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Full Length Research Paper

Empowering Second+ Career Female Academics: Strengthening Relationships through Mentoring for Personal and Professional Growth

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Mentoring of early career researchers (ECRs) in universities usually involves older, more experienced researchers providing guidance to younger researchers starting out in their careers. However, for women who enter academia as a second or more career (second +), this type of mentoring may not recognise the experiences these women bring with them or the unique barriers that they encounter. This study is an autoethnographic case study through a relational cultural theory lens of five women who entered academia later in their careers but were classified as ECRs. In order to address the unique challenges confronting them they formed a peer mentoring group. Analysis of group discussions and individual reflections resulted in the identification of common themes of disempowerment, lack of belonging and lack of collegiate relations as they confronted the often-invisible barriers presented by university processes and culture. Sharing of mutual experiences within the peer mentoring group resulted in greater self-awareness of negative self-talk and beliefs, developed understanding of university systems, empowered participants through relational problem solving and supported agency in planning career progression. The increased sense of belonging and self-efficacy that participants felt suggests that peer mentoring, rather than traditional mentoring schemes, may be of greater benefit for other second+ career female academics.

Keywords: mature female academics, mentoring, university relationships, empowerment, early career researcher(s)

Historically, university education was available only to elite segments of society, primarily white men, with admission to university by women being achieved more recently. Australian universities began admitting women in the 1890s and Oxford University in England accepted their first unrestricted female cohort in 1920. Prior to this date, women were allowed to study at Oxford, however, they were not allowed to take a degree (University of Oxford, 2023). Harvard University in the U.S. excluded women as late as 1942, with all Harvard colleges admitting women only as recently as 1965 (Wenninger & Conroy, 2001).

Gender Gaps

Although, more recently, the participation gap for females studying and working in academia has reversed, a gender gap remains in relation to female academics in positions of leadership. By the 1990s female university students outnumbered their male classmates (Wenninger & Conroy, 2001). Yet, despite entering academia, graduating in greater numbers, and moving to teaching and research academic roles, women remain underrepresented in university leadership positions. As is the case worldwide, Australian universities are showing a general improvement, precipitated by such factors as the measures introduced by the first and second Action Plans for Women implemented by the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee (AVCC), and the subsequent Universities Australia Strategy for Women (Winchester & Browning, 2015). These strategies influenced a shift in Australian universities where women comprised 40% of academic staff overall in 2005. However, women were not well represented in senior leadership positions; for example, only 17% of professors and 23% of vice chancellors in 2005 were women (Browning, 2008). Progress is being made, albeit slowly; by 2014 the overall number had slightly increased to women representing 44% of academic staff with 31% being in senior positions (Winchester & Browning, 2015). However, there is still much work to be done. In 2020, while close to 60% of employees at Australian universities were women, more than 50% of academic positions at Senior Lecturer level or above were held by men (Universities Australia, 2020). In their examination of university policies and practices, Winchester and colleagues (2006) posit that the gender disparity in promotion and leadership is due to cultural and generational

attitudes rather than poorly designed or implemented policy. The most recent figures from Universities Australia (Jarboe, 2017) show that wide gender disparities still exist in leadership positions; currently only 25% of Vice Chancellors, and 15% of Chancellors are women, and at the faculty level women make up about one third of head of faculties or schools. This slow progress is reflective of the difficulty in changing societal attitudes and unconscious biases (Vongalis-Macrow, 2016). Gender bias in the workplace more broadly is well documented, with women being less likely to achieve promotions, and more subtle differences where women are subjected to stereotypical gendered assumptions by their colleagues (Davidson, 2018).

Academic Mentoring

Mentoring for academics is a support often provided by universities. However, there is a wide variance in the effectiveness of mentoring programs including difficulty with matching mentor and mentee, and a lack of training and support for mentors (Stokes & Merrick, 2012). Women in academia have unique needs that are difficult to address through standard workplace mentoring programs, which may not consider the needs of women or the unique strengths they bring. This was the case for a group of five mature female academics at an Australian university, four of whom had attained Doctoral qualifications in the previous five-year period. Despite their varied career experiences and wealth of expertise, they were categorized as Early Career Researchers based on the completion timeframes of their Doctoral studies.

The term Early Career Researcher (ECR) or Early Career Academic (ECA) is used broadly in the university sector to describe those who are in their first five years post-completion of a PhD, and is a common measure used for both research funding and workplace training, awards, and promotion (Bosanquet et al., 2017). However, traditional views of academic support for those identified as ECR/ECA ignore the rich experiences that women who complete PhD studies later in their professional careers bring to academia. Because of this oversight, institutional mentoring support provided by universities is often inadequate for the unique needs of this cohort of women academics, partly because their distinctive strengths and skills are not considered. Having found this to be the case, we created a peer mentoring group for the purpose of providing mutual support and managing the challenges to career advancement specific to women entering academia later in their professional careers. We began meeting together for informal, mutually supportive discussions around our unique experiences. As females who had extensive career experiences but were labelled as early career researchers, we came to consensus that the term second+ career female academics more accurately described our situation. We recognized the benefits of using our background experience to support each other as colleagues through relational mentoring experiences, utilizing supportive relational behaviors such as reciprocity, flexibility, and mutual learning.

This paper shares the story of our journey for the purpose of adding to the research base of effective mentoring supports for women in academia. First, we review previous research around relational mentoring, particularly considering structured workplace mentoring programs in tertiary institutions. We then challenge stereotypical views of both gender and age often found in academia, through our argument that the unique strengths and challenges of women in academia can be more effectively viewed through the theoretical lens of Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1976) rather than the traditional linear view of human development with individuals progressing through specific developmental points across the lifespan (Erikson, 1968).

