

Re-Crafting Careers for Mid-Career Faculty: A Qualitative Study

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Mid-career faculty are a growing population within academia, and yet their career issues have been surprisingly under-researched. The purpose of this study was to conduct a rich exploration of the career experiences of mid-career faculty using the lens of job crafting theory. Interviews were conducted with 16 tenured professors at a mid-size public university. Faculty reported high levels of autonomy in their jobs and substantial flexibility in setting their long term teaching and research goals. For this reason, job crafting provided an excellent framework to understand how faculty are using task, relational, and cognitive strategies to shape their careers.

INTRODUCTION

“Now tell me, what will you do with your one wild and precious life?”

—Mary Oliver, American Poet and Pulitzer Prize Winner

Mid-career faculty are a growing population within academia, and yet their career issues have been surprisingly under-researched. Nationwide over half of faculty are considered mid-career and this number comprises the largest segment of the academic workforce (Baldwin, DeZure, Shaw, & Moretto, 2008; Strage, Nelson, & Meyers, 2008). The average age for all tenured professors is 55 and the number of professors 65 and older doubled from 2001 to 2011. With the repeal of the mandatory retirement age of 70 (in 1994), three quarters of professors say they will delay retirement past the age of 65 or plan to never retire (Fendrich, 2014). Faculty, therefore, will not only have longer careers, but will face a large gap of time where they have essentially received the highest promotion possible. So what will they do with their “one wild and precious life” when they still have two-thirds of their career to live? How can universities help develop mid-career faculty so they stay relevant, engaged, and productive? The purpose of this study is to understand the career experiences of mid-career faculty as a means to help individual faculty members use strategies to stay engaged and provide tangible suggestions for universities.

While there is no one definition of mid-career, it is often considered to be the lengthy period of time after one has earned tenure and before one starts to prepare for retirement (Baldwin, et al., 2008). For most faculty, this is a significant number of years and is oftentimes the longest and most productive years of a faculty member’s career (Baldwin, Lunceford, & Vanderlinden, 2005). Faculty perceive the mid-career period as a time accompanied by both feelings of relief after earning tenure and increased workload and higher expectations. Mid-career faculty are often expected to continue to maintain the high levels of

performance that earned them tenure, while taking on new roles and duties related to service, leadership and advising (Mathews, 2014; Baldwin, et al., 2008). Along with increased demands, other challenges that have been reported included less defined goals, growing differences between students and faculty, maintaining teaching vitality, and less mentoring support. For women and faculty of color, obligations can be even higher because of increased demands of mentoring and committee work (Baldwin, et al., 2008; Baker-Fletcher, Carr, Menn, Ramsay, 2005; Mathews, 2014).

Similar to mid-career employees in other professions, faculty at this stage are also facing important concerns related to their development stage of life—caring for both aging parents and children, promoting their own health, reflecting on the meaning of their careers, and trying to find a balance between work demands and personal life (Baker-Fletcher, et al., 2005). While in other industries there are opportunities for promotion, in academe, there is a very short ladder for growth and only one clear promotion opportunity from associate to full professor (Baldwin, et al., 2008; Mathews, 2014). Rewards and recognition as well as feedback of performance become increasingly rare for mid-career faculty (Weimer, 2010; Mathews, 2014). Even with these constraints, many mid-career faculty are in fact thriving (Strage et al., 2008; Strage & Merdinger, 2014) and this research seeks to understand why.

In this study, we conduct a rich exploration of the career experiences of mid-career faculty so faculty and their universities can best understand what keeps faculty engaged at mid-career and beyond. Wellman & Spreitzer (2011) suggested that job-crafting may provide a useful conceptual framework to understand faculty engagement. Therefore, in this study we build on these ideas and investigate qualitatively the utility of job-crafting.

Mid-Career Engagement

Although there are new challenges and demands that arise, mid-career provides a unique opportunity for faculty to set new goals, re-consider the trajectory of their careers, and focus their energy in areas that are most meaningful to them (Perlmutter, 2007; Weimer, 2010). Few studies focus on mid-career faculty, but several influential studies suggest that supporting mid-career faculty is critical to the success of the university. Researchers who have used workshop feedback or focus groups suggest that mid-career faculty are often interested in having collegial discussions about their career development, and, in particular, in having discussions about teaching development (Strage, et al., 2008).

