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# Acculturating to the Role of Tenure-Track Assistant Professor: A Family Systems Approach to Joining the Academy

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**Abstract** The trajectory toward tenure is complex and arduous, and it requires one to balance attention among diverse and competing demands. It is not surprising that many newly appointed assistant professors report struggling with this process. Borrowing from family and ecological systems theories, we proffer a framework that may help junior faculty members—defined in this article as tenure-earning assistant professors—learn about the tenure-earning process as they navigate through the university system and beyond. We also describe and clarify the many parts of the tenure-earning process, including the roles, responsibilities, and multiple contexts that must be considered concurrently by junior faculty members as they progress through the stages of their tenure-earning appointment in the academy.

**Keywords** Family systems theory and therapy · Ecological systems theory · Acculturation · Academy · Tenure track · University context · Murray Bowen

## Introduction

Although complex and arduous, the academic career can be rich and fulfilling. However, the rewards of being a member of the academy may not become apparent until the academic achieves tenure. Consequently, the ability to navigate the tenure-earning process to a successful outcome is critical (Clark et al. 2010; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Park et al. 2011; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). The trajectory to tenure requires one to balance attention among competing demands concurrently (Bogler and Kremer-Hayon 1999; Clark

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et al. 2010; Halpern 2008; Hershberger et al. 2005), and many newly appointed assistant professors struggle with this process (Chen and Anderson 2008; Coleman et al. 2006). In fact, researchers and scholars alike have long suggested that the tenure-earning process can be life-altering, with far-reaching effects on and power over the faculty member's individual, family, and professional life (Boice 1991, 1992; Burnham et al. 2010; Halpern 2008; Hill 2004; Kanuka and Marini 2004; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Phelan 1991; Toews and Yazedjian 2007).

Given the importance of this tenure-earning journey—one that generally lasts at least 6 years—methods are needed to describe, evaluate, and empirically test how one can best manage the process and at the same time establish preliminary professional competence (Clark et al. 2010; Knowles and Cole 1994; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). The focus of this article is on a brief review of what has been found in empirical studies and what has been recommended in the literature base. We add to the literature base (empirical studies and recommendations evinced in the literature) by proposing a systems approach that can be used as a resource to navigate the tenure-earning process.

More specifically, we describe how a systems theory framework can be used to guide junior faculty members during their tenure-earning years. Moreover, we deconstruct the tenure-earning process by describing and clarifying the multiple parts of the process, including the roles, responsibilities, and multiple contexts that must be considered by junior faculty members when they begin their tenure-earning appointment in the academy. We draw from multiple family systems theories, therapies, and concepts to describe these parts, and we draw from ecological systems theory to expand these foci beyond the university system to illustrate the interactive wider contexts (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) in which the acculturation process takes place. Like numerous other researchers and scholars (Boverie 1991; Kutilek et al. 2002; Shumway and Kimball 2007; Wynne et al. 1987), we believe that systems theories (family and ecological), constructs, and concepts can offer a guide or resource to help the beginning assistant professor navigate the university organizational system and interrelationships.

We begin by describing how to enter into and join with the university system, which has its own unique culture (Clark et al. 2010; Hill 2004; Kutilek et al. 2002; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Tierney and Rhoads 1994). Next, we discuss the commonly reported multiple roles and relationships that junior faculty members must develop to survive the early years in the academy (Chen and Anderson 2008; Hill 2004). We also discuss how junior faculty members can differentiate themselves from colleagues while maintaining positive working relationships. Finally, we review the multiple contexts in which junior faculty members are required to operate, as well as how to acculturate to and collaborate within and across systems in higher education (e.g., program, college, university, community, other external systems).

## Theoretical Framework

We are not the first scholars to draw attention to the parallels between an organization (such as a university system) and a family system (Boverie 1991; Bowen 1978; Chambers 2009; Deacon 1996; Friedman, 1985, 1991; Giuffra 1980; Kerr 1982; Korner 1986; Rogers 1986; Sagar and Wiseman 1982; Shumway and Kimball 2007; Wynne et al. 1987). Sagar and Wiseman (1982) suggest there are clear benefits of using systems theories—such as family systems theories and therapies and ecological systems theory—to outline the process of successfully establishing professional competence as a newly appointed junior faculty member in higher education.