Our research is structured as a qualitative, auto ethnographic inquiry, with ourselves positioned as insiders (participant researchers) exploring our own ideas and understandings and culminating in both individual and collective narratives (Chang, 2008). We report on our peer mentoring group experiences for the purpose of adding to information regarding effective supports specifically for the cohort of women who complete PhD studies and pursue academic careers as a second or more career, especially considering their unique strengths.

Literature Review

The widely used terms of ECR and ECA fail to accurately describe the growing cohort of academics who complete PhDs well into their working career. In addition, the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce means that many academics may teach and complete research for extended periods of time before gaining a permanent academic position. Because of these changing dynamics, such terms as ECR or ECA are becoming inaccurate and outdated. Studies such as those of Bosanquet et al., (2017) show that as few as 20% of ECAs follow the traditional pathway into academia through gaining permanent or full-time employment at a university almost immediately after completion of doctoral studies. Many individuals begin their academic careers through casual teaching or research positions.

Ageism & Perceptions

There is a move to discard descriptors like "young" and "new" academic (Price et al., 2015) because of growing realization that "age is not an indicator of early career" (Bosanquet et al., 2017, p. 891). A New Zealand study identified that over a third of early career academics were female, 40 years of age or over (Sutherland et al., 2013). Yet, the most common definition of an early to mid-career researcher is one that is under 35 years of age (Suarez-Martinez & Ravenscroft, 2019). Women over 35, with extensive previous non-academic career experience, plus, in many cases, a substantial academic career prior to completing a PhD, disrupt the stereotypical conceptions of who is considered an ECR/ECA. Current research literature in this area is more likely to focus on those under 35. More information is needed to understand the particular types of support which are needed by those that either change careers or enter academia through

pathways other than directly after completion of an undergraduate degree to a PhD qualification. Typical university supports are aimed at career trajectories envisaged as slow and steady progressions across a lifetime of work. In contrast, women who have gained years of valuable career and life experience before completing PhDs, bring this practical knowledge and experience with them when they join academic fields. Not only do they need different types of support for career progression, but much of their previous experience can also be drawn upon to perpetuate a more rapid climb for successful career progression and recognition. Utilising the strengths this group of women academics contribute can transform their academic career progression from a "marathon" to a "sprint race" (McKay & Monk, 2017, p. 1252).

Those that identify as ECRs are faced with challenges in relation to low job security, with precarious short-term contracts the norm (Hollywood et al., 2020; Bosanquet et al., 2017); pressure to research and publish (Raynor, 2019); increasing workloads (Acker & Webber, 2017) leading to stress, burnout and mental health issues; and poor work-life balance (Bartlett et al., 2021). However, for women, particularly those that enter academia or complete a PhD later in their career, these issues compound. Despite being successful and competent in previous workplaces, McKay and Monk (2017) argue, upon entering higher education this group is reduced to neophytes, as there are new sets of "explicit and implied rules, ideologies and hidden curriculum" (p. 1258) to master. They contend that for this group there is limited time to learn the rules, build a record of accomplishment and establish an academic profile. In addition, they face a persistently hierarchical, patriarchal, aged, and gendered environment (Hearn & Husu, 2019), where there is greater expectation that women will do more of the teaching, pastoral care, and the invisible procedural and "academic housekeeping" (p.199), work which is less valued in terms of university career progression metrics. This group of academics can 'slip through the cracks' of institutional provisions, such as research funding schemes, and career enhancing support networks that have been identified as privileging male academics to the exclusion of women (Burkinshaw & White, 2019; Boyle et al., 2015). These cracks in provision result in, what Bosetti et al., (2008) characterise as positioning women 'betwixt' and 'between' what is on offer from academia, and what women need in terms of effective career support. What became clear to us was the dominant model of career support offered at our institution, such as mentoring, lacked nuance and relevance for our needs as a group of second+ career female academics.

Mentoring

The university sector professes to offer support for ECRs, including formal mentoring programs, peer mentoring programs and other types of institutional support. However, mentoring programs tend to encourage collaboration and the development of interpersonal relationships, which can be difficult in competitive academic environments that value individual achievement (Lewis & Olshansky, 2016). Therefore, intended support may be ineffective or non-existent, especially for those transitioning between roles within the university sector (Adams et al., 2016). Respondents to a survey of ECRs in Australian education faculties conducted by Orlando and Gard (2014) reported a broad range of support from little to rich and meaningful mentoring relationships, and formal professional development programs. Those who expressed dissatisfaction found that the programs were ad hoc or produced few tangible benefits and that workload allocations made it difficult for ECRs to develop research profiles while also meeting other demands of their roles.

Involvement in leadership and mentoring programs within universities includes a range of identifiable outcomes, such as increased understanding of organizational structure, clarification and confidence around career development, and opportunities for networking and role models (Browning, 2008). Academics who have successfully attained leadership roles in research groups attribute mentoring as one of the factors alongside institutional support, research culture and institutional assistance, as contributing to their success (Browning et al., 2017). Universities often send mixed messages encouraging collaboration among academics, but at the same time rewarding individual efforts which fosters a culture of competitiveness rather than collaboration. Mentoring relationships must be built upon open and trusting relationships to be successful, and this is certainly true in a competitive professional context such as academia.

Formal mentoring programs are widely used as a support for early career teaching and research academics and are often seen as a method of support for underrepresented minority groups, including women in the profession (Lewis & Olshansky, 2016; Brown & Severin, 2014). These mentoring programs do not always provide satisfactory or measurable benefits to participants. Formal mentoring in academia usually involves a more experienced or successful faculty member providing support to a newer peer through advice, introductions and assistance navigating processes. However, currently established mentoring programs often were designed according to the needs of white, male academics and may not benefit those from the diverse groups represented in academia today (Johannesen & Bristol, 2016; Hackmann & Malin, 2020). This lack of success may be due to a mismatch of interests, backgrounds or expectations or a lack of understanding of how the relationship can benefit both parties. Traditional mentoring approaches, caution Lewis and Olshanky (2016), may attempt to fit the mentee into existing models rather than working to create new models of success. They also suggest that unless there is a method of relationship development, formal programs are unlikely to be successful.

