

# Perceptions of sponsoring as a career advancement tool for women: Are they different in Europe?

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## Abstract

The current understanding of sponsoring as an impactful tool for the career advancement of women is based on predominantly US based research. There is a lack of insight into the perceptions of sponsoring outside of the US, despite evidence that such differences may exist. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of sponsoring in Europe utilising interviews with 11 participants. Findings draw attention to how sponsoring is understood and valued by the participants in comparison with mentoring. The findings expand the existing body of sponsoring literature, reveal some previously unexplored issues, open up areas of possible research and present implications for practice.

## Introduction

Women continue to be under-represented in leadership positions, board and executive levels across the globe (Catalyst, 2017). Backed by evidence supporting the positive impact of gender diversity on organisational and financial performance, organisations, governments and policy making bodies have tried to redress this issue with various initiatives and interventions. Examples include mentoring programmes, leadership development programmes, networking events, internships at the board level (Giscombe, 2008; Women and men, 2013) and, more recently, sponsoring programmes (e.g. PwC's Female Partner Sponsorship Programme in the United Kingdom).

Mentoring, in particular, has gained the attention of academicians, practitioners and organisations for over two decades as an effective tool for the advancement of women into senior leadership positions (e.g. Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Higgins & Thomas, 2001; McKeen & Bujaki, 2008;). Most often based on Kram's (1985) mentoring model, mentors are understood to provide two types of functions: career support and psychosocial support, with sponsoring included in the career support functions.

Sponsoring as an independent concept has received attention in the US based literature and popular media more recently, and most notably following Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin and Sumberg's (2010) survey-based study, as a much needed intervention that is more effective than mentoring for the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions. A sponsor has been identified as a person in a senior position who can influence promotion decisions, make available key connections or networks with senior leaders or people in power, increase a sponsees visibility and provide any kind of support needed to move up the career ladder (e.g. Ehrich, 2008; Friday, Friday & Green, 2004; Foust-Cummings Dinolfo & Kohler, 2011; Hewlett, Leader-Chivee, Sumberg, Fredman & Ho, 2012; Hewlett, Marshall & Sherbin, 2011; Kambil, 2010; Paddison, 2013; Sandberg, 2013).



There is evidence of possible differences between US and non-US based perceptions of sponsoring (e.g. Hewlett et al., 2012; Clutterbuck, 2009) and of developmental mentoring and sponsorship mentoring being separate constructs, as was found in a UK-based longitudinal study (Clutterbuck, 2007). However, there is limited research on the perceptions of sponsoring outside of the US. The purpose of this qualitative study, with eleven participants from across 5 countries, was to explore the perceptions of sponsoring and its impact on the careers of women in Europe. Findings expand the existing body of sponsoring literature, reveal some previously unexplored issues and have implications for research and practice.

This article begins with a review of sponsoring literature and an overview of the research context. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and findings which outline the various themes evident in how the participants perceived sponsoring. The article ends with a discussion of research findings, and conclusions and implications for future research and practice.

## Literature

The literature search was conducted across multiple databases using the keywords sponsor, sponsoring, sponsorship, career advancement, women, gender, career progress and career in different combinations. Sponsorship in the context of sports and on sponsoring as a sub-function of mentoring were most predominant, and limited results on sponsoring in the workplace context indicate a research and/or publication gap in this area.

## Sponsoring

Sponsoring has predominantly appeared as a sub-function of mentoring in research and there is sparse literature that examined sponsoring independently prior to Hewlett et al.'s (2010) study. The terms sponsors and mentors were not clearly demarcated and were used interchangeably in the literature prior to Kram's (1985) seminal mentoring model. The term sponsor was older and popular in the 60s and 70s literature (Epstein, 1970), later replaced with the term mentor (Speizer, 1982). Sponsors or mentors were people who enabled individuals to make financial and career progress (Roche, 1979) and to bypass hierarchical barriers to progress careers faster (Kanter, 1977). They were also thought to belong to a continuum of supportive relationships with mentors and peers at the higher and lower end respectively, and sponsors placed lower than mentors (Shapiro, Haseltine & Rowe, 1978).

Friday, Friday and Green (2004), in a meta-review, first delineated sponsoring from mentoring and pointed out that the definition of mentoring did not always include sponsoring and that sponsoring was not always intrinsic to mentoring (e.g. Higgins & Kram, 2001; Scandura, 1998; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Turban & Dougherty, 1994; Whitely, Dougherty & Dreher, 1991). They proposed that sponsoring was an independent concept and a relationship that involved the process of a sponsor proposing, or supporting, the promotion of a protégé (Friday et al., 2004).

