

PERSPECTIVES OF EARLY CAREER SUPERVISORS ON NAVIGATING THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF THEIR DOCTORAL CANDIDATES

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How to cite this article:

Leshem, S. & Bitzer, E.M. 2024. Perspectives of Early Career Supervisors on Navigating the Socio-Emotional Needs of their Doctoral Candidates. *Journal for New Generation Science*, 22(1): 35-51. DOI: 10.47588/jngs.2024.22.01.a3.

Edition DOI number:

10.47588/jngs.2024.22.01

ABSTRACT

All supervisors of doctoral research aim at guiding their students towards success on their doctoral journeys. Desired characteristics of successfully guiding doctoral studies have been widely reported in relevant literature and gave rise to various models of exemplary supervisory practice. One area within the supervisory relationship that has received limited attention is the emotional aspect of supervisors' role, their dispositional qualities of mind and character which are key factors in establishing an intellectual and emotional working rapport with candidates.

This exploratory qualitative study sought to gain a deepened understanding of how supervisors address the socio-emotional needs of their students. A combination of online and in-person semi-structured interviews with ten doctoral study supervisors, and thematic analysis of data, revealed that supervisors fully acknowledge the notion that interpersonal and emotional issues are key factors in the supervisory process. However, the way they see, and experience emotional factors differ. While some regard the supervisory process as an intellectual academic relationship, others regard supervision more as mentoring, allowing more space for self-expression and emotions. The study's findings carry implications for enhancing the training and support offered to doctoral supervisors and students enrolled in doctoral programmes, as well as identifying potential areas for improvement.

Keywords: Postgraduate Supervision; Socio Emotional Skills; Doctoral Studies; Supervisor-Student Relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most supervisors aim at assisting their students' growing in scholarship and enhancing their professional development through technical and socio-emotional support (Wisker, 2001). Doctoral supervision thus matters greatly, especially constituting a vital and powerful influence on students' well-being, either positively or negatively (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019; Godden, Tregunna & Kutsyuruba, 2014).

Desired characteristics of successfully guiding doctoral studies have been widely reported, referring to various models of exemplary supervisory practice (Doloriert, Sambrook & Stewart, 2012; Lee, 2008). One area that has received limited attention, however, is the ways of being of supervisors, their dispositional qualities of mind and character – all key factors in establishing an intellectual and emotional working rapport with doctoral candidates (Buirski, 2020: 61). Some researchers characterize doctoral research journeys as emotional ventures (Boucher & Smyth, 2004), implying emotional intelligence as critical for both supervisors and candidates (Lee, 2008; Wisker *et al.*, 2003). Nevertheless, supervisors, and mainly early career supervisors, are rarely prepared for the emotional aspects of the advisory role. Likewise, doctoral candidates are not always given guidance on how to manage socio-emotional relationships during studies (Gunasekera, Liyanagamage & Fernando, 2021).

Given the limited literature on how supervisors may navigate the socio-emotional needs of their doctoral candidates, the present study enquired into early career supervisors' perspectives on their role in

building interpersonal relationships (including effective interpersonal communication skills), dealing with emotional issues (such as anxiety and discomfort), gaining their students' trust, enhancing their students' intrapersonal skills (such as problem-solving, critical thinking and self-regulation), allowing space for doctoral students to 'think outside of the box' and managing inequalities in supervisor-student power relations. The study thus set out to explore the question: how do supervisors perceive their role in catering for their doctoral students' socio-emotional needs?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Supervision and Socio-emotional Support

Relevant literature points to the socio-emotional needs of students as spanning several dimensions and operating on both intra- and interpersonal levels (Doloriert *et al.*, 2012; Cotterall, 2013; Conley, 2015; Han & Xu, 2021). The present study consulted literature dealing with issues related to the socio-emotional aspect of doctoral supervision.

Considering psychological safety and emotional intelligence as a conceptual frame, Gunasekera, Liyanagamage and Fernando (2021) explored how student-supervisor relationships could enhance 'safer' socio-emotional study environments for PhD candidates. While doctoral students often deal with a 'roller-coaster of positive and negative emotions' (2021:1) during their studies, they tend to rely quite heavily on supervisory support – especially within dyadic supervisor-student models and relationships. Whether such support is offered, the nature of students' socio-emotional needs and exactly how they are supported may not always be clear and obvious.