Mentoring programs in various forms including peer mentoring, group mentoring, and co-mentoring, are increasingly being utilized at university and even national and global levels, in attempts to find more satisfactory arrangements (Mullen et al., 2020; Johannesen & Bristol, 2016; Wu et al., 2016). Peer

mentoring provides a safe space where participants feel free to admit to challenges and perceived weaknesses without being judged, and to share ways of working through those challenges, including mutual support (Adams et al., 2016). Groups such as those developed by Adams and colleagues (2016) have found that being at a similar career stage and having similar research areas helped to develop bonds which provided both professional and personal support.

If early career researchers are to become the research leaders of the future, Browning et al. (2017) conclude universities need to provide strong support for activities which develop networks, encourage collaboration, and provide mentoring opportunities, as well as other systematic support such as resources for conference attendance, development of grant applications and supervision of post graduate students. We argue that this type of institutional support is scarce, as in our case, where a group of female academics found it necessary to create an informal, collegial mentoring space.

Theoretical Foundation

This paper draws on Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) as an explanatory mechanism to illustrate our experiences. First proposed by Miller (1976), RCT focuses on the importance of personal development through the process of relationship building with personal interactions, friendships, and network development. Although originally applied as a feminist theory, the concepts of RCT have been used to understand the interactions within specific groups defined by culture or sexual orientation. A central tenet of RCT is the development of mutually supportive relationships geared toward reciprocal growth and empowerment (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2015). This is in stark contrast to the traditional individualistic view of personal development where a person works through personal challenges developing greater degrees of self-confidence and independence across the lifespan (Erikson, 1968). However, proponents of RCT believe that these traditional views are aligned with the experiences of white, middle-class males, without considering the experiences of minority or marginalized societal groups such as those defined by gender, culture, or socio-economic status, who may tend to recognize the importance of community and relationships for personal development (Comstock et al., 2008). While personal autonomy is important, healthy human development, both personal and professional, is supported by interactions with colleagues, particularly those which consider the uniqueness of a person's specific characteristics such as gender, culture, or experiences of individuals who may have had marginalizing experiences (Lewis & Olshansky, 2016). Further, the group relationship development which may support positive self-concepts and lead to healthy, connected relationships were likely to be negatively identified as feminine traits and opposite to the concepts of autonomy and self-reliance more likely to be seen as male attributes.

Study Purpose & Rationale

Based on prior research into women in academia and ECR, it is evident that women who are entering academia from other careers are not represented in the literature. This study addresses this gap by investigating the differences between our experiences as second+ career female academics in comparison to younger women who entered academia as a first career. The purpose of this study is to examine the way this group of women academics used the development of relationships via a mentoring group as a supportive system to navigate the academic environment. Each of the participants has their individual academic journey to share, however, we propose that the interactions of the group provide interesting and valuable insights to better understand the ways the group supported and strengthened each other. Further, we present insights into the larger picture of academia, including how women navigate systemic supports and barriers. We seek to understand how the experiences of the women individually interacted with the collective experiences of the group. This understanding may provide more information as to the support needs of second+ career female academics.

The two research questions examined in this study are:

1. What are the perceived challenges and opportunities for second career female academics?
2. What is the impact of participation in a peer mentoring group specifically designed to support second career female academics in addressing the challenges identified?

Methods

This qualitative study utilizes Corbin and Strauss' (2008) procedures of the development of a grounded theory through examination of the context and process to understand how theoretical integration is useful to a phenomenon. This method is useful since we want to demonstrate how individual experiences interact with and act upon the understanding and actions of the group. We employed a collaborative auto ethnographic methodology to understand our lived experience from an emic (insider) perspective as five female academics at a single university within Western Australia using a narrative analysis of the data. These procedures are useful to recognize the artificial aspect of micro and macro conditions because of the complexity and interrelatedness of human interactions allowing us to make sense of both our individual and group experiences.

Participants

Each of the participants (n=5) had a career in classroom teaching and educational roles outside of schools before coming to academia and were over 50 years of age at the time of this study. Four had completed their PhD within the last two to eight years and met the definition of an ECA used at many Australian universities. In this paper, we describe these women as second+ career female academics to acknowledge their relative late entry to academia, and the fact that they are by necessity much older

than many of their university colleagues due to their previous, often extensive, work and life experiences.

The participants became part of this research in two ways. The first was as a result of a conversation between three of the academics, Jane, Alexandra and Ruth, precipitated by an incident in the workplace that impacted all three and became the impetus for this study. This incident related to a call for female ECR's to join a formal university wide mentoring program. The selection process resulted in a young female academic being selected, which caused our group to surmise that mature female academics were not readily considered by management as needing this kind of support. It was only after lobbying that one of the second + career academics was eventually included in the formal program. This shared experience, where each participant has experienced a phenomenon that is the central focus of a study, and therefore, an information rich source, is an example of purposeful sampling (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The other two participants, Michelle and Grace, were recruited via snowball sampling, a form of convenience sampling (Bryman, 2012) as they were known to the first three participants. Michelle was included as she was the only other example of a second+ career female academic within their department and Grace was selected as she had over 20 years' experience in academia but had only recently completed her PhD. This organic development is an important aspect of effective peer mentoring and allowed us to develop specific mutual support within our group.

Procedures

The group met monthly for 1-to-1.5-hour meetings for a period of one year. We also communicated through emails and informal conversations, reaching out to each other for support and information around university processes and procedures. Group members did not know each other well in the beginning, however, we discovered that we all had specific areas of experience and expertise that were mutually beneficial to the group members. This engagement resulted in a natural progression of supportive professional relationships among the group members which we found in stark contrast to our experiences in mentor programs developed through bureaucratic processes which, although well intentioned, did not provide the intended support.