Family and ecological systems theories and therapies offer a framework that may help junior faculty members—defined in this article as the tenure-earning assistant professoriate—to learn about the tenure-earning process as they navigate their way through the university system and beyond (Barnhill 1979; Bowen 1978; Bronfenbrenner 1979; Haley 1967; Minuchin 1974; Nichols and Schwartz 2006; Sagar and Wiseman 1982; Satir 1972). Numerous general concepts and therapeutic processes that have been derived from family systems theories and therapies (joining, communication, chronic anxiety, hierarchy, independent and interdependent subsystems, boundaries, coalitions, individuation, structure, and self-differentiation, triangles, power, and so forth) are applicable to the tenure-earning process, including the roles, responsibilities, and multiple contexts that must be considered concurrently (Ackerman 1966; Barnhill 1979; Bowen 1978; Boverie 1991; Friedman 1991; Haley 1967; Minuchin 1974; Nichols and Schwartz 2006; Sagar and Wiseman 1982; Satir 1972; Shumway and Kimball 2007). In addition, Bowen's family systems theory specifically offers the junior faculty member a theory about human behavior and relationships that can be applied to organizational systems and relationships in higher education (Baker and Wiseman 1998; Bogler and Kremer-Hayon 1999; Boverie 1991; Bowen 1978; Chambers 2009; Hill 2004; Kutilek et al. 2002).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems approach offers a theory about multiple nested systems that are bidirectional and interactive, that is, between the person and the environment. In these nested systems, human behavior and the academy intersect, and the acculturation process takes place (Boverie 1991; Deacon 1996; Distelberg and Sorenson 2009; Kutilek et al. 2002). The trajectory and contexts of the tenure-earning process are visually represented in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively.

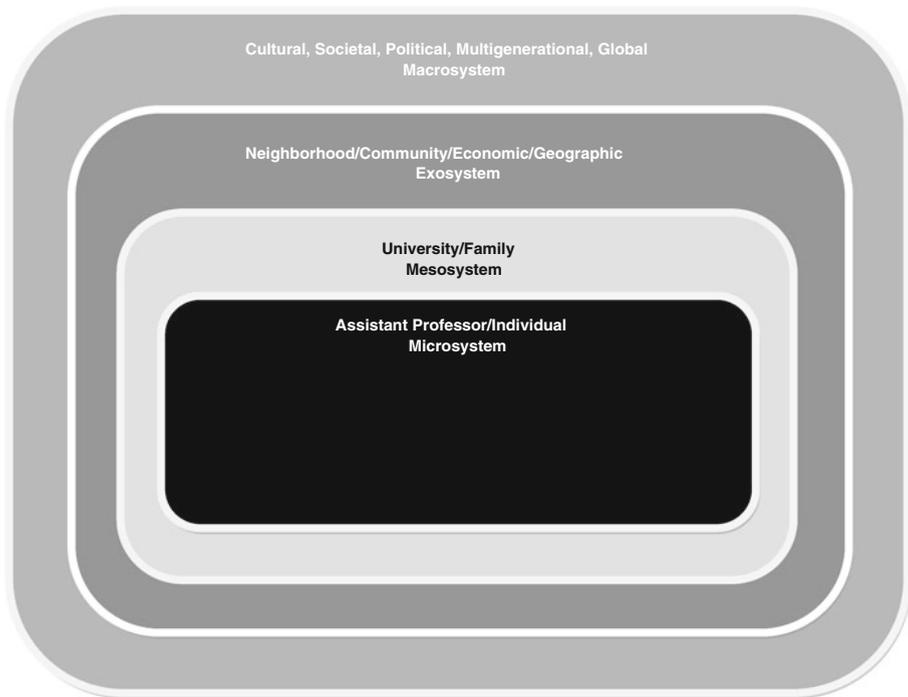**Tenure-Earning Appointment: The Process**

The process of moving through the tenure-earning years can be broken down into three stages: early, middle, and end. The early stage is when junior faculty members first enter the university system. We use the family systems therapy construct of "joining" (see Korner 1986; Minuchin 1974; Nichols and Schwartz 2006; Shumway and Kimball 2007) to describe the second stage, which actually begins immediately after faculty members enter the university system, and ends when they leave the university. Finally, we describe the end of the tenure-earning stage as the acculturation stage. (see Fig. 1.)

