



## Opinion

### Some Thoughts on Doctoral Supervision

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#### Abstract

This reflective account discusses the cultural and emotional forces underneath supervisor-supervisee relation in doctoral supervision. It highlights the dynamics and challenges in forming a good relationship which can support doctoral students. Questions were raised about the power balance between the parties, gratitude embedded in this relationship, and the extent to which emotional transition is possible in doctoral supervision. The essay concludes that doctoral supervision is a long and endless learning process that takes us from one stop to the next.

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Doctoral supervision is a complex process<sup>[1]</sup>. Being an inherently significant element in doctoral study and a complex leadership practice<sup>[2]</sup>, it can 'make or break a PhD student' (p. 267)<sup>[3]</sup>. The literature has tried to conceptualize what doctoral supervision consists of, and what makes good supervision. For example, Murphy et al.<sup>[4]</sup> discuss preferences of the supervisees: their beliefs about if the focus of supervision should be task-focused or relationship-focused. For Grant and Manathunga<sup>[5]</sup>, supervision is a largely cognitive venture instead of a complex interpersonal encounter in particular when it involves students from different cultural backgrounds. Collins<sup>[6]</sup>, however, argues that the supervisor-supervisee relationship is more highly valued than the process aspects of supervision by research students. Thus, it is safe to say that the process of doctoral supervision comprises the task-focused and relationship-focused aspects and that the roles of these two aspects can vary in individual cases and circumstances.

What makes doctoral supervision good then? Great

efforts have been made to address this question. For example, Kearns and Finn<sup>[7]</sup> have discussed supervisory pedagogies. Some authors<sup>[6,8]</sup> have explored the dynamics in supervisory relationships while Boehe<sup>[9]</sup> discusses different supervisory styles. These studies have highlighted the significance of supervisory relationship, which is well captured in Grant and Graham<sup>[10]</sup> who argue that 'the heart of a successful supervision process is the quality of the relationship between student and supervisor' (p. 77). In what follows, thoughts will be given to supervisory relationship building, in particular the hidden forces that are underneath the emergence of the relationship.

A supervisory relationship cannot be defined until the relevant parties take their positions (i.e. the doctoral student and the supervisor), who then interact with each other for a shared goal: the successful completion of the doctoral project. The interactions between them are dynamic, influenced by institutional factors<sup>[9]</sup>, the research project, the preferences or beliefs, personality and socio-

cultural characteristics of the supervisee and that of the supervisor too. Parker-Jenkins<sup>[11]</sup> remarks that supervisory relationship can be problematic for both parties due to institutional appointment of supervisor where the supervisee rarely has any involvement in this decision-making while the supervisor role being perceived as 'all-encompassing' leading to overly dependence by the student on the supervisor. Likewise, Iphofen<sup>[12]</sup> argues that doctoral students need to have a realistic view of the supervisor's role: 'I cannot be your counsellor, mentor, therapist, friend and boss - my primary responsibility is to supervise' (p. 5). Iphofen, rightly, makes the point that supervising the research project is the primary responsibility of a supervisor, which entails the primacy of professionalism in their relationship. Similarly, Parker-Jenkins<sup>[11]</sup> and Phillips et al.<sup>[13]</sup> have raised the alarm of not to make the relationship personal.

This is not to say that the supervisor should supervise the project with a 'cold' and emotionless manner. In fact, gratitude<sup>[8]</sup>, empathy, and understanding<sup>[14]</sup> can greatly enhance supervision. In my own experiences of supervising doctoral students, gratitude always plays a role to varying degrees in various contexts. Indeed, gratitude is the most important cohesive element for society and is the 'moral memory of mankind' that connects one person with another (p. 623)<sup>[8]</sup>. It informs our discourse about relationships; without it the relationships suffer. A grateful action lingers on from a good action received in the past; thus, a grateful person tends to attribute good outcomes to the contributions of other people and want to give back something good as an acknowledgement of benefiting from the past action<sup>[8]</sup>. Expressing gratitude can bring about prosocial effects, such as empathy, forgiveness, emotional support, and willingness to help others, and thus contribute not only to building and maintaining good relationships, but also the increased motivation to give back to the benefactor<sup>[8]</sup>.

There are also critiques with regard to gratitude. In educational context, ethical concerns are raised due to the association of gratitude with reciprocity, indebtedness, and obligation. A teaching/learning situation could be set up to create a perceived 'obligation' to 'give back' - anxieties are magnified, creating unhealthy power relations or in other words diminishing the goodwill or 'the purity of intention in the act of giving' (p. 624)<sup>[8]</sup>. Of course, one needs to be aware of the dark side of gratitude. This is to say that it is paramount that in gratitude practice, moral self-monitoring is required to ensure that the intention in the act of giving is not to manipulate the relevant parties and/or the situation to meet a wrong doing, such as for the sake of PhD completion or holding the other person in her/his debt, setting up unhealthy power relations.

Reflecting upon my own experiences, fortunately, I feel that my doctoral students have shown great respect

to me as their supervisor and that they are grateful for the feedback and suggestions that I have given to them. This pattern seems to be consistent across them regardless of their different cultural backgrounds. This is demonstrated through their kind words, their emotions as expressed in non-text clues, and actions-acting upon my feedback on their work. Do I show gratitude to my supervisees? I would say that I do. There have been occasions when the students expressed their difficulties and/or frustrations in their study and personal lives, and when I provided them with supportive and encouraging words and being able to feel what they were/are experiencing (partially). Some of my doctoral students and I share the same cultural background. Probably because of this, I feel it is easier and natural to have a less formal, friendly conversation prior to the formal discussion about their work. The informal pre-meeting conversations have helped all parties concerned build good rapport and open communication.

