Beyond the blueprint:
(De)constructing mentorship for mid-career academics

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Abstract

While mentorship has existed ever since Odysseus set sail for Troy, in recent decades, there has been an explosion of interest in the concept. Although there is no consensus on what the 'best' model of mentorship is, there is acceptance that mentoring plays a crucial role in the success of academic careers. In what follows, we use collaborative autoethnography to present our contrasting experiences to explore the connection between mentoring and the progression of an academic through the various stages of their career. We employ the analogy of building a house and making a home to argue that while early career academics can benefit from mentorship that addresses the basic elements of an academic career, mid-career academics require more specialised interventions - some of which go beyond mentoring - that are tailored to the individual needs and personal plans for shaping their careers.

Keywords: Career progression, career stuckness, mentorship, mid-career academics

Introduction

Higher Education institutions contend with multiple, complex, and diverse challenges that demand the attention of the academic profession. As Tangney and Flay-Petty (2019: 1) suggest,

> the nature of academic work is changing, technology is having a greater impact on our work, and sector drivers are shaping the directions of universities. Purposeful ongoing career development is therefore worthwhile for individuals, and purposeful succession planning useful for universities themselves.

While several factors mark institutional success, one of the most significant is the strategic management of academic careers (Szelagowska-Rudzka, 2018). Many of the challenges affecting success are connected to universal trends, such globalisation and increased competitiveness, as well as neoliberal pressures that call for increased student enrolment, larger workloads, and

greater expertise from staff, all while working with reduced budgets and resources. In the South African Higher Education system, successful management of academic careers contends with the impact of the changing size and composition of academic staff (DHET, 2015; Essop, 2020) and as such, some challenges are unique – including the slow progress of transformation, the under-preparedness of students due to problems in basic education, and the low number of postgraduate students. These factors hinder the recruitment of junior academics and their progression into senior staff and the professoriate (DHET, 2015). The glacial pace at which broader gender and racial representation is being achieved is a well-documented concern (see Hlatshwayo, 2024; Lewin, 2019; Mkhwanazi & Baijnath, 2003; Subotzky 2003). This concern has also been the focus of South African national policies such as the National Planning Commission (NPC 2012) and the National Development Plan 2030, and has resulted in national intervention strategies, such as the five-pronged Staffing South African Universities Framework (SSAUF).

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) framework document, the SSAUF was designed as 'a comprehensive approach to addressing the human resource challenges facing the higher education' (DHET, 2015: 8). The framework outlines five interconnected programmes intended to build an academic pipeline[1] addressing various stages of an academic career. The first intervention, the Nurturing Emerging Scholars Programme (NESP), provides postgraduate students with Masters scholarships and an academic internship, positioning them for eligibility for permanent academic positions (DHET, 2015). The second component, the Next Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP), targets early career academics for permanent positions by providing structured support for doctoral qualification attainment alongside mentoring into academic roles and responsibilities (DHET, 2015).

While the first two programmes focus on increasing the number of suitably qualified academics entering the sector, the remaining three target existing academic staff. The Existing Academic Capacity Enhancement Programme (EACEP) provides support for staff to achieve doctoral degrees through the University Staff Doctoral Programme, alongside other teaching development opportunities designed to support early career academics (DHET, 2015). The Future Professors Programme (FFP) represents a cross-disciplinary and inter-university capacity-building intervention for early to mid-career academics preparing for promotion into the professoriate (DHET, 2015). The final intervention, the Higher Education Leadership and Management Programme, responds to identified needs for leadership and management development in the university system (DHET, 2015).

However, the SSAUF framework has attracted significant criticism regarding both its conceptual foundations and practical implementation. Hlatshwayo (2024) argues that SSAUF's neoliberal approaches contain fundamental blind spots that may undermine its transformational objective. Specifically, he contends that the framework's individualistic focus on career

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[1] The 'academic pipeline' refers to the sequential pathway through which individuals progress from postgraduate study to senior academic positions. In the South African context, this refers to the systematic development of scholars from Masters/PhD students through early career academics to the professoriate.

development fails to address the systemic and structural barriers that perpetuate inequality in South African higher education.