Building on Erikson's work on human development and Dweck's work on mindset, Strage and her colleagues (2008) explored how faculty at mid-career "stay alive" and achieve a sense of career vitality. Using a series of structured in depth career interviews, researchers asked faculty members to share their stories. From their interviews, they found that three themes emerged related to creating a clear and authentic purpose: (1) setting personally meaningful professional goals, (2) embracing opportunities for growth, and (3) establishing a supportive culture and climate as well as policies and practices. In terms of goals, whether it was through research, teaching or service all the faculty in this study described that feelings of vitality came from finding new ways that professional endeavors could inform each other, finding a community and establishing new goals. In terms of growth, faculty that had a sense of vitality exemplified a growth orientation. They believed they could master anything, sought out opportunities to learn, were not afraid of making mistakes and were open to meaningful criticism. Finally, faculty discussed facilitative environments where administrators were supportive of requests for new assignments and where they were given flexibility and latitude to experiment with new ideas (Strage et al., 2008).

In 2014, Strage and Merdinger analyzed data from a mid-career retreat at a local metropolitan university. The professional growth and renewal retreat was designed for faculty who were not planning to retire in the next 10-15 years. It was a one day retreat with some pre- homework and later follow-up work. Faculty reported positive experiences from the retreat and afterwards 75% reported that they gained insight about themselves and 25% reported they gained insight related to peers and colleagues. Faculty reported they identified goals to work on and felt recharged and reinvigorated. In follow-up meetings every participant sought to advance some kind of professional project while 32% reported they made progress on a grant or disseminating their work and 20% had revised curriculum. Taken together, these

studies strongly suggest that it is critical to understand how faculty stay engaged and challenged throughout mid-career.

Job-Crafting Theory

Hackman and Oldham's classic work on job design theory explored five key characteristics of job design, including skills variety, task significance and autonomy (1975, 1976). These key aspects of one's job were largely defined using a top down approach and to increase job engagement was conceptualized as occurring within the constraints of one's job. While these characteristics are still integral for understanding work engagement and satisfaction, today it is largely recognized that employees take an active role in shaping their work lives and job-crafting is one route by which employees make meaning of their work (Grant & Parker, 2009; Oldham & Hackman, 2010).

Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) proposed the theory of job-crafting to expand on earlier work related to job design and suggests that employees alter their jobs from the bottom up (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013). Job-crafting therefore is defined as the "physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" and includes "proactive changes that employees make to their own jobs" (Wellman & Spreitzer, 2011; Wrzesniewski, LoBuglio, Dutton, & Berg, 2013). It is recognized that while job-crafting is a proactive, bottom up, process it occurs in the context of employees' jobs with expectations, task and hierarchies already in place (Berg, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2010b). Employees must overcome the challenges and constraints of organizational structure and culture to use job-crafting strategies; recognizing that although job-crafting includes constructive and legitimate behaviors, they are not always explicitly part of the job or necessarily authorized by the employer (Hornung, Rouseau, Glaser, Angerer, & Weigl, 2010). This active focus that the job-crafting theory places on employees is in contrast to earlier top down perspectives in which managers created and designed jobs that employees may or not may thrive in.

There are three different ways in which employees may engage in job-crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Berg, et al., 2013). Task crafting involves changing the content of the work to provide increased variety or meaning. Employees can add new tasks, place more emphasis on certain tasks, or redesign tasks to make them more meaningful. Cognitive crafting strategies do not change the type of work or tasks that one is doing, but change the perceptions or mindsets as to how employees think about the purpose or meaning of their job. This may involve broadening perspectives about the purpose of the work being done or by mentally focusing on the parts of their jobs as meaningful. Finally, relational crafting involves changing the quality and amount of interaction with others while working.

Although job-crafting theory is relatively new, recent studies have examined the process and outcomes of job-crafting in a variety of settings such as education, sales and non-profits (Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012; Tims & Bakker, 2010; Ghitulescu, 2006; Lyons, 2008). Not only are job-crafting strategies prevalent in a variety of settings, but they seem to be linked to positive organizational outcomes. In a study of 108 salespeople, Lyons (2008) found that 75% reported using at least one job-crafting strategy over the last year and concluded that a significant amount of crafting occurs in the relationship and functions domains. Similarly, Berg, Grant and Johnson (2010a) conducted a study related to unanswered job callings and found that when employees had perceived unanswered job callings, they were more likely to engage in job-crafting techniques in both their work and leisure activities. In a comprehensive study of manufacturing and service employees, Ghitulescu (2006) found that different types of crafting predicted key organizational outcomes. General level job-crafting behaviors were found to be predictive of work engagement as well as work performance as reported by colleagues (Bakker, et al., 2012) and day-do-day job-crafting behaviors have been found to be related to day-do-day engagement (Petrou, Demerouti, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Hetland, 2012).

