

CARE ETHICS AND EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY IN POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

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***Abstract:** This article explores the notion of care in the supervisor/supervisee relationship in postgraduate supervision as an efficient tool for a successful postgraduate program. The unequal power relations between a supervisor and supervisee sometimes bring about tension and friction in their relationship. This can hinder the aim of the relationship in research training. In this paper, I conducted qualitative critical assessments of the notions of care, language, and effective communication. I argue that the ability to express care for a postgraduate student influence how the student will, in turn, perform a supervisory function when they are found in that role, particularly in academia. The argument concludes that there is a need to prioritize the duty of care in postgraduate supervision as much as in research training itself.*

***Keywords:** care, interaction, postgraduate, responsibility, supervision*

Introduction

Every human relationship is indicative of unequal power relations and varying levels of interpersonal relationships among humans. It is permissible to say that these unequal power relations influence people's interactions. The supervisor-supervisee relationship, as one such human interaction, comes with the challenges of navigating norms and conventions of the interaction, which will lead to the realization of the expectations of the supervision process. An awareness of the demands of the interpersonal relationship that exists between the supervisor and student and the possible pull of power relations may obstruct the flow of interaction and impact the output of the supervisory practice. Should supervisors care about students' welfare and research? To what extent should care be expressed by supervisors and students?

I discuss these questions as points of humanizing pedagogy for desired progress in the postgraduate research community. In this study, I affirm that good communication is a core aspect of expressing care. I argue

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that care ethics is central to successful supervisory training and that ethics of responsibility is wholly dependent on it. I draw on my experience, both as a student and as an early career researcher in supervision practice. I argue that the type of care a student receives in postgraduate training influences how supervision practice is conceived, particularly in academia, and how the student may eventually exercise the role of supervision.

Pedagogy with a Duty of Care

Care ethics supervenes on the idea that, by nature, humans, as autonomous beings, recognize the need of others for care in social interaction.¹ Also, Bansel and Halse argue that while care ethics is an “insufficient framework”² for fruitful postgraduate supervision, they admit that care is a factor in the supervisory relationship. They also argue that responsibility and accountability provide the justice ethics needed for praxis, which properly determines the success of supervision. For them, this is fundamental to exercising mutual responsibility towards oneself and others. The sort of justice (in ethics) for responsibility that they propose lies in the recognition and practice of the demand for reciprocal roles for responsibility. This suggests that there must be a balance between the roles of both the supervisor and supervisee. One party must not do too much or too less than the other.

I agree that in some cases, care ethics may be insufficient to achieve fruitful completion; however, care ethics form the hub of assessing a supervisory relationship. It is a mechanism capable of guiding the process of supervision from start to end. This is based on the assumption that the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee has a more direct impact on the institution. In most cases, the students interacted with supervisors before the start of the program. On both sides of the interaction, the person is assessed, and basic choices regarding the program are made before institutional policies for the program are provided. The extent to which a supervisory relationship can be assessed is based on the actual interaction between supervisors and students. That institutions set policies for fairness and justice in supervision does not

¹ Pat Thomson, Patter: <https://patthomson.net/2013/10/31/supervision-as-an-ethic-of-care>, 2013

²Preeta Bansel & Christine Halse, Performance, accountability, and the ethical horizon in doctoral supervision, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol.25, No.4, 2012, p.386

imply that the policies make an actual act of caring occur. Therefore, without awareness of the attitude towards care, the purpose of policies in relation to it will be vacuous.

The topic of a caring attitude in a supervisory relationship is not as debatable as the topic of the extent of care. There is no doubt that the roles and responsibilities of a supervisor require care, just as the student should also be aware of the need to show care to the supervisor. Within this understanding of a 'mutual' care relationship, it is needful that the extent of care in the supervisory relationship is appropriate and sufficient to achieve the goal of the relationship.

One of the goals of the pedagogical nature of postgraduate training is the ability to reproduce skills acquired during the process. This is because how students are supervised impacts the method of supervision they adopt when they become new supervisors. Åkerlind and McAlpine note that the influence of purpose on pedagogy is inevitable.³ A means by which pedagogy is achieved in the process of supervision is to have a sufficient caring attitude. The act of not caring or not caring enough to meet the purpose of the training is a failing (either as a student or supervisor).

