Managing criticism in Ph.D. supervision: a qualitative case study

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This article is part of a larger study which presents findings from an in-depth longitudinal case study of a student’s Ph.D. journey. It shows how criticism is produced and managed in the supervisory relationship. As well as an overview of types of criticism produced across a range of supervisory interactions, the article presents a micro-analysis of two recorded interactions between a supervisor and a Ph.D. student. Moments of interactional difficulty, disagreement and the strategic abandonment of conflict-producing dialogue are described. Through the strategies of foreshadowing, advice-giving, repair, humour and politeness, a symbiotic and cordial relationship is collaboratively developed and sustained. The effective management of criticism is a joint activity that underlies the capacity for supervision to be educationally effective. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of training programmes in supervisory skills in higher education, as well as advising students on how to get the most out of supervisors.

Introduction

We discussed S’s literature review, on which a great deal of work has been done. I gave S written comments on this and told her of my concerns that at present this would not reach the standard required for an M.Phil. or Ph.D. (Year 1 Supervisor’s report)

We discussed data analysis today. Much of value, but a need to be more rigorous in restricting claims to available evidence. (Year 3 Supervisor’s report)

S’s writing up of data analysis is progressing well, and she has an interesting argument to make. She is well on course for completion of a thesis. (Year 5 Supervisor’s report)

Examiners: ‘Congratulations, S. It is a very good thesis … Dr Li, you can now celebrate and sleep well tonight. Once again, congratulations and well done!’ (Ph.D. viva)

The excerpts above represent critical junctures in a long (1997–2002), but eventually successful, Ph.D. journey in which we participated as supervisor (CS) and student

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We found that achieving a Ph.D. can be a lengthy and complicated process which demands competence, commitment, time, energy and emotion from both parties.

This article presents part of a larger project analysing the production of a Ph.D. in social sciences. Here we examine how both participants collaborated to manage criticism and disagreement, and maintain a cooperative educational and academic relationship. We hope that this account will show the potential contribution of detailed observational research to understanding supervisory relationships in higher education.

The supervisor–student relationship in Ph.D. work

Successful completion of a Ph.D. depends on the quality of supervision and the interaction within it between supervisors and students (Moses, 1985; Phillips & Pugh, 1987; Salmon, 1992; Denicolo & Pope, 1994; Grant & Graham, 1994; Hill et al., 1994; Delamont et al., 2000). But the Ph.D. journey is often characterised by emotional ups and downs, uncertainty, misunderstandings, disappointment, frustration, triumphs and rewards (Cargill, 2000; Wright & Cochrane, 2000): Lee and Williams describe it as ‘strewn with suffering’ (1999, p. 13).

Problems in Ph.D. supervisions have been described in a number of studies. For example, poor communication with supervisors has been blamed for collapses in cordiality and non-completion of Ph.D.s (Blanton, 1983; Salmon, 1992; Aspland & O’Donoghue, 1994; Grant & Graham, 1994; Phillips, 1994a; Delamont et al., 2000). Aspland and O’Donoghue (1994) observe that language barriers, and a lack of culturally specific knowledge about the intellectual demands of a Ph.D., can hamper effective communication between international students and their supervisors. Students interviewed by Salmon (1992) reported examples of disrespect for their work by supervisors. Excessive criticism from supervisors has been blamed for feelings of inadequacy, loss of confidence and non-completion of Ph.D.s (Phillips & Pugh, 1987; McMichael, 1992; Wajnryb, 1993; Burgess et al., 1994; Grant & Graham, 1994; Hockey, 1994; Wright, 2003). Yet, constructive criticism is necessary if good work is to be produced, since this assists students in thinking analytically and moving on in their development (Phillips & Pugh, 1987; Burgess et al., 1994).

A number of studies have suggested that supervision can be a context for the display of unequal power relations, particularly in relation to gender (Phillips & Pugh, 1987; Phillips, 1994b; Conrad, 1994; Grant & Graham, 1994; Hammick & Acker, 1998; Johnson et al., 2000). For example, Hammick and Acker (1998) claim to have found some differences between male supervisors and female students, with men more directive and less involved, women very personally involved and emotional. Phillips and Pugh (1987) report that some female students say that they find some male supervisors are too scared to criticise a female student, for fear of an emotional reaction. Grant and Graham (1994), taking a Foucauldian analysis of power, suggest that power exists in all individuals and, in the context of supervision, that the student contributes in co-creating power relations with supervisors. Yet none of these authors
substantiate their claims with evidence derived from direct observation of what goes on in actual supervisions.

