WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS: STUDENT JOURNEYS AND WOMEN RESEARCH HIGHER DEGREE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The authors conducted a pilot research project examining the experiences of women who reported negative supervisory experiences during Research Higher Degree (RHD) studies. The participants reflected upon absent/ineffective supervisory practices and the formal/informal supports they relied upon to continue their learning journeys and to achieve success.

KEYWORDS

women researchers - RHD students - RHD supervision

INTRODUCTION

Aspin and Chapman (2000) argue that lifelong learning is triadic with three core elements: economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, and social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity. Participation in the Research Higher Degree (RHD) process (by Masters or PhD) represents lifelong learning (Reay 2003). The RHD process has the capacity to satisfy each element of the definition, with an overarching sense of a 'good' or 'positive' experience (Reay 2003, Aspin and Chapman 2000). The authors had considerable anecdotal evidence from women of the key importance of the supervisory relationship as part of the successful individual student journey. The literature suggests positive supervisory practices have positive outcomes for students (Cryer 1996; Delamont, Atkinson & Parry 1997; Phillips & Pugh 2005; Wisker 2005). What if the process is a negative one? Does a negative supervisory experience produce a negative outcome and a barrier to lifelong learning? What strategies for educational success might students need to adopt in these circumstances?

Numerous texts have examined the effective practices of supervisors and students. One that seeks to promote fundamental good practice between student and supervisor is James and Baldwin's "Eleven Practices of Effective Postgraduate Supervisors" (1999). While each practice is discrete (#1 right partnership, #2 careful assessment of needs, #3 agreed expectations, #4 support conceptual structure and research plan, #5 encourage writing early and often, #6 regular contact and feedback, #7 involve in life of department, #8 inspire and motivate, #9 assist in crises, #10 assist in future career, #11 monitor final production), they collectively mirror the research journey - through foundations, momentum and final stages.

Little formal work in respect of Australian women (Moses 1990; Leonard 2002) has been done to enhance a better understanding of the 'down side' or negative experiences of supervision and what that means for women who embark on the student journey, and for their commitment to lifelong learning and creating new futures. The authors saw the clarity and accessibility of the "Eleven Practices" framework as a valuable starting point for pilot research examining the effect of negative supervisory experiences on the research and personal lives of RHD women students.

THE RESEARCH

We posed the following questions: How are women's lives/research affected by the need to develop strategies to negotiate problematic supervisory situations? When unable to access formal avenues of redress, how do the women journey within/outside the bounds of the supervision process? The diverse group of participating women were asked to reflect on James and Baldwin's eleven practices and to identify up to three they believed were absent or poorly managed in their individual experiences. The authors drew on the force of the women's narratives (Burt and Code 1995; Oakley 2000) to highlight difficulties and to privilege coping strategies the women adopted.

The authors called for expressions of interest to participate in the pilot project through the Central Queensland University Women in Research email list (which is a wide-ranging list reaching women from a variety of different institutions). The women volunteered to participate by completing a simple one-page document that indicated which of the eleven practices they saw as most problematic. The authors then held confidential, semi-structured, interviews (minimum one hour) with five women who had indicated a willingness to participate in the interview phase. All of the women were

studying/had studied at quite different institutions. The confidentiality of the interview data was protected by giving each participant a code name.

Table 1 summarises some key features associated with the participating women. Clearly, students and supervisors would display a range of attributes that could affect the nature of the supervisory experience. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore those attributes, but issues around the family responsibilities of students and the sex of the supervisors is included as some participants emphasised these issues as relevant to their RHD journeys.