Using job-crafting as a lens to understand mid-career faculty lives provides a unique perspective on careers in academe. The results will provide recommendations for faculty to find continued meaning in their work over their careers.

PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Study Participants

In order to better understand the experiences of mid-career faculty, we interviewed 4 Associate and 12 Full Professors across a wide range of disciplines. It is important to note that the Associate Professors were advanced in their rank and close to achieving Full Professor status. All identified as mid-career and participants felt that while they were established in their respective fields, they still had goals to accomplish in the future. We acknowledge that these faculty were self-selected and were faculty who remained engaged in teaching, research and service. Twelve women and four men were interviewed. Faculty had been at their current institution between 7-23 years (average of 13 years); however, several participants had come from other institutions or other careers, so were more advanced in their careers (participants had a minimum number of 10 years in an academic career). The majority reported that they planned to work at least 15 more years (only two faculty members were within 6-7 years of retirement). The faculty members interviewed were from a variety of fields including the sciences, social sciences, humanities, business, education and nursing. Nine faculty members had at least one child still living at home, 2 had children who were living on their own or who were away at college, and 5 did not have any children.

The participants in this study were recruited through an email that was sent to all associate and full professors at a mid-size university in California. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and were recorded and professionally transcribed. We asked approximately 15 open-ended questions such as “what do you like best about your career?” “how has your job changed since receiving tenure or full professor;” “what are the major stressors you face at this stage of your career;” “how have expectations changed since tenure in terms of leadership and service;” and “have you had times you felt burnt out in your career, and what helped prevent it or reduce it? ”

Data Analysis

We analyzed the interviews using a thematic approach based on the job-crafting literature (Wellman & Spreitzer, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and a data analysis technique, suggested by Taylor and Bogdan (1998), which places less emphasis on theory building or hypothesis testing, and more focus on “developing a deeper understanding of the settings or people on their own terms.” The advantage of this technique is that it utilizes qualitative analysis to identify themes and find new insights while also fitting data within existing theories. Following Taylor and Bogdan’s strategy of “ongoing discovery,” and using a similar approach to other qualitative studies on career development (e.g., August, 2011; Ensher, Nielson, Kading, 2016; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016), we utilized a design that allowed us to develop in-depth knowledge about the lived experiences of mid-career faculty. In order to do this, we kept track of emerging themes, read and reread our interview notes throughout the entire process, refined concepts and propositions, and reviewed literature to see how our data fit with existing theories and themes. The rich stories and experiences of the mid-career faculty and the associated meanings were the focus in the analysis.

First, the interviews were analyzed using a team-based thematic approach aided by the NVivo software package. The two authors read the interviews in entirety to determine the major themes and concepts that emerged. Once identified, we used the lens of job-crafting to sort the quotes and passages into the categories of relational, task, and cognitive strategies overall. Some examples and strategies clearly fit within the expected categories.

Some themes were more ambiguous, so in numerous cases the authors discussed and refined them. We identified several themes related to service expectations. While at first we identified one sub-theme related to shifting relationships and work and family balance, upon further reflection, it was clear that in fact, faculty not only felt a struggle between competing demands in their relationships, but also developed and shifted their strategies for coping with work and family issues.

Once subthemes and categories were refined, we determined that we had 4 sub-themes related to cognitive crafting strategies, 6 sub-themes related to relationship crafting, and 4 major sub-themes within

task crafting. We then went back through each interview and identified quotes and examples that represented each of these themes. Finally as a consistency check, our research assistant used NVivo to sort the quotes into 14 sub-categories of themes within each larger job-crafting strategy. Using NVivo, quotes were identified under each subtheme; we then went back and reviewed each quote to make sure it fit the subtheme identified and recorded the frequency of times that each subtheme was identified. Finally, we went back through the interviews one more time to identify quotes or passages that may not have been identified using the NVivo software. Each quote was discussed among two authors and the graduate research assistant until consensus was reached. In the end, we agreed we had 54 examples of cognitive crafting, 71 examples of relational crafting, and 39 examples of task crafting. The objective of our data analysis was to identify key subthemes and reach consistency in the sense there was general agreement of experiences being coded in a particular way. The subthemes related to different strategies for job-crafting are discussed below.

RESULTS

Job-crafting is about employees taking initiative to make changes to their job by altering how they think about or act in their jobs as well as changing the relationships they have with other organizational stakeholders (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Specific sub-themes emerged that provide further insight into the experiences of mid-career faculty.

