non-tenured faculty member to do. My mentor gentle stated, "You know, you are just experiencing a clash of identities…your struggling to come to grips with the identity that others perceive and want you to be and who you really are. Decide which one you want to be." I decided to be me, but began to understand that others would perceive me differently.

My college and institution see me as a young, tenure-track African American faculty member who, unlike my fellow White faculty, may not succeed because *everyone knows that*

faculty of color have a harder time achieving tenure (Antonio, 2002; Blackburn et al., 1994; Ruffins, 1997). Being identified as a *typical* African American faculty member has allowed my academic community to transform my personal identity into the *perceived* identity. This *perceived* identity clashes with my own view of me and my experiences. I am a mother of two young men who are in middle and high school. I successfully balanced a demanding administrative career in higher education for 14 years, while writing two book chapters, co-editing a book, adjunct teaching, being a Cub Scout leader, and learning how to be single again after 12 years of marriage prior to becoming full-time faculty. These experiences helped me develop a set of skills on how to navigate any environment that I am in.

But, whether I like it or not my mentors gently reminded me that people will only see what they want to see. They only view me as a *typical* African American faculty member, constantly trying to give me advice on how to navigate this environment. It is as though their perceptions of me and my capabilities are remarkably different than the reflection I see in the mirror every day. They try to *help* me understand the organizationally defined role I should assume as a faculty member of color on a predominantly White campus. For them, it is essential that I understand the norms surrounding the academic department, institution, and academic discipline, as they see it should be. Unfortunately, those norms are not always inclusive of the diverse needs of individual faculty, particularly one like me. These helpful colleagues often fail to value my prior experience in the academic world. It feels like a piece of cloth partially covering a mirror; that my previous experience is not valuable and should not be reflected in the glass.

This lack of understanding is evidenced by the fact that colleagues whether White or of color, honestly do not know how to support me. Many of the tenure-track faculty members who arrived on campus at the same time as I did have remarkably different experiences and perceptions of the environment because they are not *faculty while black*. It is not like they do not want to be supportive; it is just that they have extraordinarily little understanding of the experience. Even when I try to explain my interpretation of the environment and experiences, they cannot place themselves in the experience. Our experiences are just too different despite the fact that we are still all just faculty members trying to survive in this *wonderland* called academia.

I have found my support by looking outside of my institution with former mentors, writing colleagues, friends, and family. With them, I do not have to be *faculty while black*. In this space, there is a natural understanding and acceptance of the complexity of my identity and the expectation to be the best. The nonjudgmental and unconditional support that these individuals offer is not about what type of faculty member I am expected to be. It is framed around the faculty member that I already am, and they push me to be better than my best. They often remind me to reflect on the history of African American women in higher education to gain strength when I feel isolated and overwhelmed. Historical figures like Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune felt much the same way. Many of my current colleagues feel and have felt as I do and have succeeded despite those feelings during this warped, wild ride through the academy.

Fanni

I am Taiwanese. I remember how excited I was to get a job after earning my Ph.D. I wanted to be *in the game*. I felt a sense of self-actualization and being important when I went to conferences. However, a sense of isolation has grown inside of me as time passes. I am from Taiwan originally and did not come to the States until I was 22. I got married to an American and this is how and why I decided to stay in the States. I have no other family nearby. I have not met someone like me yet: a female faculty who was an international

student. I have heard of some working mothers who were international students, but then quickly I would learn that they have had most of their immediate Asian families in the States for a long time, which is very different from my situation. I feel different among my colleagues in a sense that I did not grow up here and I have not had anyone who can guide me in almost every aspect of my life. I have not had anyone beside me who could explore my new experiences with me, but also who could share past experiences that would help me move the meaning-making process forward. I oftentimes feel there are disconnects between my past, present, and future. It is like watching a movie when it is already half way through, and needing to understand it based on past experiences. I have tried for so long to connect the pieces and make sense of things in a way that is *me*. This experience is frightening, because I do feel sometimes I have no one to turn to, since no one person can connect the different worlds I am in.

The sense of *isolation* I described above has thus been something I am used to and have learned to cope with since my arrival in America. I have become familiar with the *individualistic* mentality I often encounter in a western culture, so I did not expect to receive any additional support from my college or university when I was hired as an assistant professor on the tenure track, other than what was officially given to all. When I came to this institution, I did not negotiate salary, research assistance, or professional development, and took whatever was provided to me. I needed the job for family financial and health insurance reasons and I was simply thankful for having a job that provides what my family and I need. In addition, I thought as a young faculty member, I needed to *pay my dues* before I asked for things. Later, I learned that there were assistant professors who requested teaching load reductions (i.e., teaching two courses at most, instead of the standard three-course teaching load in my department) or teaching exactly the same courses (i.e., no new course preparation time) in order to have time for research productivity. In retrospect, I wonder if I should have been much more proactive and deliberate on these issues.