Possible differences in the perception of sponsoring between Europe and the United States were highlighted by Clutterbuck (2009) who suggested that countries with a high power distance culture (such as the USA) were likely to prefer sponsorship mentoring in contrast to countries with a low power distance culture (such as the UK) which would prefer developmental mentoring. At the same time, some studies suggested that sponsorship maybe more covert and hidden than accounted for in Europe, and often a result of unintentional actions (Megginson, Clutterbuck, Garvey, Stokes & Garrett-Harris, 2006; Merrick, 2009).

Following Hewlett et al.'s 2010 study and a more recent interest, sponsoring has appeared in empirical studies (e.g. Carter, Foust-Cummings, Mulligen-Ferry & Soares, 2013; Foust-Cummings, Dinolfo & Kohler, 2011), white papers (e.g. CREW Network, 2011), perspective papers (e.g.



Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013) and scholarly articles (e.g. Paddison, 2013; Travis, Doty & Helitzar, 2013); as well as the popular media (e.g. Harris, 2014; Jacobs, 2014; Marlow, 2014; Schulte, 2013; Von Bergen 2013). After several years of being regarded as a sub-function of mentoring, this body of literature considered sponsoring a distinct, critical and more powerful phenomenon than traditional mentoring for the career advancement of women. Sponsors were defined as people in senior leadership positions who are able to, due to their position, provide visibility and make available career opportunities to their sponsees and ensure their career progression to senior leadership positions (Hewlett et al., 2010). This study was quoted often in the gender diversity literature (e.g. Followell, 2014; Foust-Cummings, et al., 2011; Hellicar, 2013; Hewlett, Marshal & Sherbin, 2011; Paddison, 2013; Travis et al., 2013) and subsequent research has reported similar findings. However, in Hewlett et al.'s (2012) similar study in the UK the participants had to be given a definition of the term sponsor and disagreed with the utilisation of the term, supporting Clutterbuck's (2009) position about a possibly different perception of sponsoring in UK and indicating an ambiguity about the meaning of the term itself.

Sponsoring has been reported to result in access to opportunities, resources and projects that generate recognition; protection from the negative impact of situations; access to a sponsors' networks that facilitates career advancement, early promotion, access to information and an increase in one's social capital; and an increase in an individual's human capital ((Burt, 1998; Eddleson, Baldrige & Veiga, 2004; Ibarra, 1995; Jackson, 2001; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010; Metz, 2009; Schor, 1997; Timberlake, 2004; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2014). However, whether the functions that lead to these outcomes were provided by a sponsor or a mentor is unclear, and the definition, functions and outcomes of sponsoring cannot always be delineated clearly in the literature.

The powerful position of a sponsor, or a mentor acting as a sponsor, is a recurring theme in sponsoring literature (Ehrich, 2008). This position allows sponsors to support the career advancement of their sponsees by acting as a door opener; providing access to otherwise inaccessible resources; and influencing promotion decisions by providing focussed support, exposure and networking opportunities and all the resources needed to meet the challenges of new opportunities and roles (Ehrich, 2008; Foust-Cummings et al., 2011; Kambil, 2010; Paddison, 2013).

## Women and Sponsoring

Women have also been identified to be in greater need of sponsoring than men (e.g. Burt, 1998; Ehrich, 2008; Foust-Cummings et al., 2011; Hewlett et al., 2010; Tharenou, 2005) since they face gender discrimination, the double bind bias (Catalyst, 2007; Hellicar, 2013; Hewlett et al., 2010) and male managerial hierarchies, and lack informal networks for advancement (Tharenou, 1999). Although the more recent perception, particularly in the US-based popular media, is that women need to 'lean in' and push themselves in workplaces in order to reach the C-Suite (Sandberg, 2013), Hewlett et al.'s (2010) research indicates that women may need sponsors to lean in. At the same time, there is also an identified lack of availability of sponsors for women (e.g. Kanter, 1977; Downing, Crosby and Blake-Beard, 2005; Paddison, 2013). This could be the result of a higher number of men in senior positions relating to people like themselves (Sandler, 2014), or believing that sponsoring women and overtly supporting them to get coveted assignments and promotions is a risky undertaking with a high chance of failure (Ehrich, 2008; Foust Cummings et al., 2011; Paddison, 2013; Riger&Gallangan, 1980). Alternatively it could be that women have mentors who are less senior and thus not able to act as sponsors (Hewlett, 2013; Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010; Sandler, 2014). Often, researchers have identified the lack of mentors but suggested that it is sponsorship that the mentors needed to provide in order to help women to advance in their career (Giscombe, 2008). Similarly, the lack of sponsorship has been highlighted by researchers without clarifying whether it is the sponsor (e.g. Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010) or mentor (e.g. Ehrich, 2008)



who is expected to provide it, indicating a continued ambiguity in the perception and usage of the terms.