Supervisor-student relationships impact strongly on the socio-emotional well-being of doctoral candidates (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019) and, by taking on mentorship roles, supervisors create more positive and healthy relations (Ragins & Verbos, 2007; Wisker, 2007). Mentoring implies a lessening of perceived or real power inequalities (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019) and thereby promote authentic study relations which, in turn, contribute to students' resilience and general well-being (Morris, 2011; Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019).

Research students mostly value, enjoy and benefit from positive socio-emotional supervisor support as they appreciate genuine supervisor interest in their general well-being (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2015), not only in relation to their research performance, but also for them being human beings in the first instance (Engebretson *et al.*, 2008; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004). Supervisors who are merely interested in their students' academic performance and fail to being approachable and attend to socio-emotional needs, clearly put them at a deficit (Ali, Cohen & Levi, 2007; Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019).

Cotterall (2013), for instance, highlighted how doctoral candidates' emotions pervade the doctoral experience, and, how the nature of supervisor-candidate interaction may enhance or diminish students' confidence. This places much responsibility on supervisors as they need to help students managing socio-emotional stress, especially in terms of how emotions within and during studies may inspire and guide, rather than delay and derail, studies.

While emotional care is important in face-to-face student-supervisor relationships, Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012: 285) have pointed to the emotional experiences of both students and supervisors within online environments as important - long before the Covid-19 pandemic which added more emotional challenges. These authors found that the role of emotion in life and studies need to be well understood and guided; not to become 'unaware victims' of emotion-related responses, but rather being 'conscious managers' of emotion.

It is also important to acknowledge that doctoral journey experiences differ across various universities, academic fields, departments faculties and nations (Pyhältö, Stubb & Lonka, 2009). Studies suggest that departmental culture can affect students' well-being (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). Posselt's research, for example, underscores the pivotal role of an institutional culture that fosters nurturing environments of growth mindset and validate students' competence and potential (Posselt, 2018). Cross-cultural psychologists have highlighted notable variations in emotional experiences across different cultures. These variations encompass differences in the norms governing emotional expression and the interpretations of events (Zembylas, 2004). Thus, supervisors involved in cross-

cultural supervision should assess the impact of their instructional approaches, deepen their understanding of their students' individual learning strategies and integrate them into a nurturing research environment (Manathunga, 2007).

2.1.1 The Interpersonal Aspect

Interpersonal supervisory skills may typically include empathy, active listening and other communication skills linked to emotional intelligence - all important in both personal and professional interactions. Buirski (2021), for instance, purports that doctoral supervisors are relatively uninformed about interpersonal skills when compared to typical helping professions. Professionals in helping professions such as psychologists and therapists are trained in interpersonal relationship-building and communication skills, but these skills seem mainly absent in study supervision and therefore the quality and effectiveness of candidate-supervisor relationships may suffer (Richardson, Sheean & Bambling, 2009).

Nevertheless, Conley (2015) had pointed out earlier that building interpersonal skills such as establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, seeking and providing help when needed, communicating effectively, negotiating conflict constructively and solving interpersonal problems, are highly regarded by research candidates and supervisors alike.

Establishing and maintaining personal and peer networks reflects on the ability of doctoral candidates to develop and manage relationships with others (supervisors and peers) who may help them to achieve their study goals. Jackson and Michelson (2015) have shown that promoting skills with doctoral students to build peer and professional networks proves to have long-term effects in enhancing the chance of them finding employment and promoting their research careers.

2.1.2 The Intra-personal Aspect

Doctoral supervision can be challenging for both doctoral candidates and their supervisors, especially for those new to the supervisor role (Doloriert, Sambrook & Stewart, 2012). These challenges often revolve around intra-personal skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-confidence and self-motivation (Wisker, 2001; Boucher & Smyth, 2004).

The importance of developing intra-personal skills as affected by emotions, however, may differ substantially across and during studies, including how positive and negative emotions are experienced and handled. Han and Xu (2021) have found, for instance, that where negative emotions prevail, active emotional regulation strategies, situated within antecedent-focused and response-focused approaches, are useful.

In addition, intra-personal skills, as related to the mental health and wellbeing of research students and supervisors, have recently attracted much attention – especially during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. One such programme in the UK (Metcalfe *et al.*, 2020) has emphasised that those with supervisory responsibilities should observe the link between mental health and academic success. Doctoral supervisors need to be sensitised towards identifying the potential triggers for students' and their own mental and emotional breakdowns. In addition, as reported by Metcalfe *et al.*, (2020), study supervisors may act as facilitators or even role models in creating and maintaining healthy studying and working environments.

