"A Singular Position:" Women Professors and Women's Community

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Twenty-six professors at a research intensive university participated in this study of senior women professors’ career experiences and reflections. Themes surrounding community and collegiality with respect to disciplinary commitment, salience of gender to discipline, and the role of personal choices are identified and discussed. Resulting perspectives on “women’s community” in academe are also developed. Respondents maintained close, long-standing supportive ties with women colleagues within their academic disciplines, particularly when women colleagues were scarce in their local departments. Respondents’ principal affiliations were rooted in their disciplines, highlighting the influence of discipline in matters related to professional identity as well as community.

Introduction

“Women faculty” is commonly a unit of analysis in studies of faculty members, such as composition of faculties (e.g., Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Moore & Sagaria, 1991; Sax, cited in Magner, 1999), promotion and tenure rates (e.g., Bernard, 1964; Glazer-Raymo, 1999), and academic culture (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Nerad, 1999; Pagano, 1990). Underlying these gender-based analyses are understandings that gender remains a policy-relevant consideration within studies of higher education. It is further assumed that stratification of data by gender will help reveal characteristic patterns in experiences and perspectives among women or men that will inform policy development and deepen understandings of academic work and the people who undertake academic work. However useful the comparative data are for many purposes, disaggregation by gender does not necessarily shed insights into the types and levels of shared experiences among women faculty members, the salience of gender identification among women faculty across a variety of disciplines, or the relative collegiality or community that women faculty members experience with women faculty from other academic areas.
About the Authors

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This study is an exploration of gender and women's community as represented on one campus, drawn from the perspectives of women at professor rank from a variety of academic disciplines and professional fields. Women from a variety of departments were included in the study to maximize the range of experiences and backgrounds among respondents and to explore the salience of gender within various disciplines. Against this backdrop, the notion of a "women's community" on the campus emerged as a complicated phenomenon. Resulting insights into academic women's community and community-building are also developed in this paper.

Theoretical Framework

The images of relationships and community are found widely in literature on women and faculty. For example, a growing body of research has identified elements of socialization that disproportionately emphasize girls' development of relationality and care for self and others (c.f., Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 1984) within localized, real-world contexts in which individuals are interdependently linked. Recently, scholars have debated the value of gender difference theories in education (Martin, 2003; Thompson, 2003a, 2003b). At issue is whether gender difference theory represents an
essentialist view (reifying white middle-class values of “caring in context”) or a source of empowerment for women (Martin, 2003; Thompson, 2003a). Of particular importance to this study, socialization and gender difference theories continue to frame current conceptions of, and discussions around, gender in education.

In a somewhat different sense, the image of relationship is echoed in the concept of local or far-flung “communities of scholars” in which faculty members figuratively participate by virtue of their advanced study and expertise. A primary commitment to one’s discipline, or Gouldner’s (1957) cosmopolitan faculty orientation, is said to predominate at research universities where faculty allegiance is disproportionately directed to one’s discipline. Consequently, one’s primary academic community is less the local campus than the group of national and international colleagues who share the task of advancement of knowledge within that discipline.

Human development literature suggests that for women, interpersonal relationships often factor disproportionately into decision-making and knowledge construction processes (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1993). Collaborative approaches to knowledge work also have implications for definitions of collegiality, which involves more than simply disciplinary affiliation, according to Tierney and Bensimon (1996): “Collegiality [within departments] is far more likely to occur when there is a shared orientation to the discipline” (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996, p. 89). A “shared orientation” suggests similar or complementary approaches to creating and disseminating knowledge among a group of scholars within a field or discipline. However, much foundational literature on women faculty identifies “micro-inequities” (c.f., Sandler, 1986) to which women faculty members are subjected within departments and within institutions. These experiences tend to erode morale and motivation and result in less than full inclusion of women as fellow experts within academic communities. Additionally, differences in prevailing communication and work styles (e.g., Sandler, 1986) or adoption of publishing strategies that result in fewer overall numbers of scholarly products (Astin & Davis, 1985; Sandler, 1986) have also been cited as barriers to women faculty members’ perceived credibility as scholars and achievement of the full collegial inclusion that credibility is assumed to foster.

