Interview with Serge Villemure

<http://stemmdiversityatmcgill.com/serge-villemure/>

Q. Please state your name and affiliation.

A. Serge Villemure. I am the Director of Scholarships and Fellowships and the Director for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives at the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada.

Q. Could you give us a summary of your background?

A. Yeah. I have a background in kinesiology, so actually, a Bachelor’s degree in kinesiology, and then I did a Master’s in Administration quite some time ago.

Q. Can you describe the path you took to get where you are today?

A. Well, I’ve started and been atkk NSERC for 25 years, so worked in a number of programs. I basically loved it so much to work with the researcher community and see what kind of discoveries researchers were making and being able to work with committees of peers were evaluating applications. It became so exciting for me that I basically stuck around for all this time.

Q. Why is diversity important to you?

A. Diversity is important for me because diversity is a central element of excellence. The Council has a responsibility to fund excellent research and we cannot even dream about being the best in the world if we are ignoring half the population. Diversity, equity, and inclusion is a question of fairness, is a question of excellence, and a question of human rights. All those put together, for me, is an essential dimension of everything that we do. Not only at the Council and in research, but on boards, for example, on company’s boards, on des *conseils d’administration* [administrative councils]. It’s a super important to be able to have a good diversity lens in everything that we do.

Q. What are some current initiatives to promote diversity within NSERC?

A. Within NSERC, we have been involved in equity, diversity, and inclusion for a number of years. Initially, we were primarily focusing on increasing the representation women in science and engineering and that lasted for a number of years. Like many other organizations and according to what the evidence says, working on representation is not enough. Because a lot of organizations like NSERC and universities and others have done a lot of work to try to increase the representation of women and underrepresented groups and it’s not working. The numbers are staying the same, they’re staying flat, so there is something more that we need to do. Based on that, the Council has started to develop its own internal capacity and capability to be able to deal with equity, diversity, and inclusion in our policies, in the way we set up our peer review process, and in the way we ask applicants to prepare grant applications. It’s very important that the Council, as well, can be experts or can develop expertise to be able to play in that field. Just promoting increased representation is not enough.

Q. I know there’s these Chairs for Women in Science and Engineering – can you tell us more about that?

A. Yup. This is a very interesting program. A program that we like a lot. It celebrated its 20th anniversary just last year or two years ago I believe. The program is basically funding researchers who have a strong interest in promoting women in science and engineering. The program, as I said, started 20 years ago with an emphasis on increasing representation, but the program has evolved to also building a capacity in terms of dealing with barriers. What are the main barriers and how do we bring them down? In fact, the work of the Chair holders - I believe we’ve had 16 to 17 Chair holders so far – have been instrumental in the way the Council came about to develop its own policy with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The program has been, in our opinion, a real success.

Q. What is the role of institutions like McGill in addressing diversity issues in STEMM?

A. McGill has a super important role. Every university has to work in partnership with the Councils, the granting agencies in general. A granting agency, like the one I work for, is one organization in an environment that includes a lot of different organizations. McGill University, as a leading research university, also can lead the way in terms of putting together best practices in terms of how to promote diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Q. So the Council works very closely with the university administration?

A. Yes and the researcher community as well. Because as you know, researchers from McGill sit on our panels, they review applications, they act as external referees for us, and they advise us on many respects including on many topics I should say including diversity and equity.

The Gender Summit has basically two goals like all gender summits have basically two goals. The first one being to increase considerations of gender equity, diversity, and inclusion in research and innovation. The second goal is also to promote the fact that gender equity, diversity, and inclusion are central elements in the research content meaning that when granting agencies like NSERC or CIHR or others fund research, they need to be cognisant of the fact that to be able - as I was talking about earlier - to be able to fund excellence you have got to make sure the research you’re doing and your research result are applicable to a broad audience. For example, in some research, most of the – oh I forget the words here - most of your subjects, sorry. If most of your subjects are male subjects and you apply your research to the overall population, then this is probably not appropriate because your research will not equally apply to all members of the population. We have to be really careful that gender equity, diversity and inclusion is embedded in the research content. These are the two main goals of the Gender Summit.

In Montreal, learning from previous summits, we want to give the summit a really strong emphasis on pluralism and diversity in general, so not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of types of organizations like gender equity, diversity, and inclusion in industry, in government, look at populations like indigenous peoples, LGBTQ communities. We want to be very broad in our concept or in our consideration of pluralism.