The emotions of doctoral supervisors have not been under much scrutiny, but emotional stress of 'new' academics has been well explored. For instance, Hagenhauer and Volet (2014) found that early career university lecturers experience both enthusiasm and uncertainty as they enter uncharted waters. The same was found for lecturers from international backgrounds or who taught international students. Supervisors who are new to the role and have not been previously exposed to co-supervision with more experienced colleagues, may experience uncertainty about issues such as norms, rules, role expectations and values, which may all contribute to stressful or even negative emotional experiences.

2.1.3 Attending to Students' Trust, Resilience and Self-confidence

Although many factors, operating at different levels, may influence doctoral completions and success, student agency plays an important role in doctoral resilience and self-confidence (McAlpine, Castello &

Pyhältö, 2020; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). In this context, viewing oneself as having the ability to handle stressful situations related to research can suggest a stronger sense of perceived resilience. Conversely, a lower perception of resilience would suggest a greater sense of helplessness or disempowerment when encountering challenges (Kokotsaki, 2023). The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic challenged students' well-being and resilience. Students were required to cope with unexpected constraints in their daily life, study patterns and networking (Levine *et al.*, 2021). Coping strategies, such as developing agency and managing emotional stress can assist in bridging relational problems that might occur during doctoral studies (González-Ocampo & Castelló, 2018). Such strategies also help doctoral candidates to maintain interest in their studies and lower the risk of study abandonment.

2.1.4 Promoting Students' 'Thinking Outside the Box'

'Out of the box'-thinking can mean many things to many people. In doctoral studies it may mean challenging a student to develop an innovative conceptual framework informed by multiple extant theories or employing an innovative methodology never tried before. Authors such as Barth and Muehlfeld (2022) see 'out of the box'-thinking as a form of cognitive entrepreneurship or creativity to be promoted in different ways at different levels. These include educational interventions, challenging students to solve pressing or complex problems, promoting holistic thinking, alternative ways of providing feedback and facilitating self-directed learning strategies.

The concept 'out-of-box'-thinking originated alongside research into creativity by psychologist JP Guilford (1973) and is associated with exploring ideas that are creative, unusual and not controlled by rules or conventions. Good 'out-of-box'-thinking therefore is considered as contributing to solving problems that others have not been able to before and novel ideas may sometimes be regarded as controversial, impossible or even irrational. The concept has also been associated with fields such as media and technology (Rakoczy *et al.*, 2019), the learning of a new language (Clarke & Cornelissen, 2014), self-regulated learning (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2008) and types of feedback (Barth & Muehlfeld, 2022).

Glăveanu (2014) has also challenged the view that creative 'out-of-box'-thinking comes only from within. He argues that creativity in many instances exists 'outside' the individual mind in that such thinking is extended by means of social and other actions. Glăveanu thus coined the term 'distributed creativity', considering three main dimensions, namely sociality, materiality and temporality. This view largely revolutionised observing and developing creativity.

For supervisors to challenge doctoral candidates to 'think out of the box' may imply elements of stress and emotion – often for both parties – since it could be unclear as what 'originality' may mean for candidates and supervisors alike. Interestingly, the link between stress, emotion and creativity has been highlighted from a neurological perspective by Vartanian *et al.* (2020). These authors suggest that neurological research can help to explain why, under certain circumstances, creativity is negatively impacted upon by stress, especially if such stress may be acute and chronic.

2.1.5 Mediating Power Relations

Earlier findings by Doloriert *et al.* (2012) revealed the reality of power and emotion accompanying doctoral research and supervision. In some instances, doctoral students perceived supervisors as having less power than themselves because of the evolving depth of their own expertise and knowledge. However, lower levels of how own emotions were managed were found for doctoral students.

Both candidates and supervisors regard feedback as a positive element in the study process. What is interesting, however, is that feedback is often accompanied by high levels of perceived power and emotion. For Doloriert *et al.* (2012) this issue raises important questions as to how doctoral candidates and their supervisors deal with shifting power dynamics as studies progress, when feedback is provided or received, and in developing strategies for managing the emotional dimensions of feedback.

Recent studies indicate that both student and supervisor satisfaction correlate highly and positively with regular and direct feedback on study progress (McAlpine *et al.*, 2020). This point was also stressed by

Main (2014), pointing out that study progress and completion are enhanced by supervisors who encourage their students through timely and effective feedback.

A good PhD researcher–supervisor fit is shown to be associated with positive PhD experiences (Golde, 2005) and research students reporting more functional supervisory relationships seem less prone to power imbalances (McAlpine *et al.*, 2020). Yet, expectations shared by candidates and supervisors cannot always be assumed as crystal clear and implicit differences may lead to misunderstandings and heightened emotional challenges, often for both parties (Woolhouse, 2002).