The framework's approach to mentorship exemplifies these concerns. Of course, it is unsurprising that mentorship is a prominent feature in the South African context which is characterised by institutions like DHET and the National Research Foundation (NRF) intent on improving the recruitment, retention, and progression of academic staff (Hlengwa, 2019; Magabane, 2022). For at least 20 years, mentoring has been 'fashionable' (Kirschmeyer 2005: 638), frequently positioned as an essential component of nurturing academic careers and commonly offered to new or early-career academic staff to cover specific aspects of their careers like developing teaching practices or more general career development (Tangney & Flay-Petty, 2019). Crisp and Cruz (2009) note the proliferation of mentoring programmes across higher education institutions globally, while Sambunjak, et al (2010) document the exponential growth in mentoring research publications. That being said, while the DHET document states that 'meaningful mentorship' constitutes 'a core feature' of all SSAUF initiative (DHET, 2015: x), and stipulates that participants are 'contractually bound to an assigned mentor or panel of mentors' (DHET, 2015: x), there remains significant ambiguity about the practical implementation of these arrangements. Although mentors are envisaged to be 'experienced and successful academics' and can include recently retired academics (DHET, 2015: x), the framework provides limited articulation beyond 'keeping close track of agreed developmental milestones and plans' regarding what exactly the mentoring role entails (DHET, 2015: x)

This lack of specificity raises several critical questions about the mentorship component's effectiveness. Given the documented shortage of senior diverse academics in the South African system (the very problem SSAUF aims to address) the reliance on 'experienced and successful academics' as mentors may perpetuate existing exclusions rather than challenge them. Furthermore, the suggestion that 'recently retired academics' could serve as mentors raises questions about their capacity to guide emerging scholars through contemporary academics' challenges that may differ significantly from their own career experiences.

Perhaps it is also unsurprising that despite the confidence in and centrality of mentoring in SSAUF programmes, the concept is not explicitly defined, given Baker's (2015) contention that there is a lack of consensus on a universal definition of mentoring. While systemic reviews confirm mentoring benefits, they also tend to highlight implementation challenges (Sambunjak, et al., 2010; Hund, et al., 2018). This may at least in part be because the building of academic careers takes place in contested and constantly changing environments (Pithouse-Morgan, et al, 2016), and so it is important to consider the effects of context on mentoring – and the effects of mentoring in different contexts.

But centralising nebulous mentorship in academic career development adds an additional layer of complexity, not least because gaps remain in understandings of mentorship's effectiveness across different career stages (O'Meara & Campbell, 2011). Law, et al. (2014: 4) argue that 'while the literature is filled with manuscripts on mentoring entry-level professionals, women, and minorities, there is a paucity of information on mentoring across various career

stages'. It could be that the lack of information on mentorship's effects on mid-career academics stems from the scarcity of mentoring opportunities themselves, that is, it may simply be the case that there is not enough mentoring happening at these other stages to write about.

Academic career development and mentorship

There is no widespread consensus in the literature on what constitutes an 'early career academic' (see Sutherland & Taylor, 2011), with Lewin (2019) conceding that no universal definition of the term exists in the field. For Garbett and Tynan (2010), an early career academic refers to the first five years after an academic has completed their PhD. It should be recognised that this definition is largely limited and exclusionary as in the South African context there are early career academics who have completed their Masters degrees, and are still in the process of completing their doctoral qualifications. As such, perhaps more accurate in our view is the expanded definition by Hemmings, et al. (2013) who suggest that early career academics are generally new to the sector and are currently undertaking doctoral education. For Antoniadou (2020), they are academics who have been working in the sector for the first five years of their career, with sessional, part-time or full-time working loads.