What is evident from the preceding review of literature is that studies that have examined sponsoring as an independent concept have been predominantly US-based and they have focussed on predetermined functions and outcomes of sponsoring.

## **Cultural context and representation of Women in Europe**

Since this research is contextually situated, this section includes an overview of the perception of women in Europe and demographic information on women in the workforce and in senior roles in the countries that the participants belonged to. We also wanted to capture and present the individual contexts for the participants 'as they see it', therefore we asked participants about their perceptions on the position of women in society and in workplaces during the interviews. Their individual perceptions are presented under the findings.

In the European Union (EU) 46% of the total workforce is comprised of women, with 34% of all working women having tertiary degrees (Women and men, 2013). Women account for about 16.6% of board seats in large companies that were public listed and based on the 27 states of the EU (Women and men, 2013). Even countries like Norway, that have shown a greater progress in increasing the representation of women on boards through quotas, have also found it difficult to achieve the targeted balance in their executive teams (Wittenberg-Cox, 2014). Similarly, the number of companies that have at least two women on their executive committees in the European Union is just 29% and the number of companies with female CEOs is nil, while in the top 100 European companies the executive committees have 80% of males (Wittenberg-Cox, 2014). The gender pay gap still exists in Europe and is largest at the top and bottom positions according to wage (Christofides, Polycarpou & Vrachimis, 2013).

The tightness of cultures, or the extent to which they display strong norms and tolerate non-conformity, can impact women's perception of their role in society and as leaders (Toh & Leonardelli's, 2013) since the culture of a country influences gender roles (Claus, Calaghan & Sandlin, 2013; D' Andrade & Strauss 1992). Countries like Norway display a tight culture, and are more likely to be compliant with initiatives such as mandatory quotas; while in loose cultures (e.g. Ukraine, Hungary, Israel, New Zealand), women are likely to perceive themselves as leaders and be resistant to initiatives such as mandatory quotas, and therefore benefit most from creating a stronger perception of women as leaders by role modelling or increasing the exposure of women in leadership positions (Toh & Leonardelli, 2013).

Countries like Norway, Sweden and Netherlands are also examples of masculine societies which place more emphasis on assertiveness, achievement, heroism and measurable rewards and are associated with opportunities for challenging assignments, continuous recognition, increased earning and career advancement into senior leadership positions; while feminine societies (e.g. Hungary and Austria) place emphasis on cooperation, humility and consideration for the weak (Claus et al., 2013; Hofstede, 1998; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). However, countries which are classified as feminine do not necessarily have a higher level of women in senior leadership positions, contrary to the perception that female leaders should be accepted more in such countries, and in Europe there is an overall expectation from both men and women to conform to the biases of societies about gender roles and perceptions (Claus et al., 2013). The demographic information on the percentage of women in the workforce, percentage of graduates and percentage of women in board positions in the countries that the research participants belonged to is given in Table 1.



**Table 1 Gender Demographics**

Country	Population <sup>1</sup> (Rounded off to millions)	Women Graduates (%) 2012 <sup>2</sup>	Women in Employment <sup>3</sup> (%) 2012 (Age 15-64)	Women in Board Positions in Large Listed Companies (%)
Switzerland	7	40.5	73.6	10 <sup>4</sup>
Luxembourg	0.5	48	59	10.1 <sup>5</sup>
England	63	50.2	65	18.5 <sup>5</sup>
Portugal	11	30.1	58.7	7.1 <sup>5</sup>
Denmark	6	52.9	70	21 <sup>5</sup>

Sources:

1. <http://www.countryreports.org/maps/world.htm>
2. [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_PUBLIC/3-07032014-BP/EN/3-07032014-BP-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-07032014-BP/EN/3-07032014-BP-EN.PDF)
3. [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_PUBLIC/3-07032014-BP/EN/3-07032014-BP-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-07032014-BP/EN/3-07032014-BP-EN.PDF)
4. [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/genderequality/files/gender\\_balance\\_decision\\_making/131011\\_women\\_men\\_leadership\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/genderequality/files/gender_balance_decision_making/131011_women_men_leadership_en.pdf)
5. <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-boards>