At the start of a postgraduate program, both the student and the supervisor may have expectations and assumptions regarding the purpose of pursuing the degree or taking up the supervision. If these assumptions are accurate, the relationship is likely to be a good starting point. However, if these assumptions are not accurate, it is likely that there will be challenges in arriving at the purpose of this study. It is useful that expectations and roles are properly set at the start of the study, as this will allow us to determine the extent to which care is expected mutually. However, the power relationship that exists sometimes puts the student at a disadvantage. Thomson notes that,

The quality of the relationship between research supervisors and students is considered to be a critical factor influencing the progress and success of students. The power balance of the relationship is skewed in favour of the supervisor and this creates the potential for many ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas can best be resolved through the application of the Duty-of-care principle.

³ Gerlese Åkerlind & Lynn McAlpine, Supervising doctoral students: Variation in purpose and pedagogy, *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 42, no. 9, 2017, pp.1686–1698

According to this principle the supervisor has the responsibility to act in the best interest of the student as manifested in the creation of an enabling learning environment through actions such as regular constructive consultation with the student, timely evaluation of the student's work and advising the student regarding funding and other opportunities.⁴

The primary focus of care in the supervisory relationship should be geared towards the successful completion of research training. However, various social processes also impact the study process. Being a human is a product of various aspects of existence. There are personal, academic, political, medical, and so on. The overlap of these categories affects the general well-being of individuals. Paying equal attention to these categories can sometimes be difficult, but attempts should be made to achieve a balance. For instance, the attention of an unmarried student towards postgraduate studies should not be expected to be the same as that of married students. In general, students with caring responsibilities and personal commitments have constraints on their attention towards the study. This aligns with what is noted as the influence of the identity of a student on a research program.⁵

The extent of care in a supervisory relationship cannot go beyond academic relationships. Postgraduate training, particularly PhD study, is a process that is intense and can be exhausting for some students (as well as some supervisors). Just as students have an academic part in their lives, which we may describe as public, they also have personal (private) lives. These public and private aspects intersect in several ways. As noted earlier, the idea of care under supervision is a mutual relationship. There is a need to find a balance between these aspects of life in order to be both personally and socially productive. This is succinctly stated below:

This balance was hard to achieve, difficult to discuss in any of their social communities of practice, and that the best they could do was cope with demands alone. Families

⁴ Pat Thomson: <https://patthomson.net/2013/10/31/supervision-as-an-ethic-of-care>, 2013.

⁵ Susan Carter, Marion Blumenstein, & Catherine Cook, 2013, Different for women? The challenges of doctoral studies, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2013, p. 340.

and supervisor recognition of the duality of their workload would help.⁶

As a student, I should care about my supervisor's well-being—physical, psychological, and in any other way—that will impact my training. This means showing care for my supervisor so far as his well-being will impact my study. As a supervisor, I should be able to have information, but minimal information about my student, with which I can make an assessment of how well they are ready to go through the various stages of the study. Care involves being responsible for a student and in the process of making the student responsible for the process.

Sometimes, there is intertwining of the reach of care between the supervisor and the student. This further indicates that academic/professional and personal lives impact each other. Hence, it may be that supervisors fulfil other roles. Marie Parker-Jenkins states that even when there is a proper description of the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor/supervisee,

... these roles get confused and it is not always the student who allows it to happen. Further, in blurring the lines between academic supervisor and personal counsellor or therapist, the student risks being without the necessary professional support which stands outside of the academic relationship. Institutions normally have counselling services in-house or access to services which separates the academic and personal counselling responsibilities.⁷

This indicates that the provision of care services to deal with personal issues is often provided for institutions of higher learning, distinct from the supervisory relationship. However, the same impact of care on students whose personal challenges are known to supervisors is more beneficial. It is agreeable that students do not have to lean on the possibility of blurring the boundaries of academic and personal lives to use it as a means of expanding the roles of the supervisor to those of the

⁶ Susan Carter, et al, *op.cit.*, p. 348

⁷ Marie Parker-Jenkins, *Mind the gap: developing the roles, expectations and boundaries in the doctoral supervisor-supervisee relationship*, *Studies in Higher Education*, 2016, p.5.

therapist. Marie Parker – Jenkins further states that, “the blurring of the division between supervisor and supervisee is particularly problematic when a relationship becomes personal as well as academic.”⁸ Hence, “being cautious about the relationship ‘becoming too personal’ and jeopardising what should be a professional engagement,”⁹ is not to be regarded as a way out of caring but a means of consciously setting out boundaries. This shows clearly that:

To slip into a ‘cosy’ informal relationship from the outset with an assumption of no need for clarity, disadvantages students as they proceed through what may appear to be a nebulous programme without direction beyond the research topic. This potentially disadvantages both parties in the endeavour. There are models of good practice which are useful for guidance, but they are context-specific and not a substitute for institutionally developed policy. Indeed, the process should go beyond clarification of the elements of the programme to consideration of the nature of the institutional ethos and a willingness to discuss appropriate roles, expectations and boundaries with sufficient opportunity for redress for both parties.¹⁰

Thus, blurring boundaries in the supervisory relationship is unhealthy for the success of the supervisory process. This may derail the purpose of the training. The boundaries are likely to overlap. Sometimes, supervisors take up the roles of therapists, psychologists, counsellors, foster parents, and even friends. The tactic is to know which of these roles is needed by the student and present a meaningful and acceptable outlook in the light of professional engagement, which is the primary relationship.

Becoming aware of major life issues of a student, such as loss of a loved one, childcare, unemployment, divorce, and so on, does not necessarily mean that the supervisor will take up other roles, but it helps provide a better understanding of the factors that may affect the progress

⁸ Marie Parker-Jenkins, *op.cit.*, p. 3

⁹ Estelle M. Phillips & Derek S. Pugh, *How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and Supervisors*, 5th ed., McGraw Hill, Open University Press, England, 2010, p. 120.

¹⁰ Marie Parker-Jenkins, *Mind the gap: developing the roles, expectations and boundaries in the doctoral supervisor-supervisee relationship*, *Studies in Higher Education*, 2016, p. 3

of the training. Engaging in good practice to support the completion of the study, for both parties, should be in the conscientiousness of the purpose, hence the possibility of “avoiding the situation of ‘when things go wrong’”.¹¹ As noted earlier, the extent of care is a fundamental aspect that is challenging to address in higher education. Thomson notes that “what caring actually means and entails is not that easy to establish”.¹² One reason for this is that the relationship is often among mature students, and a level of self-care is expected from the student. Another reason is that it takes more effort and commitment to express care for people with whom one does not have a personal relationship. Therefore, as a supervisor of a research student, I expect the student to possess the level of life skills needed for both professional and private lives. Professionally, I may be able to go heads-on to care about and for how to help with challenges, but in a student’s personal life, this is a complex issue, since the primary kind of relationship is not personal. A student mourning the loss of a loved one requires an empathetic understanding of the situation, even if such a situation will impact the program. So, I need to have the ability and awareness of balancing my interactions around professional and personal lives with my student in communication.

Affective and Effective Communication in Postgraduate Supervision

I will now turn to examining the impact of communication in expressing sufficient care towards the success of postgraduate supervision. The duty of care starts with communication, a demonstration of care in the relationship. Just as communication is the starting point of any interaction, it is the same for supervision. From the moment a student is in touch with a supervisor, there should be a clear layout of every aspect of life that may impact the period of study. Carol Webb states that:

How far a hand reaches out towards a student is crucial to helping them stay on board the doctoral rollercoaster. Emotion plays a large part in engagement, being acknowledged, feeling that you are known, a sense of inclusion, all help one to take the necessary risks. No

¹¹ Marie Parker-Jenkins, *op.cit.*, p.3

¹² Pat Thomson, <https://patthomson.net/2013/10/31/supervision-as-an-ethic-of-care>, 2013

matter one's age, the emotional needs when in the role of learner begin with connection.¹³

The interaction between the supervisor and student at the start of the program helps determine how communication will flow between them and how the relationship will develop. Just as with many other postgraduate students, my initial contact with my PhD supervisor was by email. This was our communication platform for a few months before the meeting in person. Although the tone of communication was professional, there was an expression of interest and readiness to support the program from my supervisor, such as a good follow-up of previous discussions and replying to messages within a good frame of time. This made me confident that I had good support for the program and could speak up on issues that I feel may affect my study on way or the other.

