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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Despite increasing numbers of women attaining higher levels in academic degrees, gender disparities remain in higher education and among university faculty. Authors have posited that this may stem from inadequate academic identity development of women at the doctoral level. While gender differences may be explained by multiple and variable factors, mentoring has been proposed as a viable means to promote academic identity development and address these gender gaps. A "StartingDoc program" was launched and supported by four universities in French-speaking Switzerland. The purpose of this paper is to report the experience of one of the six "many-to-one" mentoring groups involved in the StartingDoc program in 2012-2013.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study is based on the description of a group experience within a university-based mentoring scheme offered to women entering in their PhD program in French-speaking Switzerland. It is examined using a qualitative, narrative case study design.

**Findings** – Themes from the narrative analysis included the four dimensions of the Clutterbuck model of mentoring (guiding, coaching, counselling, networking), as well as an additional five emerging

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themes: first expectations, process, sharing, building identity, and unmet expectations. The qualitative analyses suggest that mentoring can be an effective tool in supporting professional identity development among female doctoral students. However, further work is needed to elucidate the most effective strategies for developing and retaining women in academia.

**Originality/value** – While a many-to-one mentoring group has been theorized and is recognized as an effective means of supporting doctoral experience, its implementation in French-speaking Switzerland is in its infancy. This study provides insights into the value of such a mentoring scheme dedicated to women at the very beginning of their doctoral studies. Most notably it created opportunities for mentees to: discover aspects of academic life; break isolation; and develop some of the soft skills required to facilitate their doctoral journey.

**Keywords** Mentoring in education, Mentorship of doctoral students, Mentoring women's issues, Mentorship of early career faculty members

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

Trends indicate that the gender gap in higher education is slowly closing (Mastekaasa and Smeby, 2008). In Switzerland, female enrolment in tertiary level education increased from 31 per cent in 1999 to almost 49 per cent in 2008 (UNESCO, 2010). However, the 2013 report from the Federal Statistical Office indicates that male graduates still outnumber female counterparts in most academic fields and that women are still less likely to advance from undergraduate, to doctoral studies or hold higher levels of responsibility (Kelso *et al.*, 2012; Office fédéral de la satistique, 2014).

Some have posited that this so-called "leaky pipeline" may be explained by historical and socio-political determinants. Besides the direct or indirect discrimination facing female faculty during recruitment (Newman, 2014), authors have argued that because of differentiated socialization aspects, women tend to have less desirable profiles for the academic career (Fassa and Gauthier, 2012). Among other characteristics, female faculty seem to have lower self-esteem (Prentice and Carranza, 2002), which early in their career might lead them to diminish their participation in academic networks. Also, the extent to which gender differences in career development can be explained by early opportunities such as postdoctoral fellowships has recently been demonstrated by Danell and Hjerm (2013).

The development of an academic identity is influenced by a variety of social, professional and cultural factors which can be individual- or context- specific (Boboc *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, the literature also reports the effects of both favourable and unfavourable organizational influences (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2014). Some authors have proposed mentoring as a way to overcome at least some of these difficulties (Lewis, 2003).

### *Mentoring*

Academic mentoring has been defined in various ways across time but most often it is considered a professional relationship in which a more experienced person (mentor) assists another (mentee or protégé or mentoree) in developing skills and knowledge, thus enhancing the less-experienced person's professional growth. Klasen and Clutterbuck (2012) define mentorship as one of the best methods to enhance individuals' learning and development across dimensions of both professional and personal life. Others view it as a unique method of supporting people in learning and career development (Lewis, 2003) and it is considered particularly important in competitive environments (Delong *et al.*, 2008).

A systematic review published from 2011 (Haggard *et al.*, 2011) illustrates the richness and diversity of the mentoring literature over the last 30 years. While the