## Methodology

A qualitative research design was utilised for the purpose of understanding sponsoring through the eyes of the participants with the help of semi-structured interviews lasting 40 minutes (shortest) to 2 hours (longest). A purposive/criterion based (Morrow 2005) snowball sampling approach was followed, utilising the professional networks of the authors. To draw upon the sponsorship experiences of participants it was essential to include it within the context of an overall mentoring experience in addition to a stand-alone concept, since there is evidence to suggest that sponsoring may be perceived as a function of the overall mentoring experience (Clutterbuck, 2009) and happening more covertly within organisations (Merrick, 2009). Therefore, the criterion for inclusion was that the individuals had been or were currently in a mentoring or sponsoring relationship, as mentors or sponsors or both; or they were protégés. Conceptual definitions of sponsoring were compiled from the literature to share with the participants if required, since literature suggested that non-USA participants might be ambiguous about sponsoring. The data was analysed thematically, guided by the six phase thematic analysis scheme suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) which was an appropriate fit for the exploratory nature of a contextually situated research study (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The demographic and personal information about the participants from Switzerland (6), Luxembourg (1), Portugal (1), Denmark (1) and the UK (2) is given in Table 2. Pseudonyms have been used for participants, workplaces and organisations to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.



**Table 2 Personal Demographics of Participants (specific data that some participants did not want to share is marked with X)**

Pseudonym	Age	Position	Industry	Tenure	Country
Kaylen	51-60	Board member / self-employed	Finance	35	Luxembourg
Brooklyn	41-50	Senior Consultant	Business consulting	~20	Portugal
Katherine	51/60	Owner and Managing Director	Business consulting	34	Denmark
Rachel	>60	President	Education	27	Switzerland
Jenna	51-60	Head of Business Unit	Pharmaceuticals	~15	Switzerland
Jason	41-50	Senior Manager	Engineering	21	UK
Emily	X	Senior Doctor	Healthcare	~14	UK
Bailey	X	Manager	Pharmaceuticals	>6	Switzerland
Mia	41-50	Senior Manager (Law)	Energy	~15	Switzerland
Katy	X	Director/self-employed (Law/Business Consulting)	Business Consulting/Non-Profit	>20	Switzerland
Rebecca	X	Director	Finance	~19	Switzerland

## Findings

The thematic analysis of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) resulted in four main themes and two sub-themes. Our approach to coding was inductive and, eventually, the analysis involved focussing both on providing a description of the themes which were visible in the data, and also developing our own interpretations of what was beneath those themes.

### Social and Cultural Barriers to Career Advancement

The participants perceived the cultural and organisational context to be powerful in establishing barriers to the upward mobility of women. These barriers resulted in women resetting their career aspirations at lower levels, not pursuing leadership roles, not being able to access opportunities or feeling under-valued. The perceptions about women in society and in organisations, and the participants' own perceptions about themselves (women) led to a situation where women did not advance at the same rate as men in workplaces. The one male participant also highlighted the additional role of race as a barrier to advancement both for men and women. Despite the economic need for women to work, women, work and leadership were not accepted as the norm, and society was not perceived to be conducive to women working or taking up leadership roles.

Leadership was understood in terms of power and therefore it was also sometimes considered unfeminine for a woman to want to be a leader (Kaylen), revealing an underlying masculine perception of power and leadership. Brooklyn described how women, who worked so as not to depend on their husbands, still had to create their own networks of support or childcare for pursuing careers. Motherhood and being a primary caregiver of children created a barrier to career progression or special assignments (Emily) since the expectation and assumption was for women to take care of the family, especially once a woman had children (Mia). Society was not perceived as conducive to women working or in being accepted in leadership roles in Switzerland (Rachel, Jenna, Bailey, Mia, Katy, Rebecca).

Women were also expected to be responsible for decisions related to their home and taking up responsibilities and making *“over 80% of decisions at home”* was also thought to impact upon a



woman's career advancement as it took *"energy away from her career"* according to Katherine. She also felt that there was an *"illusion"* among the younger women about equal opportunities because in reality it did not exist. The influence of societal pressures on career aspirations was evident when Rebecca stated that *"...a lot of women at some point don't see the point of it ....it takes too much to get to the top"*.

Jason also echoed this perception with examples of female colleagues, and also explained how race created an additional barrier both for men and women in workplaces in the UK. He explained how his being a black person influenced his ability to create networks:

*there is something definitely missing for black men... a lot of white guys who...because of the whole cultural thing they end up in the pub together ...to do the networking that way but for black guys if you are not in that group it becomes slightly difficult to actually find a different way of doing it.*

The perception of the place of a woman in society influenced how they were perceived at work. Katy explained how the *"negative"* perception was that *"women should still be number two"* and how women defined themselves *"over men"*. So at home they were known by who their husbands were and in office it was their boss [man]. Kaylen explained that the *"competencies"* of women were not *"properly detected, developed and promoted"* by organisations therefore it was a combination of cultural and organisational factors that went against the career advancement of women.

