Strategic Ambiguity: How Pre-Tenure Faculty Negotiate the Hidden Rules of Academia

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Abstract

The tenure evaluation process is characterized by a lack of clarity and governed by unspoken rules. At the same time, while institutions have increased the presence of racially minoritized people among the ranks of faculty over the last 30 years, this growth in numbers has been concentrated among non-tenure track and pre-tenure levels. This study analyzes the ways that ambiguity in the tenure evaluation process contributes to the racialized hierarchy of the professoriate. Framed by theories of strategic ambiguity and racialized organizations, we interviewed 30 pre-tenure faculty at a research-intensive university. Findings reveal that faculty in our study relate to the ambiguity of tenure evaluation primarily in one of two ways: 1) with ambivalent acceptance or 2) with a critical understanding of ambiguity as strategic, benefitting the institution. These relationships to ambiguity were differentiated by race, with White faculty describing ambivalence and racially minoritized faculty critiquing ambiguity as strategic and inequitable. Finally, we found some evidence that some White pre-tenure faculty found paths to clarity through racial privilege. Implications for research and practice include a clearer understanding of the ways ambiguity in higher education is strategic and racialized.

Keywords Racialized Organizations · Tenure Evaluation · Strategic Ambiguity · Faculty

Minoritized faculty[1] are concentrated in non-tenure track and pre-tenure positions while White faculty continue to be overrepresented at the rank of tenured professor

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[1] We use the term "minoritized faculty" to convey that racialization is an ongoing process that occurs between organizations/institutions and individuals. The processes that we address in this paper are not a function of the individual faculty members' identities but the historical and ongoing systems of oppression and exclusion. "Faculty of color" places the focus on the faculty member's identities and difference from White faculty. "Minoritized faculty" helps the reader to focus on the systems of exclusion and oppression embedded in the organization that are in effect "minoritizing" the faculty members at all times.

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(Croom & Patton, 2011; Griffin, 2020; Turner et al., 2008). Educational researchers and higher education administrators have primarily focused on this racial disparity as a 'pipeline' issue, connected to a broad system of social and educational racial discrimination (Griffin, 2020, p. 59). However, organizational processes within colleges and universities facilitate the exclusion of racially minoritized faculty from the highest levels of professional authority (Croom, 2017; Wright-Mair & Museus, 2021).

Among tenure track faculty, the tenure evaluation process is the sorting mechanism that distributes or denies professional authority. In this study, we look at one of the mechanisms that allows for the tenure evaluation process to continue to perpetuate and legitimate inequities: through its ambiguity. The tenure evaluation process is strategically ambiguous, governed by criteria that are unclear in ways that benefit the institution but at the same time are an important part of the racialization of higher education organizations (Ray, 2019). Among the pre-tenure faculty participants in this study, minoritized faculty articulate critiques of the ways ambiguity maintains the status quo and sustains the exclusion of people of color from positions of power within the academy. The theory of strategic ambiguity offers a way of understanding how ambiguity functions in colleges and universities. In this analysis, we apply this theory in order to understand the ways that the ambiguity of the tenure evaluation process may serve institutional ends such as deniability while at the same time mitigating against efforts toward equity and inclusion. This paper asks and answers the following guiding research questions:

> What role does the ambiguity of tenure evaluation criteria play in the racialization of a research-intensive university?
> How do minoritized faculty members experience and understand the strategic function of the ambiguity that surrounds their evaluation?

Overview of Relevant Research

Ambiguity in the Tenure Evaluation Process

Empirical research on the tenure evaluation process has produced key insights into the challenges (Austin et al., 2007; Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008), strategies (Gonzales & Terosky, 2020), and emotional experiences (Jackson et al., 2017; Stupnisky et al., 2016) of pre-tenure faculty. These studies characterized the tenure evaluation process as stressful, full of contradictions, and often highly conducive to reproducing racial and gender inequality (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015). One of the key features of the process is the lack of clarity in the evaluation criteria. Across institutional types and sizes, the pillars of faculty work evaluation are research, teaching, and service (Uzuner-Smith & Englander, 2015) but how excellence in each of those areas is judged is unclear (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). In their foundational study, Austin and Rice (1998) conducted focus groups with over 300 faculty, concluding that overall, the pathway to tenure was obscured, governed more by hidden

rules than explicit guidelines. They concluded their study with a call for greater clarity in the tenure evaluation process.