We agree with Pithouse-Morgan, et al.'s (2016) suggestion that our understanding of early career academics should focus more on an academic's ontological being and becoming after their employment and absorption into the academic profession, with the diverse forces and factors that shape them in the different institutions. In line with this, Price, et al. (2014) propose that the term 'early career academic' should focus on the characteristics and personalities of those academics who have limited experience in academia, and are thus in need of some form of induction or training or support. This may explain why early career academics are generally offered opportunities to develop their careers (Hlatshwayo & Majozi, 2024), but 'less purposeful development is typically offered beyond this stage' (Tangney & Flay-Petty, 2019: 1).

While there is extensive research on early career development, Zacher, et al. (2019: 366) found 'very little research on the career development of mid-and-late career academics who are in the maintenance (45-65) and possibly decline (65 years and older) stages of their careers', and concluded that later career stages are largely ignored. This is a problem because mid-career academics are - or should be - the backbone of a university - both in terms of the number of them, and in terms of the years an academic spends in 'mid-career'. In theory – and in practice for some - this period can be the most productive (Baldwin, et al., 2005). Having overcome 'the distinct hurdles that characterize entry to an academic career' (Baldwin, et al., 2005), some mid-career academics are well-established as specialists in their disciplines and are beginning to take on leadership roles in their institutions. Two decades ago, Baldwin, et al. (2005) noted that 'mid-career faculty are off the radar screen' - based on the assumption that their careers will progress naturally without active support.

More recent research supports this observation: Eldeirawi, et al. (2024) highlight a discernible gap in (research) attention to mid-career faculty, stating that challenges confronted by academics in mid-career often remain understudied and overlooked which can potentially

result in or explain frustration and attrition. Similarly, Gould (2022) describes mid-career as an often-neglected career stage, a claim echoed by Baskerville, et al. (2023) who call for attention from administrators on resources needed for workload distribution, faculty development and mentoring – all of which are required to support the professional development of mid-career faculty which is often overlooked. Additionally, Mantai and Marrone (2023) suggest that a comprehensive review by Zacher, et al. in 2019 indicates that academic career literature overemphasises the early career stage and under-represents the mid-and-late career stages. Perhaps this is not surprising given that, as the seminal work from Welch, et al. (2019) notes, mid-career faculty comprise the largest segment of academia yet there is scant empirical evidence for the policies and practices related to mid-career faculty.

Our personal experience of seeking literature on mid-career mentorship suggests too that we are somewhat invisible – with limited recent literature focused on our kinds of experiences, challenges and needs. Older literature seems to support our argument that mid-career faculty receive significantly less research attention and institutional support compared to early career academics. For example, Lunsford, et al. (2018: 139) found that 'early-career faculty members were significantly more likely to have a mentor than were mid- or late-career faculty members'. We share the view of Canale, et al. (2013: 2) that it is problematic that mentoring programmes that support early career development seem to disappear just when 'increased teaching loads, greater expectations for service and advising, a more competitive market for grants' characterise the life of a mid-career academic.

Given the above, we think that past findings that mid-career faculty have higher levels of dissatisfaction with their jobs than those at other career stages still holds true today. The levels of dissatisfaction vary from mild to severe – but the causes are fairly standard: as Trower (2011 n.p.) explains, 'vague expectations, including less than explicit requirements for promotion to full professor can be demotivating and lead to disengagement'. Matthews (2014) describes the 'plateau' that mid-career faculty reach when professional goals are unclear. Without motivating professional goals, faculty can 'settle into a dull routine or begin to invest their energies in activities outside of their professional lives' (Baldwin, et al., 2005: 49). Canale and colleagues (2013: 2) point out that 'mid-career faculty are typically at their life stage where they must balance the responsibilities of home and work', and this requires making choices between professional advancement and personal demands. In light of this, we applaud Tekeste's (20251 1) current call for 'a more supportive and sustainable academic culture' where she argues for a 're-evaluation of what it means to be a "good" academic.