## Perceptions of Sponsoring

The terms 'sponsor' or 'sponsoring' were used by the participants only when asked about it. Two participants (one male and one female from UK) did not know what it meant and had to be given definitions from the guide that was prepared prior to the interviews. One participant (Rebecca) spoke of her sponsor who she defined as 'only' her sponsor and all the others said that their mentors were also their sponsors for specific outcomes. Perceptions of sponsoring encompassed the nature of sponsoring and sponsoring functions.

### Nature of Sponsoring

Upon being given a description of sponsoring, Emily felt that it may exist although she had no knowledge of it. She said:

*I have not heard of it...maybe it exists...it's obviously not common knowledge and it's filtered out but they would pick someone and we do find out...which is one of the complaints we have because all of them are guys...that they pick them...*

Jason also said he had not heard of the term 'sponsoring' and upon being given a description, felt that it was not transparent. Katy echoed this perception about a lack of transparency and Rebecca felt that sponsoring happened in the background and that it might not be possible for individuals to actively look for sponsors.

Brooklyn explained how in a sponsoring relationship a protégé could be pressurized to *"feel obliged to give something in return"* and should therefore be *"careful"*, while Katherine felt that sponsoring could lead to creating *"clones of protégés"* and said: *"[sponsors] may not really understand what you can contribute but they just want you to get the kind of career that they can have"*. On the other hand, depending heavily on a sponsor was a sign of incompetency for women according to Mia. Similarly, Rachel commented on the lack of success with sponsoring in Switzerland stating that women in Switzerland *"don't want it because they say we don't want to depend on the sponsors"*, and felt that it was hidden. The salient features about the nature of sponsoring described by the participants are given in table 3.

**Table 3 Nature of Sponsoring**

Nature of Sponsoring
Good to have not must have
Protégé is powerless, relationship driven by sponsor
Sponsor finds protégé not other way around
Hidden
Protégé cannot quit even if they want to, bound to sponsor
Obligation to return favour to sponsor
Need for sponsoring perceived to be indicative of incompetence

### Sponsoring Functions

Participants expressed diverse opinions about sponsoring functions and, as mentioned earlier, all of them except Rebecca felt that the sponsoring functions were provided by their mentors. Brooklyn felt that in Portugal the sponsoring functions may be provided differently but that they were equally effective. The primary function of a sponsor according to her was providing “*new opportunities*” and “*talking about her work*”. Kaylen felt that “*some roles of a mentor and sponsor were overlapping*” and that the main functions of a sponsor were to provide a network, increase visibility and aid with promotions for the protégé.

A sponsor was perceived as someone “actively promoting the mentee at the right places in the organisation and so actively helping a mentee in getting the job” by Katherine. Rebecca described her boss as her sponsor said she had been “very heavily sponsored” and that her reputation within the organisation had spread due to her sponsor, which resulted in other opportunities and roles. Similarly, Mia felt that a sponsor could increase a protégé’s visibility and “let the sponsee participate in the experience and the network that the sponsor has”. A sponsor was considered a ‘door opener’ by Katy, Katherine and Jenna and all of them believed that they got their desired jobs as a result of a sponsoring function of a mentor.

However, both the participants from the UK felt that sponsoring amounted to being chosen over others. Emily thought that sponsoring was similar to “picking favourites” and Jason spoke of how sponsoring meant getting “handpicked” and said:

*....to be honest I wasn't sure what to make of sponsoring.....I would have thought maybe sponsoring is top down version where ....it is not really a concept I am familiar with; what I am familiar with is fast track development.. ... I think it tends to be that people get handpicked.*

The salient features of the sponsoring functions are given in Table 4.

**Table 4 Sponsoring Functions**

Sponsoring Functions (provided by mentor for 10 participants and by a sponsor for 1)
Provide new opportunities
Increase visibility
Get promotions
Get handpicked for special assignments
Help in getting a new job



## Perceptions of Mentoring

The perceptions of mentoring were a result of questions to the participants both as mentors and protégés. All the participants had mentors and except for one participant (Bailey), all the others had also been mentors themselves. Perceptions of mentoring encompassed the nature of mentoring and the mentoring functions.

### Nature of Mentoring

Mentoring was perceived as a trusting relationship and Brooklyn explained how her mentor was a trusted figure and someone who could be approached anytime with anything. The mentoring relationship was driven by the mentee (Kaylen), who was “*encouraged to take responsibility for his or her self-development*” (Jason), a perception echoed by Jenna.

Mentoring was considered a friendly yet professional relationship where the mentee could discuss matters outside of work (Rachel, Emily), and a partnership with mutual learning (Jenna). It was also considered a safe relationship with no repercussions if discontinued at any point (Rachel). Mia explained how her experience of mentoring made her want to have a similar experience again: “*After this absolutely stellar experience of mentoring, for two years afterwards I knew I had enough push to continue for a long moment without a mentor... but I will take one again ...that is clear*”. The salient features of mentoring described by the participants are given below in Table 5.