There was no formal mentoring system set up in the college or university, similar to my previous institution. So that was not surprising to me. Again, my expectation has always been centered on the idea that America is an *individualistic* society and that expectation has permeated in all aspects of my experiences in the States. Thus, workplace is no exception to that expectation. I believe that low expectation has made any support or friendliness I received significant to me; I did receive that here in the college where I work. Through previous connections, as soon as I started my job here, I was fortunate to be included in two research projects with two male faculty in the college (i.e., my previous advisors knew these two tenured faculty). These two male faculty had similar graduate school experiences and training as I did, so they were able to quickly help me to modify and transition from my graduate school trainings to my current position. We started research teams that are comprised mostly of graduate students, because we believe in mentoring graduate students and guiding them along the publication processes. This was a new concept in the current institution. As a matter of fact, the new Associate Dean in the college just started to push for this trend when we started. We often used the same theories for the theoretical framework of our research and aimed at similar journals to publish as well. The *languages* and the *ethos* between my graduate school experience and this current college were immediately connected. For the first time, I felt my past and my present were connecting nicely.

Additionally, there were two female senior faculty who extended their friendliness to me. They reached out not only to me but also other female faculty. They often checked on me and asked how I was doing in my job. One of them often initiated some social events and invited the entire new faculty. I knew I could go to them to ask for advice, even though I was not involved in research with these two women. In the meantime, I still felt isolated at times because of the tug of the roles I have as a wife, mother, and tenure-track faculty. It is not

conventional to *balance* work life with family life based on the culture in which I grew up. As a woman, taking care of a family is expected to come first before a career, and women continue to carry the traditional roles of a mother and a wife, while adding a new career ("The Decline of Asian Marriage," 2011). Since I grew up in Taiwan, I found that my belief system reflects that upbringing. Consequently, I felt like I have two full-time jobs. Even when I tried not to be bounded by my previous upbringing, I still could not see immediate models for me to seek out, either. I wonder if any one of my female colleagues has the same struggles as I do? I do not believe the two male faculty I work closely with would understand and be able to mentor me. Not only is their role, as husband, different from my role as a wife; their children are already grown, whereas my son was only eight. There are two tenure-seeking female faculty who have young children like I do, and I know they are just as stressed out and overwhelmed as I am. There are other female faculty with young children, but they are either already tenured or are instructors in the college without publication pressures. Many of my successful female colleagues, including the ones in other institutions and the two female faculty I mentioned earlier, are either divorced, have grown children, or in a single status. So I ask myself, is it simply true that you cannot have it all?

Because of stories I have heard from others about unsuccessful experiences in tenure-track positions, I also came into this position with the expectation that the process is *mysterious*. However, I still wanted to know exactly what the expectations are for me to attain tenure in six years. I remember when the dean of the college at the time I was hired, held a meeting about the tenure process and how the conversation was very different from the tone of the college's committee on promotion and tenure. It caused a great deal of anxiety among the young faculty, including myself. Within the college, there seemed to be a fight between the traditional (i.e., people who prefer to keep things as they have always been done in the past) and the new (i.e., people who believe things have to change to make us competitive). The university has been transitioning to an emerging research university, and I often observed discrepancies between the administration's requirements and senior faculty expectations. This made it even less probable that I could find an effective role model to whom I can look up to. Although I was under the impression that *teaching* would be more prominent under the previous leadership, the changes over the past three years have created confusion about expectations. In the past, a teaching college was the *cool* thing, now research and securing grant funding have become the center of focus for tenure-track positions. I heard different voices within the college; some said business would be and should be just as usual and like how it was; the new administration said, "The train is moving west" and "moving fast," so you better get on it. I have also been aware of the fact that it is very possible for the directions of the college and university, as well as the administration to change. I found all of these transitions confusing. These confusions created uncertainty and unknown while offering the illusion of comfort and certainties of control. I still question my ability to succeed. I am still unsure about myself and about what I know. However, I take things in stride. I understand that being able to work *on your own terms* is unrealistic. I decided earlier on I would simply do my best and work hard. So in the American spirit, I independently march on.

Discussion

The formative experiences that we have collectively had as tenure-track faculty members often seem like Alice's trip to the world at the bottom of the rabbit hole. Adjusting to a new workplace environment, expectations, and colleagues has been complicated by the need to develop individual organizational roles within academic departments (i.e., role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance). Furthermore, as we make sense of the individual and perceived environmental factors impacting the differences in our pre-tenure experiences, it

may appear at first glance, as pre-tenure women faculty and faculty of varying races, like we are reporting less than favorable perceptions of our work environments and the tenure process at our institution. It is a somber picture of the tenure process that reinforces much of the literature about the struggles of women in faculty roles.