Q. What are the most important issues regarding diversity and inclusion in STEMM in Canada today?

A. The most important issues I would say – to be blunt – I would say that were probably ignoring almost half the population. In STEMM areas in particular, I think all fields have similar issues when you look at the more senior levels in the university, for example, or in the board of a company, but in the STEMM areas, very early on, we don’t have a lot of members from underrepresented groups including women. We need to be better at making sure that when we go ahead with various research, various ideas, and various innovations that we take into account the full perspective that is available to us and currently that is not the case.

Q. You talk about how representation is not the endpoint, so what do you do beyond that?

A. Beyond representation? We want to look at the barriers. For example, implicit bias is a major issue, right. Everybody is biased, but we may not be aware of [the fact] that we are biased. We think we are being fair, but deep down within us because of our upbringing, because of a certain culture, were more favourable to certain groups versus others. This is one thing that we want to address through training, but not only training that you would do in a 20-minute video or a 20-minute module, but sustained training and reminders that we have to be careful of our biases and perhaps that we have to take a bit more time to make our decisions because when were pressed for time we work at a fast pace then it’s in those instances that bias creeps in.

Implicit bias is one, but we also want to look at gender language. A very simple example would be the fact that we are now asking our committees to not refer to applicants when they review applications from professors or from students. We don’t want them to refer to the applicants by their gender, he or she or whatever. Even if you have the paper in front of you or the screen in front of you and you have the name and you know the gender of the applicant, even if the gender is referenced during a discussion, it’s enough to trigger a bias. For example, women are not as good as men in math. This is the kind of thing we want to avoid. The Council and the community, the committees, need to work together to be better aware of how to deal with these issues. There are many other barriers we want to address as well. The way research excellence is being defined in STEMM. It’s based a lot on output and publications, but we want to make sure that other components that are very important for excellence and research are taken into account. We want to have a broader definition of what constitutes excellence in research. These are some examples of the things we want to address. We now have a framework for equity, diversity, and inclusion and these are central elements of that framework.

Q. NSERC and McGill deals with these issues in a very top-down perspective – what are some things the average person walking through the Redpath Museum can do to improve the situation?

A. This is a very interesting question. Really to check your hypothesis - check your thinking. When basically you see someone or you have a reaction towards something, you should always ask yourself why am I thinking like this or how come I am thinking like this. Just by checking your hypothesis, you might come to realize that perhaps there’s some element in your thinking that you’ve not taken into account. For me, this is one basic key element that anybody who walks in the museum should ask themselves.

Q. Can you tell us about your journey through science and NSERC? How did your interest in diversity develop?

A. Okay. That is a very interesting question. I’ve had many roles within NSERC and Discovery Grants and Research Partnerships. At one point, after restructuring, I inherited the Chairs for Women in Science and Engineering program. That tied me with the issue of encouraging women to take on careers in science and engineering. At just about the same time, there was a Gender Summit organized in Washington by the lead organization, NSF, the National Science Foundation. They invited NSERC to be a part of the organizing committee. Given the fact that I now had the Chairs for Women in Science and Engineering program, I was asked to be the NSERC rep on the organizing committee in Washington.

This was a real eye opener for me because I started to read articles to read scientific articles and papers and to hear presentations about the challenges of equity, diversity, and inclusion in STEMM. I realized I told myself “wow, am I missing something?” because as a program administrator or program officer you’ve [been] saying: “I’ve been handling the evaluation of research for a long time in science and engineering. I know the ins and out of how to assess an application and what kind of process to put in place to ensure a fair evaluation”, but then being in front of the evidence I realized that there was a big gap in what we were doing. The big gap was what I was saying earlier, in terms of not necessarily just encouraging more representation of women or underrepresented groups in science and engineering, but also look at the barriers and what we need to tackle in order to be able to have a fair process and to promote excellence. That was the whole start for me in being implicated or involved in diversity, equity, and inclusion. I have to say that for me in terms of social justice [or] conscience, you feel you want to basically have the best possible process to be able to promote and to evaluate research. I said to myself: “we need to do something” and then the participation of the Council in the organization of the Gender Summit in 2013 allowed us to basically develop this capability to having a program to promote women in science and engineering, but to focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion, in general, and also to focus on many of the underrepresented groups.

