STRENGTHENING POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

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PERSPECTIVES ON BECOMING A SUPERVISOR

TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate supervision is a complex pedagogy reliant on the interplay between, on the one hand, the supervisor, the student and other members of the university and, on the other hand, knowledge traditions, disciplinary norms and research cultures. Despite this complexity, it is generally expected that on attaining a doctoral degree the academic is suitably qualified to supervise (DoE, 2013). This chapter argues that a nuanced understanding of this complexity of supervision requires a focus on multiple issues.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the ways in which the personality of the supervisor plays out in the postgraduate process. In doing this I acknowledge that the personality of the student is also important, as are the philosophical and paradigmatic lineages of the discipline. A lens that I argue is useful in coming to an understanding of postgraduate supervision is that of discourse and textuality. By discourse, I specifically refer to the language, attitudes and conventions that constitute the disciplinary 'community' and which the supervisor has the potential to open to the student. Textuality, on the other hand, is concerned with the construction of knowledge as represented by a specific text – in this case, different texts that precede, contribute to the formation of and ultimately form part of a research report in the form of a dissertation or thesis.

I conclude the chapter by arguing for the adoption of a critical approach to supervision. As doctoral studies are considered to be a significant step in the process of a particular regime of knowledge creation, the manner in which that is achieved should be problematised. The supervisor therefore need not reduce his or her role to that of imparting the skills that the student requires in order to succeed in academia,

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but should, in addition, critique the position imposed by the academic community so that the student, in turn, does not only view his or her role as that of reproduction. The arguments presented in this chapter are drawn from my own discipline of English language studies and linguistics.

THE 'SELF' OF A SUPERVISOR

In order to understand the 'self' of a supervisor, in the context of this chapter, it is important to conceive it in terms of Phelps' (2015) view that 'self' can be divided into I-self and Me-self. I-self refers to a subject who is a knower and an actor-agent, while Me-self refers to an object that is something already known. Furthermore, I-self is said to consist of "self-awareness" and "self-agency", whilst Me-self is composed of "material me", a "social me", and a "spiritual me". Other theorists, Phelps (2015) reports, view 'self' as consisting of "individual self", a "relational self" and a "collective self", and that these three representations of 'self' are believed to coexist within the same individual. Clearly, such a conception of self is reminiscent of 'personality'.

Revelle and Condon (2015:70) define personality as a description and explanation of "the coherent patterning over time and space of affects, cognitions, desires and the resulting behaviours that an individual experiences and expresses". Similarly, DeYoung (2015:33) conceives of personality as a description of "the array of constructs that identify variables in which individuals differ" and states that the term "also refers to the specific mental organisations and processes that produce an individual's characteristic patterns of behaviour and experience". DeYoung makes a distinction between interpersonal or between-person differences, and intrapersonal or within-person differences. The former can be equated to Phelps' (2015) relational self, and the latter to individual self. However, Revelle and Condon (2015) assert that in addition to a person differing from others, which is also called "a-between-individuals difference" (reminiscent of Phelps' relational self), a person may differ from a group of individuals, which is termed "an-amongst-individuals difference" (similar to Phelps' collective self).

No one individual supervisor could be said to think, feel, or act the same way in relation to the same issue all the time – effectively, people differ from themselves. This is different from interpersonal difference or relational self where one supervisor differs from the other, perhaps on account of personality traits. Clearly, personality is perceived in terms of a range of behaviours and experiences, differently expressed according to context. This leads to consideration of personality traits, the relevance

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of which in supervision are tempered by the three types of difference identified above (interpersonal, intrapersonal and inter-group).

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Personality traits are defined by DeYoung (2015:33) as “probabilistic descriptions of relatively stable patterns of emotion, motivation, cognition, and behaviour, in response to classes of stimuli that have been present in human cultures over evolutionary time”. This definition is similar to that proposed by Phelps (2015:558), who contends that personality traits are “a collection of reactions or responses bound by some kind of unity which permits the responses to be gathered under one term”. These definitions suggest the possibility of predicting the state towards which an individual will gravitate. In other words, based on the supervisor’s personality trait(s), it is possible to predict how a student or the supervision process would be handled by the supervisor. Although the emphasis here is on the supervisor, it should also be remembered that the student’s personality traits are an important factor in the supervisor’s behaviour – that behaviour is also interactional. It is vital therefore to be aware of the different personality traits that might influence the handling of a supervision process.