authors agree that there are overlaps spanning decades, the major theoretical and empirical advancement began in the 1980s with initial scientific work on the definition and construct validity of the concept that had a focus on gender and a specific orientation towards the mentees. This laid the groundwork for researchers to examine mentoring processes more in depth during the 1990s, and to identify barriers, benefits, variety in the roles of mentors and aspects related to their identity (e.g. experience, personality, coherence of the mentoring with usual roles, race and gender within and between mentors and mentees, etc.). In the last decade or so, researchers have examined outcomes and mediating variables related to mentoring success. Moreover, this examination has included comparative performance between mentoring models/modalities (i.e. one-to-one vs many-to-one, e-mentoring) or across academic and professional settings. Based on their review of 124 studies, Haggard *et al.* (2011) conclude that three key attributes seem to distinguish mentoring from other kinds of work-related relationships: "presence of reciprocity, engagement towards developmental benefits, and regular/consistent interactions" (p. 292). More recently, Ghosh's (Ghosh and Reio, 2013; Ghosh, 2014) meta-analyses looked at the effect of antecedents of mentoring support in organizational settings. These meta-analyses concluded that three groups of antecedents are related to mentoring success: individual (e.g. protégé's proactivity, protégé's learning goal orientation, mentor's transformational leadership), relational (e.g. affect based trust, perceived similarity), and structural/organizational (e.g. organizational support for mentoring, supervisory mentoring). Other authors have used qualitative approaches to understand mentoring (Cho *et al.*, 2011; Hammer *et al.*, 2014; Vance, 2002). These authors argue that mentoring is a developmental process, which can occur naturally and/or officially to allow an individual mentor to share his/her experience, knowledge and skills with a junior mentee. Their analyses use the conceptual framework of relational cultural theory and their results suggest that mentor-mentee relationships should be growth-fostering and include mutual empathy as well as an awareness of issues related to power structures, marginalization, socioeconomics or gender.

These different perspectives highlight the lack of consensus on what mentoring is and how it is defined. On one hand, mentoring may be considered a structured and formal process that is organized, planned and monitored. On the other, mentoring may be viewed as an informal process emphasizing the voluntary role of a senior experienced person ("the mentor") in passing down skills, knowledge and experience to younger individuals ("the mentees") (Cho *et al.*, 2011). In both formal and informal settings, the principal attributes of a mentor include: knowledge, critical thinking, congruency and fit for the purpose. A mentor is viewed as a wise person who knows when and when not to intervene. In either model, key attributes of mentees involve being able to identify needs and be open and receptive to advice, ready to take initiative, capable of interdependence, and willing to grow (Vance, 2002). Although it is generally described as an interactional process in which a mentor serves as a guide (Jacobson and Sherrod, 2012), some argue that mentoring is a transformational process as both mentors and mentees are mutually influenced by one another. As such, both mentors and mentees can be transformed by these interactions (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012).

Regardless of definition or attributes of the participants in the process (mentees or mentors), there is evidence that mentoring is related to academic outcomes for mentees and mentors, including: satisfaction with the overall experience of offering or receiving doctoral supervision; scholarly products (i.e. publications and presentations); interest in research; time to complete the degree; affective wellbeing; and organizational commitment. Finally, and across studies, it is expected that both mentees and mentor will

benefit personally and/or professionally from this type of exchange (Tenenbaum *et al.*, 2001; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Nick *et al.*, 2012; Chun *et al.*, 2012). These elements were the triggers that made us decide to report our mentoring experience in this paper.

## An innovation in academic mentorship in French-speaking Switzerland

Given the previously described "leaky-pipeline", a group of Swiss universities aimed to develop a structured, flexible program to help beginning female doctoral students to develop the personal skills and peer networks needed to overcome academic isolation and effectively cope with difficulties encountered during the course of their studies. This initiative was also intended to work as a platform through which they could share their academic developmental needs with senior, female academics outside their direct supervision. The mentorship program was neither centred on gender issues, nor on specific academic roles but more on rights and duties, inequality in power, and the sense of isolation which a doctoral student might feel when either marginally or not at all integrated into a research group. It was intended that it would be helpful for doctoral students to discuss these issues in an open-minded and non-judgemental environment.

This new program ("StartingDoc") was collaboratively launched in 2010 by five universities in French-speaking Switzerland: University of Lausanne, University of Geneva, University of Neuchâtel, Fribourg University, and the Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL). It is structurally organized by Lausanne University, and is supported by the Vice Rectorate for Junior Faculty Development and Diversity and the Equal Opportunities Office. It is embedded in a broader program aimed at promoting women in academia which also includes: conferences of outstanding women researchers; funding opportunities; workshops dedicated to the development of soft skills needed in academia; networking meetings; and/or individual mentoring possibilities between academic women. It could be argued that because it was introduced for young female academics only, this StartingDoc program was reinforcing the gender isolation already seen as a negative determinant in the development of young women in the academia. However, Sue (2014), as well as Macoun and Miller (2014), argued that a critical aspect in junior female faculty development is the availability of and access to senior female mentors. The StartingDoc program was therefore developed to provide that kind of opportunity.

