Managing the student-supervisor relationship for successful postgraduate supervision: A sociological perspective

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Abstract

Supervision is an intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the student. In this process, the supervisor is designated to facilitate the student's academic development. This article will address supervision as a complex process that is influenced by many factors, including the social setting, the personalities of the supervisor and the student, the relationship that develops between them, the expertise of the supervisor, and so on. Patterns of thinking that have influenced supervision will be discussed, while an interactionist framework to project possible strategies concerning the importance of relationship skills in supervision will be highlighted. The article's thrust will be to highlight the social nature of the interaction between supervisor and student. This entails recognizing that as a social process, interaction is as much subject to limits imposed by the structural parameters within which supervision occurs as it, in turn, shapes them. In other words, whilst the interaction between supervisor and student allows a considerable degree of free expression, it is enacted within a wider context of institutional power which itself is continuously modified by that interaction. These arguments are based on the findings from a study that I carried out in the Institute of Peace, Leadership and Governance of Africa University in July 2006. A qualitative research design was employed to establish how to manage the student-supervisor relationship for successful postgraduate supervision. The study revealed that supervision is a complex social encounter which involves two or more parties with both converging and diverging interests. Therefore, balancing these interests is very crucial to the successful supervision of postgraduate research projects.
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INTRODUCTION

It is well-documented in literature that one of the challenges of post-graduate supervision is the management of the student-supervisor relationship. Supervision is a two way interactional process that requires both the student and the supervisor to consciously engage each other within the spirit of professionalism, respect, collegiality and open-mindedness. This article seeks to offer a sociological perspective on the intricacies of managing the student-supervisor relationship for successful post-graduate research supervision. The arguments raised in this article are based on the findings from a study that I carried out at Africa University in July 2006. A qualitative research design was employed to establish the details of managing the student-supervisor relationship for successful post-graduate supervision. The study revealed that supervision is a complex social encounter which involves two parties with both converging and diverging interests. Therefore, balancing these interests is very crucial to the successful supervision of post-graduate research projects. The first part of this article outlines related research into post-graduate research supervision and provides a context for the research before moving on to describe the motivations for carrying out the study and how the study addresses the gaps in knowledge about students and supervisors and their experiences in supervised post-graduate research. In recent years research supervision has become very critical for post-graduate students to achieve higher degree certification. It is out of the realization that supervision is now a central process for the successful completion of post-graduate programmes, that this study focuses on the social factors that influence the supervision process, the roles of the supervisor and the student in the supervision process, the importance of relationship skills and the power relations that characterize the supervision process. The article also identifies the differential interests between the supervisor and the student within the supervision process.

According to Smith (1996), examining supervision as a concept throws up various questions and issues. One of the questions includes, ‘In whose interests does supervision work?’ In ancient China, Africa, feudal Europe, for example, there are numerous examples of people new to a craft or activity having to reveal their work to, and explore it with, masters or mistresses, that is, those recognized as skilled and wise. This process of being attached to an ‘expert’, of ‘learning through doing’ allows the ‘novice’ to gain knowledge, skill and commitment. It enables them to enter into a particular community of practice such as tailoring and midwifery (Wave and Wenger 1991). From this viewpoint supervision is seen as overseeing. In Latin ‘super’ means ‘over,’ and videre, to watch, or see. As Peters (1969) pointed out, traditionally part of the overseer’s job was to ensure that work was done well and standardized. It is clear that the supervisor has a role to promote the effective assimilation or learning of new skills. However, the missing link is that there is no deliberate discussion of the intricacies of managing the student-supervisor relationship to ensure that there is effective learning and that the student fully explores what he or she wants to explore. This study revealed that one sure way of managing the student-supervisor relationship is to ensure that both
parties have respect for each other’s views. Particularly the supervisor should always attempt to stretch the mind of the student through encouraging the student to think deeply and outside the box. This entails that the supervisor has a role of ensuring the educational development of the student in a manner calculated to evoke him/her to fully realize his/her possibilities of usefulness (Brown and Borne 1995). This means that supervisors must have a concern for both performance and learning. It is pointless to only concentrate on performance and disregard learning or vice versa. The two must be seen as interrelated and inseparable in post-graduate supervision.

