

”Once you get tenure, it’s a lot easier”: The impact of tenure on approaches to conflict in research teams

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Abstract

The benefits of interdisciplinary teams have been well-documented; however, epistemological backgrounds and methodological approaches to research vary by discipline, often creating conflict on such teams. Many factors influence how interdisciplinary research teams may approach conflict; for teams comprised of individuals across a spectrum of ranks or titles (e.g., graduate students, pre-tenured faculty, tenured faculty), power is a critical element that can either exacerbate or mitigate instances of conflict. However, limited scholarship has examined how power from tenure – or the lack thereof – influences how individuals on interdisciplinary research teams navigate conflict. Using French and Raven's conception of legitimate or positional power, we analyzed data from interviews with six faculty to explore how power derived from tenure – or a lack thereof – to explore how tenure influences the ways in which individuals on interdisciplinary research teams navigate conflict. Results indicate that pre-tenured faculty recognized that they lacked power to shape the direction of their research teams, resulting from two types of treatment perpetuated by tenured faculty – 1) junior faculty were not trusted or allowed to engage in meaningful work on certain projects, and 2) some pre-tenured faculty felt that their need to fulfill tenure requirements were used against them, which tenured faculty took advantage of. Yet, half of the participants in the study noted that they employed subversive strategies to contribute to their research teams. Results from this study indicate that tenured faculty can take advantage of the power differential with pre-tenured faculty, creating situations where pre-tenured faculty either complete work without recognition or engage in subversive acts to contribute to research, creating unnecessarily arduous paths to tenure.

Introduction

This empirical research is a Work-in-Progress. Interdisciplinary research teams are comprised of individuals from a range of disciplines and backgrounds. The benefits of interdisciplinary teams have been well-documented [1-3]; however, epistemological backgrounds and methodological approaches to research vary by discipline, often creating conflict on such teams. While engaging in productive disagreements can be beneficial to teams (e.g. predicting future issues, building stronger relationships and understanding of each other's perspectives), miscommunication and relational conflict can lead to individual's feeling attacked, dismissed, or at risk of personal or professional repercussions [3,4]. Many factors influence how interdisciplinary research teams may approach conflict; for teams comprised of individuals across ranks or titles (e.g., graduate students, pre-tenured faculty, tenured faculty), power is a critical element that can exacerbate or mitigate instances of conflict. French and Raven [5] posit that individuals ascribed to a certain role carry authority or influence over others who are not in the same position; this is called positional power. This power, which awards legitimacy and status, is afforded to some faculty through tenure. In addition, faculty are embedded into multiple hierarchies according to their positional power in terms of academic rank (e.g. tenure status), role on grants and teams (e.g. PI, contributor), perceived experience, and social identities [6-8].

In dysfunctional power hierarchies, high-power individuals are more likely to share their perspectives and voice disagreement, while being less likely to seek to understand and adopt the viewpoints of others [9, 10] Consequentially, lower-power team members may be less willing to share

knowledge when they feel their perspective will be dismissed or discounted [9, 11] However, when teams with significant power differentiation foster a culture of trust and mutual respect, team members from all power positions are more willing to share their perspectives [12-14]; this results in healthy conflict navigation and more creative solutions to research problems [15]. Although one study has considered how power dynamics amongst teams affect the teams' impact in their research space [16], limited scholarship has examined how power garnered from possessing tenure – or the lack thereof – influence how individuals on interdisciplinary research teams navigate conflict.

