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Career Transition to the Professoriate: Midlife Women's Process, Challenges, Supports, and Strategies

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Keywords: career transition, career change, midlife, faculty, higher education
Abstract: The numbers of new faculty with prior careers and women faculty are increasing. However, traditional theories may not explain this intersection in examining faculty careers. The purpose of this study was to investigate the career transitions and strategies of women midlife career changers to the professoriate.

Record-breaking enrollments in higher education institutions have influenced greater demand for faculty, and faculty characteristics are changing (Aud et al., 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Two such changing characteristics include increasing numbers of new faculty with prior career and women faculty. Traditional adult development and career development theories are linear and may not explain the multi-directional context of multiple careers (Baruch, 2004) and resulting career transitions in a lifetime. Additionally, many traditional theories studied White men and may not fully apply to people of color and women (Alfred, 2001; Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Ross-Gordon, 1999). Last, we know little about midlife career changers to higher education.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the career transitions and strategies of women midlife career changers to the professoriate. Three research questions guided the study: What is the career transition process of women midlife career changers to the professoriate? What challenges and supports do midlife women experience during career transition to the professoriate? What strategies do midlife women use to manage career transition to the professoriate? In addition to these questions, the literature, a conceptual framework, and research design guided the study, leading to findings and implications discussed in next sections.

Conceptual Framework and Literature

Merriam (2005) summarized adult life in terms of alternating periods of maintenance and stability with changes and transition: "The transition process involves letting go of the past, experimenting with strategies and behaviors to accommodate the new, and finally, feeling comfortable with the changes one has adopted in terms of identity, values, behaviors, or social roles" (p. 7). This study's conceptual framework comprised Schlossberg's (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) adult transition model and Hansen's (1997, 2011) integrated life planning (ILP; a career development) model. Schlossberg's adult transition model provides a framework for transition analysis, and this study used the first two parts, approaching transitions and potential resources, excluding the third part, a resource-strengthening counseling process.

According to Hansen (1997, 2011), adult development and career development converged in the late 1900s, resulting in broadened concepts of *career* and *career development* to cover the life span and embrace context and multiple roles. In response, she organized six critical tasks for career development and decision making into the ILP model, used in this study's conceptual framework: finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts; attending to our physical, mental, and emotional health; connecting family and work; valuing pluralism and inclusivity; exploring spirituality and life purpose; and managing personal transitions and organizational change.

At the intersection of adult and career development, midlife career changers experience unique transition challenges as they move from prior career expert to new career novice and develop to new career expert. Mentors can support such transition but the mentoring relationship is complex (Eifler, 1997; Jackson, 2012). Coping strategies for new career novices include peers, self-directed learning, and prior career skills (Cherrstrom, 2014).

Research Design

Based on the purpose, this study used a transcendental phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology focuses on describing the essence of a lived phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), and the analysis unit supported studying multiple individuals who shared the common lived experience of midlife career transition to the professoriate.

Using criterion, snowball, and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013), I identified eight participants and used pseudonyms. Inclusion criteria comprised tenured or tenure-track women faculty, in adult education or related fields, at four-year institutions, who self-identified as career changers to the professoriate, while age 35 to 60 years. Participants affiliated with seven U.S. institutions and included four tenured and four tenure-track faculty, all professorial ranks, six white women and two women of color, single and partnered women, and four mothers, including a grandmother.

For data collection, I investigated and bracketed the essence of my experience as a midlife woman aspiring to the professoriate using Moustakas' (1994) Epoché process to release prejudgments and be receptive to participant experiences. In addition, I conducted, recorded, and transcribed two semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions, with each participant to investigate the phenomenon. Participants had the opportunity to member check transcriptions after each interview.

Data analysis included Moustakas' (1994) methods comprised of phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Accordingly, phenomenological reduction leads to textural descriptions (the *what*) and methods included bracketing in the Epoché process, horizonalization or unitizing, using ATLAS.ti qualitative research software to code meaning units, and further clustering invariant units into themes. Similarly, imaginative variation leads to structural descriptions (the *how*) and methods included systematic varying of the structural and underlying textural meanings, recognizing the underlying themes accounting for the phenomenon's emergence, considering, but not limiting to, the universal structures (e.g., time, space, relation to self and others), and searching for participant exemplifications. Last, I synthesized the textural and structural descriptions to identify meanings and the essence, resulting in the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the data analysis, this study found a career transition process and related challenges, supports, and strategies to manage the process (see Figure).