An expression of care on the part of the supervisor may sometimes be taken as laxity in professional roles. A supervisor should respect the personal issues of the student and not try to be incautious in taking on other roles as psychologists or counsellors, especially when not solicited. Even if the student requests such help from counselling to discuss personal issues, the supervisor can suggest exploring professional help in that regard. This suggestion may be augmented by supervisors' attention. However, such an arrangement will indicate that the supervisor cares to the extent that there is a balance between the relationships within the boundaries. On the part of the student, the expression of care may be interpreted as patronizing. Emphasizing the expression of care does not imply that boundaries will become blurred or that patronizing attitudes will be adopted. It is pertinent to note that, generally, the relationship calls for actions, reactions, and reciprocity.¹⁴ Hence, if supervisors and supervisees make good efforts to stay within acceptable standards of communication, boundaries can be maintained, and the intention of the training is achieved without jeopardizing mutual respect.

The use of affective language has been associated with a language of friendship in education.¹⁵ Affective language in expressing care is

¹³ Carol Webb, <https://patthomson.net/2013/10/31/supervision-as-an-ethic-of-care/> 2013

¹⁴ Pat Thomson, <https://patthomson.net/2013/10/31/supervision-as-an-ethic-of-care/>, 2013

¹⁵ M. E. Smith, & M. K. Smith, Friendship and informal education, *The encyclopedia of pedagogy and informal education*, <https://infed.org/mobi/friendship-and-education>, 2002

important for the supervisory relationship. The use of affective language does not necessarily mean the occurrence of friendship that jeopardizes the learning process. In reference, to communicate with students, it is useful to express emotions that will encourage students to pursue study. A language that shows a sense of empathy and conscientiousness in the process or context of whatever the student is going through in other aspects of life. Support for postgraduate education must include sympathy and empathy. In a situation where a student makes the need for emotional support obvious, there is a need for an empathetic understanding to help overcome it. This is based on the assumption that the expression of the need for emotional support is authentic and in good faith to avoid cases of laxity and patronizing.

The use of the language of friendship enables interaction with receptive attention. Receptive attention is an essential characteristic of care encounters.¹⁶ This shows that there is an interest, perhaps a sense of devotion, in the interaction. The language I use when talking to my friend will be different from what I use when talking to my supervisor. However, this does not mean that I cannot exercise the principles of friendship in the process. I can ask for help and favour (within my limits). Suppose I am in dire need of a ride to the clinic. I have tried to reach people and friends I know to help without success. My supervisor appears to be the only one that I can approach. So, s/he gives me a ride to the clinic. I was able to do this with the knowledge that my supervisor has been friendly and has often shown willingness to help. However, this instance should not stretch to become a constant, in requesting help or favours at the snap of my finger, as I may do to my contemporaries. Doing so will overstep the boundaries of friendship and discourage the professional relationship that exists between us. I may attend workshops or seminars recommended to me by my supervisor, which we both know is not related to my programme, as an act of deference. So, even when I do not have a duty to take the recommendation based on professional roles between us, I can pay attention to his interest in making me attend and make my decision on that basis.

Friendships can be a part of education. It may flow from the encounters between participants, it may be the

¹⁶ M. K., Smith, Nel Noddings: The ethics of care and education, *The encyclopedia of pedagogy and informal education*, <https://infed.org/mobi/nel-noddings-the-ethics-of-care-and-education>, 2004/2020

focus for learning, and it may be part of what is offered by educators. However, to talk seriously of friendship within many of the current contexts within which informal educators have to operate, is to come to up against the impact of professionalization and the other forces that worked to limit our appreciations of the relationship.¹⁷

A supervisory relationship can flow between formal and informal contexts, depending on the persona of the supervisor and the student in being aware of boundaries. While developing friendships brings about an opportunity for effective communication in supervisory relationships, it must recognize professional boundaries. As a student, I may desire to tell my supervisor about personal issues in a manner that does not overstep his role. For instance, if I experience financial stress while on the program, I can discuss it with my supervisor. S/he may like to know the extent of need and then make suggestions within professional quarters on how to obtain funding. For me, to make suggestions or find possible ways to obtain funding is a professional act, but to make an effort that sees that the situation settles is a show of care with a friendly interest.

The challenge of effective communication is a major problem faced by students during supervision. The consciousness of censoring every word, action, and request is a burden that dips some students into despair. This attitude may arise from their experience of having strictly professional interactions with the supervisor or reactions that suggests that the supervisor will keep the boundaries 'closed.' This may also influence the responses to comments from writing and assessments. Due to the strict professional mood, students may find it difficult to express the various challenges they face outside of the professional context, which impacts their study. This could be a mental health issue, physical weakness, emotional trauma, or even financial challenge. The lack of effective communication is an indication of the strain under supervision. When a student experiences a supervisory process modelled as strictly professional, the context may be well understood and accepted, but it will lack the humanistic relationship that might have sustained a career influence post-study.