Early Stage: Entering the University System

Some scholars have argued that the most important meeting a family therapist has with a family is the first one (i.e., the initial therapeutic contact; Nichols and Schwartz 2006). This first meeting or first impression will happen only once. Similarly, when faculty members



**Fig. 1** Conceptual model of the new tenure-earning faculty member's trajectory

**Fig. 2** Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) Ecological systems model applied to the new tenure-earning faculty member

arrive at the university to begin their first appointment, it is important that they consider how to enter into the academy and what kind of first impression they want to make make (McCormick and Barnes 2008; Shumway and Kimball 2007). During this early stage, new faculty members are in many ways guests, and thus their behaviors (verbal and nonverbal) ought to reflect this guest role. Scholars and researchers also have described this role as one of a newcomer or visitor (Blanton and Stylianou 2009; Gravett and Petersen 2007; Johnson and DeSpain 2004). We equate the role of "guest" to the role of newcomer or visitor. This role will change over time, but in this early stage it is important to be cognizant of one's junior faculty member status and one's role as a guest (Kutilek et al. 2002; McCormick and Barnes 2008). The tenure-earning assistant professor must also remember that other faculty members and support personnel are likely to have expert knowledge about the university culture, values, and priorities. Ignoring others' expert knowledge about the culture and other elements of the university may not be a fatal mistake, but it can significantly hinder the joining and acculturation processes, described later in this article.

During this early stage colleagues will draw conclusions about the new assistant professor's fit with the program, college, and university based on his or her preliminary behaviors (McCormick and Barnes 2008). Therefore, new faculty members do well to avoid engaging in behaviors that may give a negative impression (e.g., being late to meetings, ignoring the departmental hierarchical structure, criticizing others, missing deadlines, identifying improvement on all the things deemed wrong with the program; McCormick and Barnes 2008). Negative behaviors and interactions—even when unintentional—may lead colleagues to regret their decision to hire the new faculty member.

Meetings are important as well in this early stage of entry into the system. Traditionally, during a new faculty member's first month at the institution, numerous meetings are scheduled to orient all new faculty to the policies, procedures, physical setting, and culture of the university (Clark et al. 2010; Coleman et al. 2006; Hill 2004; Tierney and Rhoads 1994). The junior faculty member should consider the importance of attending all of these meetings. Attending required meetings—and even optional ones—demonstrates a genuine curiosity about and commitment to the culture of the university (Hill 2004; McCormick and Barnes 2008). Multiple people in diverse positions (e.g., deans, department heads, colleagues, even students) are watching the approach new faculty members take upon entering the university (McCormick and Barnes 2008).

A review of the literature suggests specific behaviors and activities that new junior faculty members find helpful when entering the university system. They should certainly review all information and guidelines put forward by the university, college, and program that can help clarify the tenure-earning process (Burnham et al. 2010; Clark et al. 2010; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). It is also important for them to seek clarity about what is expected of them regarding on-campus presence (McCormick and Barnes, 2008). Other recommendations involve demonstrating respect for others by attending all required meetings (Burnham et al. 2010); returning all messages promptly (whether from the dean, colleagues, students, or community members; McCormick and Barnes 2008); and establishing good working relationships with program support staff. A new junior faculty member will also find it important to avoid isolating and detaching oneself during early tenure-earning years (Kanuka and Marini 2004; McCormick and Barnes 2008). Finally, it is helpful to avoid being overzealous, all-knowing, or otherwise nontraditional as a newcomer or guest (Tierney and Bensimon 1996). In sum, the dynamics of entering the university system cannot be underestimated and thus must be approached thoughtfully and diligently (Knowles and Cole 1994).