Career Transition Process

The career transition process highlights the influence of midlife age, varied prior education and work experience, differing career transition beginnings and endings, and direct and indirect pathways to first tenure-track faculty positions. Hannah, for example, asked her doctoral adviser about gender, age, and pursuing the professoriate. Her adviser did not consider being a midlife woman a barrier: "What they care about is what you bring? What do you offer? What will you contribute to this program? How well do you write? How much have you published?" In contrast, Christine wished she had thought she could transition to the professoriate earlier: "I'm getting old, and I don't feel like I can do as much as I used to." She

advised, "Watch out . . . because it is hard to make it in this field, especially if you have a strike against you being older." Similarly, Barbara felt "late to the game" and laughed about needing bifocals; however, she acknowledged midlife age and associated work experience increased her credibility with students and colleagues. Women's midlife career transition is an ongoing, non-linear, and diverse career development process with relatively unique issues, themes, and tasks (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2010).
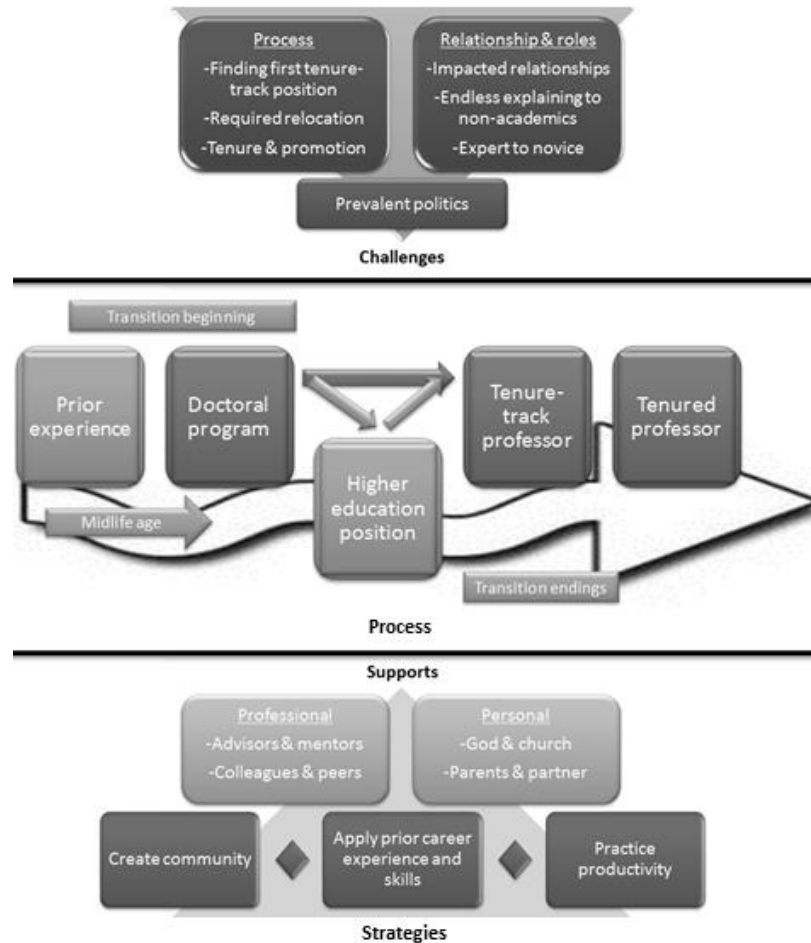

Figure. Women's midlife career transition process to the professoriate.

Career Transition Challenges

Throughout the career transition process, participants described a variety of related challenges, supports, and strategies. Specifically, process-related challenges comprised finding first tenure-track position, required relocation, and the tenure and promotion process. Relationship- and role-related challenges comprised impacted relationships, endless explaining of the professoriate to non-academics, and the transition from prior career expert to new career novice as doctoral students and faculty. Last, prevalent politics permeated the career transition process. Midlife women may experience normal transition issues more acutely and unique issues not always encountered by younger career changers (Newman, 1995). In addition, relationships and roles are critical to women's self-identity (Caffarella & Olson, 1993), connection over

separation (Ross-Gordon, 1999), and transition experiences (Anderson et al., 2012). This section further discusses three challenge examples.

First, participants referenced tenure and promotion *throughout* interviews, and non-tenured participants consistently reference *if* they make tenure. Participants further described the process as "jumping through hoops," "a marathon," "institutional harassment," "risky," and "high stakes." In her prior career, Frances supported those who came behind; however, as a new faculty member, "where I was expecting support, because someone else had been before me, I wasn't getting it."