Other studies have concluded that these marginalizing environments are closely tied to larger institutional cultures and patterns of collective beliefs within and among departments that flourished and became normalized when women were not present in large numbers in higher
According to many feminist scholars, such belief systems remain largely intact and serve to exclude women from full participation in scholarly communities in their respective disciplines (Acker, 1990; Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Grumet, 1988; Pagano, 1990; Park, 1996). In short, this literature suggests that women faculty members are not full members of the academic communities that they ostensibly represent—in terms not only of representation of women within a particular area but also of perceived legitimacy of women as scholars. For example, with respect to the field of education, Pagano (1990) concluded that the very presence of women faculty members serves to highlight the relative absence of women's thought, language, and analysis, and positions women faculty members as "exiles" or outsiders in the same professional field they seek to advance and with which they identify as scholars.

The present study was theoretically framed using feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1986, 1991; Hartsock, 1987) in order to explore the sense-making structures, perceptions, strategies, and inferences that emerged among respondents. For example, Smith (1987) and Collins (1986) have argued persuasively for acknowledgement of standpoint (e.g., gender) as a major element in identifying problems, collecting data, and formulating conclusions in the field of sociology. Based on prior data analyses (Hamrick, 2003a), the women in this study strongly identified themselves as disciplinary experts and held a primary identification with their respective disciplines and fields. They also frequently identified experiences of being dismissed or their contributions minimized because of their gender irrespective of discipline or field (Hamrick, 2003b). As women, these respondents represent a group that is traditionally and currently underrepresented in academe. Yet, as full professors, they also occupy positions of high rank and relative privilege as senior academics. These perspectives from combination outsider and insider standpoints (e.g. Collins, 1986) should serve to enlarge and complicate more traditional understandings of academic community among faculty members so situated.

The purpose of the overall study was to explore perspectives and experiences of women who had achieved tenure as well as professor rank. In the course of data collection, respondents were asked about their experiences related to academic community. Particular emphasis was given to the ways in which respondents' constructed, referenced, and construed both the nature of community in their professional lives as well as their roles in academic community as that concept was understood. We also sought respondents' perspectives on community with other women faculty
members from a variety of academic areas in order to determine whether and in what ways gender constituted a legitimate or sufficient referential basis for community among women faculty members at a single campus. The insights of these uniquely positioned “insider/outsider” respondents were systematically collected and analyzed as outlined below.

Methods and Analysis

Each of the 70 women full professors at a research intensive institution (1,395 full-time faculty including 685 professors¹ at the time of data collection) was invited to participate in an interview study on the "Characteristics, Experiences, and Perceptions" of women full professors.² Twenty-six women full professors representing a variety of academic disciplines and fields agreed to participate in interviews and discuss issues such as career progress, institutional belonging, intersections of personal and professional experiences, and stress.³ All respondents were white and non-Hispanic, as are approximately 88% of women full professors nationwide (Knopp, 1995). Years in rank were similar between the sample of 26 respondents and the group of 70 professors. The social science and education (SSE) areas were slightly over represented in the respondent group while the arts and humanities (AH) disciplines were slightly under represented (see Table 1).

Table 1
Disciplinary Distributions Among Respondent Group and Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplinary Area</th>
<th>Population (N = 70)</th>
<th>Respondents (N = 26)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Humanities (AH)</td>
<td>26% (18)</td>
<td>19% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological and Agricultural Sciences (BAS)</td>
<td>17% (12)</td>
<td>19% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and Mathematical Sciences (PMSE) &amp; Engineering</td>
<td>6% (4)</td>
<td>4% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences and Education (SSE)</td>
<td>51% (36)</td>
<td>58% (15)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Interviews with each respondent ranged between 50 minutes to more than four hours. Using prompts and silence, opportunities for interviewee-guided talk were provided to encourage respondents to name and describe
their own experiences, thoughts, and conclusions (Reinharz, 1992). All interviews were transcribed to facilitate systematic analysis through use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify common themes and concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) across the interviews. To maximize descriptive and interpretive rigor, opportunities for clarification were presented during the interviews, and two forms of post-interview member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were conducted.

In the discussion that follows, "discipline" is used when discussing academic discipline, professional field, or specialty in order to streamline the presentation. Additionally, respondents were assured anonymity with respect to specific departmental affiliation, so the four broad categories in Table 1 are used to characterize respondents' academic backgrounds.

