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Midlife Career Change to Tenured/Tenure-Track and Non-Tenure-Line Faculty: Shared and Unique Challenges, Supports, and Strategies

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Abstract: Two studies investigated the career transition and strategies of women midlife career changers to tenured/tenure-track and non-tenure-line faculty. Major findings included a career transition process and related challenges, supports, and strategies and feature participant voices.

Keywords: career transition, career change, midlife, faculty, higher education

Higher education faculty characteristics are changing with implications for teaching and student learning, innovative research and economic growth, and service contributing to society (Aud et al, 2013; Ryan, Healy, & Sullivan, 2012). Changing faculty characteristics include increasing numbers of women faculty, career changers to higher education, and non-tenure-line faculty (NCES, 2004, 2017). Traditional adult and career development theories tend to be linear (Baruch, 2004), based on studies of White men (Alfred, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 1999), and may not apply to midlife women in career transition. Although the literature includes studies of midlife career changers to primary and secondary teaching (e.g., Mayotte, 2003; Williams, 2010), we know little about midlife career changers to higher education faculty.

The purpose of two studies was to investigate the career transition and strategies of women midlife career changers to the professoriate. A 2015 study focused on tenured/tenure-track faculty, and a 2017 study focused on full-time, non-tenure-line faculty (Cherrstrom). Three research questions guided the studies: What is the career transition process? What challenges and supports do midlife women experience during career transition? What strategies do midlife women use to manage career transition? This paper highlights the conceptual framework, research design, findings, discussion of findings, and offers implications.

Conceptual Framework

The studies situated in adult development and career development literature and used a Schlossberg's (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) adult transition model and Hansen's (1997, 2011) integrated life planning (ILP) model as the conceptual framework. While adult transitions are often stressful and challenging, they present significant opportunities for growth (Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg's adult transition model provided a framework to analyze adult transition, including identifying and approaching transitions and identifying and harnessing potential transition resources. While this model broadly focuses on adult transition, Hansen's model focuses on career development.

According to Hansen (1997, 2011), career development includes new concepts embracing context and multiple roles throughout the lifespan. Therefore, she developed the six-part ILP model for career development and decision making: finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts; attending to 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. In addition to the conceptual framework, the research design guided the studies.

Research Design

Both qualitative studies used a phenomenological research design to describe the essence of a lived phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), women's midlife career transition to the professoriate. The research design used Moustakas' (1994) methods to conduct a disciplined and systematic phenomenological study; focusing on the research purpose and literature, discussed above; and participants, data collection, and data analysis, discussed here. In phenomenological research, criterion sampling ensures participants have experience with the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Inclusion criteria comprised tenured/tenure-track (first study) and full-time, non-tenure-line (second study) women in adult education or related fields, at four-year or greater institutions, who self-identified as career changers to the professoriate while age 35 to 60 years (Cherrstrom, 2015, 2017). The resulting 16 participants affiliated with 12 institutions throughout the country and included all professorial ranks and represented varied demographics.

Prior to data collection, I used Moustakas' (1994) Epoché process to investigate and bracket the essence of my experience as a midlife woman aspiring to the professoriate (first study) and new faculty (second study) to release judgments and focus on participant experiences (Cherrstrom, 2015, 2017). Data collection comprised one or two extensive

interviews of each participant using a semi-structured protocol, audio-recordings, verbatim transcription, and member-checking. Data analysis comprised Moustakas' (1994) methods of phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Phenomenological reduction included horizonalization or unitizing, coding meaning units, and clustering invariant units into themes, leading to textural descriptions. Imaginative variation included systematic varying of the structural and underlying textural meanings, recognizing the underlying themes accounting for the phenomenon's emergence, and identifying participant exemplifications, leading to structural descriptions. Lastly, I synthesized the textural and structural descriptions to identify findings.