Because we felt that our experiences were particularly unique, we believed that it was important to document the group activities and the progression and outcomes of the relationship development through research. The research procedures, including development of the research questions, and research design decisions were determined through collaborative discussions in which all group members had an equal voice. The responsibilities and tasks were shared among the group according to the strengths and interests of the members, including organization and facilitation of the focus group meetings, recording and transcription of the focus groups, data analysis and writing for dissemination. Data were generated through two sources: two semi structured focus group interviews and ongoing, reflective journaling by each participant.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were held across two distinct points during the mentoring process, at 6 months and again after 1 year. Due to COVID-19 movement restrictions at the time, one of the focus groups was conducted online via Zoom (https://zoom.us). Each focus group utilized semi structured interview questions enabling participants to provide a response to a common prompt, but also to elaborate and contextualize their response to personal experiences and circumstances. Open-ended questions generate rich qualitative data as they enable a more natural conversational relationship between interviewer and interviewees. They also encourage "depth and vitality", supporting both spontaneous questions and responses that may lead to new paths not considered in the original study design (Doody & Noonan, 2013, p. 30).

Interview Protocol

The focus group interview questions were:

1. How confident do you feel regarding your ability to navigate university processes?
2. What barriers have you experienced/perceived regarding career advancement in the academic environment?
3. What supports have you found useful regarding career advancement in the academic environment?
4. What strengths do you feel you bring to the academic environment specifically because of your life position?
5. Who have you identified as a career mentor in the academic environment?
    a. What qualities make that person an effective mentor?

The interviewer, Michelle, adhered to the set of pre-planned core questions in a flexible way building upon the responses of each participant, and utilizing secondary probing and clarifying questions. In this way, her role as a researcher changed during the focus group interview to a moderator or facilitator (Punch, 2009). The core questions guided the interview to gain a common set of data from each participant related to the foci of this study. The goal was to facilitate the generation of rich descriptive detailed accounts of the participants' experiences perceptions and perspectives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Adams & Cox, 2008) and what meaning they made of these (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In addition, facilitation of group interaction produced data and insights that enriched and expanded on individual participant contributions (Punch, 2009).

Reflective Journals

Each participant engaged in reflective journaling across the year. To support journal writing, open ended prompts were developed by consensus of the group at the monthly meetings. Examples of these prompts include:

1. Current barriers to my success are:
2. Current supports I am experiencing:
3. I feel my colleagues value/don't value my work because….
4. A colleague I trust is:
5. My goals are:

Participants were also encouraged to regularly record other thoughts, observations, feelings, and ideas beyond the specified prompts. Journaling is a form of self-reflexive auto ethnographic inquiry that enables participants to explore their ideas and understandings resulting in individual narratives (Chang, 2008). Using an auto ethnographic approach, each participant interrogated themselves and generated data in the form of a personal account. These journal entries allowed the individual to explore the broader social and cultural context through self-observation (Sealy, 2012; Wilkinson, 2020). Through engaging in auto ethnographic inquiry we, as a group of female academics, sought to weave together our lived experiences in academia in narrative form to help make sense of, and contextualize our experiences of perceptual and actual barriers to career progression. These journal entries were collated at the conclusion of the year and were entered into NVivo (https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo/).

Data Analysis

The data generated represent a collective or composite reflective narrative. The auto ethnographic accounts of our experiences centered on a common phenomenon within an Australian university over a year.

Data were analyzed in two stages. First, the transcribed recordings of responses to open-ended focus group questions were analyzed. Each researcher independently engaged in a process of open coding each line of the transcripts to generate high level categories. The researchers then met to ensure inter-coder agreement and to develop a collective consistent nomenclature for each category and clarify the meaning of each and the data relevant to each category. Then a single researcher input the transcripts into NVivo (QSR, 2012) and associated direct quotes from the participants with each category. The same process was applied to the reflective journals from each participant.

From here, coding of both the focus group interview transcripts and the journals using constant comparative analysis generated inductive themes; that is, they emerged from the data and not from the existing literature. These themes linked a number of the initially coded categories to represent broader and more inclusive concerns that resonated with the research questions posed in the study. The following themes emerged as salient: belongingness, collegiate relations, university processes and protocols, and mentoring. These four themes had a reciprocal relationship with each other, and constituted aspects that contributed to the overarching theme of (dis)empowerment, as illustrated in Figure 1. The use of the term (dis)empowerment captures the dichotomous influences on these female academics. For example, within the theme of belongingness, aspects such as the development of supportive, positive relationships can support a sense of empowerment in the workplace, whilst perceived inequities because of age or gender could lead to disempowerment. Therefore, each of the four themes had a positive and negative valence.

Results

Themes

Interviews were initially coded for themes using NVivo (QSR, 2012) software using open-ended coding as categories arose (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As coding progressed, five major categories were identified (Bryman, 2012): Belongingness; Collegiate relations; Mentoring; University culture and processes; and Empowerment/Disempowerment. Coding within these themes to find sub-themes within each category continued until no more categories arose and it was assumed that theoretical saturation had been reached (Bryman, 2012). Themes and sub-themes and the frequency of each sub-theme which describe the participants' perceptions of barriers and supportive factors for career progression are presented in Table 1. Note: within Table 1, identified barriers are represented in italics, to differentiate from identified supports.

Table 1

Supportive factors and barriers to career progression arising from NVivoTM analysis.