The purpose of this study is to explore how tenure influences the ways in which individuals on interdisciplinary research teams navigate conflict. We use positional power as a sensitizing concept (i.e. background ideas used to bring awareness to certain phenomena during analysis [17]), to guide our exploration of how an individual's tenure status impacts how they engage in conflict. Our research question is: *in what ways does positional power shape faculty's experiences on research teams?*

Methods

Data for this study comes from 60–90-minute interviews that occurred as part of a larger project which explores how interdisciplinary Engineering Education research teams navigate differences in epistemic matters. Participants came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including engineering education, social sciences, and technical engineering fields, and were all employed at public, research-intensive universities. Six of the seven participants identify as white; however, we elect not to disclose each participants' race or ethnicity to protect individual anonymity.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Position	Amount of time participant has held tenure	Discipline	Gender ¹	Institution Type
Reggie	Associate Professor	Less than 3 years	Engineering Education	male	Public R1
Caroline	Associate Professor	Less than 3 years	Mechanical Engineering	woman	Public R1
Taylor	Associate Professor	Less than 5 years	Engineering Education/ Mechanical Engineering	woman	Public R1
Gabriel	Professor	More than 20 years	Software and Information Systems	man	Public R1
Vivian	Professor	Less than 10 years	Engineering Education	woman	Public R1
Krono	Associate Professor	Less than 5 years	Social Science	cis man	Public R1
James	Research Scientist	N/A	Social Science	man	Public R1

¹ Participants self-reported their gender, which accounts for the variety in terminology.

Six of the participants in the study held tenure, with one in a research scientist position, at the time of interviews. All participants were encouraged to consider their past experiences, and for the tenured faculty seemed to organically lead to reflections on their pre-tenured experiences. We asked participants to consider one interdisciplinary team that they had recently been a part of and focused the bulk of the interview on their experiences with that particular team. Sample questions include: 1) Describe for me a time that you were working with this team to make a decision related to project goals, outcomes, or research approaches and there was conflict or negotiation in that experience. 2) Do you feel that some voices are given more weight than others when the team is making a decision? If so, can you give an example of a time that demonstrates this? 3) How comfortable do you feel asking questions, sharing your ideas, or voicing disagreement on this team? While studying power was not an intended focus of the larger study, the concept emerged as a salient part of participants' experiences as they discussed their approach to navigating conflict on teams. Therefore, we selected two sensitizing concepts, positional power and hierarchy, to guide our secondary analysis of the larger study data. Specifically, we analyzed the data both inductively and deductively, to explore connections between positional power and aspects of individual and team approaches to navigating conflict. Three members of our research team individually coded each transcript, coming together after to discuss differences in interpretation and work towards triangulation. As we inductively coded the data, we created and applied codes like "lack of power," "power from position," and "unequal contributions to project." After we completed coding the interviews, each member of our team generated a different section of a structured analytical memo for individual participants, with one team member focusing on individual approaches to conflict, another considering approaches of a team the participant discussed, and the third team member exploring how each participant and their team compared to others in the sample. All of these analytic steps helped us identify several themes related to tenure, power, and the navigation of conflict.

Emerging Findings

Results indicate that pre-tenured faculty explicitly recognized that they lacked power, with one participant noting "I'm very conscious of the power imbalance." This sentiment was echoed by others in the study, like Reggie, who stated: "I have felt like as a junior faculty, I didn't necessarily have the power to be able to shape the direction that [our team] was going in." These feelings seemed to result from two types of treatment, perpetuated by tenured faculty – 1) junior faculty were not trusted or allowed to engage in meaningful work on certain projects, leading pre-tenured faculty to question their own abilities; and 2) some pre-tenured faculty felt that their need to fulfill tenure requirements were used against them, which tenured faculty took advantage of. In both cases, participants reflected on these experiences as negative and discussed ways that the experiences shaped how they approach collaboration and leading teams as tenured faculty.

Intentional limits on junior faculty

Despite being eager to contribute to research teams in meaningful ways, faculty recounted stories demonstrating the limits they were forced to contend with, most often at the hands of tenured faculty colleagues. For example, Taylor shared that when she attempted to contribute to the team, "I always felt like I was getting tamped down a little bit...The response was 'You're so cute. You're a junior faculty and it's so nice, it's so good for you that you're concerned, but don't worry, we've got this.'" As evidenced by Taylor's story, attempting to engage in research teams as a pre-tenured faculty when others on the team hold higher levels of positional power can be a complicated endeavor.