Middle Stage: Joining the University System

The joining process is equally as important as successfully entering the university system. In general family systems theory, the stage of joining a system can be differentiated from entering the system because joining moves past the initial stages of meeting a family (Nichols and Schwartz 2006; Shumway and Kimball 2007). In this instance, joining happens after the initial stages of arriving at the university. Entry is preliminary, introductory, and a one-time event; joining is an ongoing process of establishing relationships with colleagues, peers, and others—a process that often can last a lifetime (Korner 1986). Thus, joining begins when junior faculty members enter the university and ends when faculty members retire or leave the university.

Of all the recommendations scholars have put forward, those regarding entry into and joining with the university system may be the most vital (Knowles and Cole 1994). Joining is a family systems concept that can be defined as a mechanism "for accepting and accommodating to families to win their confidence and circumvent resistance" (Nichols and Schwartz 2006, p. 446). Joining also refers to the steps a family therapist takes to establish trust with all family members, prepare the family for change, and gain a temporary position of leadership within the family (Minuchin 1974).

Like a family therapist working with families, the faculty member is partnering with multiple individuals embedded in multiple systems working at multiple levels (Giuffra 1980). It is important to understand this bidirectional process, in which the assistant professor influences the system, and the system influences the assistant professor (see Boverie

1991; Distelberg and Sorenson 2009; Giuffra 1980). In most cases, when a new faculty member joins established faculty members change will occur, including a reorganization of roles and responsibilities, and possibly even leadership within the program (Korner 1986). A junior faculty member's primary job when joining the university is twofold: to establish oneself as trustworthy and to establish meaningful working relationships for current and future collaborations (Toews and Yazedjian 2007). All university system members are equally important and should be treated as such (McCormick and Barnes 2008).

Moreover, it is unlikely that most faculty members will earn tenure without establishing at least some collegial relationships. The process of joining—whether in a family system or in an organizational system—is about establishing meaningful, trustworthy, important relationships (Shumway and Kimball 2007). No researchers have studied empirically the joining process in the context of a university system; but drawing from the effectiveness of the joining process related to family systems therapy (Nichols and Schwartz 2006), we propose the aforementioned recommendations and strategies when joining with the university system.

End Stage: Acculturating to the University System

Acculturation can be defined as the socialization into a new environment and the adoption of that environment's values, beliefs, policies, and culture (Berry 1980; Tierney and Rhoads 1994). This socialization process unfolds as two or more cultures come together and it is evidenced at the individual and systems levels. Acculturation is an important process for both families and organizations such as universities (Berry 1980; McCormick and Barnes 2008). Although acculturation is a bidirectional process, in the university the faculty member is traditionally expected to acculturate to the university's culture, practices, and values; the university does not typically adopt or acculturate to each faculty member's cultural practices, discipline, and so forth. McCormick and Barnes (2008) suggested, "Until you are completely acculturated to your academic community—observe local customs carefully" (p. 7).

When faculty members acculturate to their university, they likely have gained an identity in the university system and have also started to establish an identity and presence outside of the university (e.g., an identity in the discipline-specific professional community; Tierney and Rhoads 1994). In fact, in most cases a strong presence outside of the university is required to be promoted to full professor. Traditionally, once faculty members become acculturated to their university they are no longer considered outsiders or guests and may be considered important members of multiple teams or committees, with expert knowledge on discipline-specific topics as well as on the university system (Kutilek et al. 2002). At this point in their academic career, faculty members are likely to have an expansive knowledge base about the university, fill important leadership and staff positions, and serve as mentors themselves. Knowledge about university policies and procedures are expected at this stage as well. Finally, most faculty members at this point are starting to establish themselves as independent researchers, scientists, or principal investigators (see Chen and Anderson, 2008).

**Tenure-Earning Appointment: Roles**

The importance of having and maintaining multiple roles and relationships in the academy has been described and studied (Clark et al. 2010; Neumann 2009). The multiplicity of

roles—as well as establishing a professional identity and collegial relationships in academia—is similar to the multiplicity of roles often evinced in a family system. It is likely and most appropriate that the roles (e.g., guest, mentee, beginning expert) will change and evolve on the road to tenure (Korner 1986). As in a family system, each person in the university system is expected to take on certain roles for the system to maintain stability (homeostasis) and to thrive (Bowen 1978; Haley 1967; Minuchin 1974; Nichols and Schwartz 2006; Sagar and Wiseman 1982; Satir 1972). Most faculty members will engage in three roles as they move through the tenure-earning process: *guest* (or newcomer), *mentee*, and *beginning expert*. All three roles serve a positive bidirectional function for both the university and the junior faculty member during the acculturation process (Boverie 1991; Rogers 1986).

