Factors Affecting Participation in Mentoring Research in Academia

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Abstract:

Higher Education is focused on research, yet not many postdoctoral researchers participate in academic research regarding their experiences during mentoring. This lack of participation is creating a gap in research on mentoring. The study found sharing experiences with an interviewer not only works as cathartic instrument for postdoctoral researcher but also provides them with new perspective on their mentoring experience. Meanwhile, participating in research about their experiences in mentoring adds valuable information for mentoring programs, mentors and mentees. Despite postdoctoral researchers' scientific background lack of interest in participating in academic research is of serious concern. The study was conducted using Grounded Theory as a tool. The data was collected in 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with professors and postdoctoral researchers participating in mentoring programs across Germany. The paper aims to propose initiating a dialogue for participating in academic research in higher education especially at postdoctoral researchers' level to increase awareness.

Keywords: Higher Education, Mentoring, Grounded Theory, Academic Research

Introduction:

In the paradigm of gender equality, as stated on the website of European Institute for Gender Equality, the "paragraph 3 of the Framework Act for Higher Education (Hochschulrahmengesetz, HRG) of 2007 obliges universities to promote gender equality and to strive towards the elimination of existing inequalities. Compliance with this provision is listed among the criteria for granting public funding to universities (Hochschulrahmengesetz, §5)" ("EIGE Europe," n.d.). In accordance with the Framework Act for Higher Education, universities across Europe and especially in Germany have made substantial efforts to promote female scientists. German government and states project that in German science system "the percentage of women drops gradually from the start of studies towards the professorship. This phenomenon is often described as the "Leaky Pipeline." Women make up currently 50% of the students, but only 45% of doctoral students. Only 25% of habilitations are completed by women. On the level of professorships, about 20% are women." ("Female Professors Program," n.d.). Therefore, universities across Germany are taking steps to support women in science. One of the measures, to ensure gender equality and promotion of female scientists, was to develop mentoring programs to empower female scientists.

These mentoring programs aim to provide mentee with "personalized support from experienced mentors to provide the necessary formal and informal knowledge, key competencies, and professional contacts to effectively plan and pursue a science career, and thus help them sustainably integrate into the higher education system" ("PD-Mentoring," n.d.). As well as to "encourage gifted and motivated female academics to strengthen their abilities and potentials for the professional career track and to provide them with support from the

experiences of successful scholars further along in their careers" ("Mentoring-Charité,"n.d.).

Keeping these aims in mind mentoring programs have developed structured mentoring programs to benefit mentees.

These structured mentoring programs are organised around three foci: *mentoring, training* and *networking*. In *mentoring*, mentees meet experienced professors in one-to- one mentoring sessions. Mentors, in these confidential exchanges, are provided the opportunity to pass on their experience to mentees, to support them individually in their career planning and to provide support for professional challenges. During *training* session specific workshops focusing on developing key skills are organized for mentees. And mentees also get the opportunity to expand their network, learn from role models and get advice from experts in *networking* events organized by mentoring programs.

In short, these mentoring programs are huge endeavors on part of universities, where mentoring teams are tirelessly working towards promoting female scientists in academia. These efforts, however, need to be documented and studied to analyze their long-term impact on female scientists. The present paper will explore female scientists attitudes towards participating in academic research on mentoring and access issues.

Literature review:

Gaining access to the participants is one of the major challenges. Bernard (2011) stated that elite groups such as surgeons, professional athlete were hard to reach population, who were not interested in the research and would not respond to call for participation. Interestingly, professors and postdocs are also hard to reach population, in fact, they further fall in the category who are "hidden-by-choice" (Noy, 2008, p. 331). To gain access to these participants one has to engage mentoring program organisers who act as gatekeepers. As Devers and Frankel (2000) posit, "understanding gatekeepers views is critical for negotiating and maintaining access, and maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research" (p. 265). Therefore, challenge of gaining access becomes a daunting task as the 'gate keepers' cannot share mentor and mentee lists due to confidentially issues, hence, taking out the option of contacting participants directly. In fact, the "gate keepers" can only circulate participation invites a few times, and therefore, it all comes down to

participants' willingness to respond to the call for interview.