2.2 The Approach

The study employed an inductive interpretative paradigm where categories emerge out of the data rather than specifying them in advance of the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2013) contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how supervisors navigate their role in enhancing students' social and emotional needs.

2.3 Participants

Ten doctoral supervisors (seven women and three men) from different universities in South Africa, UK, Israel and the USA participated in the study. The supervisors were randomly selected from both STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and HESS (Humanities, Economic and Social Sciences) fields and were new to the role of supervision. The supervisors were selected through convenience sampling, with some being colleagues who agreed to participate in the study. All participants supervised fewer than three doctoral students and were clearly informed of the purpose of the research. Participation was completely voluntary. Emails were sent to participants to enquire about their consent to participate in an online open-ended questionnaire. Additionally, participants who underwent face-to-face interviews provided their consent via email. In all cases, measures were taken to guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of their respective institutions.

3. DATA COLLECTION

The study utilised a combination of semi open questionnaires administered via email with seven supervisors from South Africa, and semi-structured face to face interviews conducted with three supervisors from the UK, Israel and the USA. The decision to use both questionnaires and face to face interviews was driven by logistical challenges posed by participant proximity, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The questionnaire featured inquiries aimed at eliciting comprehensive insights on topics that captured a grounded view of the experiences and dispositions of supervisors, regarding their role in entertaining social emotional dimensions of the postgraduate experience (see Appendix 1) These aspects encompassed interpersonal relationships, emotional stressors, critical thinking skills, self-confidence, and resilience. The responses generated were categorised for analysis. Face to face interviews emerged as a more effective means of generating rich experiential narratives from the supervisors.

3.1 Data Analysis and Synthesis

Inductive content analysis of the semi open questionnaire and the interview transcripts was employed (Creswell, 2013). Each response was systematically documented and organized into tables. To maintain the anonymity of respondents, we assigned pseudonyms to respondents from letter A to J. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, each researcher independently read and coded all transcripts. This step was crucial for gaining an overall understanding of the data and identifying emerging categories within each query, which constituted the primary themes. Common emergent themes were highlighted using colour-coding.

The identified categories were then compared and discussed collaboratively by the researchers to establish common grounded categories and refine them further. Through this process inter-coded agreement was achieved. It is important to acknowledge that the refinement process presented challenges at times, as certain codes could be associated with more than one category. Nevertheless, with the support of relevant literature and in-depth discussion, we confirmed and clarified the coding structure.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Supervisors' Role in Enhancing Interpersonal Skills

Evidence from the interview data shows that building interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are regarded by the participant supervisors as key factors in the process of doctoral supervision. However, there were differences in emphasis. One supervisor (B), for example, noted that the relationship as a 'special one':

'... I strongly concur that such a relationship must be forged' The nature of the teaching relationship between a teacher and a learner is by definition a special one – or should be if optimal value is to be obtained from it. That is even truer of the relationship between a supervisor and student'.

The supervisor-student relationship for B is based on mutuality of responsibilities which are crucially significant in maintaining this relationship:

'From the student's perspective an enormous amount of dedication and application is required to eventually succeed. The supervisor must be willing to spend lots of time on somebody else's work, giving proper consideration to the contents thereof and apply his/her mind in providing detailed feedback and guidance. This entails patience from the supervisor and trust from the student and if any of the aforesaid is lacking, it may necessitate the unfortunate situation where a change of supervisor is prudent'.

Some supervisors show a more personal tendency (for instance, supervisor D): *'I even thought of inviting the student to my home for a meal, but has never done this...'*

In line with D supervisor E also strongly believes in her role to maintain an open supportive relationship. Her view of an 'open' relationship is allowing space for self-expression:

'...the student / supervisor relationship is important to me, and I always attempt to build an open relationship where the student has space to self-expression'.

However, she has some reservations:

'At the same time, I strive to maintain the necessary boundaries so that the relationship has some form of 'hierarchical' structure which can be important in difficult circumstances.'

Supervisor C stresses the social aspect of the relationship and views her role as *'...making the student feel part of the research community in which the doctoral research is taking place...and preparing the student for the real world...'*

Another issue that emerged quite often was the establishment of mutual expectations, as expressed by supervisor F:

'I take care to discuss my expectations with students, as well as their expectations of me. I put a bit of extra time and effort into this when the student seems to be struggling in this area – particularly with postgraduate students who have been out of research and tertiary education for some time'.