Even without these additional responsibilities, Wilson (2012) suggests that tenured professors can feel isolated and overwhelmed, facing the challenge of navigating the diverse demands of their roles while independently finding time to prioritise their research. Because resources are often directed towards those at the start of their careers, or those mid-career academics who require intervention to solve a particular issue, mid-career faculty 'often feel a lack of attention and even neglect' (Trower, 2011, n.p.). As one of the mid-career faculty interviewed by Baldwin, et al. (2005: 50) puts it:

Once you've gotten tenure, you are sort of in charge of your own fate. You've achieved a certain level of professional maturity that indicates the department doesn't need to oversee or nurture your next promotion. That's kind of up to you.

As mid-career academics ourselves, the term that resonates most with us, is 'stuck'. 'Career stuckness' (Treebak & Thomsen, 2021) refers to a state of being unable to progress or advance in one's academic career despite qualifications, effort, or aspirations. In South African higher education, this manifests as academics remaining in junior positions without progression to senior roles or the professoriate. It is both emotional, 'a long-lasting, complex sense of professional unfulfillment and stagnation in a job or career path' and situational 'in that the individual is subject to labour market conditions and discourses regarding successful or expected career development – external circumstances which they cannot control, but to which they must actively relate' (Treebak & Thomsen, 2021).

At the same time, opportunities for us to be mentored now, are few and far between. The early career academics are being mentored by the late-career academics, leaving the mid-career academics like us, left to our own devices. In what follows, we highlight the frustrations stemming from inaccurate assumptions about the needs of mid-career academics, which underpin the insufficient career development support on offer. Our personal experiences are invoked to support our view that mid-career academics not only need support, but that that support needs to take account of the unique challenges that mid-career academics face distinct from early-career needs (Doherty & Dickmann, 2012). These include career plateau concerns, work-life balance pressures, and the need for renewed professional purpose. We suggest that current interventions should be expanded to take account of academics in mid-career and should take into account both the environment (which can be enabling and disabling) and the needs (which can be shared or unique) of academics throughout their career.

Methods

The analysis of our own careers is intended to expand the understanding of the realities faced by mid-career academics, especially for those who, like us, did not follow the ideal – or idealised - academic career path. We initially drew on Ellis and Bochner's (2000: 742) definition of autoethnography: 'autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic introspection'. This approach allowed us to use our respective stories as primary data to explore the social phenomenon of mentorship for academics in higher education.

However, the scope of traditional autoethnography did not fully encompass the collaborative and dialogical methodology we employed in this paper. Instead, we drew on Chang, et al.'s (2013) concept of collaborative autoethnography to explore and analyse our mentoring experiences. This method combines self-reflection and narrative inquiry with the collaborative process of co-examining and interpreting each other's stories, producing a richer, more nuanced

understanding of mid-career mentoring. Engaging in collaborative autoethnography provided a platform for refining our interpretations of mentorship. By sharing, listening to, and reading each other's reflections, we challenged assumptions, confronted differing perspectives, and upheld mutual accountability throughout the process (Chang, et al., 2013). Our analytic approach is grounded in symbolic interactionism, which ensures our full representation and visibility in the text while committing to a research agenda aimed at improving the theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006: 375). This approach validated the use of personal experiences or 'insider knowledge' (Fixsen, 2021) to critically examine the concept of mentorship.

The social construction of mentoring experiences: Two divergent paths

Our collaborative autoethnographic analysis reveals how mentoring experiences are shaped by the social contexts and interactions that define academic careers. Through a symbolic interactionist lens, we examine how the meaning of mentorship (and its perceived necessity) emerges through social interactions and institutional assumptions about who needs support and why.