Results

Four themes emerged from data analysis. They were: disciplinary commitment, salience of gender to discipline, role of personal choice, and experiences of women's community. Each of the four themes is discussed below.

Disciplinary Commitment

A developing awareness of disciplinary focus and commitment began for respondents during their graduate education and continued throughout their careers. Respondents discussed training their attention to the discipline through their interactions with professors at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and respondents' resulting knowledge of their academic discipline largely shaped their perceptions of the academic work that lay before them. These opportunities for early professional relationships, modeling, and affirmation were key for many respondents as they took early steps to joining a disciplinary community. A social sciences and education (SSE) respondent observed:

I worked for a [discipline-specific] professor, who really showed me a side of research in [the discipline] that was very exciting to me, that was beyond the classroom and the usual things you learned, because it was part of my job to collect data for him, and so forth. And those two things were very instrumental in moving me, then, to the next level, and then I was very fortunate to have a major professor for both my master's and Ph.D. degree that was somebody who really challenged me and gave me lots of responsibility, and built my confidence, and so on, as I had that kind of modeling.
Respondents in this study frequently referenced their academic discipline and their contributions as experts to their respective disciplines. In describing their work commitments prior to promotion to professor, they clearly focused energy and time on disciplinary contributions and eliminated or minimized activities, whenever possible, that could derail their efforts to make these contributions. Moreover, most respondents could be classified among Gouldner's (1957) "cosmopolitan" faculty members who principally identify with the discipline and the department as local site of the discipline (as opposed to "locals" with primary commitments to the home institution). This disciplinary identification also influenced their descriptions of themselves as women within those disciplines. As one biological and agricultural sciences (BAS) respondent put it, "I am a [scientist], first and foremost."

Steadfast commitments first to discipline and then to departments as primary sites of professional identification were relatively consistent among respondents across disciplines. Respondents learned early in their careers to be sensitive to departmental and institutional expectations to achieve tenure and to be taken seriously as a scholar. The disciplinary commitment was to be a lived commitment, as a respondent in the BAS field said:

You have to be 100% dedicated. It's not a 9 to 5, and 8 to 6, or you know, a 9 to 8 job. It's a lot of your life, and you have to really love it, because if you don't, you won't want to put the time into it. And so it's really a commitment they [graduate students] have to make, and once they've made the commitment, the thing is to enjoy it.

Often respondents found they needed to engage in work that would be valued within their departments, even if they valued other projects more and believed this work was making a stronger contribution. This was the experience of one arts and humanities (AH) respondent:

After I was tenured, I worked on a computer project. And I thought it was quite an important project, and it seemed to be getting me an international reputation, and I was real pleased with it. And I thought when I first came up five years later, for my next review, I went, "Oh, boy. This is great. My stuff is being used at Harvard and Princeton and Yale, and, you know, this is super. I'm going to get promoted real fast." My department took one look at it and said, "What is she wasting her time on?...This isn't important." You know, "We don't support this at all." And so I wasn't even sent forward, and I was told that I should devote my time to things that had to do with [departmentally-valued] research and not
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“computer stuff.” That was going to be counted as service, and that was not going to ever get me promoted.

A SSE respondent echoed a similar awareness of meeting disciplinary or departmental expectations. She said, “Sometimes some women who research in areas of diversity are not granted tenure because that’s not viewed as authentic research . . . I’ve walked a fine line, I guess, between doing just enough research and writing that is institutionally validated and that which I find is more transformative and critical of the institution.”

Respondents understood their disciplinary expectations as communicated by local colleagues, paired with their own choices among projects, to be a central decision in the development of their academic careers. A BAS respondent remarked that a graduate student colleague of hers was chosen over her for an assignment not due to gender bias but because “he was in a discipline that his mentor really wanted to strengthen . . . . It was the discipline. . . . And I don’t think you can attribute that to male, female, etc.” However, another BAS respondent noted that what “females experience differently is the general attitude towards them.” The experience of being regarded as different was generally shared among respondents, but experiences of differential regard varied. One way to explore these differences is by examining the perceived salience of gender to various disciplines.