Participants in the StartingDoc program are women enroled on a PhD in any field of study within the five participating universities. Each candidate is required to provide a one-page summary of the planned thesis, a curriculum vitae, and to write a letter of motivation stating her expectations regarding mentoring and the main reasons for pursuing entry into the StartingDoc program. From the pool of candidates, approximately 30 candidates are chosen annually comprising five or six mentoring groups (one mentor and five or six mentees in each group). The mentor is an experienced female academic not necessarily working in the scientific fields of the mentees. To become a mentor, one has to be a tenure-track academic, knowledgeable about her university culture and needs to send a covering letter stating expectations regarding this programme and reasons for enroling as mentor.

This mentoring program could be considered a many-to-one mentoring model (Huizing, 2012) and was chosen for its capacity to facilitate the constitution of networks and to promote the transmission of information between established female scientists and women beginning their scientific career. The program is not focused on the scientific aspects of a PhD program *per se*. Rather, it focuses on the aspects of academic

culture that one must develop to complete a PhD thesis and launch an academic career such as: understanding milestones of an academic career path; organization; researcher's rights; researcher's identity; or balance between teaching/research and family/personal life. Groups meet regularly every six weeks or so over an 18 month period. Each group decides and manages the content of meetings, as well as its lay-out according to the participants' needs.

The theoretical and empirical model of mentoring chosen by the StartingDoc program is the Clutterbuck model (Clutterbuck, 2004). This model was conceptually adapted for the program (Figure 1) and views mentorship as flexible – meaning that it can be directive or non-directive and can be used to consolidate or expand knowledge/skills (Berthiaume, 2012). It was therefore used to analyze the experience keeping in mind that emerging dimensions could be taken into consideration.

In the Clutterbuck model, the types of mentoring experience vary depending on the mentoring style as well as on the needs of the mentees (Figure 1). For example, if a mentor has a less directive style (vertical axis), counselling and networking may be preferred. However, when mentees need more guidance and coaching, then the mentor may use a more directive style (horizontal axis). Also, if a mentor prefers to help mentees consolidate their skills, he or she will guide and act as a wise counsellor. However, if the mentees need to expand abilities, knowledge or skills, then a mentor might prefer using coaching and networking activities. Therefore, the Clutterbuck model is to be considered as a multidimensional and adaptive system dedicated to helping mentees seize opportunities to grow (Clutterbuck *et al.*, 2012).

## Design and methods

### *Study design*

A qualitative, narrative, case study design was used to examine and report the experience of one of the six "many-to-one" mentoring groups involved in the StartingDoc program in 2012-2013. This research design was chosen because it is a strategy of inquiry that first explores the experience of each individual (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Elliott, 2005) and then, reconstructs the views of all into a unique and shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). A discursive analysis technique was used to examine and classify the content of individually written material and to summarize group discussion (Gee, 2014).