HM: *The accidental mentorship scholar*

Personal narrative: I associate mentorship with a journey. And I don't mean some personal, metaphysical journey. I mean a bus ride. In January 2018, I was sitting on a bus next to the Director of the Teaching and Learning Office of my university, being transported to the first session of a Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) programme in which I had been accepted to participate, after seeing an email advertising the opportunity which was sent to all staff at my university. In response to the Director asking me what I was working on, I answered 'nothing interesting'. A day or so later I received an email from him:

> *Attached, the draft paper on mentorship which, as discussed, is in a 'raw' state. Perform your magic on it. Aim to have this finalised by end of March – latest, so that it gets published this year.*

By February 2018, I was working on three different mentorship projects - the article with the Director; my TAU project which involved the development of a mentorship virtual community; and collaborating on the evaluation of the mentorship component of a health sciences fellowship program. Talk about imposter syndrome: I was literally writing the manual and had zero experience of being a mentor, or, more worryingly, of ever being mentored.

Symbolic Integrationist Analysis: This narrative illustrates how social assumptions about who requires mentoring are constructed through interactions that reflect broader power dynamics. My experience reveals what symbolic interactionists would recognise as the 'definition of the situation' (Perrotta, 2020) - the institutional assumption that certain academics (white, with family connections to academia) possess inherent social capital and therefore do not require formal

mentoring support. This assumption became a self-fulfilling prophecy: because mentoring was not offered, I internalised the belief that I did not need it, and more critically, that needing it might signal inadequacy.

The irony of becoming a mentorship researcher without having been mentored highlights how academic identities are constructed through chance encounters and institutional opportunities rather than systematic development. My bus ride conversation demonstrates how career trajectories can pivot through seemingly casual interactions - what symbolic interactionists call 'significant symbols' foregrounding the dynamic interplay between individual identity and the broader social contexts in which meaning is created (Carter & Fuller, 2016).

Continued Personal Reflection: That's the thing. Perhaps because mentorship was not the zeitgeist then that it is now, perhaps because I was deemed to have adequate social capital to cope in academia (being white in a largely white profession and with family links to academia in general and my university - and discipline - in particular), I was not assigned a mentor as an early career academic and never thought to ask for one thereafter. The orientation and induction one might have anticipated receiving was also lacking in my case - either I was thought to 'just know' the ropes or expected to figure them out as I went along. While I had a lot to learn, the possibility of a mentor helping me do so never crossed anyone's mind - including mine. That is, until 2020, when I realised I had become a mid-career academic – at least in terms of time served - and yet not in terms of milestones achieved. Could a lack of mentorship be part of the reason why?

AH: *The Over-Mentored*

Personal Narrative: I have always been involved in mentoring (formally and informally) in both roles as a mentor and mentee, so it's hardly surprising that mentorship would eventually become central to my career. The metaphor I use for my own experience of being mentored is of being 'taken under the wings' of (usually) more experienced and generous colleagues. The accelerated academic programme that I was a part of is underpinned by a prevailing assumption that young black academics would not possess the kind of social capital that would make them thrive in a predominately white institution. This means that a lot of energy was directed at nurturing us and being explicit about what was required to navigate the university space. These 'intentional' interactions always underpinned the mentoring I have received over the years, mentoring which aimed at demystifying the sometimes explicit but largely implicit 'rules of academia' we need to know to build an academic career. As much as I had an official mentor, there was a general recognition in my department that I was transitioning into a new field, and the entire department came on board to offer peer mentorship, providing me with a variety of 'wings'. I have had fruitful engagements with colleagues that shaped how I consider my teaching practice, frame my research interests, which professional involvement opportunities to take up, the importance of service to the university and managing the administration involved in building an academic career.