4.2 Supervisors' Role in Dealing with Emotional Issues (mainly stressors such as, anxiety and discomfort)

Supervisors acknowledge students' emotional stressors, as G expresses: *'Life happens', 'Life is more than a PG degree. It is all interwoven', or ...the role of the supervisor must extend beyond that of an academic guide to that of a mentor...'* They sympathise with the reality faced by most post-graduate students, recalling their own experience:

'Most post-graduate students are employed on a fulltime basis and study afterhours. Part and parcel of research is second-guessing your work and wondering if you are ever going to

succeed and if the time, money and effort you sacrifice will eventually be worth your while. This almost inevitably causes anxiety in the mind of the student. This is where the role of the supervisor must extend beyond that of an academic guide to that of a mentor. The supervisor has the benefit of already being down that road and the student knows that' (Supervisor B).

Some supervisors, like respondent E, reveal uncertainty in dealing with emotional issues:

I'm careful not to judge or get too involved as I recognise that I am not an expert in this space. At a minimum I welcome students communicating such issues with me and try to direct them towards people who can help.

However, there are also some unwelcoming sentiments regarding space for emotional stressors. Supervisor H, for instance, indicated quite strongly that he does not identify with relating too much to students' emotional stressors:

I even try avoiding it, I run away from it, I am intimidated by it. I see the process of supervision as entirely professional. I always try to shift students' expressed emotions to 'professional' and 'academic'. If there is a problem, I will try to see with the candidate how to solve it, to move forward, but on a professional level. I do not 'busy' myself with emotional aspects at all'.

Similarly, supervisor I asserted that it is not his role to cater for the student's emotional stress. He tries to maintain a friendly but formal relationship. He also believes that university procedures of matching supervisor to student helps in maintaining a formal relationship:

I experienced a warm relationship and also correct or formal relationship. I never experienced an unfriendly relationship. This is because we try to match supervisor and supervisee beyond content congruence. We interview candidates and we write up a very detailed interview protocol. You can get an indication of the suitability (even personality suitability between you and the candidate)'.

He further commented that 'the doctorate' is something that the student must fulfill with enormous responsibility:

'As you know, tuition at our university is very high. Doctoral students are subsidized, and they have to work and prove their capabilities. If they don't do it they don't do their job and I take it very hard. It costs a lot of money and competition is very high and they have to take it into consideration. I certainly emphasise it to them. The doctorate, as an important process in life, has a role to sort out the suitable candidates. It is a lonely job, you have to initiate, to overcome all sorts of obstacles, it is a replica of real life. I am emphatic but I also have my boundaries'.

In the same vein, supervisor H contends that 'Doing a doctorate is hard work, it is a lonely endeavor. I think too many people embark on the journey without knowing what awaits them.... supervisors who are not capable of supervising, people who do not have the credentials or skills'.

4.3 Supervisors' Role in Building Students' Trust, Resilience and Self-confidence

All supervisors consider 'soft skills' an important part of becoming a competent researcher and believe in encouraging them to attend conferences and seminars so that they gain more confidence. '... They are key character traits students should develop...'

Positive constructive feedback was also mentioned as enhancing confidence:

'When one provides feedback, it needs to be done in a way that does not humiliate the student. A supervisor should at all times make the student intent on the inevitable challenges inherent to postgraduate studies and that the mere fact that the student got admission to enroll for postgraduate studies implies enough intellectual capacity to successfully complete his/her study (Supervisor B)'.

4.4 Supervisors' Role in Enhancing Students' Intrapersonal Skills

Views are divided regarding intrapersonal skills. Some supervisors think that they should definitely guide the student to develop these skills:

'I see my role as investing in that way to lift all aspects of the other person' (Supervisor D). 'I do think it is an area that we can potentially give input into, particularly when a student seems to be struggling with managing her time, critical thinking as well' (Supervisor F).

However, there are some reservations regarding the role of the supervisor in enhancing intrapersonal skills. Supervisor B, for example, thinks that these are skills that the student should exhibit as threshold requirements for enrollment:

'This is a tricky one. The question refers to personality traits that are almost surely set by way of nature or nurture by the time the supervisor and the student crossroads. The supervisor can once again give advice, but these are qualities the student must exhibit in persona if he/she is to succeed with their studies. The lack thereof may explain why such a relatively low percentage of students who enroll for a Master's or Doctor's degree ever complete their degree'.