Sometimes, postgraduate students are caught in a chain of inherited supervisory attitudes. Some supervisors make statements such as "I

¹⁷ M.K. Smith, *op.cit.*

actually being fair, my supervisor did worse to me,” or “figure it out yourself, my supervisor didn’t give me extra explanations on comments on writing” to justify a strictly professional mood and sometimes distasteful attitude. On the other hand, some supervisors exhibited a caring attitude because they had received the same. Hence, the effect of care in postgraduate studies transcends the study period, particularly in academia. This potentially creates a chain of attitudes that are received and transferred post-study.

Efforts to communicate effectively must draw on expressing feelings and emotions clearly in a language that shows the desire to affirm and encourage towards success. Achieving this will require that the supervisor and supervisee know each other reasonably well to know what inputs each person is expected to provide. Although, ‘knowing each other’ is dependent to an extent on sufficient period of interaction, it does not mean that an effort to know each other must linger to a point that may be indicate that no effort is made to achieve effective communication. Thus, from the outset of the program, roles and responsibilities must be communicated in clear terms with the recognition that having a humanistic outlook will help achieve successful completion. Embracing a humanistic outlook in communication will enable adjustment of roles and responsibilities. Social demands, commitment, and status of the student or supervisor may change during the period of supervision, and clear and prompt communication of such change will help practice a duty of care.

Conclusion

Caring is both a practice and a disposition.¹⁸ A practice to the extent that it must be expressed in this relationship. A disposition to possess as a member of society whose actions impact other people. The extent of care as a challenge can be addressed through effective and needful communication between supervisors and supervisees. Developing a healthy supervisory relationship is a virtue that requires the efforts of the supervisor and supervisee. Undoubtedly, carrying out roles and responsibilities will be part of such a process. The institution is a mediator of the supervisory process to oversee training-to-completion. It is the supervisor and student who communicate directly. A consistent review of

¹⁸ J.C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 104

the relationship must be conducted by both the student and supervisor to determine whether there is a balance in the relationship.

I have noted that supervisors should express care towards their students, at least because of their professional investment in supervision. As noted by Sidhu, supervisors need to be friendly, open, approachable, and supportive towards their supervisees.¹⁹ These attitudes can be expressed in a healthy and authentic manner for successful training. Goodwill towards each other is obvious in the supervisory relationship. However, it is necessary to clearly outline the boundaries in the relationship, even when care is expressed on both sides of the relationship. In other words:

Without boundaries, social relationships can become confused and the concept of boundaries has useful application in social, professional and academic contexts.²⁰

Even in non-professional contexts there are boundaries; therefore, setting boundaries in the context of supervision is needed.

Communication is an important factor in reaching out to students to communicate their thoughts as they undergo the supervision process. An empathetic understanding of each other's experiences helps them appreciate when efforts are made. Excesses can be checked in good understanding and with affective language that will not condone laxity of character or patronizing, but will indicate the need for redress and encouragement to be better. A healthy supervisory practice will have effective communication to sustain good engagement.²¹ In addition, supervisors must strive to express care with a humanistic outlook during postgraduate training as it will impact how much the supervisees who are trained in the present will be attuned to giving care when they become supervisors in the future.²² This is because the supervision experience for

¹⁹ G.K. Sidhu, S. Kaur, C.Y. Fook, & F.W. Yunus, 2014, Postgraduate supervision: Comparing student perspectives from Malaysia and the United Kingdom. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 123, 2014, p. 152

²⁰ Marie Parker-Jenkins, Mind the gap: developing the roles, expectations and boundaries in the doctoral supervisor-supervisee relationship, *Studies in Higher Education*, 2016, p.8

²¹ Carol Webb, <https://patthomson.net/2013/10/31/supervision-as-an-ethic-of-care>, 2013

²² E.M. Bitzer, & R.M. Albertyn, 2011, Alternative approaches to postgraduate supervision: A planning tool to facilitate supervisory processes, *SAJHE*, Vol. 25, No. 5, p. 877

the supervisee goes further into the future to prepare them for the supervisory practice, bearing in mind that supervisors are likely to supervise the way they received care and supervision while in training.

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