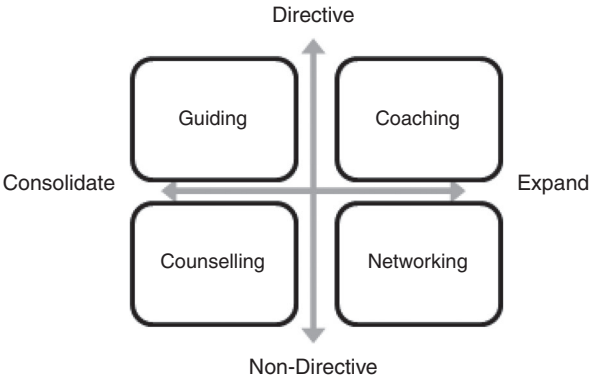


**Figure 1.**
The Clutterbuck empirical model of mentoring

*Study process*

The research process was conducted in four sequential phases. In the first phase mentees and the mentor separately reported their experience of mentoring in writing, considering the four dimensions of the Clutterbuck model (Clutterbuck, 2004). The second phase consisted of content analysis of the seven reports (one mentor and six mentees). The material was sent to all and the mentor undertook the first in depth analysis (using Atlas.ti Qualitative Analysis 7.1.6 software) to determine: the congruence of the material with the dimensions in the Clutterbuck framework; and the emerging categories of classification needed to capture the global experience. The individual material was divided into small units so that each unit represented a meaningful content pertinent to the study. Individual material was categorized (within-analysis) using the categories suggested by the Clutterbuck's model and the emerging themes. Then individual results were merged and categories were refined in order to finalize a common grid of interpretation (between-analysis). The mentor generated a first draft of that interpretation and submitted it to the six mentees. The third phase took the form of a structured meeting aiming at conducting a systematic group-analysis, during which mentor and mentees highlighted converging and diverging points of view expressed about the interpretation. This phase made it possible to take into account the diversity of the experience and ideas of each of the group members (Fortin, 2010; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The mentor mainly coordinated this work. In the fourth and last phase, the mentor wrote the first draft of this paper and shared it with the mentees. A second version was adjusted by the mentor (last author) and by one of the mentees (first author) and was read and approved by all authors (alphabetical order for authorship). The final version was finally adjusted by the mentor (last author).

*Participants*

As previously mentioned, participants included one mentor (aged 58) and six mentees (aged between 25 and 30 years). The mentees had been enroled in their doctoral program for up to two years and spanned a variety of disciplines (e.g. Sociology, History, Psychology, etc.). Each discipline represented in the group of mentees has its own theoretical, methodological and empirical research pillars which provided potential originality for each thesis. All had doctoral fellowship funding (i.e. Swiss National Science Foundation) or held a salaried assistantship with half-time dedication to doctoral work. Most of the mentees formed their research project within the context of a larger research program of their research supervisor. The mentor is a full professor and director of a research institute, and was trained in a different discipline from the mentees. She had begun her academic career almost 25 years ago, during which time she had been an attached senior scientist to the National Science Foundation, a professor and a dean. At the time of the study she had supervised and graduated more than 20 doctoral students. The four-dimension Clutterbuck model (2004) was initially selected to guide the process and analysis. Permission to examine the experience was received from the StartingDoc program and all participants consented to participate. However, in the first phase which consisted in the recording of individual experience and perspectives, it quickly became evident that this model was too narrow to encompass the richness of the individual experiences that were shared. Data analyses suggest nine dimensions of experience: first expectations, process, sharing, building identity, guiding, coaching, counselling, networking, and unmet expectations. Each of these dimensions is described in the following section and sub-sections.

## Results

### *Nine dimensions to characterise the experience*

Both mentor and mentees commented on the four aspects of the Clutterbuck model (guiding, coaching, counselling, and networking) supporting its operational utility and applicability to mentoring relationships.

*1. Guiding*. This dimension has been realised through the provision of practical tools, working methods and creative new solutions to face difficulties some of the mentees encountered. In fact, some of the individual doctoral experiences were relatively poorly organized. Some mentees commented that the objectives, skills and competencies to be acquired throughout the doctoral pathway were not well defined. In addition, the process leading to the acquisition of new skills was often deemed obscure:

> Becoming an assistant was not at all easy as I didn't know if I had to put more time into my supervisors' work than in mine, if I could use time at the lab for my own study or even if I had permission to communicate with the data manager. I was a bit too shy to ask all these questions at the beginning of my assistantship.

> Indeed, we not only learned to develop organizational knowledge, "factual" writing, information, etc. [guiding and coaching] that corresponded to my expectations, but it also taught us the "soft skills" [counseling and networking], knowledge that is not taught in any courses.

The mentor provided examples on how rights and duties could be discussed within a research group. She informed mentees on different rules such as the Vancouver Protocol in which authorship credit is defined and can be relied on for group discussion. She also shared that rigour, productivity and reflexivity can work together and that powerlessness can be lessened if recognized and discussed. She reiterated that building identity is not an easy task and an academic identity is part of a more global personal identity but also includes codes of conduct, standards, and norms that are not always clear. This is precisely why mentees need to know the rules and be affirmative.

The mentoring experience also seems to have aided mentees through uncertainties and doubts. For example, given the complexity of publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals, concrete ways to promote this complex task were given. For some of the mentees, these tools gave new keys to help reduce their anxiety in this domain.