Major themes	Sub-themes (supports and *barriers*)	Frequency
Belongingness	Developing feelings of inclusion	5
	Feeling left out or rejected	22
	Perceptions of age as a barrier	14
	Inequitable opportunities	8
	Imposter syndrome	5
	Underselling ourselves	5
Mentoring	Experience congruent with age/role	12
	Group with a range of perspectives	2
	Purposive selection of participants	1
	Experience incongruent with age/role	7
	Externally imposed	2
University culture/processes	Learning to navigate the system	5
	University culture acts as a blocker	37
	Not knowing how to navigate the system	24
	Blocks from gatekeepers	16
	Invisible processes	7
	Short-term contracts and lack of funding	7
Collegiate relationships	Being valued by others	26
	Honesty/trust	6
	Being undervalued	9
(Dis)empowerment	Agency - Positive thinking	53
	Building confidence	17
	Growing self-awareness	11
	Empowered to persist/ be resilient	10
	Gaining necessary knowledge of the system	8
	Support in career planning and decision making	7
	Problem solving	6
	Negative self-worth and confidence	15
	Negativity – lack of agency	8
	Guilt	6

Belongingness

The theme of belonging or lack of belonging within the academic environment was raised as a prominent theme by all participants (Table 1). Sub-themes within this theme represent either supporting factors or barriers to 'belongingness'. For

instance, a sense of inclusion supported a belief in belonging, while beliefs in inequitable practices undermined a sense of belonging in participants. During the initial group meetings, discussion tended to focus on the sub-themes that described barriers towards belonging. Four of the five participants noted that they had felt left out or rejected within the academic community. For instance, Ruth noted that she "was not introduced to anyone" and that told the story that "you're not really part of the school".

A second major barrier to belonging that was identified was the participants' beliefs about others' perceptions related to age. There was the perception that, although they were categorised as early career researchers due to recent completion of PhDs, that they were frequently considered to be "too old" (Alexandra) and hence overlooked for awards or promotion as they did not fit the stereotype of a young (early) career researcher. Concerns were expressed that despite selection criteria for academic positions purportedly being age-blind, that age was an unwritten factor working against career development for these women. Issues of inequitable distribution of opportunities for older women were also raised, for instance, perceptions that younger women were "offered [more] opportunities and support" and older women were given disproportionately "the heaviest workloads" (Alexandra).

Two of the sub-themes were related to the participants' own self-perceptions. Three group members noted that they had feelings that they did not really belong within the academic community – that they were imposters within that environment. For instance, Jane noted that "most of us probably do have those moments where we go 'How did I end up [here]?'"

Secondly, group members noted that we tend to undersell our abilities and skills that we have developed over many years and through many life-experiences. It was recognised that these two sub-themes and elements of the other sub-themes are examples of negative self-talk, for instance, not "believing that we can do things as well as others" (Ruth), which act to prevent integration within the academic community.

In meetings later in the year, there were fewer instances of each of these sub-themes and a perceptible increase in expressions of agency and empowerment were noted. Participants of the mentoring group noted the benefits of the group because they felt like "there are people who are like me" (Jane) and recognised that they should not be "ashamed of [their] prior experience - but, in fact, celebrate [those] experiences" (Jane). Participants also became aware of negative self-talk and checked themselves from engaging in such talk. Jane noted that she was "genuinely grateful for the group" as participation supported agency through breaking down barriers to belonging and building inclusion.

Belongingness for our group was enabled through feeling included and the perception that we were given opportunities on an equitable basis due to ability rather than age. Barriers to belongingness were related to our feelings of rejection or exclusion, underselling ourselves by not promoting our skills and abilities, and a self-perception of ourselves as imposters within an academic environment.

Mentoring

Most of the participants had taken part in formal one-to-one mentoring organised by the university. Although there were some benefits to these externally arranged mentoring relationships, all participants noted that there was incongruence between the mentor's experience and the mentees', since most mentors had worked in academia for their entire careers or in "research only positions" (Alexandra) and did not understand the unique experiences that we had as women entering academia after pursuing prior careers or trying to juggle teaching with research. On the other hand, this purposively selected group of academics, possessing a range of perspectives and experiences, but who shared characteristics such as age, gender (Experiences congruent with age/role), was considered to have a much more profound influence in encouraging members, helping them to understand the university context and supporting them in career development. For instance, Alexandra noted that being in this group had "laid bare some issues that are peculiar to us" as "the 'lost' or 'forgotten' group". Ruth noted that "hearing stories of others has given me specific steps that I can take in order to develop my career." Alexandra identified the need for second+ career female academics to engage in "a fast-track program – accelerated learning of the essential things that are known to make a difference to career progression and academic success." She noted that "having this group has made these hidden questions more tangible" and "given me courage to shape new strategies".

In summary, the mentoring provided by a purposively selected group of academics who would provide a range of perspectives and experiences was considered effective. In addition, this mentoring was significantly more effective than formally arranged university mentoring, as there was a congruence between the mentor's and the mentee's experience, age, gender, and role.

University Processes & Culture

The processes and culture of universities emerged as a dominant theme during focus group conversations (See table 1). Participants perceived the university culture as "hierarchical" (Grace) and prohibitive in enacting autonomy and feeling accepted in the workplace with "a number of barriers [impacting] on success as an academic" (Alexandra). The university environment was described as "lacking in community building and unwelcoming for newcomers" (Ruth). Alexandra described this as a "kind of 'Uni cultural cringe'" and felt people perceived her as not possessing "the right credentials to be noticed". Alexandra believed what was "valued outside academia and at the entry point into academia was a devalued currency within the university environment. The metrics for career success and progression narrowed to a small set of criteria

that often focussed on individualistic, rather than collaborative goals".

There was an emphasis on learning to navigate the system to improve a sense of inclusion in the university community with a prevailing perception that barriers were constantly reinforced if those involved "don't know how the system works" (Alexandra) and you "really have to push the boundaries" (Ruth) to achieve success and build an academic profile. Inconsistency in messages and information across the university was expressed as a barrier to progressing careers, creating uncertainty about navigating the system. Grace commented on the competitive nature of the university culture which negatively impacted the establishment of relationships premised on collegial support and encouragement because people have to "look the best or better" than colleagues. Incompetent leaders were thought to be "intimidated" and "threatened by competent people with extensive experience".