Personality traits are organised into hierarchical levels where the highest order (or metatraits) consists of stability and plasticity (DeYoung, 2015). The second level, which is commonly known as the Big 5 domains, consists of neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness which are under stability; and extraversion and openness/intellect under plasticity. The third level (or aspects) is divided into withdrawal and volatility under neuroticism; compassion and politeness under agreeableness; industriousness and orderliness under conscientiousness; enthusiasm and assertiveness under extraversion; and openness and intellect under openness/intellect. The fourth level (also known as facets) further divides each aspect into an unknown number of facets (DeYoung, 2015) (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Hierarchy of personality traits (Adapted from DeYoung, 2015)

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Dealing first with the metatraits, stability and plasticity, they respectively function to protect goals, interpretations and strategies from disruption by impulses; and explore creation of new goals, interpretations and strategies (DeYoung, 2015). People who have low levels of stability are said to be unstable, whereas those with low levels of plasticity are rigid (DeYoung, 2015).

Turning to the Big 5 domains – namely extraversion, neuroticism, openness/intellect, conscientiousness, and agreeableness – the following are the related behavioural tendencies. To have an extroversion trait means that an individual is marked with behavioural exploration and engagement with specific rewards (DeYoung, 2015). Liu, Liao and Liao (2014:1100) describe extraversion as “the tendency to be talkative and sociable”. Liu et al. (2015:1100), in their study of the influence of prohibitive voice on proactive personality traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism, assert that “more than introverts, extroverts are able to handle the expression of change-oriented ideas and suggestions”. Those with low levels of extroversion are said to be reserved. In contrast to extroversion, neuroticism marks an individual with defensive responses to uncertainty, threat and punishment (DeYoung, 2015). An individual with a short supply of the neuroticism trait is said to be unflappable. Furthermore, openness/intellect traits indicate an individual with a positive orientation to cognitive exploration and engagement with information. When in short supply, such a person is unimaginative (DeYoung, 2015). Possession of a conscientious trait means that a person is concerned with “protection of non-immediate or abstract goals and strategies from disruption”, the lack of which means that a person is unreliable. Agreeableness refers to ready engagement in altruism and cooperation, which means that an individual coordinates goals, interpretations, and strategies with those of others (DeYoung, 2015).

The next level to the Big 5 domain in the hierarchy of personality traits is the aspects, comprising (as noted above) withdrawal and volatility, compassion and politeness, industriousness and orderliness, enthusiasm and assertiveness, and intellect and openness.

TABLE 1 Hierarchy of personality traits: the aspects (Adapted from DeYoung, 2015)

ASPECTS	Behavioural orientation of individual	
	Possessing trait	Trait at low levels
Withdrawal	Passive avoidance through “inhibition of goals, interpretations and strategies, in response to uncertainty or error” (DeYoung, 2015: 42).	Self-assured or confident
Volatility	Active defence to avoid or eliminate threats.	Even-tempered

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Compassion	Engagement in “emotional attachment to and concern for others” (DeYoung, 2015:42).	Callous
Politeness	Engagement in “suppression and avoidance of aggressive or non-violating impulses and strategies” (DeYoung, 2015:42).	Tendency to being belligerent
Industriousness	Orientation towards prioritising non-immediate goals.	Undisciplined
Orderliness	Engagement in “avoidance of entropy by following rules set by self or others” (DeYoung, 2015:42).	Disorganised
Enthusiasm	Possessing consummatory reward sensitivity – experiencing enjoyment of actual or imagined goal attainment.	Unenthusiastic
Assertiveness	Possessing incentive reward sensitivity – a drive towards goals (DeYoung, 2015). Liu et al. (2014) associate assertiveness with extroversion.	Submissive
Intellect	Capacity for “detection of logical or causal patterns in abstract and semantic information” (DeYoung, 2015:42).	Lacking ability to think and reason
Openness	Engagement in “detection of spatial and temporal correlational patterns in sensory and perceptual information” (DeYoung, 2015:42).	Unobservant individual

Barrick and Mount (1991), in their study about personality dimensions and job performance, found that extroversion was a predictor for occupations involving social interaction. Applying an insight such as this to supervision, it is evident that the personality of the supervisor is most likely to impinge on their relationship with a student. For example, an extrovert is likely to lead the supervision discussions and bombard the student with a lot of information, with relatively less time spent listening to a student. In contrast, an introverted supervisor is likely to expect a student to provide more information and only come into the discussion when invited.