*2. Coaching*. Coaching was viewed by the participants as an interactive process leading to changes in personal and professional life. Mentoring differs from training sessions or workshops aimed at acquiring specific technical skills. For example, coaching was present when the mentor helped to identify the main steps of a thesis. This helped digest the multitude of tasks and distant goals of a PhD thesis into smaller, realistic, and achievable steps. This exercise helped the mentees to project themselves into the future and develop tangible steps such as setting deadlines for intermediate outcomes (e.g. publications or conferences). It helped in setting individual priorities and in choosing which tasks to invest energy and in the right order. The coaching component of mentoring helped mentees to learn how to better manage their time by valuing the use of an agenda. It was argued by the mentor that a proportion of research time has to be protected as a top priority. This research-dedicated time should also include the time needed for writing articles, and presenting in conferences. For some mentees, it enabled the development of a long-term "vision" for their academic life and career trajectory. Overall, the writing this paper with the coaching of the mentor was a stimulating and motivating experience.

*3. Counselling*. Counselling refers to aspects of a relationship in which the mentor provides advice and helps the mentee(s) understand and solve the problems they face. Mentees considered the mentoring meetings as very useful for developing "soft skills", which helped mentees in clarifying and comprehending the vagaries of student- and supervisor- relationships. It also permitted mentees an opportunity to clarify the rights and obligations of academic freedom. These skills not only benefit PhD students, but they also profit the institution, colleagues, and managers as such skills contribute to enhancing the productivity and efficiency of academic work. Routine and work intensity have sometimes prevented mentees from questioning working methods they might judge inadequate. The opportunity and the possibility to be supported and advised by an expert were viewed as a unique and helpful dimension in the doctoral work. Further, mentees perceived that the mentoring meetings often served to heighten awareness of novel approaches and possibilities that were critical for finding creative solutions to their own challenges. In addition it facilitated the creation of a new community and it also helped them to alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness. The opportunity to raise questions and share doubts freely, without fear of judgement or criticism was highly appreciated:

> I benefited from the meetings aimed at the organization of my work as PhD fellow. I appreciated the counseling form of it when it came to discussing time management, or rules for authorship.

> What I appreciated the most is that I could discuss with someone who was not a supervisor and who could listen to me without being in an evaluation mode!

This interactive process was also appreciated by the mentor who considered that the opportunity to counsel was a meaningful avenue for her to share her thoughts and views:

> It was completely new for me to discuss with a group of PhD fellows without being linked to them by any kind of evaluation scheme. It was great. […] But I guess what stroke me the most is the sense of isolation they had. It made these meetings even more relevant.

*4. Networking*. The concept of a network was deemed particularly important in these mentoring sessions. The mentoring took place in small groups of six students and was beneficial not only for the relationship with the mentor, but also with other doctoral students who sometimes experience similar situations and faced similar obstacles. Sharing problems and experiences was viewed as reassuring. It not only provided a link with a professional community, but also promoted the development of an "intellectual community of practice". This mentorship brought a sense of holistic learning (academic, professional, and personal) and was seen as a source of motivation. Mentees thought that:

> Networking was important for me as I could share doubts but also because there was some sharing of information such as the different lists of funding opportunities for example. But moreover, what helped me was to discuss with others PhD fellows without apprehension. It helped me even to develop a better organisation between my academic and personal life.

> It increased my enthusiasm and my energy at work.

Some mentees explained that this program had different impacts in terms of networking. First of all, the group was seen as a network itself, in which they could share their experiences and find support. The mentoring also provided an impetus for them to utilize and gain leverage from their existent network, to share within their own research group

as well as with other doctoral students. However, as the mentor was from a different discipline, she found it difficult to provide direct connections to grow the network of support for the mentees. Nevertheless, she was able to provide examples and encourage networking *per se*, making the mentees more aware of the importance of networking and the resources available to them to expand and develop their network.

For the mentor, the "StartingDoc" program provided limited opportunities to meet with other mentors. Further, the majority of other mentors were relatively young academics with significantly less experience in academia. In fact, she was the sole mentor to hold a professorship or Chair, and lead an Institute/research group. Although she participated in the mentors' meetings, she did not feel these were creatively stimulating.

