Reflections on supervision and culture: What difference does difference make?

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I’m in a nostalgic mood lately – having only just retired but still working with supervisees and doing research – so in preparation for this commentary I went back and read most of my own writings on graduate education. I say ‘most’ because my PhD was about graduate students, as was one article based on it, and I did not especially want to revisit the scene of that particular crime. In those days, the late 60s/early 70s, my interest was in why women were less ambitious than men for an academic career. Shortly after, along with other feminists, I learned to rephrase that question and ask what there was about higher education that was hostile or off-putting to women. Later, still, there was the challenge of ‘which women?’.

In 1969, though, when I was forming my dissertation committee, the search was on for ‘any’ women. Inspired by the women’s movement, I looked high and wide for ‘a woman’ member. I was studying sociology of education at an elite university in the US, advised, as was the norm, by a male supervisor, and while I spotted a few women on the faculty, they were temporary appointees of one type or another. I managed to add a woman to my committee only by going outside my field.

PhD unfinished, I started my first ‘permanent’ academic job at the School of Education, University of Bristol, in 1972. Chapters had to be sent to my supervisor ‘by sea’ (no email in those days) and comments, if they came back at all, were of the order ‘looks OK’. I worked at Bristol until 1990. In those years, few of us had more than two or three doctoral students at a time to supervise, and we struggled, even then, to figure out how to do this work that was peripheral to the main business of our School, yet often strangely taxing.

Flash forward to the second half of my career, in Canada at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. Supervision is important, though optional, distributed unequally and uncredited as workload. At times, some of my colleagues have had 15 or 20 supervisions and an equal number of thesis committee memberships (where we play a less dominant, but still important supporting role). The prevailing ethos means that we expect nearly all of our students to complete (eventually) and we try hard to make that happen. Many of us pore over chapter after chapter of our students’ work, editing, commenting, reading and re-reading drafts. We set up ‘thesis support groups’ where students can come

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together with others once a month or so and talk about their work. Simultaneously, we complain to each other that the students are so needy and take so long.

What accounts for the rise of a caring supervisory ethos? A changing gender balance might make some contribution. In the early 1970s, women were only 10% of academic staff in Britain (University Grants Committee, 1975) and 13% in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1972). Men dominated, numerically and culturally, even in faculties of education. Recent Canadian statistics (2007-08) show women making up 34.3% of full-time faculty and 47% of doctoral students overall, and in education, 51% and 69% respectively (Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), 2010). Women academics in faculties of education interviewed for another study complained they were overwhelmed by women students seeking women faculty to nurture and mentor them (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996). And do students feel cared for? Not necessarily, suggest the data from my graduate student research in Canada. Both in the focus group I reported on in Acker (2001) and in interviews with 31 doctoral students (Acker & Haque, 2010), many students were uncertain about how to navigate through the complex requirements for the doctorate (see Gardner, 2007) and suspicious that faculty were rationing access to crucial information and mentorship.

I could go on, but it is past time to make connections to the special issue that is the subject of this commentary. I have four questions for these authors (and readers).

First, what is supervision? Most of the articles focus on supervision, done in a variety of contexts and taking place across cultural divides. Evans and Liou and Singh write about the doctoral program more than supervision per se, while Grant and McKinley and Manathunga zero in on the act of supervision, and Barker interviews students and supervisors about their views on the impact of race. Barker could be paired with Grant and McKinley in that each paper is about cultural or racial divisions within a country, while the other three papers are about supervisors and students who come from different countries (with the exception of one of Manathunga’s examples).

Several of the authors note that there is a difference between supervision in the Australia/New Zealand context, which follows the British model of the ‘research student’ who manages to begin his/her research immediately and independently apart from consultations with a supervisor, and what is referred by these authors as the US model or tradition (which Barker calls ‘unique’) in which there are structured programs of coursework and examinations prior to dissertation research. I must note here that Canada also has this model, although there are some differences from ‘typical’ US format as well as variation from institution to institution and among disciplines.