Findings

For non-tenure-line and tenured/tenure-track participants. major findings included a midlife career transition process (Figure 1), shared and unique challenges and supports, and unique strategies (Figure 2). This section presents these findings and highlights participant voices about the influence of midlife age during career transition (Table 1) and challenges of being non-tenure-line faculty (Table 2) and the tenure process (Table 3).
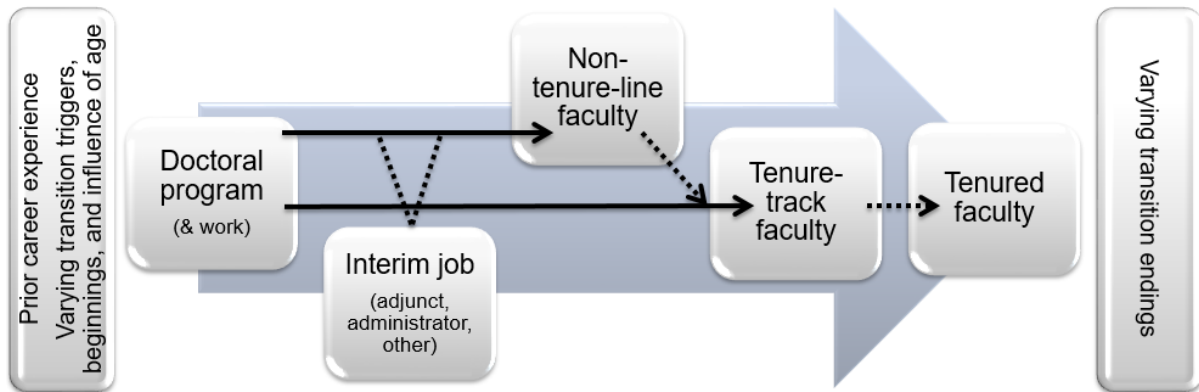

Figure 1. Midlife women's career transition process to the professoriate.

Table 1. *Faculty Voices: Varying Influence of Midlife Age on Career Transition Process* (Cherrstrom 2015, 2017)

Late to the game	*I felt late to the game . . . trying to figure out this new career thing [in midlife].*
Wish had done earlier	*I'm getting old, and I don't feel like I can do as much as I used to. . . . I wish very much I had done it earlier or known I could do it earlier.*
An issue	*I don't think age should be a factor, but it is.*
Not a problem	*I don't see age being a problem. . . . There is no retirement age. . . . What they care about is what do you bring? What do you offer? What will you contribute to this program? How well do you write? How much have you published?"*
Reason why non-tenure-line	*Age is one of the reasons why I'm non-tenure-track instead of tenure-track.*
Too late now	*What difference does [making tenure] make at my age?*

Unique to Non-Tenure-Line Faculty	Shared Faculty Findings	Unique to Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty
Challenges		
Time management Can I do it?	Similar perspectives: Impacted relationships	Prevalent politics Endless explaining to non-academics Expert to novice
	Different perspectives: Relocation Securing tenure-track position Tenure	
Supports		
Love of teaching Flexibility	Advisors and mentors Colleagues and peers Parents and partner	God and church
Strategies		
Ask for and leverage help Teach with excellence Research and publish		Create community Apply prior career experience and skills Practice productivity

Figure 2. Career Transition Challenges, Supports, and Strategies (Cherrstrom, 2015, 2017)

Table 2. *Non-Tenure-Line Faculty Voices: Being Non-Tenure-Line a Challenge* (Cherrstrom, 2017)

Inferiority	*Although I felt respected by my colleagues, the institution treats you differently as a non-tenured colleague and you feel your difference, not just difference but an inferiority.*
Exclusion	*There are little things, like being asked to leave a meeting because you're not voting.*
Lack of value	*I want to be valued as highly as someone can be valued. I want to be part of, build, and improve the university community. But as a non-tenure-line faculty member, I feel like my input is less valuable. Or less valued, that's what I mean.*

Table 3. *Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty Voices: Tenure Process a Challenge* (Cherrstrom, 2015)

Process	*Moving target. Jumping through hoops. A marathon. High stakes.*
Politics	*Horrible process. Horrible and nasty. Institutional harassment. Professional hazing.*
Lack of support	*"I think that was probably one of the things that kept throwing me off balance. Where I was expecting support, because someone else had been before me, I wasn't getting it."*

Discussion of Findings

This discussion focuses on the shared and unique experiences of midlife women who transitioned careers to non-tenure-line and tenured/tenure-track faculty. The study found a career transition process with shared and unique elements, shared and unique challenges and supports, and unique strategies.

The midlife career transition process includes direct and indirect pathways to the professoriate (Cherrstrom, 2015, 2017). Shared experiences included prior career experience and doctoral programs. Unique experiences included varying transition triggers; beginnings; influence of age; holding and types of interim jobs; non-tenure-line, tenure-track, or tenured status; and transition endings. As examples, career transitions began prior to doctoral application, during doctoral programs, and obtaining first faculty position. For many, career transition ended with first post-doctoral faculty position or making tenure, while others continue in transition seeking a tenure-track position or, having such a position, making tenure. Most, but not all, believed age negatively influenced career transition during graduate school, while job searching, and as new faculty. These findings illustrate the non-linear, diverse, challenging, and in many cases, ongoing nature of women's midlife career transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2010; Hansen, 1997, 2011).