Cognitive Re-Crafting

“The fact that I can move up, down, right, left, and am not only within my own discipline, but I can expand beyond that. It’s not a stagnant place.”

Mid-career faculty discussed a multitude of ways that they shifted their thinking about their careers. Every mid-career faculty we interviewed gave at least one example of a cognitive shift and discussed how their thinking about their career changed over time. They discussed the feelings of control and satisfaction that emerges after receiving tenure; they talked about how their thinking related to service was evolving over time and many discussed how their perceptions of time was changing. Overall there were 54 comments that were identified as examples of cognitive shifts and four subthemes emerged. Refer to Table 1 for summary of major themes and exemplar quotes.

Emerging Feelings of Control, Passion and Satisfaction

The majority of mid-career faculty discussed their shift in thinking after earning tenure; 12 comments were specific to feelings of control and autonomy. The pressure of earning tenure was removed and many felt that the possibilities were endless. For example, one faculty describes “I think that if I can envision it, outside of any financial limitation, I can do it”. Whether it was related to feelings of being able to choose work that was meaningful to them or being able to step back “when I feel like I need to back off what has to be dealt with and responded to is where I just let things slide a bit,” many faculty reported a sense of control over their work life was *the* major benefit of being at mid-career. They gave examples of pursuing projects they were passionate about, talked about not letting themselves be “pulled in 1,000 different directions” and the feelings of freedom that come with being post tenure. One faculty member described, “I am in charge of my career.... I don’t feel like I owe an explanation to anyone. I don’t feel like I have to answer to anybody else.”

Seven mid-career faculty, discussed (10 examples) this intense satisfaction and a renewed sense of energy and described feeling less pressure, “it does not feel like do or die. It feels like this is really fun.” Faculty were able to find this joy by making shifts in their approach to their jobs, for example, when one full professor was feeling dissatisfied with conflict and politics in her department, she explained “what helped was colleagues giving me opportunities to work elsewhere and to see other models where everybody was pulling their weight that made me at peace.” Another full professor captured the sentiment that many of the faculty we interviewed expressed, “I love everything I am doing. I absolutely, seriously, literally love it.”

Shifting Service Expectations and Climate

Concerns over shifting service expectations were also common. There were 23 comments related to service expectations and shifting service priorities. Not surprisingly, faculty discussed the importance of selecting meaningful service and were concerned with being stretched too thin by competing demands, “there’s been an increased expectation of service responsibilities at higher levels, more visibility, and more campus wide rather than department level efforts.”

Being a department chair was consistently the most difficult and unrewarding part of the experiences of mid-career faculty and had to shift their thinking about this role. Faculty who were current department chairs or past chairs (n= 8) were more likely to discuss this experience as related to any burnout they experienced. The perception was that the level of work required for being department chair was not compensated adequately and the job took a toll on the professional life of the faculty member, after years as a chair, one faculty member describes, “I am finding myself at mid-career with the stress that I have not really been the scholar I was trained to be.” Another described that their “research stalled” and described the toll administrative work takes on faculty members research lives, “you end up having conversations about everything but your research. You are not thinking about it anymore.” Faculty shifted their thinking about the department chair role and identified it as a temporary one; they also described the need to shift their thinking back to who they were as scholars once that job was completed. They expressed the need for the university support to help them retool and reengage with their research programs after being department chairs.

Most mid-career faculty reported that when they were early in their careers, they received messages of service expectations that were much higher than junior faculty do today. A feeling that junior faculty are now “protected” left some feeling frustrated and unclear about this new organizational culture, “we are continuing to do more (service) because of this ethos change that we are now not having junior faculty do so much. I feel ready for someone else to start doing some of these things.” “If I look around me and see that I am solicited because people are not doing their job—I feel resentful because then I cannot do what else I need to do.” As mid-career faculty are also starting to think about passing on service expectations to junior colleagues, issues around service became more relevant to them, especially when they felt junior faculty were not perceived to be stepping up to take on some of these roles; one faculty described this frustration after a junior faculty member expressed that senior faculty “already know how to do it,” “well, we did not know what we were doing when we started. Everybody here has a Ph.D., for Pete’s sake.”

Shifting time perspectives and orientation

Faculty who discussed a changing time perspective (10 comments), gave poignant examples of an important theme that emerges as faculty move from the middle of their careers into the later stages of mid-career. Faculty started to think more purposively about the time left in their career and were considering how they wanted to spend it, “there is a shift in time orientation that happens during the mid-life transition.” This shift in time focus was different for early and late mid-career faculty. For early mid-career, the focus was on the goals they still wanted to achieve (and making sure that the work was meaningful) but for later mid mid-career the focus became more about legacy and a feeling of having to step aside and let more junior faculty take on leadership. For example, one faculty reflected “my thinking is more generative because I recognize I won’t be here forever ... what do I want to leave having completed?”

