



A Commentary on the Student-Supervisor Relationship: a Shared Journey of Discovery

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I come from a long line of teachers on my mother's side of the family, a professional leaning that seems to have emerged strongly in my own career as an academic. Indeed, many of my colleagues in higher education appear to enjoy "flying solo" most of the time, sitting alone in their offices, monk-like, reading and writing, rather than teaching. I do share a certain lack of enthusiasm for formal classroom lecturing, but the experience and process of supervising student research from undergraduate to post-doctoral level is something I have always enjoyed and will miss dearly when the sun finally sets on my own academic career. And by this, I mean I really enjoy actually sitting with a student and working with them on their research, whether this involves designing a study, analyzing data, preparing a presentation for a conference or a manuscript for submission to a journal, or just talking about the broader conceptual or philosophical issues within the discipline of psychology.

My own experience of supervising students began when I was a PhD student, and my doctoral supervisor asked me to co-supervise one or two undergraduate students. One of them later became my wife (Yvonne), and if that wasn't incestuous enough, the priest who married us was also a PhD student of mine, but that's another story to which I shall return. Anyway, my career in student research supervision started back in the late 1980s, and I guess I have supervised literally hundreds of undergraduate students since then and I estimate that I have successfully supervised close to 50 PhD students.

As I sit here now, reflecting back on my experience as a research supervisor, the voices of those many individuals echo

back to me across the yawning years. Yelps of joy when that very first manuscript was finally accepted by a journal, the tears (literally on occasion) when a paper was rejected accompanied by an overly harsh, or sometimes down-right rude, review. The intense preparation for a conference paper and my own vicarious sense of anxiety and stress as I watched a student deliver their first formal presentation. And of course, the bitter-sweet joy and pleasure of congratulating a student on a successful defense of their doctoral research, knowing that the shared intellectual journey was now over and it was time for both of us to move on to fresh pastures. My role as a launching pad for their career was complete, and it was now their turn (if they chose to stay in academia) to fulfill that role for their own students.

So, what have I learned about the process of student supervision over the past 30 years? Well, the first insight, if I may call it that, is that you have to learn to deal with all sorts of personality types. Some students are, well, very easy to work with, great team players, and cause you little if any serious concern—others, let's say are at the other end of the spectrum. In fact, I would describe two or three of the students I have supervised over the years as genuine sociopaths, and one I know has the rap-sheet and jail-time to support my view! My general approach in handling the "difficult" student has, perhaps paradoxically, involved keeping them very close, which I have found serves to reduce the "toxicity" they can spread throughout a research team, and even an entire department. But thankfully, this type of student is quite rare and if handled properly, they don't do too much damage before you finally manage to bid them farewell.

Apart from personality issues, students like all of us have their strengths and weaknesses, and as a supervisor, it is important to identify what they are and to help them to fully exploit the former and compensate as best they can for the latter. So, for example, some students may be exceptionally good at the more technically demanding features of their research, but quite weak when it comes to writing research

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papers or their thesis. There is little point in spending days or weeks working with such a student on how to record and analyze EEG signals from a 128-site array when they will literally teach themselves how to do this, but you may need to spend countless hours teaching them how to write a relatively comprehensible research article.

Another important feature of supervising student research is recognizing that your view and knowledge of the field and that of the student's may be quite different, particularly as you become increasingly expert. Early in my career, my doctoral students were perhaps only 5 or so years younger than me, and in a sense, it was a case of the partially sighted (i.e., me) leading the blind (i.e., the beginning doctoral student) through the labyrinthine maze of a PhD research program. Don't get me wrong, this was far from an aversive experience. They were genuinely wonderful times—in some respects, they were the golden years. When my first doctoral students started their PhDs with me, relational frame theory (RFT) was little more than a couple of book chapters by Steve Hayes and one "in press" journal article. We had very little to go on, and thus we had to begin to lay the groundwork for what would later become the 2001 seminal volume on RFT itself (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche, 2001). Remember also that there was no internet, email was in its infancy, skype and zoom were the stuff of science fiction, and relatively cheap air travel had not yet fully arrived on the scene. Thus, getting direct access to Steve Hayes' and his research team was done, if at all, via so called snail mail. Steve was indeed very generous—thick packages of "in press" articles would arrive in my snail mail in-box every few months, and in 1995, we managed to fly Steve to Ireland to give what I think was the first ACT workshop in Europe. But at that stage, my earliest doctoral students had already graduated with their PhDs or were soon to do so. And, so, that was my early experience of supervising doctoral level research—literally and metaphorically my students and I lived on a small island, picking up the odd "message in a bottle" from an exotic and fabled land thousands of miles away. But that relative intellectual isolation combined with my own lack of high-level expertise, which can only be gained across many years of being immersed in a given field, helped to fashion a deeply shared view and vision of what we were all working towards.