## Guest/Newcomer

Although no role in the family system is analogous to that of a guest in the university system, family members' roles do shift and change over time depending upon the needs of the family (Boverie 1991). For example, as family members age and develop, there will be numerous entrances (e.g., births, adoptions) and exits (e.g., children leaving for college, divorce, older family members passing away) in the family system. Family therapists help families recognize and manage these changes in the family system configuration. Traditionally, the better the family is able to absorb these changes, the higher functioning the family system and its members are and will become (Minuchin 1974).

The university system is similar to that of a family (Boverie 1991; Chambers 2009; Giuffra 1980; Kerr 1982; Korner 1986; Rogers 1986; Sagar and Wiseman 1982). As newly appointed faculty members enter the university system, the program is expected to absorb these changes, and in many cases the newly appointed faculty members are expected to add to the program's level of productivity and efficiency (e.g., help with the teaching and advising load, serve on search committees, chair dissertations; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). Therefore, as the composition of different university systems changes (programs, departments, etc.), as people enter and exit the academy, and as the junior faculty member establishes him- or herself, roles and responsibilities will likely change (Chambers 2009; Sobel 1982). Thus, the successful academic learns how to balance, shift, and expand his or her roles and needs with the requested roles and needs of the university while still working toward tenure (Chen and Anderson 2008; Coleman et al. 2006; Giuffra 1980; Hershberger et al. 2005).

Hill (2004) suggested that role development is the primary responsibility of newly appointed faculty members in higher education. Similarly, in family systems theory, role development and relationship functioning—that is, differentiation of self—is a primary aim of each family member. In fact, a major goal of Bowenian family systems therapy in particular is differentiation of self (Bowen 1978). The concept can be defined as a person's ability to maintain objectivity in an emotional system (e.g., family system) that is in an anxious state, while at the same time actively relating to key people in the system (Bowen 1978; Friedman 1991; Giuffra 1980; Kerr and Bowen 1988). Differentiation of self can be considered from intrapsychic and interpersonal perspectives. An *intrapsychic* perspective considers differentiation of self to be an emotional detachment, or the ability to maintain objectivity by separating emotion from cognition (i.e., feeling from thinking). From an *interpersonal* perspective, differentiation of self refers to a person's ability to engage in and be close with others while still maintaining a sense of independence or autonomy.

This seminal construct has applicability and transportability to higher education and the academy as well. "Role overload" has been noted as a common phenomenon evinced in junior faculty members; thus, learning how to manage multiple roles routinely and regularly is an important part of the acculturation process. Differentiation may help faculty members clarify and make meaning of role development, managing multiple roles and role overload while in the midst of an emotional system (e.g., university system, departmental system) that is in an anxious state, that is, trying to earn tenure (Baker and Wiseman 1998; Boverie 1991; Phelan 1991).

Differentiation also helps with meaning-making, stress, and other behavioral, physical, and psychological effects of the tenure-earning process. The tenure-earning years have been described in the literature as depressing, like running a marathon, isolating, anxiety-provoking, dehumanizing, and unnecessarily ambiguous (Burnham et al. 2010; Coleman et al. 2006; Halpern 2008; Hill 2004; Johnsrud and Heck 1998; Knowles and Cole 1994; Neumann 2009; Phelan 1991; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). If junior faculty members can maintain objectivity and function at high levels of differentiation of self during these anxious and often emotionally laden times, they are likely to be more productive, empowered, and higher functioning in all aspects of their life—professionally, personally, physically, and psychologically (Baker and Wiseman 1998; Bowen 1978; Boverie 1991; Chambers 2009; Halpern 2008; Toews and Yazedjian 2007).