Participant	Degree	Enrolment*	Family responsibility	Supervisor
Toni	PhD	External	yes	Male
Jude	PhD	External	yes	male (later female)
Kim	PhD	Internal**	yes	male (various)
Jackie	Masters	External	yes	Male
Sam	PhD	external (later stages internal)	yes	male (later stages female)

**External students were studying 'off-campus'/at a distance and part-time: Internal students were 'on-campus' and full- time.*

***Kim recounted that her only ongoing consistent support and feedback came from an overseas 'supervisor' so that for most of her candidature she was effectively an 'external' student.*

Table 1. Features of Supervision Situation

THE PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

Each woman's progress was a rollercoaster that required each individual to negotiate various hurdles, to cross boundaries and overstep rules in order to continue the learning journey. Participants were quick to point out that any success was not their own, but a combined effort with family and friends. Table 2 sets out where the most problematic practices fell in terms of James and Baldwin's three main stages of the RHD journey –

	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10	#11
	Foundations				Momentum					Final Stages	
Toni		✓					✓		✓		
Jude		✓		✓		✓					
Kim							✓		✓	✓	
Jackie	✓					✓					
Sam		✓	✓			✓					

Table 2. Nominated Negative Supervision Practices

THE FOUNDATIONS PHASE

All the women self-identified (directly on the survey instrument and/or in their subsequent interview) negative experiences within the foundations phase of the RHD process. The women found the foundations were very shaky, with no apparent ground rules to ease their way. As Patterson, Barnett and Culling (2007) highlight, there was a conflict between the 'idealised 'turbo-student' (the individual 'who can succeed in the shortest possible time with few demands on institutional resources)' and the students they really were.

In terms of the supervisory relationship, Jackie stood out as having a major input into who was to act as her supervisor, but this was to prove of no great assistance in cementing a partnership that was right for the project (Practice #1) -

> *… he was one of the few people who had the expertise … so to a certain extent I didn't have a lot of choice … When I approached him he tried very hard to discourage me ... to do with his own uncertainties about his own capabilities …I pointed out to him that I didn't have a lot of options … he was a live body as opposed to a no-body. And so, on that basis, he agreed …*

Jackie went on to describe a supervisor who never initiated contact, who never suggested her original topic was too broad (but 'sagely' agreed when Jackie expressed this concern some 12 months later), and who failed to provide her with, or direct her to, any administrative information about enrolment difficulties. Like the other women participants, she was, however, quite particular about using the idea of 'blame' and 'sharing the blame' for the difficulties she encountered.

While Sam did not nominate Practice #1 as one of her three most difficult areas of experience, she nevertheless described the 'selection' of her supervisor in this way –

> *I wanted to do a Masters … and the [then] Head of School said: you've already got one Masters, why don't you do a PhD? So I enrolled … not something I had intended to do … And then he left and he passed me on to somebody else. And he left and he passed me on to [someone] who wasn't even in my area …*

Being a full time internal student did not seem to offer any protection from the fundamental problem of supervisor-student 'fit', as Kim commented –

> *I had a number of supervisors over a period of time and they chopped and changed and they would leave … There was clearly nobody that the research office believed would be a suitable supervisor either. So what happened was that the … acting Dean … was appointed to sort of oversee the last phase …*

Toni described senior staff at her then institution informing her that she was selected to work with an unknown person from another institution. Toni was struggling with a heavy professional workload, a young family, the realities of external distance education and an associated heavy travel burden. Her priorities needed to be her family and her paid work, but as she said in relation to her allocated supervisor, 'I don't think he had a whole lot of sympathy for me with the other two areas of my life.'

Jude described an ongoing supervision quagmire –

> *My first supervisor went overseas at the end of my first year – it was a dreadful experience – that man would not contact me at all and I got to think: oh, it's me. But it was just abominable and he became quite aggressive and abusive before he left …*

She then detailed a complete lack of contact from her new supervisor, and gave this example of her frustration –

> *I actually wrote in my report [to the research office] that I wasn't satisfied with the amount of contact … I had tried to phone her … over a period of weeks … and it took phoning her home number - which I am loath to do - to discover she was overseas and had been for a couple of months … I think one of the responsibilities of a supervisor is to let their PhD students know that they are going to be out of the country. I don't want to know when they are going away for a blasted weekend, but I would have liked to have known that [she was overseas] … I would like to think … she would have enough respect for our relationship to actually let me know …*