Another challenge is to engage professors and postdocs to participate in the academic research outside their field of research. Due to stress caused by shortage of time and high work pressure professors and postdocs hesitate to participate in research outside their field. Studies have shown stress level in academia gradually increasing causing multiple issues. Abouserie (1996) defined stress as

Stress is a complicated phenomenon, which has been defined and researched in a number of different ways, but stress generally commences with a set of a specific demands. Whether a particular demand produces stress depends on the individual's perception of the demand. If the individual does not have the physical, mental or emotional resources to meet the demand, the demand is perceived as a potential stressor. (p.50)

Abouserie (1996) further explained, "The main causes of stress at work appear to be doing research, time constraints, relations with others, teaching, bureaucracy and students' demands" (p.55). There is no hiding from the fact that professors and postdocs are pressed for time and engaged in research projects that demand their attention, however, Leung, Siu, and Spector (2000) study found that stress level for senior professors might not be as high as postdocs because they enjoy more autonomy; that is, they have the authority to adjust their workload (Moeller & Chung-Yan, 2013). Professors can use this autonomy to participate in research outside their field, however, only a handful of professors participate in mentoring research despite the fact that many professors participate in mentoring programs for altruistic reasons, to show concern for others, and to engage in helping behaviour without strong situational and interpersonal incentives (Allen & Eby, 2003; Bozionelos, 2004); and sometimes as Bozionelos (2004, p. 26) stated to find "an outlet for passing their accumulated knowledge and wisdom," yet they shy away from research on mentoring.

On the other hand, postdocs do not enjoy such luxury of managing their workload as timelines and targets bind them, therefore, they have to deal with higher stress levels (Abouserie, 1996; Thorsen, 1996). Despite this time constraint postdocs are motivated and encouraged to participate in mentoring programs to seek career, psychosocial, networking, organizational, instructional and

instrumental support (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2010; Kram, 1985; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). Although mentees benefit from mentoring programs, however, they are reluctant to participate in research on mentoring. This reluctance needs to be investigated and this paper is a step in that direction.

Methodology:

Participants:

`Twenty-five participants, ten mentors and fifteen mentees, participated in the study (as seen in Table 1 below). The mentees were mostly female with exception of one male mentee who was added to the group as a deviant case (see Figure 1 below). The mentors were a mix of female and male professors from different German universities (see Figure 2 below).

Table 1 Participants' Demographics

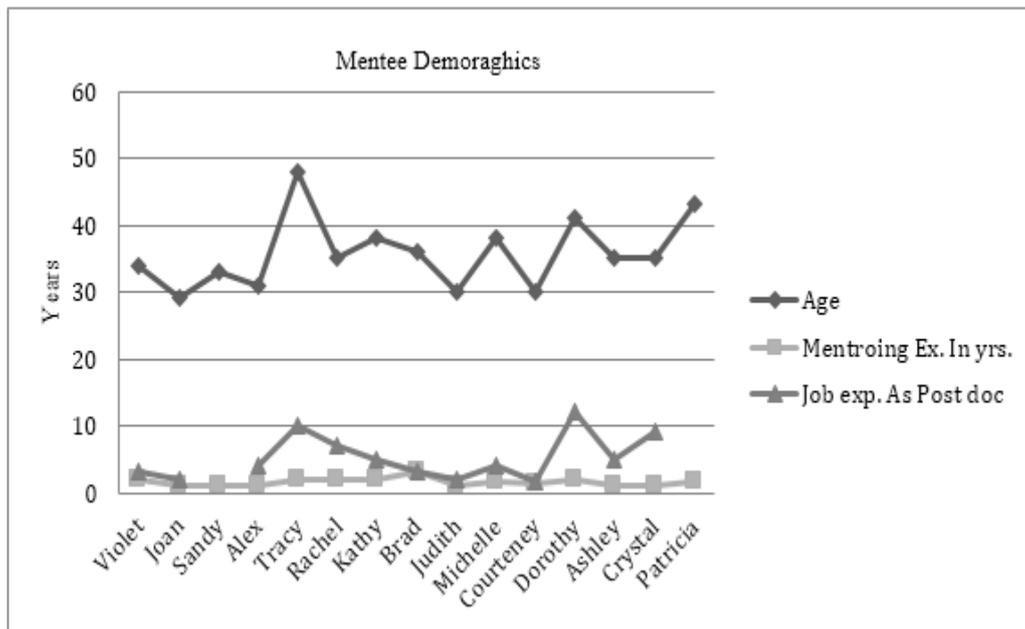| Participants	No. of participants	Male	Female	Age Range
Mentee	15	1	14	29-48
Mentor	10	2	8	33-72