Relational Re-Crafting

“There’s a greater expectation from the department that if there needs to be anything done that is controversial, it is your job to do it as Full Professor. You are expected to be the one on the firing line and protect the others more.”

Mid-career faculty reported tremendous change in their relationships with their students and with their internal and external colleagues as well. Overall, there were 71 comments related to the theme of relational re-crafting and seven distinct sub-themes emerged. Each of these themes were complex and

often represented competing tensions for faculty. Refer to Table 2 for summary of major themes and exemplar quotes.

The Mythology of Work-life Balance and its Impact on Relationships

Several faculty in this study mentioned that prior to tenure they assumed they would have more balance post-tenure, or perhaps when their children were raised, and yet this has proved not to be the case for the majority. The need to continue to prioritize work-family balance was salient for the majority of faculty interviewed. This may be because work-life balance is highly temporal and can change in an instant due to an unanticipated career defining moment (Ensher, Nielson, & Kading, 2016).

There were 25 comments related to work-family relationships overall. We further broke these up into two categories: a) finding a balance between work and family (n = 18) and b) the development of positive strategies to balance work and family (n = 7). The majority of the comments, both positive and negative, were around the competing demands of child-raising and career. For example as one professor noted, “I would say that if my 11-year-old wasn’t acting out, I would be incredibly satisfied with my work-life balance. Others noted typical sandwich generation issues such as this “My mother is 89 years old and I have to get her into assisted living this summer. My kids are doing great but I have to think about where they are moving and help them. The moving parts in this middle stage are stressors that are beyond my job.” While the demands of the job of a professor are different pre and post tenure, mid-career faculty have developed positive strategies that work effectively for their stage of life; as one noted, “ I am very good friends with my colleagues and my husband understands my passion for work and I am really satisfied with the balance. My work life and personal life blend as we unplug and socialize with colleagues.” Faculty spoke of the need to continue to prioritize work and personal life demands into mid-career and described finding a balance between their work and home life as being one of the most deeply satisfying and also most challenging aspects of the job.

Deepening of Colleague Relationships Coupled with New Expectations to Guide and Protect

One theme that clearly emerged in the interviews was that while the demands of the job were still high post-tenure, faculty often made the choice to deepen their relationship with their colleagues more than they did earlier in their careers. For those that chose to spend more time with colleagues, they reported great enjoyment and benefits. One faculty discussed meeting regularly with a meditation group and explained that sometimes they meditate and sometimes they just sit and talk, but this interaction was described as “the most rejuvenating thing to do.”

Faculty also discussed the importance of maintaining close connections to their research area through their relationships with colleagues outside of their university as exemplified by this quote: “I’ve been able to consistently go to conferences and maintain relationships with colleagues at other institutions, and collaboration. I feel like that’s extremely valuable in staying engaged in scholarship.” Although the majority discussed the importance of this type of engagement, on the other hand, some felt maintaining research engagement was not supported at this stage as much as it was when they were junior faculty.

Closer Relationships with Students/Junior Faculty and Challenge of Being Relevant

Connecting with students and junior faculty in the profession were other ways that mid-career faculty were finding new meaning through relationship crafting. One faculty member captures this shift in the thinking, “Interestingly, people are finding me and writing me. There are Ph.D. students who said, “Oh I read your work,”—In the past I would say “Oh, that’s nice.” Now I’m making more of an effort, almost like informal mentoring. I’m saying, I’m at that level that if I can be helpful to this person, I owe them that.” Faculty also expressed the importance of connecting with students as one professor noted, “For me one of the things that’s very important in my face-to-face classes is a lot of interaction between students, with students, and the instructors, and even in a bigger class I am trying to accomplish that through using clickers and other ways to get feedback.” Several of mid-career faculty discussed the benefits of deeper relationships with students as being freed from the fear of teaching evaluations or “the need to be liked” which they felt actually made them able to be better teachers and mentors to students.

However, although on one hand faculty felt they could be closer to students and in one sense were free of the need to be liked, they also felt a new challenge emerged. This new challenge was related to the idea of being relevant or perhaps being perceived as relevant due to age. It was perceived by mid-career faculty that younger faculty had an inherent advantage in being perceived as relevant to students due to generational proximity. The mid-career faculty participants mentioned that they felt the shifting perceptions of their students acutely, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. As one professor noted, “Earlier in my career, I thought I am youngish and relatable and asked them to call me by my first name. I’ve watched over the past few years and maybe it is because I have a few gray hairs but very few students call me by my first name—there is a little bit of a disconnect/insecurity in me like, can I still relate?”