If this was the beginning, it was not likely that these women would report an experience where supervisors took time to get to know them and carefully assess their needs. Three of the women specifically nominated Practice #2 as one that was especially problematic. For Toni, communication on that level was summed up as, 'there wasn't a whole lot.' But again, in common with the other women, she was reticent to ascribe the supervision difficulties wholly to her supervisor –

> *I'm reluctant to be honest to put too much of the blame on him. I don't think I'm a particularly open person … I'm not an easy person to get to know in all fairness. So he may well have tried. … But I think particularly in the last 12 months of this three year debacle … I wasn't in a prticularly good state of mind …*

Jude found herself grappling with competing academic and personal needs amid major changes in her professional and private life. For Sam working full time, managing a family, and studying part time had been a way of life for many years. She also expressed frustration at the apparent lack of interest by, or inability of, her supervisor to know and understand her needs –

> … it did make it more difficult. It made it more frustrating … especially because I thought the supervisor, obviously being an academic, knew the importance of … having a PhD. And I thought if he was busy, that's fine, I don't have a problem with that, but he should have said … let me know …

For her there was no mutual 'getting to know you' regime in place, and certainly no careful assessment of her needs as a RHD student and in such a context, Sam acknowledged that it would be impossible to establish reasonable and agreed expectations as proposed by Practice #3.

For Jude, a key source of her dissatisfaction and difficulties, centred on Practice #4 - the absence of any support and assistance to establish a strong conceptual structure and research plan –

> *And what I got from my principal supervisor in terms of support, you know, like a framework, a scaffold that might have helped me manage my time has been less that what I would have considered um … helpful. It was almost … well, it was literally … let's divide the year into months – so she drew this little table on her computer and we put the months down – and then she asked me what I wanted to do each month. That was the support I got. For Christ's sake, I don't know! Help!*

THE MOMENTUM PHASE

Somewhat surprisingly, all research participants stayed with their studies into what James and Baldwin (1999) describe as the momentum phase. In this phase, all women identified scenarios where they felt they received inadequate, or no, input or support. While none of the women specifically mentioned Practice #5 – encouragement to write early and often – that was essentially implicit in that three of them reported problems with Practice #6 in the lack of regular contact and feedback. For two students, the failure of supervisors to involve them in the life of their academic departments (Practice #7) was also of real concern. For three of these women, it was their experience of limited, sometimes no, contact from their supervisors and a lack of feedback that proved to be an almost overwhelming disincentive to continue.

None of the women actually specified problems with Practice #8 where supervisors actively worked to inspire and motivate students. However, it is clear from their stories that the sorts of supervision they each received were not likely to create an atmosphere where they felt valued and encouraged. Kim recounted occasions of her attendance at conferences and seminars – both in Australia and overseas –

> *And I was able to go to a number of postgraduate forums and workshops … sponsored by external groups … You know, you sort of live in hope that things will get better – and they sort of didn't … But I did get support nationally … which I feel also helped me make some links … I went [overseas] with support external to [my] institution … But it was also inspiring to think: yeah, what I'm doing is worthy. And even if the people around me don't see what I'm doing as worthy … other broader people believe what I'm doing is important.*

Jude recounted an incident that potentially robbed her of a valuable motivational opportunity –

> *I found out that there [had been an overseas] guest speaker [who] happens to be the primary academic whose work I've been looking at for a number of years … She's the main one [in my special field] … My supervisor did not contact me to let me know this particular academic was actually on campus … I would have thought my supervisor knowing that this particular academic has been the focus of what I've written … she would have let me know …*

Similarly, all the women reported (with two of them specifically nominating) problems to a greater or lesser degree with supervisory Practice #9 – assistance with academic and/or personal crises. Toni specifically referred to her supervisor's lack of sympathy with other areas of her life. Jude said her supervisor was aware of personal issues, but was not confident whether the resulting supervisory silence was yet another indicator of her supervisor's non-involvement. Kim described an isolated existence in the middle of a busy department while she struggled with issues of family illness and a range of outside pressures. Jackie's life underwent upheavals of 'earthquake' proportions. Sam tried to keep her academic pressures and frustrations separate from her family life. Whilst these less than satisfactory experiences were de-motivating, the participants found that the support from others outside of the supervisory relationship was invaluable to their success. Whilst such support was important throughout the research journey the importance of support from outsiders was no more evident than in the final stages phase.