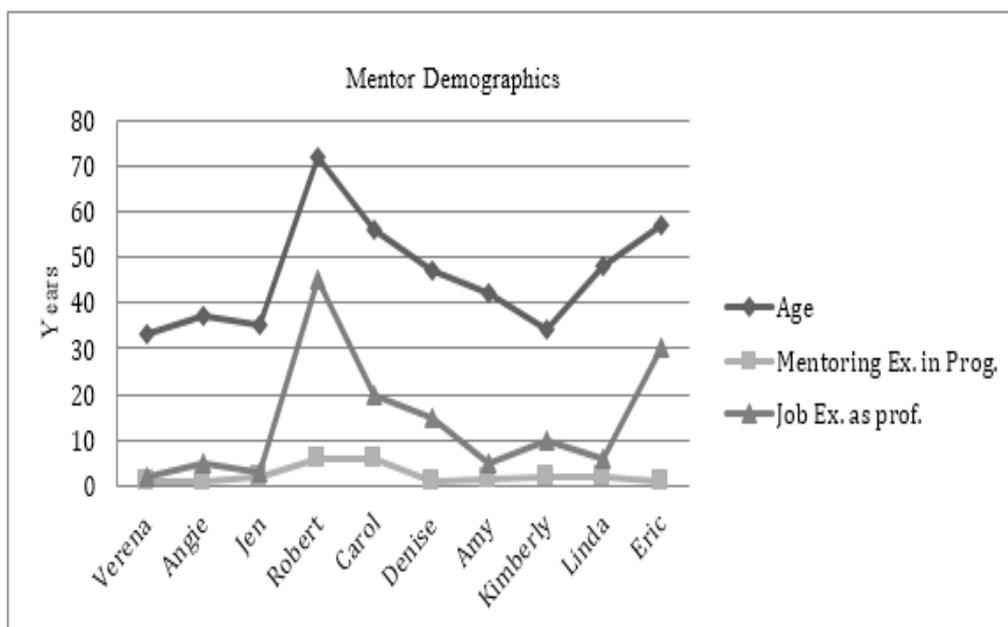

Figure 1 Mentee Demographics

Figure 2 Mentor Demographics

Interview process and setting:

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with mentors and mentees. Twenty-two face-to-face, one Skype and two phone interviews were conducted over a period of one year. The interviews were one hour to one-and-half hour long in cafes or in offices of interviewees as per their choice.

Research questions:

Two overarching questions were investigated:

1. What is the role of access to participants in conducting research on mentoring?
2. What is the role of participants' willingness to engage in research on mentoring?

Analysis:

The study was conducted using inductive qualitative case study approach and the data was analysed using Charmaz (2006) constructive grounded theory approach and Glaser's (1978) grounded theory approach. The grounded theory research process was guided by sampling scaffold for theoretical sampling (Qureshi, 2018a). The tri-stage analytic process consisted of Initial coding, Focused coding, and Theoretical coding accompanied with memo writing and constant comparison technique. Two themes emerged that were influencing the research directly; these themes were accessing participants and participants' response.

The study found that accessing participants was a challenge and it impacted the research process.

Results:
Accessing participants:

Over the course of one year seven waves of participation invites were sent to mentoring programs for female scientist at postdoc positions in universities across Germany. Using the nested sampling scheme (Qureshi, 2018b), participation invites were sent to the mentoring programs via Forum Mentoring, directly to mentoring programs coordinators across Germany as well as using snowball sampling to contact participants. Though, different avenues were employed to contact participants but due to lack of direct access to participants the data collection period was prolonged with low participation rate.