Likewise, the American Council on Education and the American Association of University Professors have called for greater clarity and consistency in tenure evaluation procedures (2000). Drawing upon national survey data, Ponjuan and colleagues (Ponjuan et al., 2011) found that pre-tenure faculty were more likely to gain understanding of tenure evaluation criteria from informal social networks than from more standardized sources of information such as faculty handbooks or departmental instructions. Researchers have also pointed to a lack of clarity in tenure policies as a source of low job satisfaction and inequitable career outcomes for faculty (August & Waltman, 2004; Williams & Williams, 2006). Despite decades of empirically based recommendations for greater clarity, tenure evaluation remains a process of high stakes ambiguity.

Racially Minoritized Faculty and Tenure Evaluation

The tenure evaluation process is fraught with contradictions and hidden rules for all pre-tenure faculty, and these challenges are magnified for racially minoritized faculty members (Griffin, 2020; Perna, 2001). As informal social networks are key to understanding tenure evaluation criteria, minoritized faculty are more likely to report inadequate or unhelpful mentorship, which can hinder their access to important information about evaluation (Stanley, 2006; Zambrana et al., 2015). Participants in Urrieta and colleagues' (2015) study of Latinx faculty experiences described tenure as a 'moving target,' with unclear guidelines unevenly applied. Critically informed scholarship on race and inequality, that challenges the status quo of a discipline (work often undertaken by minoritized faculty members) is often devalued in tenure reviews and can be difficult to publish in mainstream and high impact journals (Settles et al., 2021). Other research has demonstrated that evaluation criteria may be subject to racial bias. Student evaluations of faculty teaching, for example, are commonly included among the tenure evaluation criteria across disciplines and institutional types, even though multiple studies have established that they are subject to racial and gender bias (Bavishi et al., 2010; Smith & Hawkins, 2011).

While subjected to the same pressures to produce scholarly publications as their White counterparts, minoritized faculty have also experienced racial stereotyping, racist jokes, and undervaluation of their research (Croom, 2017; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Martinez et al., 2017). These experiences affected reported job satisfaction and productivity (Eagan & Garvey, 2015). For minoritized faculty, the lack of clarity, heavy workload, and precarious positioning were further complicated by racial discrimination and racialized organizational processes (Croom & Patton, 2011; Harper, 2012). These racialized dynamics were further compounded by intersectional discrimination, particularly gendered-racism for Black women academics (Croom, 2017).

In conversation with the research on ambiguity in the tenure process more broadly, the research on the experiences of racially minoritized faculty on the tenure track demonstrates the ways in which a highly subjective process can have

meaningful implications for equity. The current study bridges a gap between these two important bodies of research, by investigating the relationships between ambiguity and equity.

Conceptual Framework: Strategic Ambiguity

Organizations benefit from a lack of clarity in their communications (Eisenberg, 1984). Organizational communications are often intentionally vague, or "strategically ambiguous" when describing their mission or goals, allowing them to evade the constraints of specification. To Eisenberg (1984), strategic ambiguity is a desirable approach to organizational communication because it can foster "unified diversity," obscuring disagreements under the haze of abstractions (p. 230). As an example, Eisenberg described the way organizational members are sometimes united behind the 'family' metaphor. By deploying this strategically ambiguous metaphor, organizations can influence behavior and gain a sense of unity without making specific commitments. "Individuals believe that they agree on what it means to be part of a 'family,' yet their actual interpretations may remain quite different" (p. 232–233). Does the family relationship mean lifelong commitment or the willingness to perform unpaid labor? Unconditional loyalty or mindful critique? Without a clear statement about what family means, the organization gains centralized control without agreeing to specific action.

Furthermore, strategic ambiguity "preserves privileged positions," protecting powerful members of an organization from scrutiny and thus giving them greater room to create organizational change (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 227). For example, research on institutional mission and diversity statements indicates that they lack specificity and, indeed, invoke abstract terms such as 'innovation' and 'diversity' in ways that allow the institution to escape explicit commitment to action (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Wilson et al., 2012).

By avoiding specification, organizations can maintain deniability, reserve the ability to re-interpret previous statements as undesirable consequences arise. From the perspective of organizational interest, maintaining the status quo promotes stability and institutional survival. But what about questions of social justice and equity? What are the ethical and social implications when privileged positions are maintained? These questions go largely unaddressed by Eisenberg (1984) and subsequent applications and variations of the theory (see Davenport & Leitch, 2006; Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001). However, in light of Victor Ray's (2019) call to examine the racialized nature of organizational processes, we have put this theory into conversation with questions of equity. Ray's approach "replaces the notion of organizations as race-neutral with a view of organizations as constituting and constituted by racial processes" (p. 27). There is ample evidence that ambiguity (strategic or not) contributes to inequitable realities for students in higher education, whether through admissions policies (Rosinger et al., 2020) or graduate education for students of color (Levin et al., 2013). This current study demonstrates that strategic ambiguity is part of a racialized process that sustains the racial hierarchy within the professoriate.