**Table 5 Nature of Mentoring**

Nature of Mentoring
Friendly
Safe
Power with protégé, can quit anytime
Protégé driven
Two way relationship where both protégé and mentor learn
Trust as key factor in the relationship

### Mentoring Functions

Brooklyn thought that mentors helped protégés develop their own skills and competencies, and identify their own “*blind spots*”, while Mia explained how they were critical with the aim of raising a reflective attitude in their protégés. A mentor was considered to trust the competencies of the protégé (Kaylen) and support the protégé in building their self-confidence (Katy, Katherine). Katherine spoke of her mentor and said:

*[He] gave me opportunities to stand on my own feet in situations I would never have dared to do otherwise. I think what I have learnt from him was that I can swim, I won't sink even if I am not quite sure about the situation that I am in...I can do it.*

Emily felt that a mentor helped a protégé develop “*realistic goals*”, which was echoed by Jason as well who said that a mentor was there to “*have a quick chat in terms of career, development and that kind of stuff*”. He also felt that the mentor was a provider of a network that helped with career development. This was again reflected by Katy who thought that a mentor helped build alliances and increased the visibility of a protégé, while Gabriele and Bailey saw their mentors as door openers. A mentor was also considered a role model (Rebecca, Brooklyn, Katherine), and someone who was able to offer a sounding board and give a perspective on organisational politics (Rebecca).

Kaylen summed up the functions that her mentor provided and said:



*She really promoted me, she sponsored me, she was also a professional friend, she was a discussion partner, she was an advisor, she was a knowledge sharer, she was feedback giver and she was a networker.*

The salient features of the mentoring functions are given in Table 6.

**Table 6 Mentoring Functions**

Mentoring Functions
Role model, has same problems as protégé
Active Listener, discussion partner
Supports protégés in finding their own solutions, empowers them
Feedback giver, offers different perspective
Networking support, door opener
Trust in competency, builds confidence (also in event of setback), helps realise protégé's competencies
Interest in protégé (looking out for protégé)
Expert perspective
Coach
Provides a safe environment for questions, expression of emotions

## Sponsoring versus Mentoring

The design of the interview questionnaire enabled us to utilise direct as well as indirect questions to facilitate an understanding of how the participants compared mentoring and sponsoring. Brooklyn spoke about the lack of clarity in the definitions of the terms mentor and sponsor: *"It is important to define well what we mean by sponsor and what we mean by mentor and I see that mentor also can have this role of being a sponsor"*. This opinion was also reflected by Mia who also felt that there was an *"overlap"* in the functions of a mentor and sponsor. Kaylen's manager was what she called both a mentor and a sponsor and she felt that though both had advantages: *"...if the sponsor leaves the sponsor is not there anymore but if the mentor leaves the mentee has learnt something"*. On the other hand, she also understood that

*...a sponsor can just be in one specific relationship, business relationship, with the one person and make a huge impact on the career of the other person and may have nothing to do otherwise.*

Jenna spoke of the importance of the network of a sponsor that stayed with the protégé even after the relationship had ended. As a result, she believed that women should get a mentor placed in senior leadership positions if they were looking for career advancement to senior positions, who could then act as a sponsor. Therefore, if one did seek upward mobility, they were not perceived to need sponsorship. For example, Bailey did not have a sponsor and explained how she did not need one because she did not want to *"change anything at the moment"* in terms of her career

While speaking about the need for both mentors and sponsors, Katy commented on how a sponsor, by virtue of being within the company, was someone you could not about talk hidden matters with. She felt that this was where a mentor could step in. However, she also spoke about the need for both relationships depending on where an individual was in their career. Rebecca who credited her sponsor with her *"stellar"* career expressed the need for both but felt that a person needed to be mentored first before being sponsored.



Rachel thought that the individual goals and ambitions would determine who a protégé would consider more important, and that both could be helpful even though “..women in Switzerland would rather be recognized for their competency and are not enthusiastic about sponsoring”. This perception was also echoed by Jason, the male participant from UK, who said that “..up to a point” it would be good to have a sponsor to get a “different perspective” and to tap into their network. He felt that the “network of mentors” was important however for people in UK “might have reservations about sponsoring” because of the lack of transparency.

Katherine summed up her opinion and said:

*I think it's worse for women, call it mentor or call it sponsor we all need good alliances to move in the organisational career path and I think it is less easy for women.*

The salient features of the perception of ‘sponsoring versus mentoring’ by the participants is given in Table 7.