THE RESEARCH

The study on which this article is based was prompted by both students’ and supervisors’ concerns about managing the student-supervisor relationship, lack of information on the social and political nature of the supervisory process and the intricacies of balancing different interests of actors in supervision. To understand the details of managing the student-supervisor relationship for successful post-graduate supervision, semi structured qualitative interviews were conducted with eight academic staff and ten post-graduate students at Africa University. The interviews were conducted face to face using an interview schedule and interviews lasted, on average, for an hour. They were recorded in notebooks and subsequently coded for detailed analysis using a range of key themes. The material presented here is confined to the perspectives of the students and their supervisors on managing the student-supervisor relationship at post-graduate level.

The research was conducted at Africa University in the Institute of Peace, Leadership and Governance. The Institute was designed to provide a focus for training, research and documentation with a view to developing the skills of students in the areas of peace, leadership and governance. All the students who were involved were in their final year of study and doing their research projects on different topics. In addition, one former student who is now working as a Programme Assistant in the Institute was also interviewed to find out how he and his supervisor worked before he graduated. All supervisors who were interviewed are experienced and senior members of the Institute. To enable realistic conclusions to be drawn, the research, although small scale, was detailed and its focus was upon the day-to-day experiences and observations of supervisors and post-graduate students in the Institute. The study explores the social factors that influence the student-supervisor relationship, the role of the student and supervisor, respectively, in the supervisory process and issues of power and politics in post-graduate research. The remainder of this article explores these issues.

SOCIAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE STUDENT-SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP

This study revealed that there are various social factors that influence the student-supervisor relationship. In other words supervision does not occur in a social vacuum.
A lot of processes and factors influence the student-supervisor relationship in supervision. One of the factors that were identified in this study is gender. Gender is defined as socially constructed differences between men and women. According to Carroll (1996) two influences have propelled gender issues to the forefront of supervision. One is the small body of research in this area and the second is the awareness of sexual contact between supervisors and students. Nelson and Holloway (1990) studied the link between gender and issues of power and involvement in supervision. The findings of their studies indicated that there were significant differences in the way male and female students presented themselves to male and female supervisors. In this study this view was also reinforced as it was reported by students that supervisors tend to view female students’ complaints as genuine concerns while complaints by males is seen as evidence of insubordination. It can be argued that this problem emanates from biased expectations (Paisley 1994, 13) or certain underlying stereotypes of how male and female students behave or ought to behave. Male and female supervisors reinforce male and female messages differently (Carroll 1996, 34). Given these observations, one can argue that successful post-graduate supervision can be achieved when the supervisors and the students have properly managed the gender component in their relationship. It is important to do away with the gendered stereotypes of how men and women should behave because this can lead to conflict and misinterpretation of one’s intentions and goals.

Another social factor that influences the supervision process is one’s national and cultural background. Culture refers to the totality of one’s values, norms, beliefs, etiquette, and dress. Africa University’s Institute of Peace, Leadership and Governance is a pan-African institution of higher learning and it draws its students and staff from all over Africa. This study showed that the multicultural nature of the Institute has an impact on the supervision process as well. Foreign students highlighted that they often found it very difficult to work with national supervisors. They argued that supervisors from Zimbabwe often see them as less capable than their local counterparts. One student from the Institute observed that students from Francophone countries always find it difficult because they will be using a third foreign language to grasp and debate issues within their research project. Carroll (1996) observed that supervisors will see no need for working with cultural aspects of academic supervision if they, themselves, are insensitive to the underlying cultural dynamics in all human interactions. It is important to note that supervisors are not born with automatic multi-cultural awareness. Therefore, to effectively manage the student-supervisor relationship there is need for supervisors to be trained and educated on their role in the supervision process so that they can overcome challenges that are a result of failure to recognize other people’s experiences and backgrounds.

Other social factors that were identified as important in managing the student-supervisor relationship include caring, communication, consistency and fairness. Students highlighted that a healthy student-supervisor relationship is dependant upon the level at which the supervisor and the student operate. Supervisors who did not show a heart for their students...
were very unpopular with students. It was found out that genuine care must be shown toward the students by the supervisors for a positive and productive relationship to be maintained. Noddings (1988) observed that the ‘ethic of care’ is very crucial for the effective management of the student-supervisor relationship for successful post-graduate supervision. The ethic of care refers to a situation whereby the supervisor cares about students and attending to their needs (Miller, 1998). It is important to note that caring means that the supervisor expects respectful behavior from the student to him or her. However, it does not mean that student may treat the supervisor or others disrespectfully. The supervisor is expected to be sensitive to the developmental characteristics and needs of the students and respond to them as and when necessary.