Salience of Gender to Discipline
Not surprisingly, a variety of perspectives emerged surrounding career experiences and the role that being a woman played in these experiences. However, in many ways these perspectives were also related to disciplinary affiliation. Within certain disciplinary groups, such as the humanities and social sciences, gender emerged as a more salient issue for scholarly attention, and respondents in these departments often drew upon a professional language and culture in which gender had, at some level and in some ways, become part of legitimate scholarly discourse.

For example, some AH and SSE respondents spoke of close personal and professional intersections, such as using their children and aspects of their family lives as classroom examples or as an impetus for research studies. One SSE respondent remarked:

I was able to have my daughter in that lab school [that I directed], which was wonderful in terms of having her on site and having her there and being able to go in at any time during the day and watch her, being able to have her in an older children’s lab school after school when she was in
elementary school, so that was really a nice merging. And also just being in the field of early childhood and then having a child provided me with unbelievable credible anecdotes to share in the classroom.

 Upon further reflection, this respondent added, “I think the students have always responded that they really liked that personal side in that I would share my successes and failures, both in early childhood teaching but also as a parent.” Another SSE respondent observed,

 I think that my profession is so near and dear to the family life, what I’m learning and doing and the ability to learn from my profession and apply it to the family, but also my family has been a wonderful example of a living experience from my profession.

 However, for respondents in BAS or Physical and Mathematical Sciences & Engineering (PMSE), gender was rarely viewed as a discourse category or a unit of analysis central to the pursuit of disciplinary knowledge. These different disciplinary perspectives and different gendered experiences of respondents also affected their perceptions of shared experiences with women faculty members in other disciplines. In these fields, being female and speaking of gender often served to place one outside the perceived core concerns of the discipline and symbolized instead a departure or distraction from one’s role as content expert. Among respondents, issues of gender and their own status as women overlapped with professional interests and research agendas in some cases but not in others. More typically, the scientists in this study echoed the view that success as an academic, in the words of one BAS respondent, “has nothing to do with gender at all. It’s just where you happen to be.”

 A PMSE respondent said, “I have not found women faculty in other departments, you know, in other colleges outside of [my scientific discipline] to understand what we’re going through here. It’s a lot tougher, from anything I’ve heard expressed by any women at any of the universities I’ve taught at . . . .” This faculty member shared her conclusion that within the sciences, some fields were more open than others. “I mean, even physics has more women full professors than [my department], statistically, and so somehow, when I meet physics professors, somehow they’re different than professors [in my specialty]. They tend to be more open to the world, politically more liberal.”

 Gender issues concerned respondents within the traditionally male science disciplines, and especially so with respect to career advancement and working conditions as a faculty member. The same PMSE respondent


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noted that, due in part to her experience of an unsuccessful preliminary promotion and tenure review, she had come to view third year reviews as ways “that they can really weed out people.” This respondent, the sole woman professor in her department, noted that earlier in her career, “there were a lot of problems with women in the department, women students coming to me. I was the first and only woman they had ever had in that department.” This respondent spoke of paying a “cultural tax” (Padilla, cited in Tierney & Bensimon, 1996) in the form of extra attention to students. Other examples of this “tax” can include additional service work (often in areas related to diversity and equity) and public relations appearances on behalf of the university or department, all of which are expected but do not count towards tenure and promotion. Critically, although women and faculty members from other underrepresented groups are expected to perform these tasks on behalf of the department, this work is ultimately regarded as a distraction from one’s scholarship to advance the discipline, which is the work that is most valued in the tenure and promotion process.

One exception to the low to nonexistent salience of gender within the science disciplines was an interest in increasing the representation of women in science and applied science fields, including the professoriate. Respondents, however, did not tend to portray the working conditions—primarily the level of collegiality—as a feature of their work that would appeal to prospective women scientists. Among science respondents, for example, ignoring disrespectful incidents in their own careers and work circumstances was the preferred and most recommended strategy for the academic workplace. According to one BAS respondent:

I think one thing that females have to watch out for is becoming too sensitive to those things, because it can only hurt yourself. . . . I think that those people who—those females who have stayed in science have really ignored. They happen. You’re not happy about it. They make a statement to you, but you just ignore [it] and go on.