Such rapport can be built up well before the formal supervision arrangement is agreed. For instance, one of my PhD students had approached me directly via email to express his interest in pursuing his project under my supervision. This was followed by an online video call so that I could get a better understanding of his project. The video call has also given me the opportunity to see his home in China, which is also my motherland. Following the formal application process, he was then offered the first interview opportunity wherein my colleagues and myself assessed his ability to potentially undertake his PhD in our institution. The first interview's outcome was not as what he would have hoped for - he was asked to revise his proposal to be considered in the second interview. During the first interview, it was clear to me that the expectations that we held of PhD candidates were very high. In fact, in my view they are impossible for many recent postgraduates to meet. Considering his enthusiasm and passion to become an academic, I decided to give him more support to help him get to the position whereby his proposal may be accepted by the panel of the second interview. This involved more online video calls with this student (PhD applicant then) and multiple revisions of his proposal. Thanks to his ability to follow my guidance and ability to produce a good piece of academic work in the given timeframe, he was eventually offered a place to study in our university. In reflection, the driving reason of my action or gratitude practice was my sympathy for his 'impossible mission' and willingness to help this particular young individual from China to get on a boat that can sail him to the destination that he wants to get to.

Do I express my gratitude to my supervisees enough? Probably, not enough. Reflecting upon this, I draw from the Confucian tradition wherein the teacher-student relationship carries unbalanced power exchange. In that, the teacher has the power of knowing things while the student is there to

learn from the teacher or the ‘master’ in the ancient term. Thus, the gratitude is expected to come from the student - ‘being grateful for teaching me’ - to the teacher who expects the student to overcome all difficulties to learn well. The expectation of extreme gratitude is echoed in Chinese ancient saying ‘一日为师，终身为父’，of which direct translation is: ‘One who is your teacher for one day, is the father for your whole lifetime’. In contemporary society now, people do not really follow the facial meaning of the saying but the saying nevertheless highlights the expectation of this unbalanced gratitude practice in teacher-student relationship. Does this disposition mirror the ‘dark side of gratitude’<sup>[8]</sup>? I would say ‘no’, because this social normative expectation of a teacher-student relation in the Confucian perspective remains to be one wherein the student respects the teacher while the teacher teaches the student with genuine concerns for the person’s development.

Various authors have argued that supervising doctoral research is a psychosocial process that plays out in rational and irrational ways in which emotions are embedded<sup>[14]</sup>. Thus, Henderson<sup>[14]</sup> calls for more critical analysis of supervisor’s reflection on the transition from supervisee to supervisor in professional development of supervisors. Previously, I stated that I could feel what my supervisees have experienced partially in my doctoral supervision practice. This is because the research-related problems that they have experienced or are experiencing are those that I had experienced in my own PhD research. Because I was exposed to these problems when I was a PhD researcher myself, I can understand what my students are going through, but only partially. It is ‘partially’, because their emotions are not reducible to their PhD project. They, indeed, arise from the students’ personal lives - their interactions with their family members, social and financial difficulties, and joy, too. When I was a PhD student, my personal circumstances were very different from that of my supervisees. That is, the pressures that I experienced then are bound to be different from theirs. My emotional responses to the pressures then are bound to be different from the way that they are handling theirs, not to mention the differences in our personalities which also play a significant role in our handling of difficult situations. Indeed, our ways to deal with pressures are bound to be different. Therefore, if I were to adopt a supervisory pedagogy based on my past experience as a PhD student and apply it to my supervisees, any directly emotional transition is problematic.

Thus, supervising research itself is a learning process for the supervisor. Indeed, it was well said that supervising doctoral studies is an ongoing ontological process<sup>[15]</sup>. It is evident in Halse’s<sup>[15]</sup> writing that such a learning and developmental process occurs in supervision in many disciplines. Supervising doctoral students itself is indeed a learning journey for me as supervisor, not just in terms of subject matters and scientific research methods, but also institutional policies, procedures, and politics. Doctoral

supervision changes how supervisors see, think, and act in light of the context that they are in. It can also shape our attitudes, values, and orientations in supervision. Therefore, valuable and meaningful knowledge generated through the practice of doctoral supervision needs to be recognized and appreciated.

When we as doctoral supervisors recognize that, actually, the supervision process is a learning process for ourselves, then we are shifting our position of the ‘knowledge expert’ to one of learner. Subsequently, we are bringing ourselves down to the same level that our supervisees are at. Logically, the pedagogy needs to be adapted to one that is more equal, collaborative in nature. The implication of such a shift could result in doubt by supervisees about the academic guidance that their supervisors provide. Clearly, there is a dilemma here. Should we need to be cautious from here onwards? It is not possible to draw a conclusion in this essay because this reflective essay has effectively opened up a further question about how the relationship in doctoral supervision should be positioned. The only conclusion that I can draw with a good level of confidence is that PhD supervision is a long and endless learning process that takes us from one stop to the next.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declared that there was no conflict of interest.

#### Author Contribution

Li L wrote and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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