THE FINAL STAGES PHASE

Jude actively sought what she described as an 'external supervisor' to supervise her project. This 'external supervisor' was a lecturer at another university who she met coincidentally. Jude's comment of her 'external supervisor' was, 'and she's interested – she shows interest in my work ... whereas I don't find any interest [in my work] from [my primary supervisor] at all'.

Kim's immediate family took drastic action as a form of encouragement –

> *… when people would ring up [they] would say I wasn't there. I could hear [them] on the phone. [They] monitored who was ringing and [they'd] say "I don't know where she's gone, she's gone away to write her thesis, she'll contact you when she can". My partner here would say: "she's gone away for a while she won't be back".*

Kim, in order to finalise her thesis 'escaped' to her family in a different town, one relative ruling that other members of the family 'were limited to visiting me once a week. Because it was made clear that I was there to do my work.'

The benefits of having a strong support basis were evident for Jackie who did not have any extended family to assist with the care of her child to give her time to attend her university campus. She lamented that it took a long period of time for her to build up support networks, inside and outside the institution, that were of assistance to both her studies and life outside study. For Toni the burden of the RHD journey was too much and she failed to finish her study. The experience was such that Toni indicated that she will not pursue future doctoral studies.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUTSIDE SUPPORT

At the time of the pilot study four of the five women had completed their studies. Despite their negative supervisory experiences none of the women were passive victims. As a key strategy they displayed great persistence and courage in what was often a totally alien and isolating situation. This was particularly the case given that the institutional strategies for resolving issues with their supervisors were often lacking.

For Jude the institutional complaint system was of limited benefit. She completed her annual report stating she was unhappy with the amount of supervisory contact. The supervisor responded positively in the report and committed to a more regular contact regime. However, Jude found that in reality nothing changed. There was no evidence that the institution had in any way followed up or monitored her concerns. Sam also decided to submit a written expression of concern to her institution's office of research. She never received a response. She then made the momentous decision to go it alone and completed a 50,000 word thesis. Her final, and perhaps most powerful strategy, was to change institutions and connect with her final supervisor in what had been a long and arduous journey –

> *My new supervisor [looked at my thesis] and said: … we're going to completely start from scratch – And I was devastated because that was like eight years work – so I threw away 50,000 words and wrote a PhD in 12 months …*

The failure of some strategies speaks to the institutional failures that ignored (often formal) calls for help, that failed to provide any preliminary preparation and advice about the RHD process, and that apparently failed to adequately train, monitor and audit the individual supervisors working within the various organisations (Manathunga 2005). The strategies that were successful were those where women drew on families and other women and colleagues for support. These proved to be the powerful guides and confidantes that sustained and encouraged and offered all manner of practical assistance.

CONCLUSION

The research was a pilot study only. The women themselves echoed the findings of the relevant literature that effective supervisory practices are crucial in the foundations stage and in maintaining the momentum of research work. For these women inadequate support in the foundation and momentum stages of their journeys led to the adoption of some quite stoic and innovative strategies to ensure final educational/career success. The determination and commitment to their lifelong learning journey led them to find the necessary supports, indeed impetus, outside the formal supervisory relationship. These women shared stories that exemplified personal development and fulfilment and also highlighted economic and social accomplishment – the triad (Aspin and Chapman 2000) identified initially in this paper as vital to lifelong learning.

What emerged as common to the five women were survival strategies that took them outside the boundaries of supervisory relationships. With a little help from friends, supports and/or mentors (wherever the women found them) the responses of these women 'interrupted dominant academic discourses that construct doctoral candidature as an individual endeavour and interrupted the dominant subject positions available … as 'individual' … students, with 'individual' supervisors …' (Patterson, Barnett and Culling (2007)). For all the women, the further strategy in participating in the pilot research has been to again step outside the often isolated and isolating world of supervision and to speak out as a way to encourage and support others who may face similar difficulty, discouragement and disincentive in the RHD lifelong learning process.

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