**Table 7 Sponsoring versus Mentoring**

Sponsoring versus Mentoring
Lack of clarity in definition
Mentor can also sponsor
Need for both
Mentoring precedes sponsoring

## Discussion

The findings indicated that the participants identified both mentoring and sponsoring as developmental relationships that empowered them. However, there were differences in the way that these two concepts were perceived.

### Developmental Networks

A developmental network is a sub section of an individual’s social network. It is a set of co-existing relationships that crosses organisational boundaries and ranks and is perceived as being important to an individual’s development at a particular point of time (Higgins, Chandler & Kram, 2008; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Thus, it supports the personal and professional development of an individual with outcomes dependent on the strength of the relationships (Baugh & Scandura, 2001;). Viewed through this lens, the participants in this research perceived mentoring and sponsoring as developmental relationships that were established to satisfy developmental needs. Mentoring and sponsoring were therefore tools for personal and career development.

The female participants perceived two types of developmental needs: personal and career development. The sole male participant however reflected upon ‘development’ as just career development or career advancement, perhaps a gender related perception that could be explored in future research. Personal development was perceived as equipping oneself with skills that could be utilised to advance in the workplace or get a new job, cope with the issues of work-life balance and cross barriers to upward mobility. The functions of a mentor facilitated these outcomes by providing the necessary advice or guidance that enabled the protégés in finding their way, based on the agenda set by the protégés themselves. This also led to learning and accumulating new skills, both for the protégé as well as for the mentor. All the participants in this research linked mentoring with their personal development and those who had heard of sponsoring or had a sponsor did not associate sponsoring with personal development.



Career development included career advancement, promotions, asking for desired positions, resolving workplace conflict and setting themselves up as entrepreneurs. While describing the career development functions some of the participants felt that their mentor was performing a sponsoring role when providing those functions, while others just attributed it to a mentoring function. Only one participant attributed these functions to a sponsor alone.

Perhaps, defining the provider of the developmental function as a mentor or sponsor enabled individuals to decide how much and in what way to invest in the relationship or what to expect from the relationship. However, the one participant who described a short-lived, one-off sponsoring relationship that she did not initiate but benefitted from, felt that the relationship had no other function besides gaining a promotion. It could perhaps be considered “developmental assistance” that provided one specific career developmental function (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 267), or indicate a special relationship that lies outside of the mentoring framework of Kram (1985), or maybe the developmental assistance framework of Higgins and Kram (2001), and is impactful on the career advancement of individuals. Given the continued low numbers of women in senior leadership positions across organisations, this relationship needs to be highlighted as a focus for future research.

Findings also indicated that the responsibility of initiating and engaging in developmental relationships or developmental initiation (Higgins et al., 2008) lay with the protégé in the case of mentoring whilst this was not the case with sponsoring. Socio-economic factors, gender, age and nationality can all affect the level of developmental initiation pursued by individuals (Higgins et al., 2008) and women, by virtue of being less pushy or hesitant by nature, would be expected to have a low level of initiation of such relationships, although this is contrary to research that indicates that women have more mentors than men. Further, the women in this research perceived mentoring as a tool for countering the instinctive diffident nature of women - not to be pushy and assertive (for example Kaylen and Emily). One explanation for this finding could be that perhaps the women in this research did not feel that women needed to be ‘pushy’ in order to initiate mentoring relationships but that they needed to be ‘pushy’ to progress in their career. The other explanation is that women in formal mentoring programs within organisations, or informal mentoring relationships outside of the organisation which were set-up by mentoring groups, would be able to form mentoring relationships even if they were instinctively hesitant, due to the structured nature of the programmes. The role of nationality, socio-economic status and age in determining the initiation of such developmental networks has not been examined in this research and is therefore a possible agenda for future research, particularly with respect to sponsoring.

## Sponsoring versus Mentoring

The findings of our research indicate that sponsoring was perceived as an important career developmental relationship, driven by the sponsor and out of control of the protégé, whereas mentoring was perceived as a personal developmental relationship, driven by the protégé, which often led to sponsoring outcomes. Mentoring also provided a network that could be tapped into for career moves, such as new and desired roles. As one participant explained, mentoring was critical to reach a position where someone could sponsor an individual. There was an underlying assumption that a ‘mentored’ employee was more likely to find a sponsor because she or he would be a better performer and have access to the mentor’s network.

Mentoring was perceived as a two-way relationship where both the mentor and protégé gained and the reciprocity in terms of learning came forth in mentoring relationships, whereas with sponsoring relationships an expectation of loyalty came forth, which did not happen naturally or spontaneously but was an ‘unwritten rule’. In some cases, it was even detrimental and negative because the protégé was tied to a sponsor who would not allow the protégé to then quit the relationship. Therefore, although the participants perceived mentoring and sponsoring as relationships that were part of a broader developmental network, within that network, mentoring was perceived as an



essential and critical element of their personal development, while sponsoring was considered good to have or, in some cases (Mia and Rachel), rather unacceptable because it impinged on their self-esteem or ability to advance in their career on their own merit.