Relationship re-crafting is a form of accepting different roles at various points in one’s career. Each variation has aspects that are both deeply satisfying and challenging. Making these implicit roles explicit by reframing them can help faculty skillfully adapt to the inevitability of their changing relationships.

Task Re-Crafting

“My philosophy towards teaching is every day is a wonderful chance to experiment and see what happens”

Task re-crafting involves how employees modify their day-do-day tasks to find more meaning or enjoyment in each task. Faculty gave 39 examples of where and how they used task crafting strategies on a day-do-day basis. The vast majority of these involved the way that faculty approached teaching their classes. Faculty felt that they were able to regularly shape and change their teaching strategies, take risks, and try new and innovative approaches. The vast majority of faculty discussed feeling much higher levels of confidence in the classroom and in their knowledge and ability “I think there is a sense of confidence in not being as much of an imposter as in previous decades.” In addition to increased teaching confidence, faculty felt more control of their research and felt they would take a longer term approach to projects. Refer to Table 3 for summary of major themes and exemplar quotes.

Risk Taking, Increased Technology Use and Confidence in the Classroom

A major shift for faculty related to their confidence in the classroom. There were 18 comments that specifically focused on taking more risks with teaching. They discussed their deeper understanding of what students really need to know. One faculty member describes this experience that comes with time, “when you first start teaching, you create elaborate teaching plans, print them out and have a high level of attachment to covering it all ... now I have a much better sense of what students are needing at any given point.”

In addition, faculty were more likely to try innovative strategies that may or may not work. For example, one faculty member explained, “A significant change in my teaching over the last year or two has been a focus on problem-based learning and simulation. A lot of what I do now is give students real cases and have them problem solve together....” Others described a confidence that just comes with teaching a course many times, “knowing how to handle student questions and not feeling like I need to know everything” and the ability to make classes more fun and playful as one becomes “more comfortable with his or her position in the academy.”

Faculty also reported they were using more technology in the classroom and many were eager to learn new strategies including online teaching. There were 10 comments that related specifically to increased technology use in the classroom; several of these related specifically to online teaching, “I taught my first online course. I shot the moon. I tried everything” and specific technologies such as, “using clickers to get feedback.” Other comments involved more general examples of new expectations around technology and the need to keep up. As one full professor explains, the expectations have changed greatly, “technology has changed a lot. Students don’t come to class to particularly gain knowledge, they want to be entertained. The expectation is to have active learning.”

Increased Time Spent Mentoring Students

Numerous faculty members discussed how increased confidence in the classroom opened them up to spending more time mentoring students. One faculty member described that he has more time to do what he likes to do and for him that is spending time mentoring students, as he says, “it goes back to what your heart tells you to do.” Six faculty members gave specific examples about making a conscious shift to spend more time mentoring students. One full professor described this recent meaningful experience, “this semester, I put together an independent study where students and I read a book together. It takes a lot of time and is a difficult book. In the past, I would not have done that.” A mid-career faculty member captured the spirit that other faculty expressed as well, “being able to mentor students from underrepresented backgrounds and watching them fulfill their potential is really exciting.”

Longer Term Perspective for Projects

In addition to shifting their tasks related to teaching and mentoring, faculty reported that they adjusted the artificial time boundaries around research projects. Eight comments related to taking a longer term approach to projects. For example, one faculty discussed the scope of his research projects, “now I can think about book projects that might take 2-3 years.” Another discussed the importance of longer term projects that involved the community and explained, “The idea is that when I am done, there will be something I can see that changed, as opposed to how many papers I got in.” They also discussed a longer term perspective in terms of their next goals and plans, “I think I have a good sense of how all the (research) pieces fit together now as part of a larger coherent body of work.”

In summary, mid-career faculty used task crafting strategies to change the nature of their day-do-day work. These strategies involved changing teaching approaches, making more time to mentor students, trying new and innovative technologies and intentionally taking on longer term projects that involved collaborations or community partners. Not doing the same things class after class, year after year was critical to the engagement and satisfaction that many of them reported.

DISCUSSION

Based on our in-depth interviews with faculty, it was clear that job-crafting strategies were useful to mid-career faculty and enabled them to stay engaged in their work. Faculty in this study not only made concrete changes in the types of tasks that they performed, but also made shifts both cognitively and relationally.