There were perceived risks associated with being outspoken and challenging decisions and leadership. Participants had been "omitted from conversations and excluded from opportunities" (Alexandra) and there was general agreement that "they actually pick out people who are going to be compliant" (Grace) rather than someone who challenges the system.

More in-depth discussion about the university culture centred on "the type of people we're employing [at the university] and the appointment of incompetent executive leadership and "dysfunctional leadership" (Grace) as barriers to establishing a positive community ethos and an inclusive workplace. Leadership often provided explanations that were "very inadequate in justifying some decisions" (Alexandra). Despite the perception of deficits in the interpersonal skills and expertise of staff, participants ascertained that a "good relationship with your head of school" (Alexandra) was an effective strategy for traversing obstacles in the system. Alexandra described a leadership group as "a little purple circle" where information flow and decision-making was constrained within the "bubble" with "minimal discussion" and not disseminated to staff more broadly to ensure equitable access to information. Michelle appreciated the support of the mentoring group as it helped "to keep a more balanced perspective and allows me to see that the unhelpful attitudes and actions of the university aren't personal to me, but it speaks of many differing agendas of the people who are in power and make decisions".

Participants alluded to two key problems with university culture: "sometimes you are genuinely blocked" and on other occasions it is because "you don't know what you don't know" (Jane) There was a belief that employees "learn the ropes" (Alexandra) and identify the "gatekeepers" (Michelle) over an extended period. "Find[ing] the right person" is key to navigating the barriers to progression. With no "formal induction into university processes", and "no idea about what my role was" (Ruth) striving for success was "a process of osmosis relying on your own initiative" (Alexandra). Personal responsibility was accepted in some instances with (Jane) commenting that a part of the reason is because as "women… we don't necessarily want to admit that we need help".

Grace surmised that she was "tired of the instability, constant restructuring and reshaping, poor leadership, lack of long term strategic and operational planning designed to achieve strategic imperatives, incongruence across the institution, and repeat conversations for the last 10 to 15 years." The group identified that an inclusive culture where they were welcomed as newcomers and valued for previous experience, would support their progress in academia. Less emphasis on credentials, and greater focus on collaborative rather than individualistic pursuits were identified as ways to build a supportive culture.

In terms of university processes, several factors emerged as helpful such as a more formalised induction process that clarified the role of an academic and ways to navigate the various, and ever changing, systems with the help of knowledgeable colleagues who could identify gatekeepers. Transparent and effective leadership committed to equitable dissemination of information was also identified as supportive measures.

Collegiate Relationships

Participants acknowledged the "deep importance of interdependence and really valuing each other and encouraging each other" (Ruth). Appreciation of nurturing collegial relationships where one can speak "honestly and frankly, and voice ideas/concern that are accepted and validated" (Alexandra) was considered essential for navigating a difficult work environment. There was consensus that supportive groups of this ilk were "very powerful and helped to clarify perceptions based on self-doubts and those that are systemic problems" (Ruth), thereby building self-awareness and identifying strategies for breaking down barriers. Developing global networks outside the university were considered valuable for "self-esteem" (Ruth) and professional "credibility" (Grace). "The deep importance of interdependence and ...valuing … and encouraging each other" (Ruth) was highlighted as benefit of the mentoring group.

Grace discussed the benefits that evolve from "networking and building those networks and relationships", perceiving this strategy as instrumental in breaking down barriers. Ruth described the mentoring group as "instrumental in changing my perspective about how to develop my career." Participants referred to "informal connections" that evolved into collaborative professional relationships. Jane described an example where her confidence was boosted when a colleague sought her input and subsequently "found that [the colleague] learned just as much from [Jane] as she did from me - about different things". Actively "keeping up relationships and keeping online and … doing zoom calls with people "(Ruth) was deemed essential to maintain relationships during COVID-19 restrictions. Despite examples of positive relationship building and acknowledgement of the importance of collegial relationships, the underlying perception was that academics "don't play well together" and lack "social skills" (Michelle).

The group identified the powerful interdependent collegiate relationship developed had privileged honesty, trust, frankness, and valuing of each other, and was instrumental in breaking down personal barriers to career progression.

[Dis] Empowerment

Perceptions of empowerment and disempowerment echoed across all themes. Personal agency, confidence, and resilience were afforded through an enhanced sense of belonging, strengthened collegiate relations and mentoring. Conversely, negative self-worth and lack of confidence, and a prevailing sense of powerlessness emerged from feelings of rejection, being undervalued, and a university culture characterised by obstacles. Participants agreed that it was important to take ownership and initiative in managing your career and not rely on others who are self-interested. Feeling empowered to "push the boundaries" (Alexandra) was critical to success and wellbeing. "A lack of value for work and efforts by the university" (Ruth) and feeling "largely invisible and unrecognised in my workplace" (Alexandra) led to a lack of confidence and a feeling of inadequacy. Jane expressed doubt in her capabilities referring to an "imposter syndrome", questioning that she deserved accolades and success and "needed to accept ownership of her career trajectory".

Personal agency and positive thinking were resonating themes throughout discussions. Participants agreed that it was essential to "keep a more balanced perspective" (Michelle) and recognise that "the unhelpful attitudes and actions of the university aren't personal but speak of many differing agendas of the people who are in power and make decisions" (Ruth). Alexandra conceded that "Much of what we need to succeed is left to a process of osmosis or relies on your own initiative". As participants "shared individual strengths and reaffirmed each other's valuable contributions" (Jane), confidence grew and ownership of one's destiny emerged. Ruth was inspired by the group as a sense of pride emanated and a willingness to "celebrate prior experience and … say I actually have something to contribute here".