The study also revealed that another foundation of healthy and strong student-supervisor relationship is communication. Daily verbal and non-verbal communication from the supervisor, as well as written and verbal programme descriptions, are two critically important forms of communication (Miller, 1998). Through written and verbal explanations of programme expectations, students learn what is expected of them during their interaction with their supervisors. Non-verbal communication such as gestures, eye movements, and body placement also tells the students what is expected, condoned, reinforced or unwanted in the academic supervision process. It is important to emphasize that verbal and non-verbal communication is one of the most critical elements in the management of the student-supervisor relationship for successful post-graduate supervision. Effective and sensitive communication will help to build positive and long lasting student-supervisor relationships.

Consistent rules and procedures were also identified as very crucial in the cultivation of a strong and reliable relationship for successful post-graduate supervision. Supervisors should not change goalposts to suit their own interests and programmes. If some students are allowed to break the rules and go away with it, this will create a sense of injustice and unfairness on students who are discriminated against. Participants in the study highlighted that a negative student perspective and poor relationship between the supervisor and the student can lead to violence or threat of violence, truancy and witchcraft allegations. Discrimination sets the platform for negative attitudes and interactions leading to suspicion and mistrust. However, when all students are treated equally, fairly and with justice using the same rules and procedures, then positive attitudes and relationships are fostered, which will facilitate positive interaction between the supervisor and the student. Therefore, it can be argued that supervision is a relationship-based responsibility of the supervisor and the student. To form positive and productive relationships with students, supervisors need to ensure that they need to be trustworthy, respectful and fair.

**ROLES OF THE SUPERVISOR IN POST-GRADUATE RESEARCH**

The study revealed that successful post-graduate supervision is also predicated upon an understanding of the role of the supervisor by both the student and the supervisor.
A role is a set of responsibilities, obligations and duties that are associated with any given position that an individual holds in society. There are duties and responsibilities that are expected to be performed by supervisors of post-graduate research projects. This section presents information gathered from both the students and supervisors on the specific duties that should be fulfilled by supervisors to promote successful post-graduate supervision. One lecturer, who has supervised more than fifteen post-graduate research projects, observed that first and foremost the supervisor is a research advisor. He observed that ‘to properly and competently advise students, the advisor needs to be conversant with the area that the student will be working on -- the literature available, history of research in the area and the key debates around the area.’ Therefore, in order to be effective, the supervisor needs to assume many different roles at different times to suit the student’s needs and circumstances. A number of supervisory roles were identified; supporting, challenging, consulting, evaluating and mentoring. For example, one senior lecturer described the main roles of the supervisor as monitoring and evaluating student progress, enhancing student growth and promoting the development of independent and critical thinking for the student. In addition, students observed that supervisors had an important role of sharing their knowledge, skills and experiences to help the students to cope with the challenges of venturing in new research.

The research findings show that the roles of the supervisor are diverse. However, to be effective the supervisor must consider where the student stands developmentally, what the student’s needs are, and many other things prior to assuming a particular role (Campbell 2000, 22). As Bernard and Goodyear (1998) suggested, role flexibility is essential for effective supervision and different situations and supervisees call for different roles, techniques and approaches. The supervisor must be willing to make adjustments in the relationship process to meet the supervisee’s learning needs. Holloway (1995) referred to this as the artistry of supervision. Effective supervisors are continually balancing student learning needs, professional guidelines (ethical, legal and procedural), and organizational or contextual needs. Conflict may build as they attempt to balance these needs. One suggestion for easing this conflict is for the supervisor to talk with the student about the multiple roles and then, together, to process their impact on the supervisory relationship. The key is that the supervisor has the responsibility of allowing the student to learn through doing, repeated practice, taking risks and self scrutiny. The supervisor should always encourage the problem solving skills of the student to grow.