For this respondent, too much sensitivity to the conditions or environment of one’s work diverts attention from what she regarded as most important—carrying out the work itself. However, if disrespectful or insensitive treatment is not addressed, it may well continue. The strategy of ignoring or dismissing disrespectful episodes appears to advantage individuals with the abilities to, as one respondent put it, “let it roll off my back.” Among these respondents—all of whom have achieved senior rank in the institution and demonstrated their abilities to work successfully
within their environments—experiences of disrespect have not been allowed to color their perceptions of the fundamental high quality of their work or the legitimacy of their presence.

The ability to, in the words of another respondent, “just ignore and go on” represented an important choice for several respondents. Personal choices related to priorities and time was also a theme among respondents with implications for community.

Role of Choices
Primary manifestations of gender salience in many women’s lives are the choices they make about family and career, often with consequences in terms of time (e.g., Hothschild, 1990) and career advancement (e.g., Schwartz & Zimmerman, 1992) that have affected women professionals disproportionately. Respondents’ discussion of choices mostly involved time allocation, prioritizing, and timing. Many respondents cited careful attention to time and timing as an important consideration in making life decisions as well. A BAS faculty member felt personal choices were critical to her professional development; indeed, she saw the personal and professional as intrinsically connected:

To me, it has always seemed very arbitrary for people to say, “Well, you know, you shouldn’t have to put off child-bearing until you have tenure or until you have a good job or this or that,” and to me, it’s “Yes, you do. You need to have income. You need to be able to support [your children].” And so it’s really difficult or impossible to separate what you choose personally from what you’re doing professionally.

As this respondent clearly indicated, personal choices are often guided by external decisions and structures as well as received timeframes. Institutional structures and expectations often gave respondents clear messages about success that also truncated respondents’ perceived range of choices. “Write papers, write papers, write papers, write papers,” concluded another BAS respondent.

Choices cited by respondents also centered on decisions they made regarding family and handling disrespect or indifference. Some women postponed having children, but many chose to have children—even while going through tenure review. Such was the experience of one SSE respondent, who recalled, “I had my second child actually when I was going up for promotion here. . . . When I was putting my promotion package together, I was also buying layettes and whatnot.”
However, a BAS respondent recalled skepticism of life choices she made, beginning in graduate school:

The chair of the department, who I respected in many ways, in fact, but he said to me, “Why don’t you go off and have your children first, and then come back and get your degree?” So that was the piece of encouragement I got. And so I decided not to do that, and they agreed reluctantly to take me on as a master’s candidate, and so I came in as a master’s candidate, and ended up getting my Ph.D. in three years, but they weren’t willing to let me start out that way.

Often respondents’ choices reflected adaptations to challenging academic expectations within a sometimes challenging, and for some, hostile, environment. Seen this way, respondents did what they believed they must do to succeed at a research university. However, it is critical to note that most respondents in this study adapted to the institutional research culture and found creative and personally meaningful ways to assert their expertise and thrive within the culture. A SSE respondent said, “I create my own aura of power and respect. I don’t think the system works to produce that for a person. She or he has to create that. She has to create that for herself, that respect and status, and so forth, and sense of personal power, but the system works against that.”

In general, respondents identified an institutional system that constrained choices, introduced a variety of time pressures, reinforced or rewarded community building in the form of disciplinary-specific collaborations within departments or colleges. Consequently, notions of interdisciplinary, cross-cutting “women’s communities,” while valued by most, did not fit comfortably into the perceived institutional structures and prevailing faculty climate. However, respondents also discussed other kinds of community that they maintained with women as well as the bases for these communities.

**Women’s Community**

Many respondents spoke of the relative absence of community among women faculty members on the campus. According to one SSE respondent, “It concerns me that I don’t know very many women on campus, because every place I’ve been before, strong women’s community has been really important.” However, respondents still stressed the importance and value of their relationships with women. These relationships took many forms. For example, respondents spoke extensively about mentoring other women within their respective disciplines and encouraging women in their
disciplines and others to succeed, such as the SSE professor who remarked, "as a senior woman faculty member and one of not very many in my field, my job is to mentor women across the world."

Some respondents found supportive relationships with other women who were faculty members outside of their home departments, such as this SSE respondent:

I find I have an incredibly strong female support network with friends ... who work in the university, but not in my department, and one who has been—who went through a divorce at the same time I did and [we] raised our kids together [but she has now moved away]. ... Whenever I have something that I really need to get on the table or process, I will call all three of them.