Five additional emergent themes came from the qualitative analysis:

*5. First expectations*. Beginning a PhD is a pivotal moment in the career where a young researcher enters the academic field and gradually discovers – sometimes the hard way – explicit and implicit codes that govern it. Research support, opportunity to develop an original project but also power struggle, gender inequalities and strict hierarchy amongst academics are all aspects lived by the mentees within their doctoral experience. Developed within a framework designed to meet the needs of young doctoral students, the StartingDoc program's objectives were thought to help the understanding of these structural aspects that are not seen as part of academia *per se*, but nevertheless deemed necessary to rapidly understand for the completing of a doctoral project in due time:

> I felt the need to learn from people who have already experienced the many challenges of PhD but who were independent and without any conflict of interest.

> I wanted to share my questions and my doubts with people from different disciplinary backgrounds but embedded in the same PhD adventure while being accompanied by a person having an academic career.

The mentorship was judged attractive because it was "outside the box" and because it helped to address some of the key issues needed to strengthen the regular partnership with supervisors or research colleagues. Early on, mentoring was seen as a relationship between people around a specific object: the doctoral track. A priori, it is not viewed as being a friendly relationship, even if it may, in some cases, create a certain form of empathy amongst the participants:

> It is not a professional relationship and even less of a therapeutic relationship. It is more of an exchange relationship on the professional sphere, more specifically in this case, on the academic career.

The experience was anticipated to be without hierarchy, without competition between the participants and without direct outcomes or measurable impact on the lives of participants. Mentoring sessions were viewed as enclosed spaces where all participants could invest themselves. It was expected that mentoring would be based on exchanges on general issues of the academic career. It was anticipated to be a kind of "free zone" in which each participant could come and share concerns, problems, questions, and draw on experiences and knowledge from one another. The role of the mentor is seen as being able to ensure that these thoughts and resources could be shared in an opened and "duty-free" space. In that sense, it was expected to embrace a large spectrum of aspects. There were no expectations to implement skills or to transmit and share knowledge. The mentor did not know at first if her experience could be of any value

for young researchers that were not at all in her field of expertise. She questioned herself about what she could really share. However, she felt that at this moment in her career, it was the best time to share everything she could:

> According to the expectations I had in me entering the program, I realized that mentoring covered a lot more than I initially imagined, and in general this was a good surprise.

*6. Process*. The first meeting was "breaking-ice"- and process-oriented. It served to discuss what these sessions were to be in the next 18 months. Themes for the remaining three-hour meetings were decided, and dates and locations were planned. Mentees were in charge of the planning. The five chosen themes were as follows:

(1) time management;

(2) scientific publications and communications;

(3) how to build an impressive resume;

(4) group dynamics; and

(5) private and professional life balance.

Meetings took place in different locations and two had to be postponed (always due to the mentor's agenda).

Meetings were not prepared for in advance and generally were unstructured. Nevertheless, they were neither disorganized nor unproductive. They began with the mentees sharing their recent experiences and the mentor helping in organizing ideas. For some mentees, this type of dynamic was initially quite difficult because it neither provided answers to all their questions nor did it provide solutions to target all the difficulties they had to live through. One mentee said:

> I had to accept that the path that lay before me would be full of pitfalls, which I could neither always avoid nor anticipate, regardless of the number of programs that I would participate in. I became aware of the uniqueness of my career.

*7. Sharing*. These hours shared by mentees and mentor provided moments removed from daily stresses and strains, and took place in a relaxed ambiance exclusively dedicated to development, support, advice, and sharing of knowledge, practices and experiences. Gradually these meetings developed a kind of trust, in which each person, including the mentor, could embark on their own journey of professional and personal development. A consensus seemed to emerge out of each session: peer-to-peer and peer-mentor sharing provided an unparalleled motivational impetus, but also an awareness of the "rules of the game", and more generally a wider vision of what the academic world is. It also provided an awareness of how to use one's own and surrounding resources to meet the future challenges to be faced in an academic career.