Symbolic Interactionist Analysis: My experience demonstrates how institutional assumptions about race and social capital shape the way academic identities are reflected and internalised. The intensive mentoring I received was premised on deficit assumptions — that as a Black academic in a predominantly white institution, I would require explicit guidance to succeed. While well-intentioned, this approach constructed my academic identity through a lens of presumed disadvantage, resulting in what might be called *mentoring overload* — where the sheer volume of guidance paradoxically imposed its own form of constraint. Shulman's (2016) dramaturgical perspective helps illuminate this dynamic, as I was continually cast in the institutional role of a dependent mentee, a character I was expected to inhabit. Over time, this institutional script risked becoming internalised. Similarly, Markus and Kitayama's (1991) theory of interdependent self-construal suggests that repeated social cues (especially those emphasising support over autonomy) can shape how individuals come to understand themselves in relation to others. In my case, the persistent framing of my potential through a narrative of vulnerability may have undermined my sense of agency in shaping my own academic trajectory.

Continued Personal Reflection: And yet, fast forward a few years post PhD, and it is intriguing to me that I am a mid-career academic who, on some level, is operating as someone in the early stages of their career – at least in terms of achievements that are tangible and or legitimated in a research-intensive context. How is that possible with all the mentoring I have had?

The construction of 'career stuckness'

If, as McLaughlin posited as far back as 2010 (879), that there is increasing evidence that mentoring makes a difference, how is it that we, the non-mentored and the uber-mentored, are stuck in the same rut now? If early career experiences and affiliations have long-term effects on career outcomes (Ahern & Scott, 1981; Sonnert & Holton, 1995), why were the two of us, who have had such different experiences, in the same position in our careers? We were both over 35 years old, and more than five years post PhD[2] yet our careers had yet to progress as might be (and indeed is) expected. While we are at different universities, they are both research intensive institutions, yet have a high demand for and place a significant emphasis on teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level. In both our contexts, a measure of expected career progression would be, at a minimum, promotion into the rank of associate professor – a rank where there is demonstrable evidence of teaching prowess, an established research record that includes both publications and successful supervision of postgraduates, as well as 'significant' leadership or administrative responsibilities within the institution and the disciplinary field. While we each have some achievements in some of these areas, neither of us feels confident that a promotion application to the rank of associate professor (from our current status of senior lecturers) would be successful, given the gaps – particularly as relates to publication outputs - in our respective CVs.

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[2] In South Africa, as in many other places, being over 35 and/or five years post-PhD is usually the cut-off for many funding opportunities.

While this may in part be a question of lacking confidence, the reality is that the promotion process in both our institutions values research outputs more highly than service and/or teaching and learning - the two aspects of our careers we have focused our attention - and energies - on. It is worth acknowledging that the neoliberal agenda rhetoric, which privileges publication as a measure of efficiency and productivity (and which contributes to university rankings) had not taken hold to the extent it has now, when we were early career academics.

This shift in institutional priorities represents what symbolic interactionists call 'social change through interaction' - how new meanings (neoliberal productivity measures) become institutionalised through repeated interactions and eventually reshape individual career expectations. Our experience of being 'caught between' career stages reflects the temporal dimension of how social meanings evolve.

While moves are currently being made to balance the decades-long 'fetishisation' of research - moves which include the recognition of the importance of academic citizenship and are highlighted by the growth in the scholarship of teaching and learning - the extent to which we can be 'credited' for our past engagements (and not punished for our lack of publications) is seemingly limited.

Both comforting and concerning is that we are not alone in this position. In addition to the fact that we see many of our colleagues in a similar place, research findings related to post-doctoral outcomes highlight this issue. Notable studies examining the relationship between doctoral education and scholarly publications (e.g., Frick, et al., 2016; Lee & Kamler, 2008; Van Schalkwyk, et al., 2020), collectively indicate a concerning state of research output stagnation post-doctoral graduation.

The emergence of the 'inbetweeners' as a recognisable category of academic represents the social construction of a new academic identity. This identity emerges through shared interactions and mutual recognition among academics who find themselves too junior in our accomplishments to be considered established academics but not junior enough to be eligible for the resources needed to help us achieve that status.