In the same vein, supervisor I claims that universities should identify these qualities prior to acceptance:

'... the process of selection is also to identify this potential. The role is more to develop skills that maximize the potential of thinking skills... We also have a mid-year monitoring system where they had to prove their abilities and if they do not meet the requirements, they are suspended from the programme'.

4.5 Supervisors' Role in Enhancing 'Thinking Outside the Box'

Most participant supervisors agreed that the supervisor should encourage novel thinking at all times and be there to constrain such thinking only when they judge it to be too divergent in terms of a project's aims.

One supervisor remarked:

'There needs to be space for a certain amount of creativity while maintaining scientific convention. Our role as supervisors is in guiding the students about where and when this is appropriate' (Supervisor F).

One other supervisor (A) states that at the current point in her career she is quite selfish in that she needs to build up her research profile, thus she actively steers students into her own areas of research. Supervisor J indicated that he would grant free thinking, but under his control:

'... if the student would suggest something 'different', I would try to understand the student, to see if it has logic, I would ask questions that would help the student carry out what they want to do. I would not accept it as is, I would need to have a thorough understanding'.

4.6 Supervisors' Role in Mediating Power Relations

It seems that the issue of power relations took some of the supervisors by surprise as they did not experience it with their students. However, they describe instances which imply power relations, especially in cases of co-supervision when parties did not get along very well.

Supervisor B believes that power relations shift when the student becomes 'the expert':

'Doing a PhD is getting to know more and more about less and less! As the study progresses, the student will be dealing on an intimate level with the research he/she is conducting and will become the expert on the little part of the cosmos he/she is dealing with – by default more of an expert than the supervisor. This will eventually change the power relation because the student will in time gain enough deep knowledge on the subject matter of the research to challenge the supervisor - with authority - if varying interpretations become an issue'.

Another supervisor (E) contended that there might be inequality when the supervisor is seen as 'superior':

I think this can be an important dynamic under certain circumstances, but it is a risk as students can feel like they are being 'dominated' or over-powered by a strong and closed-minded supervisor'.

Supervisors also noted that both students and supervisors might be reluctant to share experiences beyond the technical academic dimension, often due to time pressure, role identity and the authoritative nature of supervision. It is interesting to note that most supervisors, even those with more supervisory experience, shared their own doctoral supervisory experiences. These experiences seem to have a strong impact on their beliefs regarding their role as supervisors. As Supervisor J recalls:

'I am still under the awe of my own supervisor....' The influence of my supervisor on me was very strong. Every word could either destroy or construct! At a certain stage in my doctorate, I moved to a university in the US and he didn't like it at all. He saw it as 'betrayal'. He actually reprimanded me, which gave me cold feet and my progress got completely paralysed for a whole year. I crashed emotionally and I even remember that I had tears in my eyes. Later the relationship improved, and I think he was a great supervisor after all. So, his authority was in a sense destructive and constructive'.

5. DISCUSSION

The study set out to explore perspectives of ten supervisors regarding their role in catering for their doctoral students' socio emotional needs. Research on the emotional landscape of the student-supervisor experience is understudied, although the psychosocial factors may correlate with candidates' mental health challenges and explain failure in completing doctoral programmes (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019; O'Meara, Knudsen & Jones, 2013). Mental health studies of PhD students revealed that one third of PhD students are at risk of developing psychological distress (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). The literature emphasises the complexity of the doctoral journey where students have to deal with positive and negative emotions (Cotterall, 2013), which rely heavily on the quality of supervision and the role of the supervisor in managing these emotions, by helping to develop a climate of psychological safety (Gunasekera *et al.*, 2021). However, at the same time, supervisors themselves are expected to navigate between conflicting roles, which may induce stress and the need to regulate emotions of their own (Han & Xu, 2021). Emotions are important in adult learning, and they can either impede or motivate learning (Zembylas, 2008). In doctoral studies these are 'fundamental features of well executed research' (Coffey, 1999: 158) and all doctoral students experience 'emotional swings', negative or positive (Morris, 2011).

The evidence reveals that all participant supervisors fully acknowledge the notion that interpersonal and emotional issues are key factors in the supervisory process. However, views on their role in enhancing and nurturing students' such skills and emotions, differ. Some of them regard the supervisory process as a special teacher-learner relationship, others regard supervision more as mentoring, allowing space for self-expression. It is argued that many aspects of the supervisory relationship have in common with mentoring, teaching coaching and other professional relationships (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000; Wisker, 2007; Holmes, Costa & Lopez, 2020).