In the hierarchical academic world where communication between doctoral students and professors is often hampered by difference in status, gender, perceptions and experiences, the mentoring sessions were a privileged safe place to exchange views. The experience, skills and knowledge of the mentor were considered as key components in the mentoring sessions. Willingness to share experiences in a spirit of openness offered a perspective rarely afforded to doctoral students. The mentor could give ideas to tackle problems experienced by mentees and sometimes enabled new perspectives rooted in experience but also in international norms or recommendations. Examples of these were the examination of the rules for authorship in research

publications (Winston, 1985), or the planning of the publication and communication agenda throughout the course of the study program. Likewise, issues raised by the mentees offered the mentor insights that helped her better decode the culture of the PhD-to-be generation in other disciplines:

> Authorship was a big deal. I never thought that rules for authorship were that clear but also, I never thought that they could vary so much from one discipline to the other.

The experience of the mentor served as a model to demonstrate that it is possible to be a woman, have a family life and have a productive academic career. Listening, giving positive feedback and non-judgemental constructive openness are skills that were deemed helpful to provide a rich mentoring environment. The fact that the mentor was completely external to the working environments of the mentees, with no conflict of interest, permitted open discussions free of constraints. She also reinforced that fact that mentorship does not replace regular supervision *per se*, but it is complementary and works alongside this on a parallel level. The fact that the mentor was from a different academic field, a potential obstacle, was in fact an advantage in structuring the exchanges on a more general, global level. The mentoring was rather a resource which the doctoral student could draw upon if a difficult situation emerges or more simply, if there is a need for an outside objective opinion:

> To discuss openly with a person out of the game was positive. However […] sometimes I would have appreciated that these discussions would be heard by my supervisor.

An additional positive aspect was the professional status of the mentor. As a full professor and thesis supervisor, her perspective was valued and appreciated. Also, the fact that she was a woman in a position of responsibility, who was completely out of the mentees' field of study and who had no formal liability amongst the mentees, was highly appreciated:

> I previously shared a number of observations with my colleagues, both men and women concerning the fact that professorship was linked to a lack of privacy, and to constant and daily struggle […] To have a model such as our mentor – a female senior professor was unique. In this sense, she acted as a guide who led the way and showed the direction to follow.

*8. Building identity*. The program aims to bring and develop a better understanding of the academic environment in which the doctoral students must invest themselves. This includes and is linked to the need to develop new organizational and interpersonal skills. As two of the mentees said:

> Listening and support received during the mentoring sessions were reinvested in my daily work in strengthening my own confidence and my own skills.

> During our meetings, I became aware of my own position as a woman amongst male colleagues and leaders.

Mentees felt there was an identity before and after the PhD track, but during the PhD program, the rules of engagement and the expectations placed on them were unclear. Some mentees thought that not all the doctoral students in their research group were treated the same way. The mentor discussed the concept of equality vs equity and argued that a research supervisor can decide to give less attention to stronger, more focused and more productive PhD students, in order to dedicate more time to those who need help in developing research skills. On the other hand, a supervisor can overburden very efficient and autonomous PhD students with supplementary tasks. In either case,

such matters should be discussed with a research supervisor, yet this must be broached in a non-critical and constructive way. As a professor, she sometimes helped the mentees to build a broader understanding of their supervisors' possible expectations which often remain unsaid:

> It never crossed my mind that I was given more responsibilities maybe because I was a more productive doctoral fellow. I always thought that it was because my supervisor was unfair to me. I'll look it over!

*9. Unmet expectations*. This program is open to participants across disciplines coming from four universities. Given that each participating university has its own program of activities regarding gender issues, not all mentees have had the same preparation or course on that matter. Some mentees were surprised by the fact that the gender issue was not addressed directly as a central theme in the mentoring program, rather, that it was addressed indirectly and implicitly. The consensus among mentees at the close of the program was that gender was a fundamental issue, and that it had been discussed too briefly:

> I was surprised that gender issues were not fully and directly addressed by the program. I would have thought that gender is a strong determinant of academic success. In the future, I think this should be made clearer.

Another important discussion concerned the fact that the mentorship program was only designed for women during their first years in the doctoral track. Mentees felt that there were other additional important moments in the doctoral process that could be effectively supported by such a mentoring process. In particular, mentees felt that such support would be useful during the final year of a PhD program, when students are preparing the final version of thesis and seeking career opportunities position:

> It is indeed important to be supported at the beginning, but I anticipate difficulties in the final stretch when I will be writing the final thesis and preparing for oral examination. I know that it is too early now to prepare for job applications and interviews but it stresses me a lot already when I think about my future. I would appreciate to know that I can count on some kind of coaching or guidance for these future steps.