It should now be clear that a supervisor would handle supervision according to the distribution of personality traits that has been discussed above. Unmistakably, these traits, as explained here, indicate how, based on personality trait(s), different supervisors are likely to handle supervision.

The focus on the personality traits of the supervisor in this chapter is important in understanding the postgraduate relationship, given the unequal power relations that frequently characterise the supervision process. However, it is acknowledged that the personality traits of the students are often an equally important consideration.

APPROACHES TO SUPERVISION

Shifting the focus of this discussion from personality traits to approaches to supervision, Lee (2007) calls for indicators of supervisor predisposition for encouragement, facilitation of learning, resourcefulness, and commitment to students – all of which,

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arguably, should be visible in either an introvert or extrovert personality. Travelling the journey of doctoral studies, which in many instances is a lonely one for a student, requires the occasional infusion of encouragement from the supervisor. Similarly, the whole undertaking is also a learning process for the student as they are inducted into the world of research. The supervisor must facilitate that learning and at the same time be a resource. This calls for explicit commitment from the supervisor – commitment being one of the personality traits identified above.

It should be noted that the indicators of supervisor predisposition that Lee (2007) postulates imply student-supervisor power relations. The supervisor, if viewed as the provider of encouragement, facilitator of learning, and a resource, has the potential to wield undue power over the student. However, the supervisor needs to guard against being fixated on the persistence of these aspects of supervision. As the student develops their capacity for critical thinking and independent learning it may appear as a threat to a supervisor. This eventually may be interpreted in terms of the earlier discussion about the personality of a supervisor and, perhaps, that of the student as well. Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (1997) suggest that a clash may be inevitable where, for instance, the student is too dependent or too independent of a supervisor who may have expected the opposite.

Lee (2007) proposes that there are five main approaches to supervision and that expert supervisors are able to navigate between these, based on the needs of student and the research project. The five approaches are enculturation, functional, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development, and are described as follows.

Enculturation: the supervisor, who often acts as a gatekeeper, diagnoses deficiencies to be remedied and, based on these, nurtures the student.

Functional: the most prominent activity is the rational movement through tasks, and the student is expected to obey the direction given by the supervisor, as in a project management situation.

Critical: the focus is on the development of disciplinary scepticism in the student.

Emancipation: requires a supervisor who is a facilitator to mentor the student for the benefit of the student's personal growth.

Relationship development: is concerned with fostering emotional intelligence and personal awareness, and managing conflict. The supervisor needs to be emotionally intelligent and have a range of experiences to draw upon to assist the student in their development (Lee, 2007).

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It is my contention that these approaches to supervision mimic the theoretical traditions of research. Enculturation and functional approaches sit comfortably within positivist philosophy, where the supervisor is an expert who must replicate that expertise in the student (see Canagarajah, 1999). Such expertise is often understood to be factually or empirically evident in the accomplishments of a supervisor in academia. It is therefore expected of a student to follow the lead and the directives of the apparently knowing supervisor. On the other hand, the critical and emancipatory approaches (amongst others) critique the positivist stance by shifting the focus to a student who is encouraged to construct knowledge and develop independent thought.

Wadee, Keane, Dietz and Hay (2010) propose a three-dimensional approach to PhD support consisting of supervision, mentoring and coaching. Supervision is seen as “task focused, formal, time efficient, agreement oriented where interaction is formal and requires formalised commitment”, whilst the “mentoring approach is more holistic and takes into account the mentor’s own experience and desire to see the student succeed” (Wadee et al, 2010:91). On the other hand, coaching “promotes independence, reflection and self-directed action – all of which are essential for an emerging researcher” (Wadee et al., 2010:91). Wadee et al. (ibid) propose that a PhD supervisor should be able to integrate the three roles.

As students are inducted into the discourse and narratives of academia, one should not forget that it is a learning curve which may be quite overwhelming. A supervisor should therefore provide pastoral care which should settle a student’s anxieties. In this respect, it is imperative that the supervisor locates the student in the context of learning, rather than of expert – the latter possibly being responsible for unrealistic postgraduate performance expectations.