Previous research also acknowledges that mentorship is part of effective supervision requiring the supervisor to develop the student into an autonomous researcher, critical thinker and innovator (Wisker, 2007). Some supervisors agree that the role of the supervisor must extend beyond that of an academic guide. This notion is consistent with arguments claiming that supervision is a blend of pedagogical and personal relationship skills (Grant, 2003) and is more of a helping relationship.

The other side of the coin is that some supervisors regard themselves as academic guides and have a purely 'professional' view on supervision. They do not deny the complex and stressful process of doing a doctorate, but their practical view is that doctoral students are chosen partly by their capabilities, which include also socio emotional skills. They consider 'doing a doctorate' 'a job', or 'work' (Taylor, 2008) and it is the student's responsibility to fulfil their role. Unlike 'the emotional supervisors', whose view is that 'life is more than a Post Graduate degree' and thus sympathise with emotional stressors,

the 'practical' supervisors see the process of doing a doctorate as a 'replica of real life' where one has to cope with challenges.

This view is also referred to by supervisors when the issue of intrapersonal skills such as guidance of problem solving, critical thinking and self-regulation are discussed. At this point there are more reservations and both groups 'the practical' and 'the emotional' supervisors agree that there are threshold requirements for enrolment and 'these are qualities the student must exhibit in persona if they are to succeed in their studies'. Universities must identify such qualities prior to acceptance. Overall, Deane & Peterson (2011) found that the more task-related help and personal support research students receive, the more positively they evaluate their supervision. This notion echoes the different dimensions of doctoral supervision and the dichotomy between doctoral supervision as purely academic or involving pastoral support (Lee, 2008; Doloriert *et al.*, 2012).

The degree to which supervisors encourage such students to think and act autonomously or 'outside the box' was not uniquely associated with their supervisory satisfaction but indicated greater research self-efficacy. A combination of high levels of autonomy and support was associated with the highest levels of research self-efficacy. When greater levels of personal support were accompanied by low levels of allowing for research autonomy, students reported lower research self-efficacy. This accords with the notions of student agency which play an important role in doctoral resilience and self-confidence (McAlpine *et al.*, 2020, McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). It reinforces the evidence of supervisors' support of 'thinking outside the box' yet, within some boundaries of their own research interests or sense of 'authority'.

It is claimed that supervision is an authoritative context which can sometimes, even subconsciously, be misused and impede positive supervisory relationships (Lee, 2008). This is also echoed in the evidence when supervisors note that students eventually '*become the expert on the little part of the cosmos he/she is dealing with*', and this might create an unequal relationship unwelcomed by the supervisor. Also, Supervisors' styles of supervision are influenced by the way they themselves were supervised (Lee, 2008; Fillery-Travis *et al.*, 2017), as one of the supervisors reflects: '*authority was constructive and destructive at the same time*'. Supervisors may also have a more laissez-faire approach to supervision, preferring to give their supervisees more autonomy in their work, rather than providing direct support. This may be misunderstood by the supervisee as being 'less helpful'.

A study by Doloriert *et al.* (2012) reported that, with respect to emotion, research students presented low on emotion management, in many cases being unaware of displaying or even experiencing their own emotions. Both students and supervisors were found to lack sensitivity to power and emotion as potentially sensitive aspects of doctoral supervision. This lack of awareness raises important issues for supervisors in meeting students' socio-emotional needs, bringing into focus how both students and supervisors are to be sensitised towards recognising and dealing with their emotions. This sensitivity includes identifying and controlling shifts in power dynamics, giving and receiving feedback, and managing evolving relationships.

Results such as these indicate that effective doctoral supervisors may better navigate their candidates' socio-emotional needs by supporting them to voice and act on their own ideas while simultaneously providing guidance on how to successfully complete research tasks. Effective study guidance, therefore, seems to involve balancing socio-emotional help and academic guidance with supporting student autonomy; also considering that supervision that leads to student satisfaction may not be what most strongly facilitate student progress. In essence, socio-emotional support that restricts the need for doctoral autonomy suggests doing more harm than good in promoting doctoral journeys.

Our research set out to explore supervisors' views on their role in enhancing students' social emotional needs. Views were divided between formal academic relationships to more sensitive relationships towards social emotional dimensions. It seems that what underlies these supervisors' beliefs is the influence of their own experiences as students, the culture of the university they are employed by, lack of cultural sensitivity to supervisees from different cultural backgrounds (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2009), or lack of knowledge and skill to deal with the social emotional skills. There is no prescribed formal preparation for 'becoming a supervisor', or training of the pedagogy of supervision. Most supervisors learn how to supervise on the job (Maritz & Prinsloo, 2015). It is also claimed that supervisors enter the field with assumptions about the nature, values and beliefs about research and supervision. They bring their past into the present and it affects their practice.