Implications and Recommendations for Faculty

Because of the long stretch of time that faculty will be mid-career, it is important that faculty become knowledgeable about and pro-active in job-crafting. Based on these interviews, one of the most important recommendations is for mid-career faculty to step back after earning tenure or full professor and take the time to reflect. Indeed, consistent with previous research (Perlmutter, 2007), we found that faculty who had thought about the long trajectory of their career actually enabled them to identify projects and activities that were more meaningful to them. Job-crafting can provide a useful lens and set of strategies to enable faculty to take personal responsibility for their career engagement in three important ways.

First, mid-career faculty can gain empowerment in their careers by recognizing the opportunity for making a cognitive shift in their career. In this study, it was clear that faculty felt both the positive and negative tensions of making a cognitive shift. Faculty felt that being freed from the strictures of gaining tenure and promotion was positive as it enabled them to think about and pursue opportunities in their domain from a broader and longer term context. Many faculty felt the pull towards taking on greater responsibilities in leadership and administration, which offered varying degrees of fulfillment for those who did so. The key to cognitive re-crafting successfully is recognizing that there are choices that must be made and then consistently making choices that support your cognitive career ideal, “one cannot always be liked or please everyone, which was my goal while trying to get tenure.”

The second way that faculty can enhance their engagement at mid-career is through relational re-crafting. Mid-career faculty in this study shared their experiences of making conscious choices to deepen their relationships not only with their students, but with their colleagues as well. Deepening relationships with students was no longer seen somewhat cynically as a “teaching evaluation manipulation tool,” but was done simply because it was meaningful and enjoyable. Faculty at mid-career seem to be taking more time to smell the proverbial roses whether that was through enjoying bike rides with colleagues, meditating or just making more time for hallway chats.

However, mid-career relationships are not all about meditation and meaning. It is also about balancing work responsibilities and personal relationships in a very real way. Most mid-career faculty in this study still had children at home or only recently out of the nest with each scenario bringing its own set of challenges. Several of the participants in this study spoke of the sandwich generation issues as they have children and aging parents to care for. In addition, a few faculty mentioned their own increased struggles with health and physical challenges which are often an inevitable aspect of aging. Indeed, most of the faculty felt the need to prioritize work-life balance but many also seemed to simply accept that work-family balance is never achieved but is always in flux. The mid-career faculty in this study who seemed to feel most in balance had simply made their peace with the shifting temporal reality of balance. As one participant noted, “Now you have it, now you don’t but you get used to that being okay.”

The third way that faculty can re-craft their careers is by actually changing the tasks they perform or incorporate new learning and approaches into what they are doing. A majority of the participants spoke about the joy in taking new risks and trying out new ideas in teaching such as community based learning. Faculty spoke of using technology to craft their tasks differently. Many spoke of the ability to engage in more research projects that had a larger scope and take more risks with their research which led to a tremendous sense of meaning and the satisfaction in making a long term contribution to their field.

Study Limitations and Future Research

Although this examination of mid-career faculty’s experiences using the lens of job-crafting yielded some useful implications, this study is not without its limitations. First, the study sample was small and all participants were from one university. Therefore, the small sample size and single location may affect the generalizability of these findings. This is difficult to ascertain as there is a dearth of research in the area of mid-career faculty engagement overall and using job-crafting in particular with a few notable exceptions (Wellman & Spreitzer, 2011; Wrzesniewski, et al., 2013). Future research that examines mid-career engagement would be well advised to include universities that range along the continuum of expectations for research and teaching (Baldwin, et al., 2008). Future empirical research using the job-crafting scale would be a welcome extension to this study and build on our knowledge of the utility of job-crafting (Bakker, et al., 2012). Also, while this study focused specifically on the experiences of mid-career faculty, future research in other industries would be very helpful.

Recommendations for Institutions

The results of this study on job-crafting also suggest a number of interventions that academic institutions can use to help mid-career faculty, and perhaps other professionals, stay engaged. A few ideas from our interviews emerged such as the suggestion to offer “jump starter” research funds for travel to conferences or course releases to help faculty get back into research after being heavily engaged in administrative or other service activities. Support for faculty who wanted to retool or recharge was seen as a critical aspect of institutional support. For example, sabbaticals are often given to faculty who are highly engaged in and already have an active research program, but may prohibit faculty who have been highly involved with service to receive one. In addition, while many institutions focus on providing research support and professional development funds for junior colleagues, it is important to continue to support and reward full professors. In addition, offering training, mid-career retreats, faculty learning communities, and workshops that focus on mid-career topics was seen as highly beneficial. Training for faculty who want to move into leadership roles or are department chairs was also seen as important.