The research findings point to the fact that, to effectively manage the supervisory relationship, the supervisors need a broad range of competencies. Students and lecturers who were involved in this study stated that supervisors should be confident but not dictatorial, be respected and seen by others as capable and be advocates for their students. One student observed that the supervisor is the link between the student and the faculty or department and has the responsibility of providing the faculty with information on the student’s progress honestly and impartially. In line with this observation, it was noted that some of the personal attributes helpful for supervisors to effectively

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work in the supervisory process are respectfulness, genuineness, flexibility, concern for the student’s growth and development, tolerance and openness. The better the supervisor’s self esteem, communication ability, personal congruence and role flexibility, the more likely that the supervisory relationship will foster exploration, learning and development. From the preceding discussion, an ineffective supervisor can be described as unavailable, inconsistent, inconsiderate, dogmatic, closed, prejudiced, inflexible, arrogant and disinterested. Thus, regardless of the specific theoretical model or the level of the student, a supportive and facilitative supervisory environment is critical for the effective management of the student-supervisor relationship for successful post-graduate supervision.

ROLES OF STUDENTS IN POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

Students or supervisees have specific roles to perform to ensure that the supervisory relationship is successful. The student has the responsibility of ensuring that he or she commits him or herself fully to the demands of post-graduate research. One supervisor noted that ‘there is nothing as bad as appearing as if the supervisor is pushing the student to do his or her work’. Whilst supervisors have the responsibility of motivating and encouraging the students in their work, students also have the responsibility of preparing fully in terms of reading relevant literature on the research subject. The student must demonstrate the willingness to read and critique recommended texts and other relevant material. It was generally agreed by all respondents that post-graduate research students should have an interest or deep curiosity about the research topic that they would have independently developed. The role of the supervisor is to help the student shape the topic and research problem so that it is both technically and academically sound. It was also observed that students should have a strong passion or commitment to make sound contribution to the common stock of knowledge, sharing observations and experiences and writing. It is incumbent upon the student to disseminate his/her findings to a larger audience in various ways, for example, through participating in workshops and conferences and presenting papers.

This study revealed that the student-supervisor relationship will succeed when both the student and the supervisor understand their roles. They should know where they need to complement and help one another. Failure to acknowledge the specific roles that each one must play may degenerate into conflict and tension. One supervisor observed that there were circumstances when students behaved as if the research belonged to the supervisor. She highlighted that many a times students wait for the supervisor to push them to do their work. She said that she once worked with a student who would not come for consultation or feedback until she had called her. She said that probably this had something to do with the student’s background where the student believed that it is the teacher who should monitor students’ performance. Thus, it is important to note that at post-graduate level students should be able to monitor their own performance and approach their supervisors to seek advice on how to improve or maintain the current
performance. The supervisor should work very closely with the student to inculcate the ability to self-evaluate and to engage in a genuine self feedback. The student should be able to actively participate in the process of learning and academic development.

POWER, CONFLICT AND POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISION

There are questions concerning power relationships within supervision. There are issues arising from position in agency hierarchies and the extent to which dynamics of gender, age, class and nationality play a pivotal role in the supervision process. Supervision is a social encounter between the supervisor and the student. The encounter is influenced by the interface, lived experiences and the agency of the two parties. There can be little doubt that differential power relations exist between the supervisor and the student (Jones et al. 1997, 102). In post-graduate studies, students should be accepted as members of an academic class, as knowledge producers as well as knowledge accumulators (Jones et al. 1997). Andrews et al. argued that students should be encouraged to make decisions and provided with opportunities to analyze and synthesize information in a respectful environment. In other words, supervision is a space for the student to explore his or her practice, to build or test theory and to attend to feelings and values. The supervisor should not act as the all powerful who renders the student powerless, rather he or she should cultivate a spirit of adventurism in the student so that the student can venture into unexplored and virgin areas of academic interest. This way the supervisor would have averted potential sources of conflict.