A small number of respondents described close relationships with other women and men within their departments, such as the following AH respondent:

My husband also teaches in this department. Most of our friends are in this department—our friends here in town—so . . . it's our own little community now. A lot of them live in our neighborhood, even . . . It's pleasant because, of course, those are people we share a lot with in terms of what we're interested in, what we think about. We complain about the same things.

For most respondents, however, the community of women they discussed was frequently discipline-related and also far-flung geographically. Respondents relished opportunities for contact with women colleagues from other institutions. These colleagues were often (but not exclusively) women with whom respondents went to graduate school and maintained strong connections through professional conference attendance and electronic mail. One BAS respondent felt "the only common experience I have is with my women colleagues in [her disciplinary field] across the country." A SSE respondent put it this way:

When I did my Ph.D., there were a large group of us, and those friends are now colleagues, they're all at different institutions across the country, but I think that group has always been—when we go to professional meetings, etc., there's that camaraderie and that support, the interest in each other and what we're doing and what, you know, idea sharing, and not so much collaboration in terms of doing research, but collaboration in terms of willingness to reflect in dialogue in relationship to ideas that we have.
An AH respondent added,

Really, most of the support that I had [at a particularly difficult time] was off campus, was within my professional organization, and almost all of the people that helped me intellectually to do the work I was doing were not here. They were elsewhere... they were all over the country and the world.

This widespread collection of friends and colleagues was the community most often referenced by respondents as a principal support or primary network. One AH respondent contrasted this to the lesser sense of connectedness she perceived locally: “I network with lots of women away from [this institution], and I have lots of women friends, here, you know, but there isn’t such a thing as a real professional network.”

For many respondents, their communities of women were comprised of disciplinary colleagues at other institutions, many of whom had been graduate school peers or colleagues, and with whom respondents had regular but infrequent opportunities for face-to-face contact—mostly at disciplinary conferences. Only a few respondents spoke of close relationships with women colleagues in their own departments (particularly in the two sciences-related categories of BAS and PMSE where respondents were the only women in their departments or one of very few women), but close contacts with women in far-flung disciplinary communities were fostered through communication technology—principally telephone and electronic mail.

In terms of a cross-disciplinary community on the home campus, respondents mentioned their contacts with other faculty members (women and men) as enjoyable and conducive to successful committee work and institutional governance participation. A SSE respondent said:

Support is through friends and community and a few in the university, collaboration with people on projects, and mostly outside this department and out of the college, but I find a lot of interest in friendship with people in other departments. You know, that is professional in the sense that it evolves usually out of serving on somebody’s committee. You get to know people in other departments, so I’ve found a lot of commonality with people across campus, which I think is real satisfying and gives a sense that there’s more to this enterprise than first meets the eye.

However, these relationships also had been exacted at a price of time—often time away from research and writing, which they perceived as having
little value for not only their scholarship but also their (now former) promotion and tenure cases. According to one SSE respondent, one’s community also depends on one’s priorities: “My friends are my colleagues. I have family and I have work. That’s all I have time for now.” As a group, the respondents focused on their independence and opportunities to make disciplinary contributions in their day-to-day work, and they were more likely to find community in their long-standing networks of women friends and colleagues at other campuses. By focusing on disciplinary (and departmental) expectations, respondents established themselves as experts within their respective disciplines, and their communities of friends were populated heavily but not exclusively by disciplinary colleagues as well.

Disciplinary expectations may also serve to hinder the development of local communities of women faculty members, due to workloads but also due to differential salience of gender and a questionable assumption that respondents’ experiences of being women and faculty members are sufficiently similar to give rise to shared identification. Based on respondents’ stories, the notion of a localized community of women, if premised on assumptions of women’s (at least in this study, women in the senior faculty ranks) common experiential bases and expectations, became more complicated. Respondents’ discussions of disciplinary differences were accompanied by emphases on women faculty members’ differential experiences more so than potential similarities. One PMSE faculty member said:

When I’d go to these [feminist book discussion group] meetings, they’re mostly [arts and humanities] professors there, but professors from [social sciences], too. I always think, “Wow, they really have a totally different world. They don’t know what it’s like.” I really cannot express what it’s like because it’s different. It’s certainly different from women who are in colleges like [SSE disciplines]. . . . Maybe [a professional school professor’s] experience is somewhat like mine. I don’t know, but I have not found women faculty in other departments, you know, in other colleges outside of [mine] to understand what we’re going through here. It’s a lot tougher, from anything I’ve heard expressed by any women at any of the universities I’ve taught at, and the only common experience I have is with my women colleagues in [my discipline] across the country.