These types of interactions seemed to be heightened for those who were not faculty but still held a doctorate or expertise that warranted membership on their respective research teams. For example, James shared a story about an experience he had while serving as a research scientist. In presenting some quantitative data analysis he had conducted, he stated the others on the team – all tenured faculty – “they were seeing me as a trainee and so they, I think felt much more comfortable correcting me.” He went on to explain that the cause of this interaction was “some hierarchy there, some power differential” in which the other team members felt comfortable telling him that he was wrong in a way that he did not believe they would have done to each other. James went on to describe how on this team graduate students and those in postdoctoral positions seemed to suffer the most with their ideas being dismissed often. He stated that:

There was this kind of hierarchy that would be present in a lot of meetings from what I heard and even saw, where faculty wouldn't necessarily listen to what students had to say. [There was] kind of this espoused versus enacted thing where the [tenured] faculty would verbalize that we care about you; we want to hear your perspective, and we think that what you have to say is really valuable. But at the same time, when a person with less power would say something, it was often, just kind of hand waved, if it wasn't in direct alignment with what somebody with power was saying. ^[P.]_[SEP] And then when somebody without power would step in to try to say something or to redirect things back to a more productive space, there was this kind of disregarding of that position.

These sorts of interactions and experiences weigh on and shape pre-tenured faculty perceptions on both collaborations and self-perceptions. For example, Caroline stated of her pre-tenure experiences: “I didn't have the sense of self to be able to be like, no,” while Gabriel, in reflecting stated: “once you get tenure, it's a lot easier...to just get rid of [those who don't do the job they committed to]. Until tenure, I don't know, I mean, I was told to be afraid of repercussions of being too vocal.”

Subversive acts of engagement

Still, half of the participants in the study noted that as junior faculty, they employed subversive strategies to contribute to their research teams, like generating independent side projects or acting autonomously when other members were unavailable. For example, Gabriel described how they responded to an ongoing disagreement within their interdisciplinary team focused on developing a software program. Despite having perhaps, the most experience building similar applications, those with less experience but higher statuses refused to allow him to move forward with what he believed to be the most appropriate course of action. Ultimately, Gabriel waited until

All the people above me in the group went on vacation at the same time. They were gone for two weeks. I went and built the whole tool in those two weeks. When they came back, it was like, ‘okay, let me explain it to you.’ And I showed it. They were like, “oh, that's good. Where did you get that??” [And] I said, ‘I didn't get it anywhere. I wrote it’... And they were blown away that I could build something, not following their arcane ideas, but I had to, I had to go rogue. I had to wait for them to be on vacation.

Regardless of Gabriel's expertise in the team's area, it wasn't until his teammates were away and disconnected from the work that he was able to contribute in the way he knew would support the group's goal. Recall that Taylor had a similar experience being disregarded on her research team; due to her junior status; however, she responded to it differently than Gabriel. Taylor stated that she and the other junior faculty on the team

actually created a sub-project for ourselves because we kind of felt like it gave us an opportunity to have control over something and to be able to shape direction and do research that wasn't just like managing other research [because] with regards to the overall direction of the [larger] project, I think that I didn't really have much.

Driven to contribute to the team and to make the experience meaningful for themselves, Taylor and her colleague felt they could only do so by carving out a separate project that they would lead.

Tenured faculty taking advantage of pre-tenure colleagues

While some participants were not allowed to fully engage in and contribute to their teams, others were asked to join projects and then expected to do significant amounts of work. For example, Caroline stated that she was recruited by a “very senior, very well known” tenured researcher in their discipline who “said all the right things” to yield her. Caroline shared that she was “super flattered” that someone had recommended her for this team, especially because she was young and pre-tenured. Ultimately, Caroline discovered that she was expected to solely complete much of the team’s work, while PIs who were paid to be on the project did not contribute. She concluded, stating:

I realized, and it was only by connecting dots and doing some gossiping on the backend with others, that this same person reliably used junior faculty members in this exact way. So, it's like the bastardization of ‘here's my vision. I need someone to do this and fill in the slots...’^[P]_[SEP]but doing that and putting that labor on other people at the last minute and capitalizing on this flattery kind of thing...on the backs of junior faculty because no one else who knew their own worth would play ball.