As the years rolled by, naturally I did become increasingly expert, the journal publications increased in number, and the first full-length book treatment of RFT was published at the beginning of the new millennium. Now, when new PhD students joined me, they could hit the ground running, so to speak. There was no need for me to grind through the basics and the sense of shared "working out where are we going" gradually faded away from the supervision experience. Don't get me wrong—doctoral supervision still retained that sense of a shared intellectual journey for both me and (I think) the student. But now, there was an increasingly experienced captain at the helm and we all had well-charted waters to navigate.

Apart from recognizing that the supervision experience changes as you become increasingly expert, it also seems important to understand that the student's perception of you also changes. In the early years, academically speaking I was a "no-body," and I guess students chose me as a doctoral supervisor because they were interested in the research area and how I had lectured them as undergraduates (all of my early PhD students had typically been taught by me as undergraduates). As my reputation in the field grew in strength, naturally I started to attract students who were perhaps more interested in having my name on their CV than those who worked with me in the early years. This, of course, is to be expected, but it does change the supervision dynamic. New students started to arrive in my office clutching the 2001 RFT book as if it was a holy text and stutter and stammer their way through a potential idea for their doctoral research program based on some part of the book. For a few years after the publication of the book, this seemed entirely reasonable, but as time passed and the book became increasingly dated, I would suggest putting the book to one side and consider thinking about a research program that was, well, not directly connected to some specific part of the book. Crestfallen, the supervision experience was already off to a bad start. I was not what the student expected—far from an RFT bible-bashing, chest-thumping fanatic, I was suggesting a completely different research program to the one they wanted to pursue. In more recent years, a broadly similar pattern has emerged in the context of the Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure (IRAP). New students started to arrive in my office clutching some papers on the IRAP and "implicit cognition" and describe how they wanted to use the procedure to study implicit attitudes in some domain or other. With a strange sense of *déjà vu*, I gently suggest that we put the IRAP as a measure of implicit cognition to one side and focus instead on the dynamics of arbitrarily applicable relational responding. Once again, the new student is crestfallen and the supervision process is off to less than an ideal start. Don't get me wrong, though, the process is far from mortally wounded, but as a supervisor, one has to adapt across the years from being an academic "no-body" to "a face" who the student associates strongly with a particular line of research. Disabusing the new student of their view of you and what you are going offer them can be a challenge, but it is one worth meeting head-on.

One final area in which I think the supervision experience has changed over the years is the external academic context in which the modern PhD student is forced to live. Specifically, the increasingly strong focus on the impact factors of journals and other so called key performance indicators (KPIs), such as h-indices, and number of article downloads can serve to undermine a student's genuine interest in a research area and leave little else behind but a strong focus on the level of KPIs that need to be achieved by the end of the PhD. And yet, other external pressures have also entered the mix, such as

the Open Science Framework (OSF), on foot of the so called replication crisis. This is not the place to work through the potential costs and benefits of these more recent developments in academic life, but the apotheosis of the KPI and the unquestioning acceptance of the OSF, all of which seem so reasonable at first blush, have the potential to impact on academic life in perhaps unexpectedly negative ways. One such consequence is that the student-supervisor relationship may be twisted and distorted into one in which a student simply sees the supervisor as the “best bet” for increasing their KPIs by the end of the PhD, with the student having little or no interest in actually learning how to acquire a full and rounded set of research skills because existing data sets may be re-analyzed courtesy of the OSF. It would be unfair to blame the modern student for reacting to these modern external pressures because in truth they are contextual factors that my generation ushered into academic life (shame on us!). But they are now a reality and dealing with them in what I have often found to be a deeply rewarding, and human relationship, that of student and supervisor, creates a new challenge that certainly was not present when I first began the journey of student supervision.

So what final “words of wisdom” do I have to share about the supervision experience? Well, as the distant echo of those voices I have supervised over the past 30 years call back to me in the late summer sun of my own academic career, I see how important they have been to me in providing a sense of meaning and purpose to my working life. But the rewards in some cases certainly stretch beyond work. Some of my ex-PhD students have become life-long close friends. And as I noted

earlier, I married one of the first students I supervised, and the priest who officiated over the ceremony was a current PhD student at the time. Many years later when my father passed away, he also officiated at the funeral and cremation. The supervision experience, at least for me therefore, has sometimes involved sharing the best and the worst of times. So, if I was to summarize the supervision experience in one phrase, it would be “a shared journey of discovery.” And to all of my students (even the odd sociopath!), both past and present, I would like to thank them sincerely for sharing that journey with me.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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