Across countries, though, I would venture that the process of ‘supervision’ is much the same, even if embedded in a different program style. But I ask: Who gets to be a supervisor? How? Is there a choice? How many students do academics usually supervise? What are the benefits and drawbacks of being a supervisor? Are any of these matters different when students come from minority groups or other countries? Are there any institutional incentives or supports for supervising in such cases (or at all)? Do practices vary across institutions and university types?

Some of the articles touch on related issues. Evans and Liou make it clear that encouraging international students to study in Australia is an ‘institutional imperative’, as is the need for teaching staff in higher education in Taiwan to
acquire a higher degree qualification, often from abroad. It is well known that Australian universities have gone in heavily for international student recruitment as a way to cope with insufficient budgets. Fears of declining foreign student enrolment and its consequences have been featured in the press (Maslen, 2011). Grant and McKinley raise the question of ‘risk’ for supervisors. All the supervisors they quote are women – and it is interesting that they express such strong desires to be supportive to their students. At the same time, supervising this group is said to be ‘risky’, at least for Māori supervisors and less clearly for the others. The Māori supervisors risk overload and being pushed to the limits of their expertise. The point is very similar to the concept of ‘cultural taxation’ (Padilla, 1994; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996), which refers to the way in which academics from under-represented ethnocultural groups are in demand to work with and mentor vast numbers of minority students, thereby making it more difficult for them to fill other expectations such as research productivity. In general, I would say that the impact of supervising on supervisors is still under-studied in the doctoral education literature.

Second, what are the implications of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ when applied to the supervisory dyad? From my own ruminations, I would raise questions of whether any supervisory dyad is actually composed of individuals who are ‘the same’. There are so many ways in which to be different! A 1990-91 study of supervisors and supervisees in Education and Psychology in three British universities (Acker, Transken, Hill, & Black, 1994a; Acker, Hill, Transken, & Black, 1994b) showed that supervisors varied considerably in their preferred ways of doing things, yet adapted their approach when they thought it was necessary. I am reminded of the anecdote in Manathunga’s paper where the supervisor changed his style to what he thought on the basis of a Korean supervisee was appropriate for international students, only to be much too directive for a student from Mexico. Our research suggested that students, too, have different approaches, and we gave labels to some ‘types’ we identified (Acker et al., 1994b). The ‘rugged individualists’ were happy working on their own; the ‘academics’ were looking towards a career in higher education; the ‘supported’ (not many) had extremely high levels of help from supervisors; the ‘taking charge’ told their supervisors what they would do and not do; while the ‘buffeted about’ – an unfortunately large number, mostly in Education where a number of students had a year’s secondment from teaching to start the degree but then returned to the job – seemed at the mercy of forces beyond their control. The combinations and permutations of styles and preferences of supervisors and supervisees were beyond the focus of the study but they must have been myriad.

In that study we aimed for as diverse a sample of students as we could get, including men and women, older and younger, domestic and international, part- and full-time students. I think we were on the cusp of understanding the diversity that is now widely acknowledged and highlighted in the special issue as a factor in supervision. The age range of the students was 22 to 67! Age was often a source of worry for the students – those in their 40s, let alone their 50s, worried that they were too old to be taken seriously as would-be academics. Students’ registration status made a big difference in how they spoke about their research: full-timers worried about money; part-timers working outside the university were often happier but less involved in the institution; part-timers working full-time on a funded research project – often for their supervisor – seemed the worst off, as they lacked the status of the full-time academic and their degree research often disappeared...
while efforts were concentrated on ‘the project’. A focus group in Canada (Acker, 2001) added some other twists – students who lived at a distance complained that they were not integrated into departments and did not know the faculty well enough to find a supervisor, a task that students had to do themselves after a year or more of coursework. Ethnicity and social class came up here in terms of feeling comfortable in graduate school – what, following Bourdieu (1990), we might call possessing the appropriate habitus. Some students contrasted the individual, competitive atmosphere of the graduate school to the collective, family-oriented ethos of their home background.