Data and Methods

This study is based on interviews conducted with pre-tenure faculty members at one large, research-oriented university in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. We use an iterative research process, beginning with research questions based on previous research and then revising questions and protocols in response to emergent data. Our analysis process employed the two cycle approach, systematically identifying then categorizing and connecting emergent data in a qualitative research process "cyclical rather than linear" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 45).

Participant Selection

Because this study attends to an organizational process, the organizational context is important in understanding the experiences of the participants. Accordingly, all participants shared the same organizational environment—a large mid-Atlantic public university (Research State University, RSU) and the same broad tenure evaluation guidelines. The study site is a predominantly White four-year university, with a heavy emphasis on research in faculty evaluation. Among faculty generally and in particular on the tenure-track, White faculty are overrepresented at this institution. In mid-2019, the researchers recruited full-time faculty eligible for tenure and currently at the assistant professor rank for participation in the study. We sent out a form email to every faculty in the two largest colleges at the university. Out of 128 e-mails sent, 30 faculty responded and participated in the study. The final group of participants was more racially diverse than the overall university faculty, including 8 Black, 17 White, 2 Asian, 2 Multi-racial, and 1 Latinx participants.

Procedure

The data for this study came from semistructured, one-on-one interviews. The protocol for these interviews was informed by previous research on faculty experiences of the tenure evaluation process. Interview questions included: "In what ways is this process ambiguous", "Can you talk about how you approach ambiguity?" and "When you envision yourself post-tenure, do you think you would do things differently?" The majority of the interview questions, such as the above, were not explicitly about participants' race or gender but we did refer to positionality more broadly by asking, "How do your social identities shape your approach to the tenure and promotion process?" Following a responsive framework for qualitative interviewing, our protocol evolved with emergent data, allowing space for participants to interpret the questions in their own way.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Immediately after each interview, the researcher who conducted the interview wrote an analytic memo in order to reflect on the research process and content of the participant's responses. Data analysis was based on Saldaña's (2016) two cycle strategies for qualitative data coding. In first-cycle coding, a broad set of codes based on initial research questions were applied comprehensively to the data. In second-cycle coding, themes derived from

the first cycle were used to synthesize the data. Throughout the process, researchers were reflective and attuned to the implications of emergent themes.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

We worked to ensure trustworthiness through established techniques that included: a diverse group of participants and researchers, researcher reflection through analytic memos, intercoder reliability checks, and member checking. The research team members met weekly to reflect on emerging themes and clarify research goals. In this process of consultation, we reflected on our positionalities, and how our professional and social identities shaped data collection and interpretation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013). In a study that focuses on social identities, it is important to acknowledge and interrogate the ways our positions are interwoven with our research. One White woman graduate student, one Black woman assistant professor, and one Multiracial woman assistant professor conducted this study. Part of our reflection on the ways our identities affected our research included analysis of the ways our race, gender, and professional status created different experiences in interactions with participants and interpretation of interview data.

Findings

Across17 different academic disciplines, most participants found tenure evaluation expectations to be ambiguous, with weighty professional consequences hinging on vague, unstated, or contradictory criteria. Participants expressed two primary relationships to the ambiguity of tenure evaluation: 1) ambivalent, understanding ambiguity as simultaneously useful and detrimental and 2) as strategic, protecting and benefiting the institution with negative implications for equity. In addition, we found some evidence that White pre-tenure faculty who carved paths to clarity did so through racially privileged behaviors that were not available to faculty of color, an aspect that reproduces the racial hierarchy of the institution. We present this last finding as tentative and encourage others who study whiteness to further explore how White pre-tenure faculty navigate ambiguity as a particular form of opportunity hoarding.