Previous studies on faculty engagement also suggest that community engagement (Baldwin, et. al., 2008; DeFilippo & Giles, 2015) in which courses are reworked to add in service learning projects are a tremendous means of job recrafting. While mentoring is often touted as an important tool to orient new faculty (Gibson, 2004), newer forms of mentoring such as reverse mentoring (Ensher & Murphy, 2005) and the idea of mutual mentoring and relational networks (Murphy & Kram, 2014) can also provide a means of engaging mid-career faculty.

In sum, academic careers are notoriously independent and even lonely at times. Faculty in this study used job-crafting to stay energized almost intuitively without an awareness of the actual theory. How much more powerful would job-crafting be if we actually provided seminars and continuing education to faculty so that they could consciously use the strategies suggested by this theory? This begs an excellent question to address in future research.

This research is unique as it was the first study to examine the lived experiences of mid-career faculty using the theoretical frame of job-crafting. Professors have a unique opportunity to energize the next generation of leaders not only through a formalized curriculum but through the example of how they lead their own lives. Many academics have a career span that lasts well beyond 30 years, therefore committing resources to keep mid-career faculty engaged can be highly beneficial to universities. In fact, organizations need to consider that the best recruitment tool for young faculty are the existing mid-career and senior faculty. Young faculty are more likely to join organizations where colleagues are dynamic and engaged, rather than burned out and unhappy. The five to six year slog to associate professor and tenure passes quickly and then five more years to applying to full professor even more so. The professors in this study shared their experience of feeling like “What now?” Job-crafting may provide an answer to this not so existential question.

TABLE 1
COGNITIVE CRAFTING STRATEGIES

Cognitive Shift Theme	Frequency Mentioned	Exemplar Quotes
Feelings of control over careers	12	“The choices I am making now are more in line with what I value most.”
Thinking about how to spend the time left in their careers; major shifts in time focus	10	“Is it time to step aside? Is it time for new leadership? Have I done everything I want to do it?”
Feelings of sense of peace and satisfaction and increased energy	9	“I do find myself more reenergized now than I was earlier in many ways. I feel research wise I have found my niche. I know the literature. I have collaborators.”
Shifts in service expectations and thoughts about role as Department Chair	23	“My biggest burnout was being department chair.” “I feel more obligated to take on leadership roles”

TABLE 2
RELATIONAL CRAFTING STRATEGIES

Relational Theme	Frequency	Exemplar Quotes
Struggle to balance work and family	18	“Here I have this job where I love flexibility and I can spend time with my child but what I am doing? I am working and on email all the time and it drives my kid crazy.”
Developed positive strategies to balance work and family	7	“I feel like I do have balance. I leave campus at 2:30 and pick my kids up. They work on their homework and while they do that I work on my service and research until about 6:30 or so.”
Deepening of relationships with students	11	“I don’t need to be popular or liked by my students any more. I try to stay connected with them and show them that I care.”
Development of deeper internal university colleague relationships	12	“I go on research bike rides with my colleague now. While we are riding around we talk about research and work and life- I’m not so sure I would have made the time for that before tenure.”
Call to develop/protect junior colleagues	10	“Now my junior colleagues come to me and say I don’t like how this is done and can you fix it. It is not on my plate, my table or even my kitchen and yet there is a perception that I have a power to make other people listen or behave as full professors.”
Concern about staying relevant and responding to shifting perceptions from students about who you are.	8	“One of my fears is keeping up with everything – I cannot keep up with everything so what do I choose? Intellectually and socially I want to keep up with them so I can teach better.”
Development of external relationships with professional colleagues outside the university	5	“I’ve become more active on social media, Twitter and so on and I hear from doctoral students in Germany about my work. Now I focus on my academic professional citizenship.”

TABLE 3
TASK CRAFTING STRATEGIES

Task Theme	Frequency Mentioned	Exemplar Quotes
More likely to take risks and try new things with teaching	15	“I feel like I could go into any classroom and get a really good learning experience going with far fewer tools.”
More emphasis on online and using technology in teaching	10	“Certainly, there’s more emphasis on technology, That’s just gonna happen.”
Feeling more able to have a longer time orientation and take more risks in terms of research.	8	“I had a few projects that I wanted to pursue when I was associate, but when I became full I felt like I could really spend more time on those.”
Spending more time mentoring students	6	“I have many opportunities for satisfying mentoring experiences”

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