Our looking glass, the social cognitive career theory (SCCT), suggests that our perceived experiences have been influenced by the interplay of our personal, environmental, and experiential factors. Our common factors, being women tenure-track faculty at a university transitioning to emerging research status, would lead one to perceive that the experiences of all tenure-seeking faculty would be the same. In some cases, they are. Each of us has experienced isolation and fear, believing that no one else has experienced what we have. Stephanie and Colette both experienced the additional pressure of administrative work as new faculty. While, Fanni and Colette, as faculty of color, both have had to address the differences in expectations based upon their cultures. On the other hand, Stephanie has experienced differential treatment based on being White, evidenced by a lack of support.

Searching for our reflections in the looking glass, we have learned valuable lessons about ourselves as women faculty in the tenure process, despite the collective beliefs of what the process should be. As women faculty, we are well aware of the literature discussing comparatively low numbers of female faculty achieving equality in the tenure process in higher education (Denker, 2009; Hargens & Long, 2002; Kite et al., 2001; Williams, 2000). This research clouds our individual self-efficacy and outcome expectations for tenure. By examining how we, as faculty members, define who we are in certain circumstances, we make certain interpretations of what we *see through the looking glass*. Therefore, analysis of the reflections of our journey through the looking glass using social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the interplay among personal, environmental, and experiential factors, is important.

Personal Factors

Personal factors affect the individual experiences of tenure-seeking female faculty. All three of us are intelligent, extremely motivated and ambitious, and have expectations that working in academe - perhaps the most diverse working environment of any type of organization - would be one that embraces differences and supports the diverse work of colleagues. We all are employed by the same college and university. However, as one reads through what each of us has written about our experiences during the past couple of years in our work, personal factors (such as ethnicity), past experiences, beliefs, expectations, and confidence change how each of us experience our institution's environment, and direct the different emphasis of our stories as we reflect on our individual experiences. The environmental factors appear to take on different images depending on the individual.

Fanni's low expectation of American society being communal has caused her to expect nothing but individualistic paths in her work. Her story of her experience focused more on her struggle with her past cultures and experiences, which is due to the fact that these disconnects were seldom resolved in her past. For Stephanie, she did not see that the environment was toxic, but her lack of experience in conducting research led to a hope that someone was proactive in finding out what help she needed. She perceived that there simply appears to be less institutional support for White female faculty. For Colette, the environment was perceived as more hostile and subtle racism occurred. In addition, Colette, despite prior administrative and teaching experience, seemed to struggle with establishing credibility with her students and fellow faculty.

Although because of personal factors, each of us view our experiences through different lenses, there were some shared experiences that we perceive an institution can learn

from to enhance the experiences of its women faculty on the tenure track in a positive way. These common experiences will be described below.

Environmental Factors

"The awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to the expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation" (Freire, 1972, p. 16). Though we all have had experiences of being supported through various ways, mainly through informal acquaintances, the college and university has no formal support systems in place. The outward appearance of the college and university is one that supports that all faculty who are hired are important and that the institution is committed to their success. Typical business practice would support this - why would one invest in someone and not support his or her success? But, as one moves into the inner circle - and experiences the environment - there are subtle environmental factors that affect the success of women seeking tenure. As the literature states, these include isolation, competition between colleagues, loneliness, and work and life balance struggles (Greene et al., 2008). For the three of us, not having mentors, subtle racism, limited monetary and resource support, as well as a deeply rooted culture entrenched in a lack of collegiality, seems to have been barriers for our tenure process. As Barnett (2000) so eloquently states, perhaps it is time to consider a new epistemology for the university. An epistemology that is "open, bold, engaging, accessible, and conscious of its own insecurity. It is an epistemology for living amid uncertainty" (p. 409).

Fanni, in her respective program, received some mentoring and protection from taking on administrative duties (i.e., most of the people in her program are tenured senior faculty). Colette and Stephanie were in a program where the faculty were mainly assistant untenured professors. Consequently, they were given a great amount of administrative duties that added enormous stress in the tenure process. Without consistent and official mentoring support, Colette and Stephanie were left to figure out how to balance their workloads on their own and still cannot grasp if they are on the right track to tenure and promotion. In any case, all three of us found the standards to attain tenure unclear and confusing. This situation was also heightened by changes of leadership at the college and university levels. Specifically, the lack of models, instruction, and feedback on our efforts have caused us to question our abilities and our expectations. This is not to say that if we needed support and asked for it, that it would not be provided. Nevertheless, this illustrates precisely how setting up formal mentoring systems could facilitate positive experiences for tenure-track faculty.