Ambivalence toward Ambiguity: Benefit and Detriment

Consistent with previous research, most of the participants (26 of 30) in this study agreed that the tenure evaluation process lacked clear guidelines to inform the years leading up to tenure evaluation. Official tenure evaluation guidelines and faculty handbooks were of little use to most of the faculty we interviewed. Without useful or consistent information from official sources, the pre-tenure faculty in our study had to make high-stakes decisions about how

and where to focus their energies and dedicate their time. Often these tough decisions centered on prioritizing research projects and selecting publication outlets. The participants described contradictions between principle and practice when it came to balance between the major categories of tenure evaluation—research, teaching, and service. Several White participants acknowledged the inequity embedded in the ambiguity. For example, Brenda, a White woman, considered the intersection of social identity and high-stakes ambiguity: "The ambiguity is really hard to navigate, and I think it's additionally so for underrepresented, historically underrepresented faculty members, right?" For many White participants like Brenda, this ambiguity was viewed with ambivalence, understood as having both good and bad aspects. "I also think in some ways the ambiguity is meant to protect you, right? It's meant to help you understand that a successful tenure candidate can look different, right?" From this 'good side/ bad side' perspective, the nature of faculty work necessitates some ambiguity in evaluation criteria. James, a White man, had a similar interpretation of the ambiguity surrounding the tenure evaluation process:

> It creates room for folks to be their own scholars, to make different kinds of contributions, and to make sure that we are valuing the different kinds of contributions that can be out there. In that way, it can be used for good, but it could also be used for evil. It can be used to create room to not provide tenure to folks who rock the boat too much, or not provide tenure to folks who follow a line of research that maybe is well respected within some sub-disciplinary part of the field, but that other scholars don't want to see have a place at the university.

From James' perspective, ambiguity could foster innovation, as Eisenberg (1984) predicts in his theory, or maintain the status quo by suppressing dissent and filtering out those who might advocate for change. Many participants saw quite clearly the strategic nature of ambiguity surrounding tenure evaluation. Eric, a White man, noted "senior colleagues, and the department heads and deans stick together, are absolutely not going to tell you a number [of publications] because they're essentially trying to not commit themselves to having to tenure you if they don't want to." From his perspective, this negative aspect is balanced by a positive side, allowing for flexibility. Mary, a White woman, described the positive aspect as leniency. "You need some sort of ambiguity,—You need some sort of leniency I should say, rather than ambiguity, leniency for people to make their case and their argument." Mary expressed what many participants described as a kind of equivocal ambiguity, with both benefits and downsides, perhaps, as one participant put it, "a necessary evil." Necessary because the nature of faculty work is highly differentiated and cannot all be evaluated according to a standard rubric. As Lisa, a White woman warned, "You don't want to turn those [evaluation criteria] into a checkbox process for everyone's career." However, uncertainty, fear, and the potential for biased evaluation that eliminates scholars who might 'rock the boat' are all aspects that these participants identified as problematic.

Strategic Ambiguity Protects the University and Reproduces the Status Quo

Not all participants saw the ambiguity of the tenure evaluation process as benign or an accidental downside of individualized evaluation. Minoritized faculty clearly and emphatically identified the ambiguity of the tenure process as not only strategic, but as an instrument that preserved white racial privilege. While White participants also identified ambiguity as a source of anxiety and confusion, minoritized participants dissected the ambiguity with much more precision, raising pointed questions about all aspects of tenure evaluation. For these participants there were important unanswered questions about number and quality of publications but also about how teaching and service were evaluated. Like their White colleagues at this research-focused institution, minoritized academics were quite clear that scholarly publications mattered most but found ambiguity in the less emphasized areas of teaching and service equally unsettling. Even service, which was the least valued of the three pillars of evaluation according to participants, was an area with contradictions and ambiguity. Participants questioned what forms of service were valued and how much time to invest in them. Likewise, questions lingered in their minds about which measures of teaching excellence mattered. Were student evaluations of teaching valued more highly than enrollment numbers or type of course taught? Though participants agreed these areas were less emphasized than the number and prestige of publications, they still worried that ambiguity in how these areas were evaluated would be used against them. Ann, a Black woman, saw minor details in the tenure evaluation process as points where racial bias could influence the tenure decision.

> I worry that the committee, whether intentional or unintentional, would make the stakes harder for me, as a woman of color. They'd find ways to poke holes in my story. And so I think I'm working extra hard because of that. Like I don't want there to be any holes that they could potentially try to find.

Ann and other minoritized faculty felt they had to expend extraordinary amounts of time and effort in order to counter the barriers of an inherently racist organizational process. As a self-identified critical scholar Sharon, a Black woman, encountered the tenure process as one in which her scholarly contribution was unlikely to be given the value it deserved.