The "lack of job security" (Jane), "funding and the freeze on contracts [are] major barriers" (Ruth) to progressing academic careers. "Short term contracts" (Ruth) were perceived as barriers to career advancement. COVID-19 was regarded as an "insidious" (Alexandra) factor in limiting career progression and propagating a sense of disempowerment.

Jane articulated a deepening sense of empowerment the group enabled through "making it a safe, supportive space to share highs and lows" and the collective discussion on "ways to counteract [the negatives and injustices]". "It's also been great to see how the group seems to be more as a whole than the sum total of our parts. I think we are stronger as a group than we would be if we were just individuals" (Michelle).

Empowerment for the individuals in the group was strongly supported by being part of the collegiate mentoring group. Through the group the factors identified as relating to a sense of disempowerment were able to be dealt with in a collective, affirming, and supportive way. As Michelle expressed: "The conversations and relationships that I've developed with the group members have helped…me [to recognise] that as colleagues the other group members do value and appreciate my work/ideas". Empowerment for the members was enabled through a collective dismantling of perceived barriers.

Discussion

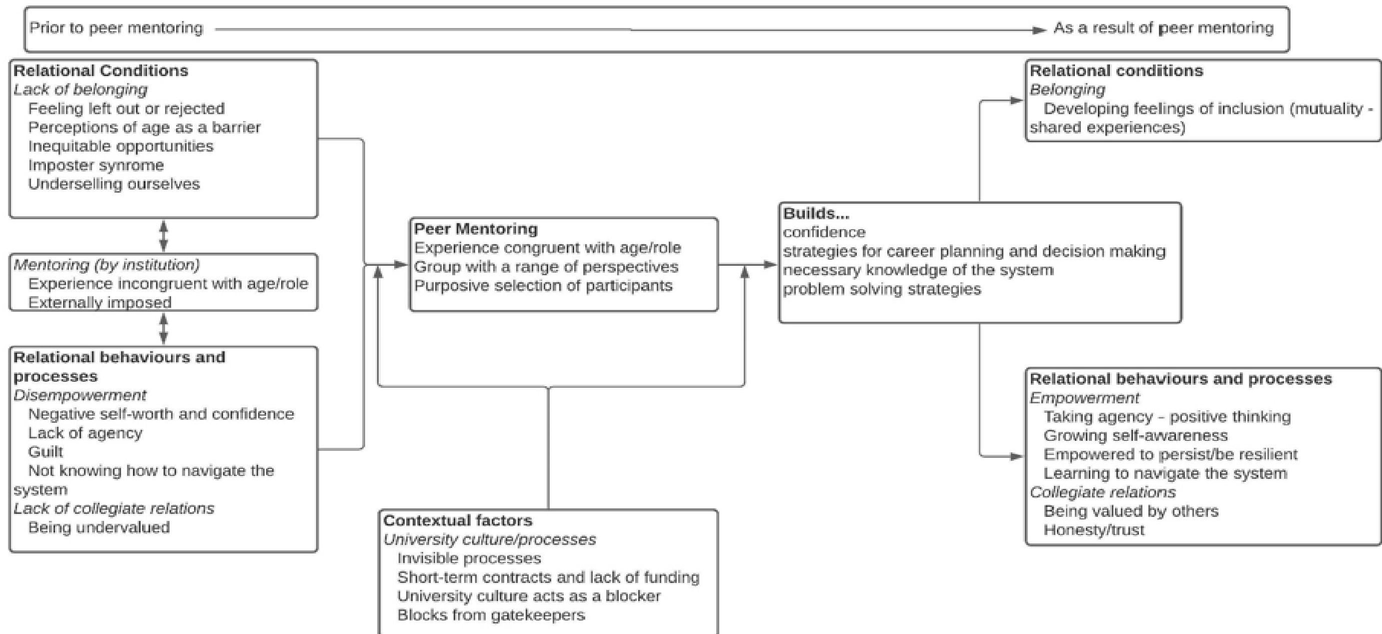
Women are well represented in university teaching and research roles; however, they are less likely to hold leadership positions as compared to their male counterparts. Although universities attempt to address this inequity, support offered such as mentoring, is not always effective because the strengths and needs of women are not taken into consideration (Stokes & Merrick, 2012). The purpose of this study was to better understand the challenges and opportunities of women who complete Doctoral degrees and enter the field after completing other careers. Second, we wanted to know if participation in an organically developed peer mentoring group was useful in addressing identified challenges according to their perceptions. Second + career female academics have unique strengths created by the rich experiences they bring with them as well as specific support needs, which are not always addressed by mentoring programs developed through traditional bureaucratic policies.

Overall, the data indicates that despite a wide variance of career experiences and aspirations of the participants, there are common recurrent themes in the identified participant experiences and perceptions suggesting that traditional support systems and bureaucratic processes are often inadequate or ineffective and, in some instances, create further challenges for the second + career female academic participants. Further, there is compelling evidence that participation in a peer mentoring program which is organically developed may mitigate these challenges. This section will discuss the overall themes gathered from the data, including how the thematic concepts are interrelated as well as their relationship to RCT (Miller, 1978), and finally, how this data can inform the development of more effective supports for other second+ career female academics.

Five broad themes were identified: belongingness, collegiate relations, mentoring, university culture and processes and empowerment/disempowerment. Each theme has distinct characteristics yet are interrelated concepts relevant to the concept of relationship building, the foundation which underpins both mentoring and RCT (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2015) as both hold that quality peer interaction is essential to healthy human development. Not only were the five themes evident, but the data in each category also helped to tell the story of our individual growth through the development of supportive professional relationships. See Figure 1 for a graphic representation of the interconnectedness of these thematic concepts as they relate to the positive relational development over time.

Figure 1

Thematic interactions illustrating growth of relationships across the peer mentoring activities.