Respondents identified differences not only in terms of disciplinary demands but also in terms of perceived philosophical differences. For example, as she discussed her perceptions of the experiences of women
faculty members in various disciplines, one SSE respondent observed: "I think [the mission of the science-related disciplines is] a little different than the mission viewed by someone in the liberal arts. That may have more of a teaching focus, but less focus on the mission of a land grant university." Such broad emphases on identifying difference, distinction, or uniqueness may also serve to underpin the relative emphasis on differences among faculty members' experiences than on similarities.

Expectations of establishing a "women's community" premised on shared experiences seem to oversimplify the more complex dimensions and dynamics of gender and experiences within academic departments across campus and possibly also the larger academic forces that serve to emphasize differences and distinctions over commonalities. Further, expectations that women faculty members across campus have the same concerns, or common definitions of problems, or a single agenda, misrepresent—and severely underestimate—the power of the disciplinary focus among these respondents who have achieved full professorship. Given the disciplinary and academic contexts as perceived by respondents, the concept of "women's community" is problematic at best and may serve to undermine the potentially valuable coalitions that could be built by acknowledging and exploring the relative differences among women professors' experiences and perceptions.

Conclusions and Implications

To summarize, respondents identified themselves primarily as scholars of their respective disciplines, and they were very aware of the high or low salience of gender as an issue within their disciplines. Respondents made choices—particularly with respect to scholarship they pursued—based at least partly on these understandings and their perceptions of academic success within a research university framework. Finally, respondents identified strong and sustaining women's communities of which they are part, yet most of the identified communities were not local to this university or with other members of the targeted group of women professors. Rather, their communities of women tended to be collections of long-term colleagues, now friends, with whom they kept in contact via phone, e-mail, and periodic visits—often at academic conferences.

Respondents in this study placed a premium on their disciplinary work and, for most, on their accomplishments as researchers and contributors to their disciplines. However, with respect to institutional rewards for faculty who make disciplinary contributions, Smart (1991) showed that one's
gender is more closely related to rank and salary than one's scholarly contributions. Even if gender appears to be a less salient topic in the academic discourse of certain disciplines, gender remains a highly salient factor in explaining an institution's material valuing of faculty members across academic disciplines.

Although feminist scholarship has gained status in academe, such scholarship presents dilemmas for scholars. For example, in her study of myths surrounding the conditions and progress of women faculty, Glazer-Raymo (1999) discussed a dilemma faced by women law school faculty. Although the crux of legal scholarship is studying the application of laws to specific peoples and situations, when women law school faculty study the situations of women, their scholarly focus on women is considered less compatible with the norms of legal scholarship. This study provides more evidence of the slow rate of change and the resistance faced by women scholars who identify strongly with their disciplines and at the same time seek to make original contributions to advance their disciplines in terms of scholarship related to gender.

Most of the women full professors in this study described their achievement of success in terms of embracing disciplinary values and focusing on demands characteristic of their respective disciplines. Consistent with this perception, individual choices are made about how to allocate time and where to put effort, but significant constraints on choices are apparent as well and are acknowledged. These respondents also expressed relative acceptance of, on balance, the expectations related to academic success; recommended ignoring or dismissing derogatory or sexist messages; and learned to do their best work within the system as they perceived and understood it. However, this does not mean that the respondents saw no flaws in institutional structures or did not challenge unfair decisions and processes (including some respondents' successful challenges to their own promotion and tenure bids that were initially rejected).