## Mentee

The criticality of being mentored in the academy has long been reported and recommended (see Burnham et al. 2010; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Salazar 2005; Tierney and Bensimon 1996; Wright and Wright 1987). Surprisingly, the extent to which new faculty members engage in or receive mentoring is quite mixed, even though it is important for successfully entering into and joining with the academy, acculturating to the university, and learning about the tenure and promotion process (Boice 1991; Burnham et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 1999; Kanuka and Marini 2004; Knowles and Cole 1994; Salazar 2005). Scholars have identified two commonly reported reasons for a lack of consistent mentoring behaviors in the academy: (a) mentees fail to seek out mentoring, and (b) mentors lack the requisite time to provide quality mentoring.

Irrespective of the causative factors for mixed findings, there is consensus on the importance of mentoring (see Burnham et al. 2010; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Salazar 2005; Tierney and Bensimon 1996). Two recommendations are important for establishing a successful mentoring process and experience: to have multiple mentors, and to seek or initiate mentoring (see Burnham et al. 2010). Mentors can help in the acculturation process, including helping the new assistant professor understand the culture, values, and priorities of the university (Hawkins and Fontenot 2009; Kanuka and Marini 2004; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Tierney and Rhoads 1994; Toews and Yazedjian 2007).

The empirical literature has identified many reasons to seek out and maintain mentors throughout one's entire academic career, but most importantly during the early development years (Tierney and Rhoads 1994). For example, some benefits reported in the literature include increased productivity, greater rates of participation in professional association leadership positions, increased numbers of funded grants, and a greater number of publications as compared to peers who are not mentored (Kanuka and Marini 2004).

An obvious benefit of having a mentor is the assistance that junior faculty members receive with understanding the barriers and priorities related to a successful outcome in the tenure-earning process (Johnson et al. 1999; Wright and Wright, 1987). Mentors also can

help faculty members garner departmental, university, or external support for their research program. Although department heads are often cited as the most helpful mentors and colleagues, they cannot and should not be the sole source of collegial and mentoring support (Burnham et al. 2010; Hill 2004).

Mentors also can help with the evolving and expanding roles played by most junior faculty members (i.e., on the path from newly hired to tenured faculty member). There is some expectation that the newcomer will rely more heavily on senior faculty members and the department head than on the faculty member who has progressed to become a beginning expert (Chen and Anderson 2008). For example, compared to new faculty members (i.e., newcomers), faculty members who have started to establish themselves as academics and beginning experts in their niche area typically will have greater knowledge, skill, and competency when it comes to the rules, roles, and responsibilities in both the internal systems (e.g., university, college, department) and the external systems (e.g., professional associations) in which they are embedded and interact.

Beginning Expert

During the tenure-earning years, a junior faculty member is expected to establish a research focus (i.e., a niche, an area of expertise). The beginning expert status will have implications across multiple systems: that is, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Depending upon the type of university (see Carnegie Classification or other criteria), junior faculty members may be required to fund their research program and thus their niche. This requirement is common as faculty members begin to approach tenure, although some research-intensive universities require one to obtain external grant funding before applying for tenure (Clark et al. 2010; McCormick and Barnes 2008; Toews and Yazedjian 2007).

Having a niche or beginning area of expertise has implications for teaching and service as well. Some universities expect junior faculty members to enhance the program's curriculum by developing new courses in their area of expertise. Additionally, the dean, provost, and other academic leaders will likely expect soon-to-be-tenured faculty to make some kind of contribution outside the university (e.g., local community, profession) based on beginning expert status.

**Tenure-Earning Appointment: Responsibilities**

Tenure-earning assistant professors also must commit to multiple responsibilities (Toews and Yazedjian 2007). Extensive and competing responsibilities have been described in the literature (Coleman et al. 2006; Knowles and Cole 1994; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). Although responsibilities are informed by individual roles and the university's priorities and values, the primary roles assigned to junior faculty members generally are associated with the standard triad of research, teaching, and service. The distribution of one's efforts related to these different responsibilities will depend on the university culture (Tierney and Rhoads 1994; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). For example, some universities require more research and grant writing than teaching and service, and others require more teaching and less research. Traditionally, irrespective of the university culture, the amount of service a new faculty member must provide will be minimal, although expectations of service usually change over time (Clark et al. 2010). As faculty members become more acculturated, they are expected to provide more service. The service should be carried out across

multiple contexts (Toews and Yazedjian 2007): university (committee activities), community (in-service activities), and nation (editorial board membership and leadership roles in discipline-specific associations).