Arguably, why we – and our colleagues who are in a similar position - are where we are may at least in part, have to do with personal choices – focusing on having a family, or joining academia later in life after pursuing another career, or simply preferring teaching to research or grant-writing. But it is also important to recognise as mentioned above, that the institutional environment was different a decade or more ago: there was far less pressure to publish, or to generate additional funding through grants, and performance management was something that belonged in the corporate world, wholly foreign to those in ivory towers.

Our analysis reveals that mid-career 'stuckness' is not simply an individual failure but a socially constructed phenomenon emerging from the interaction between changing institutional expectations, differential mentoring experiences, and the temporal misalignment between when academics entered their careers and current performance expectations. This finding challenges the individualistic assumption underlying many mentoring interventions and suggests the need for more systemic approaches to mid-career support. Our contrasting experiences reveal a

fundamental paradox in academic mentoring: neither the absence nor the abundance of mentoring guaranteed career progression. Through our symbolic interactionist analysis, we identify how institutional assumptions about who needs mentoring - based on race, social capital, and perceived preparedness - may inadvertently constrain rather than enable career development. Drawing on Blumer's foundational ideas about collective action, Lacaze (2013) argues that shared institutional meanings - like privileging research output over teaching - operate as symbolic frameworks shaping career trajectories. This aligns with our observation that 'career stuckness' is not purely personal, but socially constructed through these normative expectations.

The (de)construction of support

While we think it is essential that 'career planning should not stop just because an individual is no longer new to the field' (Couture, et al., 2023: 618), for us, it is less obvious what this support should look like. We hold the view that while different career stages require different kinds of support and opportunities, more important perhaps, is the recognition that even those in the same career stage may not require the same sort of support. That is, while in our cases, despite vastly different mentoring experiences, many of the deficits we identify (in securing promotion for example) are the same, it is not necessarily the case that the kinds of support we need are similar. As Zacher, et al. (2019: 364) suggest, 'there may not be any "one-size-fits-all" programme of intervention for successful career development'. They argue that there are 'multiple mechanisms beyond mentoring through which career-related self-efficacy may be developed' (2019: 364).

So, what could these mechanisms look like? Given our own experiences, we agree that we need to look 'beyond mentoring' because the claim that there is 'increasing evidence that mentoring makes a difference' (McLaughlin, 2010), requires critical engagement in order to resonate. We think the limitations of traditional mentorship models are particularly acute for mid-career academics. Those 'one-size-fits-all' models may be suitable for early-career academics requiring more generic support and guidance for an extended period of time, but those of us in the middle of our careers need much more tailor-made and often quite 'quick' interventions. In what follows, we draw together what we perceive as useful features into a model best described through the analogy of houses and homes.

Building houses, creating homes

The term 'building an academic career' is touted in the literature (see, for example, Stenken, et al., 2009; Semenza, 2020; Cleary, et al., 2017) as a descriptor of what is expected to progress up the academic ladder. This notion of 'building an academic career' has connotations that we link in the following way to the house and home analogy. For a house's physical structure to be erected, various experts in the construction industry are involved. It is reasonable to expect that the owner of the property contracts for an extended period of time an architect, builder, electrician, and plumber for the construction of a generic house. New academics, particularly in

the early stages, ought to be provided with an array of developmental opportunities, ensuring a firm understanding of what they need and how to demonstrate competency in teaching, research, and service to the discipline and the university. The responsibility to ensure this happens could be settled on the shoulders of one 'expert', or the new academic may be advised to seek advice from several different experts. It is important to consider that 'building' indicates an expectation that academics demonstrate agency, so their careers should not be determined (solely) by pre-set regulative measures. That said, it is reasonable to expect that academics are aware of, engage with, and operate within the parameters of disciplinary expectations, institutional staffing policies, terms of reference and perhaps academic conditions of service. Agency is a significant factor in successfully navigating and demonstrating competencies of the academic job's roles, expectations and responsibilities at various levels of academic promotion and development. Zacher, et al. (2012: 89) refer to Du Plooy and Vansteenkiste's notion of 'career sculpting, which they describe as the 'creative involvement of individuals in shaping their own lives and careers' and which involves a deliberate, strategic shaping of one's academic career trajectory through intentional choices about research focus, institutional affiliations, skill development, and professional relationships. The concept implies agency and choice, although structural constraints (funding, institutional culture, transformation imperatives) may limit sculpting opportunities.