Student empowerment in the whole supervision process is very essential. The popularity of student empowerment in post-graduate research supervision undoubtedly stems from the widespread acceptance that many students in the past and at present have been actively disempowered by supervisors. Students who were involved in the study felt that they had been put down by supervisors who claim to have expert knowledge in the field of their interest. This has generally created tension between the student and the supervisor. For example, one male student complained that the domineering tendency by his supervisor eventually led to his failure to submit his dissertation in time. The supervisor did not allow the student to explore his area of interest. He only wanted him to focus on areas of interest to the supervisor. It can therefore be argued that the supervisor should be prepared to learn from students if the supervision process is to succeed. The major challenge we have is to encourage learned professors to be prepared to acknowledge that students have the capacity to think independently. It is not productive and helpful to put bridles on students to think like their supervisors. One student noted that ‘the problem we have as students is that the supervisors would want to produce a post-graduate in their own image. They want to create their own disciples in us, to have many people who support their ideas. They behave as if they are little gods.’ This indicates that students want to be heard not to be silenced when they are working on their own project. The point is that supervisors should be concerned with ensuring that they do not knowingly or unknowingly disempower their students. In an
increasingly post modern environment, supervisors should understand that their knowing is partial. They should allow the student to venture into the unknown. Therefore, whatever the degree of commitment to empowerment, supervisors should encourage their students to find their own voices; ‘to talk back’ as Hooks (1989) has put it.

All learning requires the learner to actively construct meaning. Therefore, supervisors should act as collaborators in creating knowledge in a process that is oriented towards the development of the student’s academic competence. All students who were involved in this study saw themselves as committed, intelligent, resourceful and dignified people who could discuss, debate and make informed decisions about the course of their research. Students highlighted that supervisors should view them as active participants in the democratic creation and use of knowledge. Supervision should not only promote students to adopt and use knowledge that has been produced by others. Students are not just empty vessels to be filled with someone else’s ideas and they are not merely consumers of past research. On the basis of this observation, research supervision is a vehicle for inquiry and experimentation aimed at knowledge generation, not simply knowledge adoption (Brown and Bourne 1995, 52). The primary purpose of supervision becomes the improvement of learning by helping students to acquire a deeper understanding of the research process. Knowledge generation can be achieved when supervision becomes a process of action learning. Action learning is simply a self reflective process undertaken by students in order to improve their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which practices are carried out. The supervisor must relinquish the role of critic to assume the role of co-creator of knowledge. Brown and Bourne (1995, 53) argued that the supervisor must remove the awesome burden of serving as judge, jury and director of the supervisory process and allow the student to feel safe to think aloud, express concerns and take risks. However, in committing themselves to the promotion of an equal dialogue and engagement, supervisors are often faced with some difficult decisions. For instance, one supervisor posed a question, ‘When students choose to remain silent, should this be taken as subordination or a refusal to engage with the subject under discussion?’ In this study supervisors highlighted that the challenge they have is that students look up to them to offer guidance, to an extent that it becomes difficult to engage them as equal partners in the process.

It can be argued that the supervision relationship brings the potential for long lasting happiness, but they are not always smooth sailing (Ellis 2000). Many authors, consultants and workshop leaders talk about conflict resolution. That term might imply that we can eventually be free of all conflict in supervision. But as long as supervision is a relationship or a social encounter, there will always be potential for serious conflict. With this in mind, it is more reasonable to talk about conflict management instead of conflict resolution. This study revealed that one way of effectively managing the student-supervisor relationship is to make every effort to manage conflict when it arises. Instead of trading personal attacks during a conflict, it is more helpful to step back. One supervisor from the Institute argued that one strategy to manage conflict during
supervision is to define the conflict as a problem to be solved not as a contest to be won. Both the supervisor and the student should maintain a cool head during the supervision process. They should both attempt to avoid anger, hostility and competition. This will help the supervisors and the students to develop relationships and environments that enable them to respond to each other’s needs.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The findings presented here, although from a small scale study, show the intricacies of the student-supervisor relationship in post-graduate research work. It was established that the supervisory relationship is influenced by various social factors such as gender, culture and nationality. It was also established that supervision is a very complex process which requires complete commitment and respect by and for the student and the supervisor if the relationship is to be fruitful. In as much as the supervisor is an important gatekeeper involved in evaluating the ethical, professional and intellectual competence of the student (Campbell, 2000), it was shown that the student must be viewed as capable, knowledgeable and competent enough to know what he or she wants to do and how to do it. The supervisor should allow the student to explore areas of interest not to thwart that interest. In other words, the supervisor should strive to facilitate and encourage a spirit of adventure and academic probing. The supervisor should acknowledge that students have the capacity to develop new ideas and interrogate existing ones. Post-graduate level work is not about following the written script, but of exploration, adventure and high level of independent analysis and judgment. Failure to acknowledge these facts will inevitably lead to conflict and tension between the supervisor and the student and consequently substandard and uninspiring research output.

**REFERENCES**