Participants' response:

It was also observed that participants' response rate affects the research process. Despite repeated efforts the response rate was slow and low. During the first month two participants responded and then for next two months there were no interviews. Then next three months saw a rush of participants, which later faded to one interview per months for the next three months. The participants again responded during next two months, however, this bounty was soon over with one interview per month till June when there were no more interested participants (see figure 3 below). Due to this slow response the data collection period was not as productive as expected earlier in research process. Also due to low participant turn over the researcher was unable to generalise the results as was in the scope of the research.
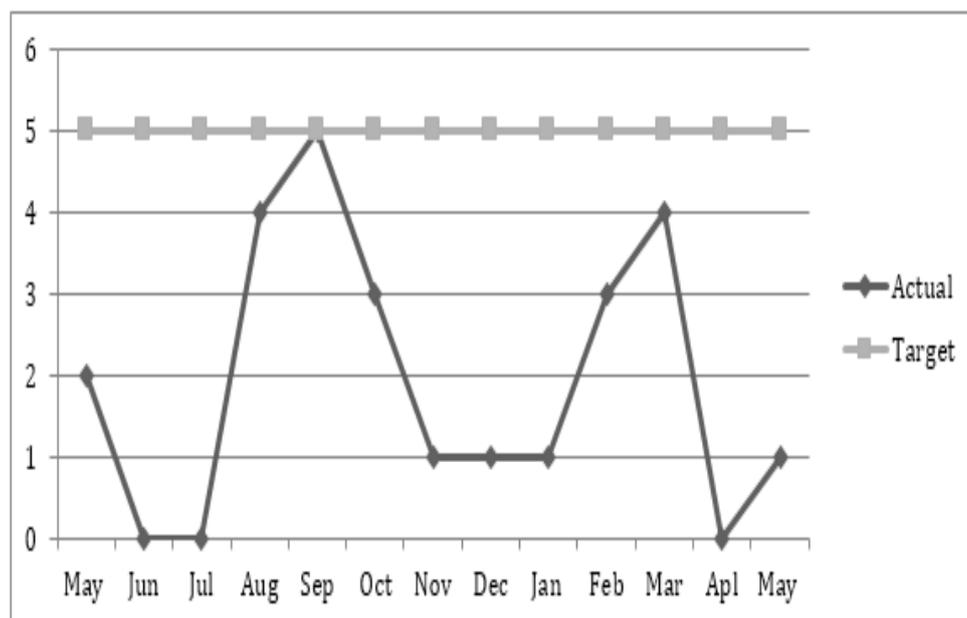

Figure 3 Actual participation activity vs. expected participation activity

Discussion:

In mentoring research, two main challenges encountered during this research were accessing participants and convincing participants to participate in the study. Access to participants was restricted due to confidentiality reasons. The programs do not advertise participants' names on their websites and they refrain from sharing participants' names and contact information with researchers. On one hand, this establishes an environment of trust among program participants that they are secure; on the other hand, it creates issues for the researchers. In this study, seven waves of participation requests were sent to different German universities mentoring programs over a period of one year and only twenty-five participants responded. This lack of interest among mentoring program participants to join studies investigating issues related to mentoring is alarming. The mentoring programs contacted during the course of the research were well-organised and professionally run programs. These mentoring programs have organised structured mentoring designs with focus on one-to-one mentoring, workshops and networking opportunities. For the success of these mentoring programs if they add participating in mentoring related research as a complimentary commitment it would benefit mentoring related research as well as the participants.

The other challenge faced during this research was convincing participants to join studies on mentoring. Participants are unaware of benefits they may reap if they participate in research on mentoring just as participating in mentoring programs benefits them. The study found that participants of these programs gain catharsis, insight and future plan of action. The first benefit was found to be catharsis as 15 mentees participating in this study in someway or other found talking to the interviewer as a means of elevating stress and negative emotional baggage. Zech and Rimé (2005) in their study stated that participants *perceived* they have benefitted from emotional disclosure. It was found that short-term result of talking to interviewer was genuine relief not a *perceived* one. However, long term impact of talking to an interviewer about their mentoring experience or job-related experience is still to be investigated. In this study, mentees used this opportunity as an outlet to express their worries and emotional stress in a confident and secure environment. An environment which is made possible by an interviewer engaging in supportive and empathetic activities, for instance to "exchange ideas and experiences, give advice, offer recognition, validation and support" (Zech & Rimé, 2005). And also by ensuring that interview environment is safe and mentees have been assured that the information they share would be dealt with utmost care to safeguard mentees identities.