Moreover, the domain of doctoral supervision is in a sense, a 'secret garden', a private space, with little external scrutiny or collaboration (Park, 2007; Leshem, 2013) to the extent that colleagues do not really know what the others are doing (Grant & Manathunga, 2011). The Covid-19 crisis has been 'a strong stress test for education' (OECD, 2020:1) and brought to the forefront the aspect of 'well-being' in the doctoral journey. Studies suggest that supervisory interaction was challenged by the pandemic, resulting in a decline in supervisors' and supervisees' well-being (Pyhältö, 2022). Some universities have mandatory training for supervisors about effective supervisory practices, but less so, if at all, on how to deal with social emotional issues, which is a common practice in many of the helping professions (Richardson *et al.*, 2009; Kiley, 2011).

6. LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

We are cognisant of the small sample of our study and of the fact that policies, pressures and approaches to supervision vary across universities, and there is no uniformity in these diverse contexts, hence the role of the supervisor may also be configured differently, and expectations of competences are not homogeneous (Holmes *et al.*, 2020). Our study focused on emotional aspects of supervision as an exploratory study. Its aim was not to generalize but to identify approaches towards emotional aspects of supervision and arrive at insights that can be further investigated in other contexts. The majority of participants were female (70%), suggesting gender related variations that could have impacted the study's outcomes. Additionally, we must acknowledge that the study took place amid the Covid-19 pandemic, a period marked by social and emotional challenges for both supervisors and students.

Thus, conducting further research across various contexts and with diverse populations on the emotional dimension of supervision can enhance our understanding of the relational aspects inherent in supervision.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

Our research underscores the practical importance of providing sufficient training and support for PhD supervisors (also see Lategan, Nel & Bitzer, 2023), particularly those who are new to the supervisory roles. Training and professional support will equip potential supervisors with the necessary skills to effectively address the social and emotional needs of their doctoral students. In turn, such actions and support could have a substantial impact on the quality of the supervisory relationship (Buirski, 2020), benefiting the broader research community, especially newly appointed supervisors.

In the final analysis, the present study's findings carry significant implications for enhancing the capacity of doctoral supervisors and the emotional well-being of their students. They also point to potential areas for improvement and future research - hopefully to the practical benefit of current and future doctoral supervisors and students.

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APPENDIX 1

Dear Colleague

One of your professional aims is probably to guide senior degree students to study success. However, we would be very interested in your experiences and views regarding the *socio-emotional aspects of research supervision*. Socio-emotional aspects are often associated with students' self-efficacy, grit, self-control, perseverance, social competence, personal problem solving, goal setting, autonomy, and others. How do supervisors see such social-emotional skills as being possible to develop with postgraduate students? Have you observed any cases as to where and how such skills (or at least some of them) did develop or not?

These observations could be experiences from you being a doctoral student yourself, your own current supervision practices or merely how you see your current or future role as research supervisor. Against this background we would appreciate a few minutes of your time to consider and respond to the questions below.

[Note: Whether you respond with a 'yes/no/uncertain' (to some questions), please provide some explanatory comments and/or experiential detail in each case.]

Question 1	Do you see yourself as having a role in building interpersonal relationships (including effective interpersonal communication skills) between you and the students you supervise?	Yes	No	Uncertain
Comments/experience:				
Question 2	Do you see yourself as having a role in dealing with emotional issues (such as anxiety and discomfort, for instance) that students may present with?	Yes	No	Uncertain
Comments/experience:				
Question 3	Do you see yourself as having a role in building your students' trust, resilience and self-confidence?	Yes	No	Uncertain
Comments/experience:				
Question 4	Do you see yourself as having a role in enhancing students' intrapersonal skills (such as problem-solving, critical thinking and self-regulation)?	Yes	No	Uncertain
Comments/experience:				
Question 5	In your opinion, do you consider the supervision process entailing inequalities in power relations?	Yes	No	Uncertain
Comments/experience:				
Question 6	How much space should supervisors allow students for 'thinking outside of the box' (if at all)?			
Your opinion:				
Question 7	Many senior degree students experience what has been described as a 'rollercoaster of confidence and emotions'; Why then, in your opinion, do we hear so little about the emotional dimensions of the postgraduate experience?			
Your opinion:				
Question 8	What suitable metaphor can you associate with in describing the current or future relationship between you and the students you supervise (or, alternatively, between you and your past supervisor)?			
Your opinion:				