In that light, a supervisor who provides pastoral care will soon realise that a one-size-fits-all approach is not likely to be effective. Some students would require mentorship whilst others would be at a stage that needs close follow-up. Indeed, some students may feel claustrophobic when the supervisor monitors their work closely but work more efficiently when given some space, whilst others lose focus and confidence when the supervisor adopts a *laissez faire* approach. In other words, a supervisor needs to take into consideration such things as a student’s learning style and personality so that the supervisory process enhances positive experience. In that respect, Lee (2007:685) rightly postulates that “a mismatch in styles (such as when the student is still dependent but the supervision style is one of ‘benign neglect’) [is likely to] lead to poor completion rates”.

The student-supervisor relationship varies. Some supervisors get so close to students that they invite them into their families (see Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997).

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Whilst this is envied by some, others consider it to be an unacceptable practice. In fact, some supervisors believe that, first and foremost, the student-supervisor relationship is informed by the institution where the student is registered and most contact between the supervisor and student should occur in that context. When a relationship between the two develops outside the university context, it is often driven by a specific set of circumstances as, for example, in the case of part-time candidates who are likely to find consultations during office hours inadequate.

Furthermore, a supervisor should be an effective communicator, which is potentially achieved when a supervisor listens and makes an effort to understand a student. Most communication between the supervisor and a student revolves around student submissions. Effective communication, therefore, involves clear and timely feedback for student writing. Wade et al (2010) argue that it is desirable for the supervisor's feedback on written submissions to be direct, fast, clear, honest, and consistent. Effective communication also involves setting up follow-up meetings and the scheduling of milestones, such as completion of research proposal and completion of the thesis. Although these are often arranged by the student, the supervisor should ensure that effective planning is maintained. Furthermore, Wade et al (2010:28) propose that "the supervisor keep records of all decisions taken during a contact session in order to ensure follow-up".

The foregoing discussion has dwelt on the self of a supervisor – the fundamental expectations for a supervisor and some philosophical foundations that inform these expectations. The focus on the nature of supervision thus far has largely been on the pragmatics – the practical aspects of supervision – as these seem to be the measurable aspects in terms of successes. The following section looks into two of the processes involved in the production of a dissertation or thesis. Specifically, the discussion is grounded in the need for a student to enter the disciplinary community, which entry should be facilitated through supervision.

DISCOURSE AND TEXTUALITY: IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Postgraduate studies, especially at master and doctoral level, are traditionally research oriented, culminating in the submission of a dissertation or thesis. I would argue that the production of a dissertation or a thesis goes through two crucial stages: display of discourse competence in a specific discipline and adherence to the conventions of academic text construction.

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Display of discourse competence

Lea and Street (1998) argue that there are conflicts in student writing caused by variations in academic discourse expectations in different subjects. Lecturers themselves adopt different stances to academic discourses, influenced by their own disciplinary conventions (Lea and Street, 1998). Lea and Street rightly observe that the main criteria of students' success in academia is the ability to switch from one academic setting and context to the other; to be able to cope with the linguistic repertoire appropriate to each setting; and to realise the social meanings and identities that each context and setting evokes. For example, students would find it taxing that on one occasion their writing is prescriptively expected to be impersonal and passive whilst on other occasions they have to maintain personal identities through first person and active forms (Lea and Street, 1998). It must be highlighted here however that such challenges of multiple discourses are typical of undergraduate studies. Indeed, Lea and Street's (1998) research was conducted mainly among undergraduate students. The observations are nevertheless relevant to postgraduate students – the main concern in this paper – who are increasingly involved in cross-disciplinary research.

Since the candidate who must produce the dissertation or thesis does so from the context of a particular discipline, it is imperative to be well versed with the discourses of that discipline. For example, discourses that are specifically for Natural Science disciplines differ from those of Social Science and the Humanities. This indicates the need for the mastery of academic discourse for aspiring academics within specific disciplinary contexts. It needs to be noted, however, that notwithstanding this, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has come under fire for appearing to be too prescriptive, demanding absolute allegiance to its conventions for anyone wishing to be admitted into the academy (see Hyatt, 2005). Generic notions of academic language are of little or no relevance (Lea and Street, 1998). The student therefore needs to be grounded in the nuances of conflicting discourses within and across disciplines. This is important because part of the evaluation of 'doctoralness' (Green and Bowden, 2012) is the candidate's competence in his or her own discipline.