Q. Have you seen much improvement for women and racialized people in STEMM?

A. Not really. I think there is a good momentum going on right now because a lot of universities, like McGill for example, they’re now having offices and experts on equity, diversity, and inclusion. The Council [is] also developing expertises in the same area, so in that sense there is momentum, but the numbers over the last 20 to 30 years have not changed as much and we need to change the numbers. I once listened to a presentation by Imogen Coe from Ryerson University and the main theme of her presentation was change the numbers and this is exactly what we need to do. Before we can consider that we’ve reached some level of success, we need to see the numbers change.

Q. How does Canada compare to other developed nations around the world?

A. Probably were all about the same. If I think of the United States, my interactions with the European countries - we have a lot of partners in the European countries – in terms of numbers we’re pretty much the same. Other countries have started to have some really good mechanisms to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion within their research and innovation ecosystem. Canada needs to be a bit better in developing those tools.

Q. Are there any specific examples/specific countries that we could learn from?

A. Yes, the one that I’m thinking about in the UK is called Athena Swan. Athena Swan is an initiative funded by the UK Research Councils. The main goal is to provide universities – universities can become members of Athena Swan and by becoming members, they agree to a certain list of principles regarding best practices in equity, diversity, and inclusion. They apply to a certain level of certification or recognition. Basically, a bit like the buildings, they could apply for a bronze or silver or gold level in terms of their diversity best practices. This process in the UK has really become very efficient in raising awareness and having institutions have a better focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. I think this is a really good initiative.

Q. Any plans to bring that to Canada?

A. Possibly. Yeah. There are actually discussions with the United States to be able to bring something similar to North America. Very very early stage. I can’t tell you there is any commitment towards that at the moment, but it would be, in my opinion, something that would be desirable.

Q. How do you maintain a healthy balance between career and family?

A. That’s a good question. I try to limit my hours at work. Even if I have a busy job, other people have busy jobs as well. You have to maintain a certain discipline in terms of when do you start and when do you finish your work. There are occasions where you have to work more because you have a rush [or] you have a meeting or Gender Summit coming up. That can justify doing maybe some more hours, but these have to be limited to a fairly low number. As well, I try to exercise. I like yoga. I try to do other things to basically be able to fight the stress that I have in my job. Now, I’m talking about my job, but it’s not only my job, it’s anybody I think. They need to have a good strategy for stress management through healthy diet, healthy exercise, and so on, and not too many hours at work.

Q. Have you had any mentors in the course of your career?

A. I’ve had many mentors, both male and female mentors, that have been really useful to me in terms of being able to just give me an indication on what I should focus. Like if I have a bunch of things to do, to prioritize the most important ones. I have some really good examples of mentors who basically showed me how to do that.

Q. Any specific names? You can give them a shoutout.

A. Yes. She’s retired now, but Danielle Ménard used to be one of my previous directors at the Council and she really had a good discipline and a good thinking process from which I really learned a lot. Pierre Charest, my current boss, as well, would be a good mentor. I’ve also had interactions with an executive coach that was really helpful to exactly help me balance my work life with my private life. Mentors are really important.

Q. What advice do you have for someone who is interested in STEMM?

A. The best advice I would have for anybody interested in STEMM is to be really aware of all the excitement and all the challenges that you may overcome in undertaking that career. I will explain [this] a little bit. A career in STEMM is very exciting because there are many areas [or] STEMM fields that you can really, basically, ultimately change the world. A lot of these fields are very exciting in terms of the amount of options that you have and the amount of things that you can do in the STEMM disciplines. With all kinds of excitement, there comes also a level of stress and some level of challenges that you will face. My advice would be to talk to a lot of people, if you have mentors, university professors, [and] to really be aware of the challenges that you will face as well because you will face some challenges. Especially if you are part of an equity seeking group or part of an underrepresented group, you will face challenges that you may or may not even know that you will be facing. Going into the STEMM career really well informed about all the excitement that there is and also the challenges that there is will make you a very good candidate to succeed in the STEMM areas.

Q. Do you have any final thoughts?

A. Don’t hesitate to talk to people. To go to resources if you face a particular problem with respect to equity, diversity, or inclusion, or any kinds of problems. Don’t hesitate to go see the experts in the field that are available to help you succeed in a STEMM career.