Based on the results of this study, women faculty members across a variety of disciplines seem to highlight differences more often than common ground with other faculty women as academics. Two examples of these differences are their perceptions that their concerns and pressures are not the same as faculty members and women in other departments, and that they do not speak similar disciplinary languages with respect to the role and salience of gender. Respondents perceived that they faced very different sorts of challenges, experiences, and obligations that would not be the same in other disciplines. The same might be said for women from
different cultural backgrounds: That, in many ways, women of color speak a different language than the language of white middle-class women (Thompson, 2003a) that is predominantly represented in this study. In light of the portrait that emerged of well-integrated disciplinary experts who represented a variety of specialties and affiliated with their disciplines more often than with the home institution, the notion of an interdisciplinary women's community should not be a simplistic conception that assumes shared experiences and meanings held by a broad range of women faculty members. Future studies on the experiences of women professors who are also women of color may further problematize and enrich concepts of commonality and experiences of difference.

A wide variety of work environments exists across any one campus, characterized by departmental and/or program character, local history, and countless other factors. Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry (1997) described development of the crucial knowledge of how disciplinary judgments are made and of helping aspiring faculty who may otherwise be "cue-deaf" (p. 105) to prevailing expectations and standards characteristic of the discipline. The professors in this study possessed keen understandings of their disciplinary environments, including content mastery as well as the differential salience of gender. These understandings—plus their primary professional identities as disciplinary experts—undoubtedly shaped what kinds of cross-disciplinary, local women's communities are possible. As women faculty are socialized into their respective disciplines, they may also perceive less commonality or solidarity with other women faculty members with whom they share the status of being female and being a nondominant person on the campus largely because they do not perceive sharing similar disciplinary meaning-making structures or similar sets of discriminatory or isolating experiences.

Tierney's (1993) "communities of difference" offers a more complicated alternative for envisioning interdisciplinary communities among women faculty members. Communities of difference presume common ground to be not commonality of experience but instead a shared opportunity to understand and appreciate complex and multiple dynamics experienced and articulated by others. In this case, a cross-disciplinary women's community premised on difference may well yield greater awareness of the range of gendered dynamics at a single campus and within various disciplines and their respective discourses. Such discussion and dialogue on differences may lead to a more satisfying sense of community where women's experiences need not be identical but where multiple perspectives are assumed, valued, and explored. Pagano (1990)
also emphasized this potential of community when she concluded that women, through speaking together, can realize that “We are connected and we are different” (p. 156). Such communities premised on difference may also hold potential for strategies to pursue change on campuses. Emphasizing the priorities on scholarship for academics, Glazer-Raymo (1999) suggested that women faculty on a given campus may be more constructively thought of as a “loosely-connected polity rather than a unified organization of activists. Academic priorities preoccupy their energies and deter their involvement in potentially intrusive policy debates” (p. 205).

Finally, this study also has implications for mentoring and socialization of aspiring women professors or faculty members who aspire to senior rank. These implications include the primacy of developing one’s disciplinary expertise and the cultivation of one’s community of graduate student peers as the important beginnings of one’s own community of women. Martin (2003) has called for feminist scholars to engage in a collective enterprise embodying a welcoming spirit for all women. However, academic socialization, concurrent with one’s development of disciplinary specialization, also may work against cross-disciplinary scholarly collaborations by faculty members that are regarded as desirable on some campuses. In many ways, this study has affirmed the strength and enduring power—as well as the perhaps unanticipated consequences—of the cosmopolitan faculty role and the power of the discipline as a socializing factor and a central element in one’s professional identity. In light of this socialization and identification, one’s energies are appropriately devoted to advancement of the discipline and less toward attending to local campus-level problems, participating in formal or informal campus governance processes, and working towards community with other women faculty members. In joining scholarly communities and focusing on disciplinary demands, women professors run the risk of reinforcing gender-biased structures that have served as barriers to women in the past. At the same time, experiences of women professors offer a glimpse of what it might be like for women to experience themselves as players within the most senior academic ranks.

Notes

1 “Professor” is used throughout the manuscript to indicate the senior professorial rank. When discussing other faculty ranks, appropriate modifiers (e.g., “assistant” professor) will be used.
2 The adjective "full" was often used in describing the study to potential respondents and within the interviews to emphasize the research interest in respondents' senior faculty status as opposed to the generic descriptor "professor" as synonymous for all faculty members.

3 The researchers wish to acknowledge Dr. Mary Huba's central role in project development and her work in conducting approximately half of the interviews. Ms. Karen Zunkel arranged the interview appointments and contributed insights to developing the project.

References