Mentoring is considered one strategy for balancing the demands of conflicting societal, professional, and familial goals (Young & Wright, 2001). Ponjuan, Conley, and Trower (2011) found that many researchers reported that mentoring and other professional peer relationships help to increase the professional satisfaction of tenure-track women, as well as their successes at garnering tenure status.

Experiential Factors

As a group, we expressed discouraging critical experiences, which made us doubt our qualifications for the professoriate. Colette sometimes considers leaving the academy prematurely due to consistent expectations and her perception that she should work harder than her other colleagues to prove herself, as well as the institution's expression of tokenism by pigeonholing her to always represent minority issues on committees. Stephanie has considered leaving and moving back into the corporate sector, simply due to the disconnection of her perceptions of what it means to be a professor in an academic

environment, and the reality of actually being one - it seems to her that academe may not be Wonderland. Fanni's constant struggles among her roles as wife, mother, and a tenure-track faculty member make her question not only her abilities, but also her goal to pursue a tenure-track position. All three of our physiological reactions to stress, unhappiness, and anxiety in this experience also send signals to tell us how our own perceptions of our abilities affect our confidence and lead us to perceive we are inefficient and ineffective in our roles. This then creates even bigger needs for environmental support. The social influence on guidance and feedback could offset these individual feelings. Each of us expressed gratitude to the few expressions of support and mentoring we have received. In the end, we all wish at times that someone would stand behind our back to tell us how we are doing in our work – even if it is only to say *you are on the right track*.

Implications

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* reminds us that as individuals our identities are shaped and molded by the people and situations we face on our life journeys. Our collective stories illustrate that despite the commonality of our journey, the tenure process, everyone's path looks different. The differences based on our perceptions of and experiences in our environments is our looking glass. What is apparent from our stories is the importance of environmental support in colleges and universities. Many of the issues that we have addressed can be resolved through more formal support structures and conversations. The research literature on tenure does support the need for mentoring programs. If those women and men faculty members who desire mentoring relationships receive the support, validation, and guidance necessary to maneuver through the obstacles presented as part of the tenure process, they will be more successful, as well as have more positive experiences in the process. Senior faculty have a responsibility to their tenure-seeking counterparts. As stated by Stokowski (2000), it is the responsibility of those few who are part of the elite senior faculty to utilize their positions to begin telling the stories of the women academics and their desire to be included as whole beings in their professional positions.

In addition to mentoring systems, the discussions of our experiences pinpoint areas of which institutions need to be cognizant. The first has to do with individual *start up* packages for tenure-track faculty. There is no standard policy or practice within our college. To ensure equity, regardless of race, we perceive there to be merit in consistent support packages that ensure individuals have a solid foundation for their tenure success. This can be accomplished by simply establishing standards for all new tenure-track faculty, such as reductions in course teaching loads for the first year, as well as monetary and equipment support for research.

These simple policy changes could have impacted our experiences but upon reflection, issues of diversity have played an even more significant role in our collective journey. Isolation, collegial relationships, and for some, unusually high service commitments and family responsibilities, whether because of our gender or race, have provided a backdrop for our lives in academe and have, in large part, defined our experiences as professors. Coping with feelings of isolation and a lack of support, negotiating family life and work, and making meaning of the tenure journey has all been influenced by our individual differences. Our personal, environmental, and experiential factors serve as different colored lenses on our individual looking glasses. Specifically, race and ethnicity determined how we each perceived our experiences in the same environment.

Traditionally, higher education has struggled with issues related to diversity, which is evident by the fact that untenured and tenured faculty ranks remain predominantly White nationwide (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2010). As strong-willed women, determined to successfully complete our quest for tenure, we realize that academic life for women and

specifically women of color, has historically been influenced by the organizational culture of institutions. Our overall attitude is to persevere and conquer. What we want is simple - we want what every professor wants - to be respected and be judged on the quality and merit of our work regardless of our gender and skin color. Moses (1989) clearly articulated that, "one of the best sources of support that faculty members can get is the respect and validation of their peers" (p. 30). We want to take this a step further and add that the support systems provided by the department, college, and university are also important to the success of those on the tenure track.

Examining the culture in departments, colleges, and universities, and questioning whether or not the culture supports women who choose to work in academe in tenure-track positions, supportive environments can then be created. It necessitates specific attention to aspiring faculty to build and maintain strong support systems among themselves, such as mentors, colleagues, and family. By actively creating opportunities for diverse faculty to share their experiences, whether through organized mentoring programs or informal *sister to sister* groups, universities overall would demonstrate their belief in them as valued, contributing members within the academy. By empowering ourselves, we can control the bewildering images we see in the looking glass.

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