After a while, a house becomes a home – but again, there is no pre-set time as to how long this takes. A house begins to have a familiar 'lived-in' feel, and often this is when homeowners notice various 'improvement projects' and desire to make alterations. At this point, renovation plans may begin to take shape. This can be conceptualised as one big renovation or several smaller, more carefully executed projects. What is important is having a clear sense of what requires attention – without this, one cannot identify correctly what is needed to bring on to the site to ensure the successful completion of the project. For example, building on the coast or at the beach requires different materials (for example rust proofing) whereas building in the mountains requires insulation experts and fireplace installers. What is also important is to recognise that renovations, in general, take less time and require fewer resources than the initial construction, and so the contractors brought in in this phase are not needed for as long or as intensely as they were in the original build (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Building a house, building a home

This image was generated using OpenAI's ChatGPT and reflects AI-generated content based on user prompts.

As mid-career academics, we align where we are in our careers with home renovation. The basic requirements are in place – our house is built – we have obtained a PhD, acquired some teaching experience, achieved some research productivity, and may even have served on disciplinary and university committees. We now need to focus on and help with the aspects of the academic job that we have limited exposure to or success in. As such, we need to identify those 'experts' whose counsel we can seek for advice in these areas. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009: 547) refer to 'significant networks' where faculty rely 'on a small number of significant others for conversations that are characterised by their privacy, by mutual trust and by their intellectual intrigue' (2009: 547). Who these significant others are – and what their expertise consists of – will necessarily differ for each of us depending on our own needs, as will the duration and nature of our engagements with them.

The first stage in home renovation is, we argue, to identify exactly what our needs are – to review the blueprints of our house - and then to develop highly specific plans for the necessary alterations or improvements. Networks are critical at this stage: it is in speaking to others who have been on the journey that we find out what to expect, what is needed, and where we can get those needs met. Once we have established what needs to be done, we need to find an appropriate 'contractor' (or contractors) - whether it be a senior colleague who is available to offer mentorship themselves or to introduce us to other colleagues who may know of opportunities for, or can assist in, fulfilling our needs – from research agenda development, grant writing, taking up institutional/disciplinary leadership, or accessing resources.

It should, however, not only fall to us. Alterations must conform to regulations and are usually subject to approvals; this is where the institution's role comes in. Institutions are like the land or site where the building takes place - and as such, can – but often do not – create an environment conducive to a successful build. They can do this by making visible (and ideally providing) the resources that mid-career academics need, from the level of who is available to mentor in what capacity, to opportunities for and support with funding, to time off for the development and implementation of activities identified as necessary to reach career goals.

Conclusion and recommendations

We have proposed the analogy of house construction and home renovation to illustrate how different phases of an academic career require distinct interventions. For those entering the academy, the foundations of a PhD, gaining teaching experience and an emerging publication record are akin to the standard components of a house –floors, walls, and a roof. However, as we progress into mid-career, our needs become more nuanced, necessitating personalised resources. Drawing on our own experiences and unsolicited conversations with peers, we instead have tried to offer considerations that can be taken on board in the process of building and developing one's academic career and in seeking support for that process. Using the lens of symbolic interactionism for analysis, we have learned that context matters in the construction of one's (academic) identity, as do social cues. While we suggest that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not desirable, appropriate, or effective for mid-career academics who need tailor-made solutions provided and supported by the institutions in which they have made their homes, our aim has not been to prescribe definitive 'solutions' for mid-career academics but to show how (our) 'insider knowledge' can examine critically how, and to what extent, mentorship can contribute to an academic career.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Open AI's ChatGPT 5 (free version) to generate the image according to user prompts. The Authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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