Another way of looking at discourses that underpin disciplines is the communities they represent. It can be argued for instance, that academia constitutes a community which is bound by its own discourses and thereby different from the discourses of other communities, such as those of business and of journalism for example. However, supervisors may complicate the student's reception into the academic community by assuming that they are already conversant with conventions of academic discourse. For instance, Hyatt (2005:340) argues that students often struggle with "terms

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[such] as argument, structure, plagiarism, explicitness and clarity which appear straightforward” to the supervisor but have little real discipline-specific meaning for the novice student. It is pivotal therefore for the student to be inducted into the academic community – a long and ongoing process which, for postgraduate students, is influenced by the expertise of the supervisor.

Given the inherent power relations in the supervisor/student relationship, it is unsurprising that the supervisor may be viewed as a gatekeeper in the context of access to disciplinary writing practices, especially when the expectation from a student is that he or she reproduces those practices. These expectations operate on the level of exclusion as the student is already labelled as the apprentice and therefore outsider, and the supervisor, the expert and insider. Hyatt (2005) proposes that “critical inclusion” be the basis of the induction process of a student into the academic community – a stance which requires reflexivity on the part of both the student and the supervisor.

However, the induction into the discourses that characterise different disciplines is easier said than done. This is partly because, in an era of complex social problems, research is characterised by cross-disciplinary lineages where communities merge and borrow from each other. Therefore, it is a complicated process to settle comfortably into a particular community and its discursive practices. The mastery of a particular discourse consequently becomes a challenge, especially when a student has a prior affiliation to another community with discourses that may conflict with the academic ones (Canagarajah, 2002).

An illustration of this challenge is presented by Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (1997) who discuss the plight of a supervisor who lacked competence in the “discourse community” that the student was working with. The student was investigating ancient Greek medical thought using IT, in which the supervisor had no expertise. These are two different communities of practice: ancient Greek medical thought (which is grounded in the interpretation of ancient texts), and IT (which is modern technology). In order to provide effective supervision, the supervisor had to acquaint herself with the imperatives of the disciplinary communities within which the student’s research was located. In a case like this, the supervisor-student relationship needs to be reciprocal, with the student sharing expertise in areas where the supervisor falls short, and the supervisor providing the necessary leadership.

The manner in which a postgraduate student is inducted into the disciplinary discourse is pivotal, for it can occur in different ways with different consequences. For example, as Canagarajah (2002) implies, the supervisor may treat the discourse as a means of mastering or gaining access to the disciplinary community. In that respect, what

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may be deemed important would be the student's mastery of the discourse viewed as a skill. A successful student would therefore be the one who has attained the skill that enables him or her to operate within the confines of the discipline. However, the consequence of this approach is that the mastery of the discourse is viewed as the means to an end and the student seems barred from interrogating the construction of and the ideologies behind the disciplinary discourse (Canagarajah, 2002).

This impediment is not the ideal situation in a postgraduate study, especially at a doctoral level. At doctoral level, if discursive practices are uncritically adopted, there is a danger of replicating the hegemonies of dominant discourses, which arguably can run counter to the notion of doctoralness. Belcher (1997), in a case study of dissertation writing, illustrates the production of a counter discourse deviating from disciplinary norms, indicating the often dismissed fluidity of disciplinary discourse and the fear of challenging the norm.

In this section I have argued that the display of discourse competence is one of the central aspects for the effective production of a thesis. I have discussed the supervisor's role in ensuring that the student achieves mastery of multiple discourses and is skilled in switching between discourses, appropriate to context. This, I have argued, is central to the supervisor's responsibility to direct the student's induction into disciplinary communities. In the next section I will briefly address another important aspect of effective production of a thesis – the actual production of a dissertation or a thesis text.

Production of text

Whilst the power exerted by disciplinary discourses is acknowledged, it is necessary to bear in mind that writing – the construction of the text – plays a significant role as it shapes the document that must be submitted for evaluation. A brief distinction between discourse and text shall suffice here. If discourse could be said to be fluid, representing the appropriate use of language in a social setting, and thus open to various interpretations of representations and constructions (see Abdul Hamid, Nambiar and Abu Bakar, 2007), text would be somewhat rigid, serving the purposes of preservation, and thus authoritative (see Ntombela, 2012) – albeit that such authority may be subject to reinterpretation over time.

The construction of texts has its own nuances, influenced by approaches to textuality (see Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981). When looked at closely, it is evident that every step of the research process is governed by texts – be they short notes scribbled by a student as the supervisor comments on the work; recording of data either from the research field or observation in a laboratory; or the putting together of the research

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report in the form of a dissertation or thesis. All these different texts eventually become part of a whole. In other words, when a student writes up, for example, the interview questions or a transcription thereof, there is a process of representing or constructing narratives (see Scot and Usher, 2004). Put in another way, a dissertation or thesis is a constructed text that represents a certain way of looking at the world – the academic way.