Caroline’s experience was not an isolated one. As a pre-tenured faculty, Gabriel had a similar situation on a grant where he was one of eight co-PIs; however, he was also one of three who were actively completing the work. Upon asking his department chair for advice about how to remove himself from the team, he was told: “No, you can't do that.”^[P]_[SEP]It's a lot of money. It's important,” which Gabriel was frustrated by. So, he went to the lead PI on the project to discuss his dissatisfaction with the unequal distribution of work “and his answer was, I need to learn to say no.” Yet Gabriel reminded the PI that “it wasn't my job to do their job.”

Pre-tenure experiences shape post-tenure approaches

In reflecting on how their pre-tenured experiences shaped their post-tenure interactions on teams, the majority of participants noted that they are both aware of power imbalances and have a desire to protect those with less power. For example, Gabriel shared how he responds to negative team experiences differently post-tenure. He stated: “Until tenure, I was told to be afraid of repercussions of being too vocal, [but now] I don't hide anymore because what are they going to do? Fire me. They can't, so.” Note that Gabriel stated that someone communicated to him that he should be wary of the potential consequences of speaking his mind, and in his case, presenting viewpoints that were in opposition with those holding the most power. In response to her prior experiences, Caroline noted that she tries to choose “collaborators who have a demonstrated commitment to servant leadership.” She concluded by sharing that regardless of a potential collaborator’s expertise or notoriety within a field, “if they're not a good person, I don't want them on my team. Now that I'm in positions of power, I get to make that happen.”^[P]_[SEP]I don't care how smart people are if they can't work with other people.”

Implications

As pre-tenured faculty work towards meeting the requirements for securing tenure, they should participate in research teams, collaborate with faculty colleagues on grants, and interact with tenured faculty in a variety of capacities. However, few studies have examined the role that power plays in pre-tenured faculty members' experiences on teams with varying levels of positional power [for exceptions, see 5]. Results from this study indicate that tenured faculty can take advantage of the power differential between pre- and post-tenured faculty, creating situations where pre-tenured faculty either complete work without recognition or feel forced to engage in subversive acts to contribute to research teams and projects, creating unnecessarily arduous paths to tenure.

The implications of these findings are significant, as such experiences can negatively impact pre-tenured faculty as they strive towards achieving tenure. Many of the participants were surprised by the impact of positional power on their experiences; in short, faculty were not prepared to be dismissed or exploited by colleagues. Doctoral programs should incorporate training that acknowledges the ways that power can impact the experiences of early career faculty. Higher education administrators, teaching and learning center staff, and others who train faculty could offer formal mentor programs, workshops or individual sessions that focus on helping early career faculty process experiences like those described here and develop plans for how to address issues where positional power is used against them. In many of the stories shared, participants did not seem to have colleagues advising and protecting them from those with positional power who perpetrated harm. A broad consideration that could implicitly and preemptively mitigate power-related concerns like those discussed here is for mentorship to be included in the criteria for promotion. Calls for requiring mentorship of early career faculty in promotion criteria are not new [18], but the focus of mentoring continues to most often be on graduate students, with junior faculty mentorship included as an optional activity under service.

Limitations and future research

We recognize that a limitation of this study is the lack of comparison between pre- and post-tenured faculty; this was simply a result of the sample of the larger study. We attribute the makeup of the sample (i.e., all post-tenured faculty) to their increased likelihood to be on grant-funded research teams as well as the possibility that they have more time and agency to participate in studies like this one. As such, future research includes broadening our examination of the implications of power across teams that have a wider variety of rank and status to include pre- and post-tenured faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and postdocs. The inclusion of pre-tenured faculty in future studies could then somewhat attend to concerns around recall bias of post-tenured faculty, as the sample would include additional data sources, serving as a triangulation method.

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