It is clear that Ph.D. supervision is a shared emotional, intellectual and learning journey involving mutual expectations and responsibilities (Denicolo & Pope, 1994; Aspland & O’Donoghue, 1994; Wright, 2003, McCormack, 2004, Wisker, 2005). Grant and Graham (1994) are, therefore, right to say that the exercise of power is reciprocal. In relation to the management of criticism, several authors (Phillips & Pugh, 1987; Phillips, 1994a; Cryer, 1996; Delamont et al., 2000) point out that students have an important part to play in managing critical feedback, and these authors sometimes offer generalised advice on how students can respond to criticism. Cryer (1996), for example, says that, while students should not feel they have to agree with everything, they ought to hide feelings of embarrassment or anger, suppress the desire to justify the criticised work immediately, and be grateful for their supervisors’ criticisms.

Texts offering advice to supervisors and students seem often to be based as much on authors’ personal experiences and opinions as on research evidence. For example, Knowles (1999) presents views about how to deliver written comments, but bases her advice on personal opinions rather than any analysis of what supervisors actually write. Such research evidence about Ph.D. supervisions as does exist commonly relies heavily on interview data or questionnaire surveys (Delamont et al., 2000; Marland & Lyttle, 2003; Hyatt, 2005; Wisker, 2005). Relying on self reports of behaviour is clearly open to recall bias of various sorts, and the rarity of observational studies of supervisions is regretted by Delamont et al. (2000), who state:

> there is … a continuing lack of observational data on actual conduct of the most private supervisory relationships. The data that are available, and that have been reported in recent years, consist almost exclusively of accounts, collected under the auspices of qualitative interview studies. (p. 134)

This view is supported in more general terms by Johnson et al. (2000), who indicate that ‘postgraduate supervision—and more generally the pedagogic practices of the PhD—has largely remained unscrutinised and unquestioned’ (p. 135). Acker et al. (1994) point out that ‘thesis supervision has been little studied’ (p. 483), but go on, nevertheless, to propose generalised models for understanding the supervisory relationship.

We have identified just three studies involving analysis of audiotapes of supervisor–student dialogues (McMichael, 1992; Cargill, 2000; Wisker et al., 2003). McMichael (1992) briefly reports on a single session, describing a breakdown in communication caused by a domineering style offering little opportunity for student response. Wisker et al. (2003) followed a cohort of Israeli Ph.D. students, describing broad types of interaction, including summarising, supporting, eliciting, clarifying, confronting and tension-relieving.

In our view the most rigorously conducted observational study in this field is that of Cargill (2000), who presents a detailed conversation analytic account of transcripts of interactions between two supervisor–student pairs in agricultural science. This
author documents quite precisely the excessive deference that can obstruct clear communication when there are cultural and linguistic differences between students and supervisors, favouring the supervisor’s language and culture. Cargill also reports briefly on the successful use of these transcripts in workshops for supervisors and students, suggesting that this method possesses considerable potential for helping raise awareness of interactional difficulties and potential solutions to these. We believe there is considerable potential for extending this kind of work, so that supervisory interactions in different disciplinary contexts become better understood. Specifically, in the present article we present an analysis of supervision in social science. We aim to understand strategies for delivering and managing criticism and disagreement in supervisory interactions, in which we include both verbal and written communications.

Methods

This article reports an intensive analysis of a longitudinal case study documenting a student’s Ph.D. journey in a UK university department of sociology during 1997–2002. The participants were the authors of this article. The case-study design helped us investigate the supervisor–student relationship within its real-life context (Yin, 1989). We used multiple sources of evidence, which allowed us to trace the Ph.D. journey through the analysis of critical events shaping the supervisor–student relationship. Data sources include:

- 17 transcriptions of audio-taped supervisory sessions recorded at different stages of the Ph.D. journey. In these supervisions, which usually lasted between one and two hours, we frequently discussed written work or issues arising in fieldwork;
- 17 written records of the main contents of supervisory sessions made by the supervisor and agreed by the student;
- written comments made by the supervisor on 40 drafts of written work;
- 5 annual progress reports written by both parties;
- 18 emails containing requests or responses to clarify issues arising from S’s written work or fieldwork;
- a research diary kept by the student documenting her perception and interpretation of events in the Ph.D. journey.