It is argued, however, that textuality, in the context of writing a Doctorate, favours one aspect of knowledge construction which is Western oriented. For example, any form of knowledge that is represented by orality is either regarded as inferior or simply sidelined (Ntombela, 2012). Although there have been developments in certain disciplines to recognise as valid texts such as works, artefacts, compositions, public performances and public exhibitions as partial fulfilment of the doctoral qualification, a written thesis remains the deciding text (DoE, 2013). It becomes crucial therefore that the supervisor adopts a critical stance in relation to both research and the student. Clearly, texts are specific to their context and therefore the student best acquires academic text construction through engagement with the supervisor.

TOWARDS THE ADOPTION OF CRITICAL APPROACH IN SUPERVISION

Knowledge construction in academia tends to be universalised in a positivistic paradigm. In fact, academic institutions are a good example of the globalisation of knowledge, not for the sake of sharing per se, but for furthering a particular ideological worldview (Salomone, 2015). The role of a supervisor becomes a crucial one in destabilising these ideologies in the experiences of the student. This is possible through a critical approach to supervision.

Being critical does not necessarily mean operating within the ambit of critical theory per se, for critical theory is just one of the tenets of critical approaches (Scott and Usher, 2004; Wellmer, 2014). Being critical should rather be understood as being reflective, in this case not just on the part of the student, but mostly on the part of the supervisor (in the context of this chapter). This is in contrast to positivist methodology which always seeks closure (Scott and Usher, 2004). Being reflective or critical therefore recognises the fact that the practice of supervision involves social players: student and supervisor, who are both knowledgeable and cannot accept social action as deterministic (Scott and Usher, 2004). Failure to be critical, especially on the part of the supervisor, most likely results in replication of dominance at the expense of transformation which is at the heart of doctoralness.

One of the principal definitions of a doctoral degree is the pushing of boundaries which essentially relates to the conceptualisation of new research initiatives and the

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creation of new knowledge (SAQA, 2012:12). This means, in the process of creating knowledge, a doctoral candidate needs to demonstrate how the work has stretched the boundary of existing knowledge. This has implications for the supervisor, who must see to it that the progress of the work, from its conception to culmination, does contribute something unique beyond that which already exists. But we need to question how possible that is when operating strictly within the confines of a discipline. Many disciplines have woken up to the reality that knowledge construction is exactly that – it is a social construction which borrows freely across disciplines. This is exactly where critical approaches to knowledge construction are relevant.

Critical approaches have been seen as a response or reaction to the totalitarian nature of positivist approaches, in which natural science is most often grounded (Kinsella, 2007; Scott and Usher, 2004; Canagarajah, 1999). A scientific study, from a positivist approach, envisages solutions that are factually grounded as determined by the objectivity of empirical scientific enquiry. The study would therefore seek to objectify the investigation to the extent that the researcher must obliterate him or herself from the text in order to be seen as what is claimed to be objective within the research process. Traditionally, this has been considered to be at the heart of experimental design in science, where the course of happenings must assume a natural occurrence from which apparently valid conclusions can be drawn.

Because of the historical dominance in academia of natural science, academic research has for a long time been approached from a positivist perspective, including in social and human sciences (Scott and Morrison, 2007). Critical approaches – particularly in the social sciences – have therefore reacted to this, arguing, among other things, that research that includes humans as objects of study may not be approached in the same way as laboratory-based research on inanimate objects. Furthermore, since the subjects are humans who are knowledgeable, just like the researcher, the researcher is likely to introduce cultural, contextual or historical knowledge into the research process (see Ntombela, 2013). The construction of knowledge in this respect tends to take a very different route from that of a typical natural science approach.

It is important to emphasise that it should not be concluded that critical approaches are only relevant to social and human sciences. In fact, even the notion of objectivity, which is the fulcrum of natural science research, is not as simple as normally regarded. Despite the fact that the natural world seems to exist on its own, and therefore can be observed by enquirers who seek to understand the reality that crafts it, the world in which this observation takes place, and its representation through texts and discourses that have been particularised, is constructed by researchers. In

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other words, the researcher who is deemed, in the natural science tradition, to be objective is at the same time involved in the representation of those facts that, in the process of representation, have become the creation of the researcher. It becomes valid therefore to question whether such can ever be wholly objective.