What none of these projects did was to label the interaction of student and supervisor as ‘across cultures’, although as I have suggested above, virtually everyone could in some fashion claim to be working across some kind of identity difference. In my Canadian, urban, equity-focused department, many, perhaps the majority, of graduate students are ‘people of colour’. But they are no longer arrayed against a set of White, male faculty members. As of the 1st of July, 2011 (after the retirements of two White women, including myself), the department was left with 12 full-time faculty members: 6 women and 6 men. Two of the women were non-White, four White. Four of the men were non-White and two White. (I have included Aboriginal under ‘non-White’.) We can mix things up still further. Some faculty are first-language French, many come from other countries originally, some are gay or lesbian, some Jewish, some have a disability. To some extent there is a sorting process going on which would be predicted from some of the special issue papers: students seek out faculty ‘like them’ in at least some regards. It is harder for us to think in broad categories like ‘Black’ and ‘White’ (Barker) or Māori and Pākehā (Grant and McKinley) or Australian and Taiwanese or Chinese (Evans and Liou, Singh). Many students from Toronto epitomise diversity – with backgrounds that mix several ethnicities and nationalities. Nevertheless, when I think about my students of the past few years (masters and doctoral, supervisions or committee memberships), I see that most are White women, plus a few non-White women. What jumps to mind when I consider factors that have slowed them down is having a child, financial needs (often resulting in working at several part-time jobs) and, for some, full-time work. Perhaps the writers on supervision have entirely missed the having a child issue! In my opinion, these students are being very sensible in their timing, as early academic careers and children are an even more difficult mixture, and the biological clock is ticking. Our doctoral students generally begin with a master’s degree and, if full-time, have six years in which to complete their research, with several possibilities of further extensions.

What I am suggesting is that we need to consider ‘intersectionality’, as difficult as it is (McCall, 2005; Søndergaard, 2005), and somehow take account of the many identities that both students and supervisors can lay claim to. There are hints of this concept in the articles, though the term itself is not used. Going in a similar direction, Manathunga writes: ‘We do not leave our identities as raced, classed and gendered bodies outside the door when we engage in supervision: instead our personal histories, experiences, cultural and class backgrounds and social, cultural and national locations remain present (some might say omnipresent). Culture, politics and history matter in supervision’. As another example, Grant and McKinley comment that many Māori supervisees are in the field of education and are often older women. They acknowledge the diversity even in this apparently homogeneous group. ‘Gender’ is mentioned in most of the articles, but is not a prime consideration. But should it be?
As Crossouard (2011) found for the viva voce (oral examination), are there unacknowledged gendered dimensions of ‘doing supervision’?

In foregrounding cultural difference, are we missing anything else? How do we avoid the occasional essentialism of referring to ‘the students’ and ‘the supervisors’ as well as the unintentional implication of homogeneity within each group? In attempting to write about the variations in origin and outlook of various groups, writers face a tension that arises in many discussions of identity. I found Henry and Tator’s (2009) book on racism in the Canadian academy helpful in describing a ‘culture of Whiteness’. These authors depart from some conceptualizations of Whiteness as attached to individuals and instead present a viewpoint more lodged in the social setting, arguing that ‘Whiteness is not a monolithic status; rather it is fluid, situational, and sometimes related to its local geographical context’ (p. 26). In other words, we need to find ways to balance discussions of what happens when individuals from particular places or backgrounds come together with an understanding that the cultures and institutions they are working within also contain shaping influences.

Certainly, the chapters in this collection move us forward on the topic of supervisors and students who differ from each other in some culturally meaningful way. Manathunga gives vignettes that show the fine detail of the understandings and misunderstandings that take place. Her research is unusual in its direct concentration on supervisors and supervisees who work together, as well as including other features such as the inclusion of supervisors who themselves are from other nations, and the subject of Engineering which contrasts in many ways with the arts and social sciences that many others study. Evans and Liou describe how ‘waypoints’ were created for a group of Taiwanese students in Australia (e.g. occasional seminars, summer school, a colloquium) to reduce anxiety and counter expectations that there might be a structured program on American (i.e. North American) lines. They argue that several of the innovations took some of the power of the supervisor away, but do not describe actual supervision.