> My understanding of the tenure process is that my work is going to be judged by people who don't understand it at the very least, or at the worst who are actively hostile against it.

These faculty understand the ambiguity surrounding tenure criteria as a strategy for maintaining the status quo at the level of university, department, and academic discipline. An academy in which racially minoritized faculty are dramatically underrepresented among tenured professors is organized in a way that prevents change and maintains positions of privilege. Sarah, a Black woman, identified ambiguity as a gatekeeping mechanism.

> I feel like the world of academia is sustained by the hidden nature of its rules. If the rules are made clearer, I think two things will happen: It'll be

way more accessible to way more people, and they don't want that. And secondly, the holes in the system will be exposed. So, in order to maintain the way that it has been, I think the system relies on the fact that not everybody knows the system itself.

For Sarah and others, ambiguity is the dynamic of inequity, reproducing and preserving historical and current racial inequalities by obscuring deeply unfair standards of evaluation that are applied much more rigorously to racially minoritized groups than to privileged groups. Sarah also observed,

> The fact that not everyone is held to the same rigorous standard, that people are able to say things like they're not a, quote, "good fit," and that that has impact beyond maybe what it should, to be such a non-specific phrase. Those, I think, are the holes in the system. That it is a good old boys club in a lot of ways.

Like the White participants who expressed ambivalence about ambiguity in the tenure process, minoritized faculty identified ambiguity as a shield that protects the university from conflict and litigation. However, minoritized faculty and specifically Black women who expressed a more unqualified critique of strategic ambiguity emphasized the systemic nature of exclusion and bias inherent to tenure evaluation. Ann saw the process as a way of preventing change. "It won't change because the system is designed to weed people out."

In addition to maintaining the status quo and protecting the institution from potential conflict or liability, the lack of clarity surrounding the benchmarks for tenure promoted a habit of constant work. Many participants described feeling pressured to 'do it all' or 'work all the time' because they could never be sure when their work was enough. Ann, a Black woman, described the way ambiguity pushed her to overwork:

> I'm probably doing more than I need to because I want to meet these ambiguous guidelines. So I'm going to try to go above and beyond in my research, above and beyond in my teaching, and service, I don't know. That's still a fuzzy category. But it makes me want to go above and beyond, because I want to be on the safe side because I don't know exactly what they're looking for.

Though most participants talked about pressures to work long hours and produce publications, some participants pointed out that the pressures to work were not evenly applied across race and gender. Ethan, a Black man, pointed out that ambiguity around evaluation criteria affected pre-tenure faculty with marginalized identities differently than their more privileged colleagues.

> Depending on how you are situated with your own identities, race, gender, and other identities, I think those criteria look different. Some folks feel undue pressure and want to produce at higher rates than some may. Particularly given where certain work is more accepted, in terms of journals and so forth. I think people of color, and those from other marginalized identities, experience different sorts of pressure in production

Minoritized faculty are walking a tightrope, not knowing how to craft a 'safe' route to tenure. The 'subjective' nature of the tenure evaluation process, which some of their White colleagues understood as either a positive quality or a necessary evil, made them feel vulnerable to bias. The sense that their work would be undervalued, pressured them to work longer hours and go 'above and beyond' in terms of number and prestige of publications.

White Faculty: Paths to Clarity through Racial Privilege

Finally, we found some evidence that White pre-tenure faculty were leveraging racial privilege to generate clarity. While most of the participants in our study spoke at length about the ambiguity in the tenure evaluation process, a few participants rejected the notion that clarity was unattainable. These participants acknowledged that most of their pre-tenure peers found tenure evaluation criteria unclear but they rejected this idea. Some of these participants described the tenure evaluation process as 'subjective' but rejected the idea that a lack of clarity made the process particularly challenging. Emily, a White woman in her second year at RSU, attributed her clear sense of the tenure evaluation criteria to her own assertive inquiries during the job interview process.

> Every person I sat down with, I was like, 'How many publications do you need per year for tenure?' Like literally that explicitly. And they would hem and haw, and they would say, 'Well, it really depends on the quality of your work, blah, blah, blah.' But I asked multiple sources, and the answer I came up with is two or three.