This may seem a bit of a digression but there are reasons for it. The main concern here, to reiterate, is that it is essential that supervisors foster awareness in their students of the epistemological developments underlying normative practices in the enterprise of academia. In this respect, I refer to the possibilities for both adherence to and critique of the tenets of the discipline(s) in which the student is conducting research. In this way, the route to the 'pushing of boundaries' becomes a potentially worthy course.

Most importantly, supervision goes beyond adherence to the norms and expectations of a discipline; it speaks to human relations between a student and a supervisor. In other words, a supervisor needs to be cautious not to treat supervision as a research project where the student is reduced to a passive recipient of the supervisor's input. This calls for the supervisor to be critical in his or her approach to supervision. Being critical in this respect entails reflection on how the supervisor manages the relations with the student.

As Scott and Usher (2004) argue, critical approaches to knowledge construction relate to a range of approaches that problematise the universality of knowledge construction. Critical approaches – to give them labels – would thus include the interpretive or hermeneutic approach, emancipatory approach, critical theory, and action research to name a few. Thus, a supervisor who operates within the critical approach would have to realise and acknowledge the specific context of the student and the research field. Furthermore, the supervisor would have to continuously reflect on their supervision practice in order not to stifle the student with rigid disciplinary conventions. The supervision process would thus be most successful when working towards benefiting both parties in terms of exploring avenues that may lie outside the traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Continuous reflection is grounded in reflexivity. Darawsheh (2014) classifies reflexivity into introspection, intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique, and discursive deconstruction. According to Darawsheh (2014:560), "reflexivity refers to the continuous process of self-reflection that researchers engage in to generate awareness about their actions, feelings and perceptions". In qualitative research, proponents of reflexivity claim that its use in research promotes rigour, reliability and validity. It is further believed to improve "transparency in the researcher's subjective role, both in conducting research and analysing data, and allows the

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researcher to apply the necessary changes to ensure the credibility of their findings” (Darawsheh, 2014:560). I believe the same could be said of the supervisor in the supervision process. That is, the supervisor needs to constantly reflect on the whole process of supervision so that the student remains appropriately supported in their research process. The same way that researchers utilise reflective diaries in order to enhance rigour, supervisors could also use the same tool in order to improve the supervision experience.

One important strength of reflexivity is that the researcher becomes more aware of his or her actions in the process of research (Darawsheh, 2014). What this means is that, in the case of supervision, the supervisor becomes conscious of how he or she handles the supervisee as an important player in the supervision process. This is important because, many times, the student carries most of the blame for not adapting to the style or personality of the supervisor (Ntombela, 2013) despite the fact that it may be that the supervisor needs to alter, say, their supervision style so that it suits the student.

However, though the researcher has become more aware of self, reflexivity does not leave participants outside as the researcher acknowledges the influence exerted on participants and the research process. Therefore, supervisors are similarly aware of the influence of the supervision process on themselves and on students. In fact, Darawsheh (2014) admits that reflexivity helped in identifying personal traits that could subjectively influence the findings and research process. In other words, reflexivity would assist the supervisor in gaining awareness of self as an individual and as a supervisor.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has made clear the importance of supervision in postgraduate research. It has acknowledged the pressure institutions are under to improve the throughput and graduation rate of postgraduate students. In order to expedite this, measures have been put in place where the burden of effort for implementation, in many cases, rests on the shoulders of supervisors. The manner in which supervision is conducted has thus been subjected to much scrutiny.

I have argued here that the self of the supervisor – in terms of their personality and personality traits – is a critical factor in influencing the nature of the relationship between supervisor and student. However, as much as approaches to supervision are shaped by personality, choices between the possible different roles of the supervisor are also critical in shaping the relationship between the supervisor and student.

STRENGTHENING POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

Two aspects of supervision addressed are the provision of pastoral care and the importance of communication. Both activities are important in effective supervision of the two significant stages of dissertation production – namely the display of discourse competence and the production of the text in accordance with disciplinary norms. I have argued that the supervisor has a decisive role to play in induction of the student into membership of the relevant disciplinary communities and that, to be effective in so doing, a critical and reflexive approach to supervision is imperative. Recognition of the underlying assumptions regarding knowledge construction in academia is, I have argued, a necessary component of doctoralness.

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CHAPTER 4 • PERSPECTIVES ON BECOMING A SUPERVISOR: TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPROACH

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