Relational theory posits that women's development is underpinned by a notion of connectedness with others, and relational practice emphasises the ability to connect with and build relations with others in organisations; with empathy, authenticity and mutual empowerment identified as relational skills (Fletcher, 1998). It also explains how these skills and practices that are primarily used by women lead to their experiences of development (Buttner, 2001). Relational practice leads to mutual empowerment and benefit rather than being one-sided and there is a lack of growth fostering relationships in its absence (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). Thus, when women perceive that a relationship does not involve relational skills and practices, it is not likely to be considered a growth fostering relationship and they may even start to view it in a negative light. When a relationship such as sponsoring was, perhaps, not perceived as an 'in-connection' relationship according to some of the participants, it was viewed negatively or as not significant enough. Where it was perceived as positive, developmental and growth fostering, it perhaps involved relational practices.

## Empowerment

Finally, the findings of the research indicate that the developmental relationships that the women engaged in were a source of empowerment. Empowerment can be thought of as a process by which people are able to participate in decision making processes from a position of strength, perceive themselves as having the ability and the authority to be in that decision-making space and having the right to be influential (Rowlands, 1996). Empowerment can also be thought of as removing negative social constructions that find their way into organisations and create barriers to career advancement for women (Buchanan, 2010). The opinions of the participants in this research, on the position of women in society and in the workplace, indicate their perception of a lack of empowerment. Careers and career advancement are pursued with the goal of empowerment and therefore mentoring and sponsoring, as tools for empowerment, are considered significant. From this perspective, in this group of women, the focus on personal development is as important and significant as the focus on career development. Since the sponsoring relationship was perceived to place the power in the hands of the sponsor it was perhaps considered less significant than mentoring, which placed the power in the hands of the protégé both during and after the relationship ended.

## Conclusions and Implications for the future

The purpose of this research was to understand the perception of sponsoring as a career advancement tool for women from a sample of people (10 women and 1 man) in Europe. This is a contextual exploratory study, arguing against the usage of generalisations in exploratory research (Stebbins, 2001), and the findings do not claim to meet the generalisability criteria of research.

Research findings give rise to fundamental questions about sponsoring: whether it is a sub-function of mentoring, a sub-function of a developmental network, or a separate relationship. Findings suggest that the perceptions of sponsoring are diverse and located on a continuum of positive to negative perceptions depending upon context, highlighting the pluralistic notions about sponsoring. Therefore, further research should seek to provide an insight into sponsoring and the nature of the sponsoring relationship. Findings draw attention to the influence of factors at an individual level such as diversity (race/ethnicity and gender), career goals and prior experiences on the perceptions of sponsoring; future research could focus on these. They also draw attention to the significance of context and culture in the perceptions of sponsoring, indicating the significance of empirical research on the impact of social, cultural and organisational factors on the perceptions of sponsoring.





Implications for practice include a focus on the role of Human Resources (HR) in recognising the diverse needs of women across organisations and coaching senior leaders to respond accordingly rather than a one size fits all solution. The implementation of diverse HR approaches can enhance an organisation's success and competitiveness, through increased adaptability, more effective execution and tapping into a variety of viewpoints that likely better mirror their customer face. With varying career goals and definitions of career success there is a need to focus on women employees as individuals with distinct and diverse desired career pathways, and the role of senior leaders and HR is to be enablers for those pathways. At the same time, a more relational approach (Olkkonen, Tikkanen & Alajoutsijärvi, 2000) to sponsoring will enable sponsor-sponsee relationships that promote mutual growth rather than power with the sponsor. Future empirical research could focus on the impact of the sponsoring functions on female employee empowerment, within the organisational, social and cultural societal context. This would inform and support organisations and HR practitioners in improving the effectiveness of sponsoring initiatives.

With sponsoring positioned as a potential solution to address the continuing under-representation of women in leadership positions across the globe, a research focus on sponsoring has the potential to inform policy makers, organisations and practitioners involved with gender diversity initiatives and interventions. Further research could focus on: on the motivation and benefits of sponsorship for sponsors and organisations; cross gender sponsoring relationships; formal versus informal sponsoring; contrasting cases such as participants who only have mentors or sponsors; newcomers versus those with several years of experience; cross-gender relationships; cross-industry focus; participants from male dominated industries versus those from female dominated industries. A move from large scale cross sectional surveys to utilising a repertoire of methodologies such as phenomenology and longitudinal or case study research are suggested for future research on sponsoring.

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