Second, unique to midlife career changers, participants experienced the challenge and stress of transitioning from prior career expert to new career novice. The field of adult education strives to value prior experiences, but within the context of career transition to the professoriate, participants felt their prior career experience unrecognized and unvalued. For Frances, as example, "The hardest thing about being someone who did this [career] transition in midlife was going from expert to novice." She advised, "You have to be . . . willing to grapple with that; otherwise, you add a layer of stress." Furthermore, several participants lost power in transitioning from prior careers. For example, for Christine, "The downside was I lost my authority. [In my prior career,] I had power to make changes and do things. . . . You come in as a peon, an assistant professor who has no power."

Last, as new career novices, all participants noted prevalent politics in higher education. Despite desiring to not deal with politics, all participants faced challenging and prevalent politics during midlife career transition to the professoriate. Some participants perceived gender and/or age as particular challenges in higher education institution's political environment. Such political environments tend to be traditional and hierarchical and, at the extreme, were experienced as uncivil.

Career Transition Supports

All career transition supports were relational. Professional supports comprised advisors and mentors as well as colleagues and peers, and personal supports comprised God and church as well as parents and partner. For example, most participants had advisors and mentors who provided emotional and practical support, including encouragement, affirmation, and opportunities to teach, research, write, and publish. For example, Christine shared, "I had [a committee member] on speed dial. [laughter] I still have [her] on speed dial. . . . Her advice is always sound; I knew, if I did what [she] told me, I'd be okay." However, mentor support varied and Williams (2010) cautioned mentors to recognize and validate career changers' prior experiences while simultaneously realizing novice competency does not preclude needed support and encouragement.

In addition, colleague and peer relationships, especially within the same program of study, were critically important to all participants. Several participant spoke deeply of relationships formed in doctoral programs that grew as new faculty and continue to this day. Knowing they were not alone and sharing similar experiences with others supported the participants in their career transitions to the professoriate.

Career Transition Strategies

Based on their experiences, participants identified three overarching strategies to manage the career transitions process: create community, apply prior career skills, and practice productivity. These strategies fully support Jones and DeFillippi's (1996) boundaryless career competencies on understanding the new industry, in this case higher education, and partially support the competencies of self-knowledge and skill navigate higher education.

First, all participants took purposeful actions to create community in order to manage the midlife career transition process to the professoriate. By strategically creating community, they sought to cope with career transition challenges and leverage career transition supports. Created communities provided emotional and practical support participants. For example, they found comfort in realizing or confirming they were not alone in their experiences. Furthermore, the created communities understood and supported several career transition challenges, such as the loneliness and newness of required relocations, the stress of tenure and promotion and impacted relationships, the tedium of endlessly explaining and defending the professoriate to non-academics, and the political pressures of higher education. Beyond such emotional support, created communities also offered practical solutions such as sharing information, brainstorming solutions, and researching, writing, and publishing activities.

Participants also strove to apply prior career experience in their new higher education contexts. Such experience influenced their research, writing, and service. For example, prior career knowledge, skills, and interests influenced research agendas, brought real world practice to classroom theory, and influenced service assignments and activities. Despite such striving, participants often struggled in how to best transfer such prior career experience to the professoriate. In some cases, advisors, mentors, or colleagues helped guide such transfer. Overall, however, participants would have appreciated greater recognition of their prior career skills and benefited from help in how to transfer such skills to the higher education context.

Last, participants understood research and publishing are top priorities for tenured and tenure-track faculty positions. However, several felt conflicted about devoting time to research at the expense of teaching. They purposefully sought to practice productivity by minimizing, as much as possible, conflicting demands and focusing on what it takes to make tenure and promotion. Therefore, practicing productivity usually related to increasing time and activities devoted to research, writing, and publishing. In addition to advancing in the tenure and promotion process, participants hoped practicing productivity would free up time, and alleviate related guilt, to spend with family and friends who did not understand process demands.

Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

For theory, this study contributes to the adult development and career development literature with its focus on midlife, women, career transition, and higher education. In addition, it expands the limited expert to novice transition literature, specifically prior career expert to new career novice and the subsequent development and journey to new career expert. For higher education policy and related practice, this study has implications for graduate student admission, advising, programing, and preparation as future family. For faculty, this study has implications for new faculty search committees and hiring as well as faculty development.

For transition-related practice, the study has implications for adult educators of midlife career-changing women in classrooms and training rooms. For midlife women transitioning to the professoriate, this study has implications for students' doctoral program selection and use of resources as well as new faculty's first tenure-track position search, institution selection, challenge awareness, tenure and promotion navigation, and strategy execution. Ultimately, through research, teaching, and service, women midlife career changers to the professoriate can benefit students, colleagues, institutions, communities, academic fields, and the world.

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