In most cases, the newly appointed faculty member will be overscheduled, overworked, and under acknowledged (Knowles and Cole 1994; Toews and Yazedjian 2007). Managing competing roles is often reported to be challenging and overwhelming—even after acculturation and after one has begun to establish oneself as a beginning expert (Phelan 1991). In fact, some faculty members report that the number and type of responsibilities increase rather than decrease following the process of becoming tenured (Neumann 2009; Phelan 1991). To manage these multiple responsibilities, McCormick and Barnes (2008) suggested, "Research your passions, teach your knowledge, and serve your multiple communities" (p. 16).

## Tenure-Earning Appointment: Contexts

A family system consists of numerous subsystems (parental, couple, sibling, and so forth) embedded in multiple contexts, and so, too, does the academic and university system (Deacon 1996). Developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986), ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of the contexts in which the person—in this case, the junior faculty member—is embedded and explores the interaction between and among those contexts. Bronfenbrenner identified four nested systems in which individual phenomena are embedded: micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (see Fig. 2).

Scholars have suggested that to be successful faculty members must recognize the importance of the interacting and overlapping contexts in which they are embedded a (Boice 1992; Matheny and Zimmerman 2001; Tierney and Rhoads 1994). In other words, faculty members must be mindful of university systems beyond their program or department. Junior faculty members cannot afford to exclude or ignore knowledge about and skill with the other important systems (meso-, exo-, and macrosystems) that may impinge upon the tenure-earning process. Importantly, inclusion of and support from individuals already embedded in these external systems are likely to help junior faculty members with the roles and responsibilities required of them (Distelberg and Sorenson 2009).

In a bidirectional and interactive process, the roles and responsibilities of a junior faculty member affect the contexts in which faculty are embedded, while the context in turn affects the roles and responsibilities (Conyne and Cook 2004). Although much of this article has focused on the university system, all of the systems in which a tenure-seeking faculty member is embedded are important (Boverie 1991). We use ecological systems theory to better understand these significant contexts that impinge upon the tenure-earning process and thus the possible success of the junior faculty member. As shown in Fig. 2, the junior faculty member or individual is at the center of the contexts. We consider four levels or nested systems relevant to the junior faculty member: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

### Microsystem

Microsystems can be defined as "contexts or systems in which a person or persons have primary face-to-face contact with important and impactful individuals" (Conyne and Cook 2004, p. 16). Examples of people who may have continuous proximity and impact on a junior faculty member include family members, program colleagues, and community

members. All of these individuals in the microsystem could have an impact on the teaching, research, and service contributions of a junior faculty member, along with his or her ability to manage the stress that often accompanies the tenure-earning process (Chen and Anderson 2008; McCormick and Barnes 2008). The geographical location of the university, too, could affect the resources, barriers, and productivity (e.g., pilot research studies) a faculty member experiences (Tierney and Rhoads 1994).

Mesosystem

The mesosystem represents the relationships and connections existing between micro-systems (Conyne and Cook 2004, p. 16). This system is higher and broader than the microsystem, yet the mesosystem and the individuals embedded in it directly influence productivity, efficiency, and functioning. An example of the influence of the mesosystem is the interaction between microsystems such as the family system and work system. A plethora of empirical evidence has shown that these two systems interact with and affect one another (see Aiken et al. 2006; Burnham et al. 2010; Grappa and MacDermid 1997; Neumann 2009). For example, discord and a lack of support from family members can have a deleterious effect on one's work (Halpern 2008).