She acknowledged that for other pre-tenure faculty, the criteria might not be clear, but that clarity could be obtained through persistence. "It's not written anywhere. It's more of are you willing to be obnoxious enough to be like, 'I need you to tell the number.' And I was because that's how I plan things." For Emily, the fog of ambiguity can be dispersed with determination and a willingness to confront others but for racially minoritized faculty, and Black women faculty in particular, confrontation is not an option. For example, Sharon, a Black woman, shared a story about her first days at the university when a member of the administrative staff told her they were afraid to mispronounce her name, for fear she would "get mad and curse them out." Sharon marveled at how she could be perceived as so frightening before anyone had even gotten to know her. "I'm already out of the running for collegiality, I know this because people won't even give me a chance to be mean. They already just assume that I am." Being 'obnoxious' in order to generate clarity is only an option for White faculty because they are unhampered by racialized stereotypes. Additionally, when White women exercise 'persistence' it can be viewed as a positive trait, yet if Black women enact similar behavior it can be viewed as threatening, framed by gendered-racist stereotypes.

Other participants acknowledged a degree of ambiguity in evaluation criteria but thought the tenure evaluation process at RSU was relatively clear, in comparison to other universities. Catherine, a White woman in her second year at RSU, compared

her experience there with that of peers at other institutions and concluded, "It actually felt a lot more clear to me what was expected for tenure." Like Emily, she "understood" that the most important elements of her tenure application would be publications and set the number at "two or three articles a year or the equivalent of what a book would be in peer reviewed articles." She described the evaluation process as "systematic" and "refreshing." Like Emily and other participants who disagreed with the idea that tenure criteria were ambiguous, Catherine expressed a good measure of confidence in her chances for a successful outcome in the tenure evaluation process: "They can't have a concern about my publications because I just have a significant amount." The participants who expressed a very clear understanding of evaluation criteria were in the minority, only 4 participants out of 30. None of these participants came from racially minoritized communities.

Our findings demonstrate that, for most pre-tenure faculty, the process of working toward tenure is fraught with contradictions and uncertainty. While many White faculty relate to that ambiguity with ambivalent acceptance, racially minoritized faculty critiqued ambiguity as fundamentally a racialized process. When these major themes are considered along with a trend among a few White faculty to employ assertive strategies to gain clarity, we understand ambiguity in tenure as a mechanism that, intentionally or not, preserves the racialized status quo.

Discussion

The ambiguity of the tenure evaluation process, its reliance on unspoken rules, and the psychological distress it causes pre-tenure faculty has been well established (August & Waltman, 2004; Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). In addition, other scholars have focused on the inequitable outcomes for faculty of color (Griffin, 2020; Turner et al., 2008) and specifically Black women (Croom, 2017; Croom & Patton, 2011) in advancing through the professoriate ranks. This study links those two areas of research by understanding ambiguity as one of the mechanisms that leads to these racially inequitable outcomes, strategic in ways that may serve institutional ends but creating and legitimating racialized hierarchies within academia.

In his theory of racialized organizations, Victor Ray (2019) urged researchers to investigate the ways organizations "internally recreate institutional- level segregation, as racial hierarchies are mapped onto ostensibly non-racial positions" (p. 39). Ray's theory is, in part, a response to the field of organizational research and theorization which has focused on organizational dynamics while ignoring the role of organizational processes in perpetuating and legitimating racial inequality. This article applies Ray's theory by building upon the organizational concept of strategic ambiguity, and asking how that process is racialized and racializing.

Among the tenets of racialized organizations, Ray (2019) pointed out that formal rules are often decoupled from organizational practice in ways that are racialized. "'Objective' rules and practices may be enforced in ways that disadvantage non-Whites, or rules aimed at diversifying or ending discrimination may be ignored" (p. 42). In our analysis ambiguity is a part of this decoupling. The faculty handbook and its explicit discussion of tenure evaluation is perhaps the least helpful source

for the participants in our study. Rather, informal social networks convey bits and pieces of advice, stories, and hints that pre-tenure faculty cobble together to guide them. Though these interviews were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, the import of this study is even more meaningful in the context of the pandemic, when most social networks have been disrupted or suspended. With even the informal networks of advice unavailable, ambiguity surrounding tenure has, arguably, increased.

Most participants acknowledged ambiguous decoupling from formal guidelines but White participants had different ways of understanding its function. Most White participants described positive aspects to the ambiguity of tenure evaluation, such as facilitating individualized evaluation, avoiding a series of meaningless 'checkboxes,' and leniency. The negative aspects of ambiguity were variously understood as unintentional, an unavoidable byproduct of the nature of academic work, or as intentional strategies to protect the university from conflict and potential litigation. However, even the intentional aspects of this negativity weren't framed by White participants as racialized.