Furthermore, out of the 15 mentees only 4 mentees shared they experienced bad mentoring relationship, yet they claimed that they were not alone and many colleagues were also experiencing dissatisfied mentoring relationships. These other mentees did not respond to the study call and did not share their grievances. This is a vital point that makes these mentoring programs vulnerable as they are not aware of the extent of discomfort mentees are experiencing. Mentees choose not to inform mentoring programs to safeguard their reputation and relationships in close knit scientific community. However, in the long run it might be harmful for them and they might not act as ambassadors of mentoring programs due to their unpleasant experiences. In this scenario, talking to a researcher serves a purpose, that is, reasons of dissatisfaction are conveyed to mentoring programs as well as the scientific community in general via the researcher and experience the cathartic nature of talking to an empathetic and supportive interviewer.

Moreover, another benefit of participating in mentoring research is that it provides insight to the participants. Multiples cases were observed in the study where participants, mentors as well as mentees, while talking to the interviewer stated that they had not thought about an aspect brought up by the interviewer and took note to think about it later. And many a times participants while talking with the interviewer stated that they have some new ideas due to talking about mentoring situation. Some even asked the interviewers own views based on the interviews conducted and then devised new strategies to make mentoring sessions better for them. Hence, it was found in concurrence with Zech and Rimé (2005) that talking to an interviewer was insightful for participants.

And it was also found that as suggested by Zech and Rimé (2005) the retelling of experience is not re-evaluation of events, as it was observed in this research the re-evaluating of experiences and events became cathartic when the interviewer engaged participants in reflective practice by engaging in collaborative inquiry and critical reflection (Carter & Francis, 2001; Richter et al., 2013; Wang &

Odell, 2002); to build, as proposed by Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, and Bergen (2008) study, a collaborative environment. This collaborative environment would then lead to re-evaluations of events and catharsis for the participants. And since this is a work related issue Zoni and Lucchini (2012) study suggests that many models are available to assess work stress and suggests preventions using social dialogue.

In truth, there is a dire need to initiate dialogue from mentoring programs' platform on the benefits of participating in mentoring research. Mentoring has been linked to multiple benefits for mentors such as promotions and increased income (Dreher & Ash, 1990); career satisfaction (Turban & Dougherty, 1994); and networking (Scandura, 1992); enhance performance (Ghosh & Reio, 2013); and developing leadership qualities (Hudson, 2013). Similarly, mentees also benefit from mentoring as mentees experience reduced isolation, boast to confidence and self esteem, professional growth, and enhanced self-reflection and problem solving capacities (McIntyre & Hagger, 1996); "career self efficacy" and "career success" (Eby, Butts, Durley, & Ragins, 2010); and networking, reflection, professional development, and personal satisfaction (Bell & Treleaven, 2011). These benefit are ample motivation for professors and postdocs to not only participate in mentoring programs but also in research that can help enhance mentoring programs' performance.

Conclusion:

In short, research on mentoring is important for understanding issues being faced by participants of mentoring programs; however, the study found that these participants are hard to reach population due to lack of direct access to them which affects the research process. Another factor affecting research on mentoring is participants' own lack of interest in sharing their issues by participating in research on mentoring. The participants need to be encouraged to participate in mentoring research to fill the gaps in mentoring research and it will be beneficial for professors, postdocs and mentoring programs as well. Promoting participation will also set a trend for future mentoring program participants, ensuring that mentoring programs keep providing high quality services to mentors and mentees participating in these programs.

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Email ID: q.henna@yahoo.com
Received: 2019-04-30
Accepted 2019-05-27
Publish Online 2019-05-30