Exosystem

Although the early stage of an academic career will likely focus on the microsystem and mesosystem, awareness and knowledge of the other systems (exosystem and macrosystem) are necessary (Tierney and Rhoads 1994). As can be seen in Fig. 2, the exosystem sur-rounds the micro- and mesosystems. Exosystems can be defined as systems in which a person may not directly participate, but in which important decisions and actions emerge that significantly affect the person (Conyne and Cook 2004). Examples of systems and individuals embedded in this level include university committees and discipline-specific accrediting bodies (Tierney and Rhoads 1994). Although the junior faculty member may not directly participate in and interact with this system, decisions and policies emanating from this system can affect the junior faculty member.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the broadest and highest-level system, consisting of societal, social, cultural, political, institutional, and procedural components. Individuals and subsystems who inform this level are both internal and external to the university system and have enduring and significant impacts on all of the other levels (micro-, exo-, and mesosystems). As Conyne and Cook (2004) noted, the macrosystem is the most pervasive system, con-taining blueprints for defining and organizing social and institutional life in a society—including general values, political and social policy, and ideology.

Typically, a faculty member's success is contingent upon the faculty-environment fit and a clear recognition of the interactive, interdependent, and synergistic nature of these environments, contexts, or systems (Boverie 1991; Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986; Distelberg and Sorenson 2009). Therefore, a common refrain heard in family systems theories is applicable here: change in one system often will influence change in another system (Tierney and Rhoads 1994). As mentioned previously, junior faculty members cannot and should not attempt to extricate themselves from or otherwise disregard the contexts in

which they are embedded. Rather, successful and reflexive faculty members recognize, acknowledge, and work in concert within these contexts. These systems can be considered and understood separately and jointly (Kutilek et al. 2002). Most importantly, they all have leverage points, such as system factors that may impede or enhance the tenure-earning process, or the stress related to acculturation. The new assistant professor would do well to consider how these contexts and the people embedded in them may serve as support systems to help increase confidence and skill as he or she moves through the tenure-earning and acculturation process (Bogler and Kremer-Hayon 1999).

## Conclusion

In this article we have used the conceptual underpinnings of systems theories—family and ecological—to elucidate the roles, responsibilities, and contexts in which a junior faculty member engages during the tenure-earning process. We have described how multiple family systems theories and concepts, including Bowen's (1978) family systems theory and therapy, may be applied in the university setting. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory complements family systems theories and therapies well; family systems theories focus on the junior faculty member, whereas ecological systems theory focuses on the broader systems in which the faculty member and the university are embedded. Although our brief review uncovered both empirical studies and specific recommendations and strategies for junior faculty members to consider while moving through the tenure and promotion trajectory, additional research is warranted. Moreover, our proposed model describes linkages that are theoretical and have yet to be tested empirically. Empirically testing our proposed model would be an important next step (Chambers 2009; Matheny and Zimmerman 2001).

Although it is useful to apply family systems theory to describe acculturation to the university system, some limitations ought to be noted. For example, Boverie (1991) described important differences: (a) there is a level of permanence within the family system, whereas faculty members can leave the university system; and (b) organizations can be restructured (e.g., not award tenure to a faculty member), whereas families typically do not extrude family members from the system. Moreover, Boverie (1991) and others (e.g., Chambers 2009) have criticized the appropriateness and utility of using therapeutic theories to make meaning of behaviors and processes in nontherapeutic settings (e.g., Chambers 2009). And in general, organizational systems such as a university are traditionally less intense than family systems (Boverie 1991; Matheny and Zimmerman 2001).

Nonetheless, a review of the literature points to the parallels between the processes, roles, and responsibilities evidenced in family systems and organizational systems such as the academy (Boverie 1991; Bowen 1978; Deacon 1996; Giuffra 1980; Matheny and Zimmerman 2001; Rogers 1986; Shumway and Kimball 2007). Extrapolating from family systems and ecological systems theories can provide junior faculty members with important knowledge, skills, and strategies (i.e., competence) when they begin their first tenure-earning appointment in the academy. If one follows the tenure-earning process (entering into, joining with, and acculturating to the university) and attends to the multiple contexts of this process (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem), it is possible to do it *all*—that is, to establish numerous competing and complementary roles and take on numerous competing and complementary responsibilities, both internal and external to the university system (Toews and Yazedjian 2007).

The complexity of the tenure-earning process and the multiplicity of roles, responsibilities, and contexts with which the tenure-track assistant professor must contend require a useful model that has transportability to diverse universities (Neumann 2009; Phelan 1991). We believe our model, undergirded by systems theories, offers the tenure-track assistant professor a road map to moving through the acculturation process and ultimately achieving tenure in the academy.

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