Relational conditions (lack of belonging) and relational behaviors and processes (disempowerment and lack of collegiate relations) were in evidence within our group during the period when the only mentoring we experienced was formal and institutional. A sense of belonging or fitting in to our environment is important to promote confidence and safety. The sense of not belonging is strongly linked to the concept of 'imposter syndrome', a sense of not really belonging because of a feeling of being fraudulently allowed 'in' – that any achievements or successes are inauthentic or fraudulent and that, when this fraudulence is uncovered, the person will be unmasked and shamed (Breeze, 2018). The development of supportive relationships which occurred over time through the peer mentoring activities allowed the participants to move from a sense of not belonging, being unsupported, and without a sense of empowerment, to the development of belongingness within an effective support system and gaining a strong, positive sense of empowerment.

The data provides evidence that strategic and positive peer interaction is not merely an effective coping strategy, rather it sets in motion processes that promote further personal and professional development. These findings are consistent with the work of Lewis and Olshansky (2016), in which academic mentoring is underpinned with the framework of RCT and emphasizes the importance of organic relationship development as a counterbalance to mentoring programs developed through arbitrary bureaucratic processes. Although formal mentoring programs can be effective, they are more likely to assign mentor/mentee dyads arbitrarily and are less likely to support the rich interactions needed for effective relationship building. This group developed by the participants, provided a more supportive foundation for effective relationship development.

The group activities included periodic formal meetings as well as informal conversations consisting of rich, supportive interactions between the group members, providing information, peer support, and an emotionally safe space to exchange useful feedback. Through these exchanges we developed a greater sense of confidence in our abilities. This venue to openly ask questions and engage in non-judgmental discussion helped to promote a sense of emotional safety, while dispelling imposter feelings.

Further, we found that being able to ask questions was useful to the entire group, as together we could better navigate our way through bureaucratic processes by pooling our knowledge, contacts, and experiences. We collectively made use of our strengths, such as problem solving and persistence, supporting the development of the group in a manner more consistent with RCT rather than traditional individualistic views (Miller, 1976). This is particularly relevant, considering that not knowing the 'rules of the game' has been identified as a factor resulting in the absence of women from senior positions in academia (Fagan & Teasdale, 2021, p. 779). For instance, understanding when it may be appropriate to speak out and draw attention to a particular accomplishment, or to be able to frame an activity in the most favourable manner may be difficult to ascertain. Therefore, collective support can be especially valuable to navigate the invisible, intangible aspects of the academic

environment that are not necessarily codified in any 'manual', and if not discerned by the individual remain an imperceptible barrier to career progress. Thus, through the process of our peer mentoring we established the relational conditions of belonging, which in turn precipitated the relational processes and behaviours of collegiate relations and empowerment as academics. Our experience indicates that universities would be wise to encourage fertile environments for organic, collaborative relationships to develop, rather than creating arbitrary and artificial supports which may not meet the needs of the academics they are meant to support.

Recommendations for Practice

The field of academia can be incredibly challenging with well documented issues of gender inequities and feelings of professional isolation. Women who enter the academic field as career changers may also experience difficulties due to age discrimination. Many traditional supports do not consider the changing demographics of teaching and research academics. If universities are to benefit from the experiences which second+ career female academics bring to the field, appropriate supports must be developed which promote agency, self-confidence, and an inclusive culture of belongingness. Mentoring as a support can be valuable, however, mentors and mentees should not be arbitrarily matched, rather collaborative networking opportunities which promote organic relationship development should be supported. Provision of university support for mentoring programs in elements such as workload and meeting space, while allowing the participants to retain agency as to goals and objectives of the program would be more likely to provide effective support for participants. Further, rewards for individual achievement should be balanced with the recognition of collaborative accomplishments and recognition of the contributions of all participants.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This study draws upon the richness of the lived experiences of a specific cohort of women in academia. However, the participants are a small group from one geographic location and may not be representative of all women in academia. Further, the participants in this group were all white women from relatively privileged backgrounds. Although we began this study to counter our feelings of marginalization due to our gender, age and experiences, other academic groups may experience marginalization due to other factors and have different experiences and perceptions from us. Further research is needed to understand if other academics from underrepresented groups such as minority cultural groups, low socio-economic backgrounds or diversity in gender identification would also benefit from more targeted supports.

Although our cultural backgrounds are important to our present perceptions and understandings, this was not specifically noted through our conversations or data analysis. Further research with a focus on the influence of culture within the academic community would be valuable. In addition, replications of this research in fields of study outside of humanities, such as engineering, health sciences or other areas would add valuable information to the overall knowledge base.

While lived experience is valuable, it is also important to remember that the opinions, views, and experiences of the participants are very personal, and it may be difficult to disclose highly personal information. Quantitative, anonymous data building on the rich qualitative data would provide vital objective information to better understand the inequities often experienced in academic environments.

Conclusion

Although women have a strong presence as academic lecturers and researchers, and potentially contribute unique attributes that enrich academia, there remains an equity gap in leadership and promotion opportunities. This study examined an under researched cohort of academics, women who enter the field as a second + career, and with relatively recent PhD completions, to identify supports and barriers to their career progression. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of RCT (Miller, 1976), this study highlighted the influence of self-selected mentoring groups on second+ career female academics. Mentoring programs are often offered as a key mechanism of support by universities; however, they lack the organic elements needed to allow relationships to develop. The collegiate relationships that evolved through a collaborative mentoring dynamic enhanced participants' sense of belonging and empowered group members to navigate university culture and processes to progress personal career trajectories. Our findings indicate that the unique needs of second+ career female academics are supported through peer mentoring, however, to be effective, the group must be developed by the mentor/mentee participants to allow for the development of a safe space which enables honesty, mutual trust and respect, and an appreciation of each group members' diverse strengths and skills.

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