Decoupling can also be circumvented by racial privilege. White woman Emily's story about just being "obnoxious enough" to get the criteria stated explicitly demonstrates the way ambiguity is subject to negotiation for some faculty. However, it is hard to imagine Black women participants in our study, many of whom described struggles to overcome racist stereotypes of the 'angry black woman,' gaining clarity in this way. Unlike Emily, who as a White woman could make bold demands for specificity, the Black women in our study had to carefully choose their words and demeanor in order to manage the emotional reactions of their White colleagues. Michelle, a Black woman, described the tremendous energy and effort that she put into managing the discomfort of her White colleagues:

> I literally can tell that so many white people are uncomfortable interacting with me as a black woman. And so I do a lot of performing, which as black and brown people are accustomed to doing, performing to make white people know, "You can talk with us. We're not going to harm you. We're safe." I do a lot of that, which is very tiring.

Michelle's and Sharon's experiences are consistent with studies that find that Black women faculty often encounter racist tropes that characterize them as aggressive or difficult to work with (Croom, 2017; Croom & Patton, 2011). The strategic ambiguity that frames the tenure evaluation process is penetrable to those not already burdened with racialized stereotypes.

Organizational theorists such as Eisenberg (1984) have given us effective tools for understanding organizational behavior but have done so largely with the organization as the protagonist of the story without considering the ways that strategies for organizational survival contribute to social inequality. Eisenberg's (1984) theory of strategic ambiguity was offered as an effective approach to organizational communication because it was theorized to promote the power and longevity of the organization. However, when we understand the organization to be racialized, to be an institution which shores up the value of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), the costs of such strategies become clearer. Employing strategic ambiguity in tenure evaluation criteria serves the university's ends in a number of ways. It promotes maximum

productivity from pre-tenure faculty by making the goals for research and publication obscure yet ever-increasing. It protects the university from litigation in the event that tenure is denied (Ward, 2021). Strategic ambiguity allows the university to send multiple, often contradictory, messages about what is valued in faculty performance without incurring conflict, allowing "multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same message" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). This study showed how that the interpretation process was influenced by race and gender.

Though Eisenberg (1984) was focused on the ways strategic ambiguity benefited the organization rather than how it functioned as a process of racialization, the connection between ambiguity and privilege was embedded in the theory. Drawing primarily on examples of managers communicating with subordinates, Eisenberg described the way those with privilege and power within the organization could maintain that power by avoiding unequivocal disclosure of information. Rather than being constrained by the need for consistency, decision-makers could exercise their discretion, following or deviating from organizational rules as they saw fit and thereby preserving their positional privilege. Many of the participants in this study saw the ways that ambiguity in evaluation functioned in this way, protecting the institution from accusations or liability and protecting tenured scholars from confrontation. In our analysis, however, the ways that strategic ambiguity sustained privilege goes beyond the need for managerial discretion. Like Eisenberg, we observed that ambiguity preserved privileged positions and thus served institutional ends by maintaining the status quo. However, the preservation of privilege was more sinister. The hidden nature of the rules in academia served to preserve *racial* privilege, not just positional privilege.

Implications for Research and Practice

The racialized ambiguity described in this study is part of a system of interlocking practices that sustains the racialized hierarchy of the professoriate. Multiple studies send a clear message: racially minoritized faculty experience racism in a wide array of organizational processes from hiring (Cahn et al., 2021), to bias in student evaluations (Smith & Hawkins, 2011), disproportionate workloads of undervalued work such as service and mentorship (Griffin & Reddick, 2011), exclusion from departmental networks (Urrieta et al., 2015), and devaluation of their research (Settles et al., 2021). Ambiguity cloaks these interlocking practices and connects them invisibly to promotion and rank. Higher education researchers and administrators must critically interrogate all the processes that surround faculty work evaluation in order to promote equity in the tenure system. For example, Emily's demands in the hiring process led to advantages in her path to tenure. Sharon's focus on racial inequality in her research led to a sense that her work would not be afforded the proper consideration. Michelle struggles with an exhausting workload of managing White colleague's emotional reactions. Though each of these dynamics happens in a different arena of faculty work—departmental, disciplinary, interpersonal—they each feed into tenure evaluation at points obscured by ambiguity. Indeed, though participants

in this study were drawn from 17 different disciplines, the experience of ambiguity as a mechanism of inequality was shared by all minoritized faculty. Institutions that are serious about racial diversity among faculty should find ways to prioritize transparency in the tenure process. For example, institutions might conduct workshops for department chairs on the evaluation of tenure-track faculty that frame clarity of communication as an equity issue. Similarly, formal faculty mentoring networks should emphasize the importance of dispelling ambiguity surrounding expectations for tenure. Faculty, especially minoritized faculty should not be expected to decipher the unspoken rules of tenure.