Turning to career transition challenges, midlife women may more acutely experience common transition issues and unique issues not always encountered by younger career changers (Newman, 1995). In these studies, all participants identified impacted relationships as challenging (Cherrstrom, 2015, 2017. This may be significant for women, since relationships and roles are critical to self-identity and transition experiences (Anderson et al., 2012; Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Additional shared findings, but with different perspectives, included relocation, securing tenure-track position, and tenure. Generally, non-tenure-line faculty chose not to relocate, thus limiting opportunities, while tenured/tenure-track faculty relocated for first position. Participants respectively found "being" non-tenure-line and the tenure process challenging. Unique non-tenure-line challenges included time management, especially dealing with heavy teaching loads, and self-questioning ("Can I do it?") as doctoral students, new faculty, and in some cases, experienced faculty interested in tenure-track positions (Cherrstrom, 2017). Unique tenured/tenure-track challenges included endless explaining to non-academics, expert to novice transition, and prevalent politics (Cherrstrom, 2015). For example, as new career novices, tenure-track faculty felt others did not recognize or value prior career experience and expertise. Some perceived gender and/or age as particular challenges, finding higher education's political environment traditional, hierarchical, and at the extreme, uncivil.

As career transition supports, all faculty shared advisors and mentors, colleagues and peers, and parents and partners (Cherrstrom, 2015, 2017). Tenured/tenure-track faculty also identified God and church (Cherrstrom, 2015). Motulsky (2010) found relationships assist midlife women in overcoming career transition barriers, especially relationships with experts, colleagues, and friends. Furthermore, midlife women with such professional relationships experienced fewer and more effectively dealt with career transition challenges. Although advisor and mentor support varied, many provided emotional and practical support, including encouragement, affirmation, and opportunities to teach, research, and publish. In addition to relationships, non-tenure-line identified love of teaching and flexibility as supports (Cherrstrom, 2017). They brought prior teaching experience to the transition and reported "loving" or being "passionate" about teaching, which, combined with pride and positive feedback, fueled them during difficult times. They also recognized flexibility as a support for themselves and others, such as children and aging parents. Love of teaching and flexibility illustrate Hansen's (1997, 2011) critical tasks of finding work that needs doing, attending to well-being, connecting family and work, and exploring life purpose.

In contrast to challenges and supports, major findings excluded shared strategies to manage career transition. Unique non-tenure-line findings included ask for and leverage help, teach with excellence, and research and publish (Cherrstrom, 2017). Non-tenure-line faculty

leveraged mentor or advisor help and asked others, often colleagues and peers, for help. Williams (2010) recommended mentors recognize and validate career changers' prior experiences and cautioned even competent novices need support and encouragement. Love of and passion for teaching, a support, complimented the second strategy, teach with excellence for job performance and as much security as possible. Lastly, they strove to, and in many cases accomplished, research and publishing. Unique tenured/tenure-track findings included create community, apply prior career experience and skills, and practice productivity (Cherrstrom, 2015). Faculty took purposeful actions to create community to cope with career transition challenges and leverage supports. In addition to emotional support, created communities provided practical solutions, such as information sharing, brainstorming, and research activities. They also strove to apply prior career experience in their new context. Prior experience shaped research agendas, provided real-world practice to classroom theory, and influenced service assignments and activities. However, transferring prior career skills also presented challenges, and they would have benefited from help (Williams, 2010). Lastly, participants purposefully practiced productivity by increasing time and activities devoted to research and publishing. Collectively, these findings offer implications and prompt further research.

Implications

These studies offer implications for theory, practice, and policy. For theory, they contribute to the literature with focus on women, midlife, career transition, higher education, and the intersection of growing numbers of career changers to higher education, women faculty, as well as the shared and unique experiences of non-tenure-line and tenured/tenure-track faculty.

For individual practice, the studies have implications for midlife women transitioning to the professoriate, their career development goals and outcomes, doctoral program selection and studies, non-tenure-line and tenure-track position searches, institution selection, challenge awareness, process navigation, and strategy execution. For higher education practice and related policy, the studies have implications for graduate student advising, programing, and preparation as future faculty as well as searching for and hiring, developing, and promoting new faculty. Furthermore, the studies illuminate the common and unique experiences, perspectives, and needs of non-tenure-line and tenured/tenure-track faculty.

Future research opportunities include studying women midlife career changers over time, expanding the study to other disciplines and men, and interventions including, but not limited to, mentoring, including peer-mentoring, and coaching. Such research will support the

success of midlife career changers to higher education who, at various faculty ranks, benefit students, colleagues, institutions, and society through varied combinations of teaching, research, and service.

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