## Discussion and conclusion

Following review of the elements in the previous section, it was concluded that the shared mentoring experience was overall beneficial. This conclusion was based on many features of the interactions and outcomes of the mentorship program. This is coherent with the view that, mentorship is a way of contributing to students' professional socialization without interfering with the scientific content of their work (Hall and Burns, 2009). The reflexive and non-judgemental approach that was employed was explicitly identified as a central feature that promoted interaction. Reflexivity for the mentor was based on the fact that she derived her interventions within the context of her own academic life experiences. For the mentees, reflexivity included being prepared to share, ask for and receive support, and to accept suggestions and questions regarding their ideas and/or practices. From this, the climate of trust and openness prevailed and was considered to be an important ingredient despite the finite number of meetings. In all sessions, mutual respect, open communication, and focus on meetings' themes were a priority.

The theoretical framework used to share the experience (Clutterbuck, 2004; Berthiaume, 2012; Clutterbuck *et al.*, 2012) was initially useful yet rapidly proved to be

insufficient for capturing the breadth and scope of the experience. As opposed to the four dimensions posited by the model, nine dimensions were ultimately deemed necessary to report our experience. Of these, doctoral identity was certainly a central theme throughout this mentorship experience. Further, it was noted that doctoral identity was unique to each individual. It was considered to be shaped by other parts of life, yet it was agreed that mentorship contributed in parallel enabling the mentees to better know, question, tolerate ambiguity, be disciplined, be authoritative, and be persistent. Consistent with the view of Boboc *et al.* (2012), identity development was perceived to be influenced by many factors. Further, the position of Lewis (2003) was deemed relevant in that mentoring supports identity development and that it should be more clearly associated with gender issues. Gender issues were not enough explicitly discussed and analysed and this was judged to be a limitation of the program.

Given the pressures that doctoral students face, it seems evident that these individuals require both personal and professional support. Furthermore, the professional relationships that doctoral students develop within and outside the academic community should ideally provide opportunities for both professional and personal development.

Like in all studies, some limitations have to be addressed. First, very few people participated in this study. It is therefore not possible to generalize, or to make any systematic comparisons. That is why a narrative case study design was chosen as it permits the analysis of a single and small group experience. Second, it is possible that mentees did not extensively share negative views about this many-to-one mentoring experience in front of the mentor. In order to overcome this type of difficulty, individual reports, group discussions and the team process of writing this paper made it probably easier to share less positive feelings. Third, the quality of qualitative research often depends on the interpretation and validation phases of the data. In this narrative case study, the participants were either a senior researcher or doctoral fellows currently involved in the development of research skills. They all took specific attention to conduct the analytical and interpretation processes with iteration. As it was about their own experience, they also proceeded in such ways that each and all participants were involved to validate the final results.

In conclusion, this paper describes the experiences of one mentoring group in a structured mentoring program, involving six young women undertaking doctoral studies and a mentor. This program called StartingDoc is new and a full evaluation is ongoing. Therefore, although this experience demonstrates some of the beneficial aspects of such a mentoring relationship for both the mentees and the mentor, it does not necessarily represent the experiences of other groups. In fact, while mentoring has been theorized and is recognized as an effective support scheme, its implementation remains a challenge. For women at the beginning of their doctoral studies, mentoring must be flexible and take into consideration aspirations, fears, experiences and expectations of young researchers. Mentees are just beginning to discover aspects of academic life that were previously unknown to them. Considering that each doctoral student has a particular path, a singular thesis project and a specific institutional position, the probability that the expectations towards the mentor were met, could be due to other aspects than those in the Clutterbuck model. Also, the many-to-one mentoring scheme should be evaluated to see if it leads to giving voice only to those who already have the ability to communicate their needs, fears and expectations.

Clearly, more evaluation research is needed to draw conclusions on the value and efficacy of the StartingDoc program and others like it. We suggest that research is still

required to better understand the influence of students' academic relationships on professional identity development in a variety of disciplines and to dissect the relative roles and impact of those aspects that contribute to the overall professional development of early career academics. Indeed, a longitudinal comparative study would be necessary to assess the long-term impact of such mentoring experiences. However, the shared experiences resulting from this many-to-one group within a larger mentoring program suggest that mentoring can be an effective tool in supporting appropriate professional identity development among female doctoral students.

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