This type of transparent intervention is more important than ever in the context of the unprecedented working conditions of the pandemic. Though many universities have offered extensions to the tenure clock, how are pre-tenure faculty to interpret this offer? Department chairs and deans can support faculty and promote racial equity by eliminating ambiguity through clear, specific communication. As many participants in this study pointed out, on the surface there are compelling reasons for ambiguity and many well-intentioned departmental leaders may be sustaining ambiguity in the name of individualized evaluation. Yet, individualized evaluation can have consistent and transparent protocols.

Furthermore, colleges and universities are not ambiguous only in the realm of tenure evaluation but in a wide variety of communication outlets and organizational processes. For example, research has shown that ambiguities in expectations for graduate students create barriers for graduate students of color (Levin et al., 2013). The results of this study should encourage advisors and mentors of graduate students to be clear and specific in communications with advisees, particularly racially minoritized students who are considering a career on the tenure track. Further research could examine how ambiguity in graduate student advising is strategic, what role organizational processes play in producing it, and to what extent it contributes to racial and gender inequity. In much the same way, the findings of this study could be helpful in understanding the role of ambiguous organizational processes as it relates to a variety of facets of higher education including admissions, hiring, and undergraduate education.

Finally, this study could be useful to scholars who study Whiteness by adding questions about racial privilege and ambiguity into interview protocols. A small number of White participants in this study (4) expressed confidence in their ability to pierce the veil of ambiguity through confrontation or other strategies. Future studies should take up this phenomenon to understand more fully not only how ambiguity can create disadvantages to minoritized faculty but how White faculty leverage racial privilege to circumvent ambiguity.

This analysis argued that strategic ambiguity plays a role in creating unequal experiences of the tenure evaluation process, but this insight about the equity impact of ambiguity can be applied to many important organizational processes, from hiring to graduate socialization, and undergraduate student engagement. The meso-level focus of this analysis reveals insight into the types of organizational processes that impede progress toward diversity goals. It is difficult to foster organizational change and achieve more equitable representation of marginalized groups in powerful positions if the very evaluative procedures by which they gain that power are

key factors in the racialization of colleges and universities. By examining the hidden rules of the university, we can create more equitable practices in many areas.

Conclusion

In US universities, the hidden and informal nature of faculty work evaluation is a holdover from the medieval legacies of the professoriate (Hertzog, 2017). Despite the vast changes in the structure and function of colleges and universities, the way we determine the success of faculty work remains subjective and idiosyncratic. To some extent these characteristics endure because they are essential to keeping the university hierarchy in place and mitigating against organizational change. What is lost when the maintenance of the status quo is prioritized in a racialized organization? In Eisenberg's (1984) theory, strategic ambiguity was beneficial to organizations because it maintained the status quo, prevented disruption, and kept managerial authority intact. However, in higher education environments, maintaining the status quo is tantamount to the exclusion of minoritized groups. Colleges and universities have goals that necessitate change, requiring forthright communication in order to serve goals such as equity or innovation.

Ray (2019) crafted his theory of racialized organizations in response to the omission of race from traditional organizational theory and research. This study demonstrates how important it is to interrogate the racialization of organizational processes in higher education. The ambiguity of tenure evaluation is, on its face, a race neutral aspect of higher education, either a burden or necessity depending on your interpretation but not apparently targeted at any racial group. However, the minoritized faculty who participated in this study spoke very clearly about the way that ambiguity was not race-neutral. By seeming racially neutral while functioning to preserve racial privilege, strategic ambiguity perpetuates and legitimates racially differentiated outcomes. The Black women participants also affirmed the gender-race nuances and how an examination of inextricable social identities is necessary. This study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of a specific organizational behavior in a specific aspect of higher education, but at the same time expands our understanding of a broader pattern of how seemingly race-neutral processes can sustain and legitimate racial inequality.

Declarations

Competing Interests All authors certify that they have no competing interests.

Ethics Approval The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of the Pennsylvania State University Office of Research Protections under study ID number 00012608.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study

Data All authors certify that all data and materials used in this research support any claims made and comply with field standards.

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