Singh makes a strong and convincing argument that it is possible for Anglophone academics in Australia to work with Chinese research students in a way that does not assume a priori that the Chinese students will be deficient and in fact goes further in maximizing the chances for those students to draw on ‘theoretical tools’ from China. The students all seem to be attached to a teacher education program that focuses on Chinese language teaching in Australian schools and it seems that their research is related to that program. I would like to have known more about how the master’s and doctoral students fit into a teacher education program, whether they all do research on Australia instead of their home countries, who does the supervision and what happens in those interactions, and how and why students ended up analyzing the Australian policy of ranking journals (now apparently abandoned) as part of the Excellence in Research for Australia program. While it is clear from several examples that students use Chinese theoretical tools, it would seem that they also have to learn a lot about the Australian scene and about theoretical tools used in Australia in order to mount the critiques mentioned in the article.

Third, to what extent do context and structure enter into supervision? The efforts to contrast (North) American and British-based doctoral education are related to this question, as is the ‘institutional imperative’ issue. I would like to have seen more information on higher education policy in Australia and New Zealand. These policies seem to change frequently and have altered the landscape of academe in
these countries in major ways. Barker does a nice job of sketching in the racial climate in the American South, implying that whatever students and supervisors think and do is inflected by history. Manathunga also stresses historical impact, extending the idea to incorporate post-colonial theories: ‘Each student and supervisor will have complex and often contradictory positioning in relation to that history of colonisation’.

Fourth, are there issues of ethics or positionality to be found in the research methods used by these authors? What do we need to know about ‘the researcher’ in understanding these chapters? Manathunga places herself by ethnicity (Irish-Australian), and Liou is clearly Taiwanese, but the other authors do not declare their ethnicity nor for that matter their gender (Grant and McKinley describe their five-person research team, but not themselves). Even if one didn’t know that a particular name is more likely to be used for a male or female, there are generally clues, such as ‘his colleagues’ for Evans and ‘her peers’ for Liou.

I spent a few minutes googling the various authors to see what else I could find out about them. To judge from his website picture, Barker is an African-American male. He interviewed White faculty advisors (supervisors) and Black doctoral students in a predominantly White, research intensive university in the Southern USA. Like Manathunga, he interviewed pairs, noting that both faculty and student participants gave permission for the other one to be interviewed. I wondered whether there were still any lurking ethical or trust issues here – for example, how open could a student be when his or her advisor is also in the study? Barker states that he used a particular framework that allowed him to consider his own racial experiences in relation to participants – but he does not tell us anything about that framework or his own position. His key results include the importance of the Southern US context, the agreement that Black students need some exposure to others of the same race and, if possible, same sex as mentors, and a discrepancy over whether being Black was a liability or an advantage. The students all described the disadvantages – poignant struggles with managing negative experiences, feeling the need to overachieve, operating in a White environment – while faculty described both disadvantages and advantages, the latter related to some assumed additional chance of getting fellowships or jobs that might accrue. I am intrigued by that finding. Barker gives several possible interpretations, none of which is very flattering to the White supervisors. I would also like to know whether there is any chance that the White participants modified their responses to a Black interviewer. Perhaps trying to avoid being seen to equate ‘Black’ with ‘liability’, might they have struggled to come up with what they imagined was a positive side to their responses?

Taken as a whole, this provocative collection tells us much about supervision pedagogy and its varied cultural contexts. All chapters contain important insights. It was a pleasure to reflect upon the contents and issues.

As I wrap up this commentary, a big package from one of my doctoral students arrives. I’m happy, as I know it is the final version of the thesis, to be examined shortly by the thesis committee plus another University of Toronto academic and an external appraiser from a different university. But then I see that she has double-sided the pages, with no binding, despite my asking for a plastic binding. For a moment I feel a rush of anger – anger at the need to keep all the pages in order while switching from front to back on each page, anger at my needs not being recognised, anger that it has taken her so many years to complete. Are there any lessons in this special issue that will help me? There are certainly ways in which
the student and I differ, but they are too idiosyncratic to make us a case for supervision across culture, unless we extend the idea to include a ‘supervisor’ and ‘student’ culture, based on their different positionalities. Then, as usual, my anger recedes. Like the women faculty interviewed by Acker and Feuerverger (1996), I am ‘doing good and feeling bad’. Perhaps the anecdote adds a small additional note of urgency to my arguments about needing more focus on supervisors per se or reminds us to interrogate the emotional and gendered aspects of the process (Crossouard, 2011) so readily forgotten these days.

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References