Audio-recorded data was transcribed and all sources of data were word processed or already in electronic form (e.g. emails). These electronic texts were imported into the NVIVO qualitative data management software program. Data were read separately by SL and CS, until an agreed definition of themes emerged. Examples of themes include criticism and disagreement, supervisory styles (clarifying, directing, probing, eliciting), praise and thanks, apologies, misunderstandings, advice-giving or advice delivery. We jointly coded the data according to these themes and compared instances where our coding disagreed, discussing these and resolving issues of differential interpretation. For the present article we report on data coded under the heading of criticism (which includes responses to criticism).
Having retrieved bits of data relating to criticism (there were 250 coded passages across all data sources), we then carried out a content analysis to subcategorise types of criticism. Here again, we jointly coded the data and resolved differences through discussion. Certain instances of criticism in the audiotape transcripts, chosen because they struck us initially as interesting, were then inspected more closely, and two extracts were chosen for the detailed conversation analysis shown in the second part of the results section below. The method of conversation analysis is derived from an ethnomethodological theoretical framework, and is now described in a number of introductory textbooks (for example, Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). SL’s Ph.D. thesis is an application of conversation analysis to talk recorded in health care settings (Li, 2002, 2005). CS’s methodological experience includes content analysis of verbal interactions (Seale et al., 2005).

Results

(a) Types of criticism

We identified four different types of criticism produced by the supervisor. These were direct criticism (92 instances across the whole data set), indirect criticisms (23 instances); criticism with caution inserted (66 instances) and criticism with guidance or support inserted (69 instances).

The first of these, direct criticism, was characterised by being given immediately and (when it happened in verbal interaction) without turn delays. For example, ‘your way of working out percentages is wrong’ (email message).

The second of these, indirect criticism, involved the delay of criticism within a turn or across a sequence of turns when it happened in verbal interaction. It was also sometimes foreshadowed by ‘pre-emptive strikes’, such as an episode of praise. For example: ‘you’ve got some good materials ... but you tend to say things that are not necessarily in the data’ (Supervision session).

The third of these, criticism with caution inserted, is exemplified by ‘I think you are trying to cover a huge amount’ (Supervision session), or through checking with a question reversed: ‘this is not the case, is it?’

The fourth of these, criticism with guidance or support inserted, involved the insertion of episodes of encouragement, praise, politeness markers (for example, apologies) or assertions of helpfulness (all categorised as ‘support’), or of offers of alternative directions (categorised as ‘guidance’). Examples include:

_There is a lot of good stuff in this chapter. Sometimes it repeats itself, and some of the more ambitious arguments don’t work for me, but broadly speaking a lot of the points were convincing and well supported._ (Written comment on script)

_Forgive me saying this, but this seems a bit obvious._ (Written comment on script)

C: I think you may be covering too many themes all at once at present. _Slow down and focus in detail_ on just a single one like ‘nice staff’ for example. (Supervision session)

In the following section we analyse in detail two verbal interactions in supervision sessions because they demonstrate ways in which criticism is sometimes foreshadowed,
emerges and is managed collaboratively. First, we analyse an episode of indirect criticism, then an instance of criticism where agreement was not reached and the discussion was effectively (and collaboratively) abandoned, providing an example of Merrison’s (2004) ‘sensitive abandonment’.

(b) Managing indirect criticism

In this section we show how mutual alignment to the maintenance of a polite, cooperative relationship is accomplished by both parties, through analysis of Extract A, taken from a supervision session occurring in June 1999.

Extract A (figures in brackets indicate pauses in seconds)

14 C: you are basically trying to compare
15 S: yeah
16 C: hospices and hospital (0.3) and you’ve got some interesting material (0.4) and some of the stuff
17 I mean you’ve got some interesting ideas some of the ideas are quite well supported
18 S: uhm
19 C: in the data so (0.3) there’s potential there
20 S: uhm
21 C: to produce something (0.3) useful
22 S: uhm
23 C: erm (0.3) so there’s some good stuff in there you you’re trying to do this comparison on the
24 basis of very few cases
25 S: yes yeah
26 C: you know and (0.4) its rather over-ambitious given that you don’t have very much material
27 S: yeah I I thought I was erm you asked me to just look at a smaller bits of data so chose a
28 smallest bit to see how I get on with the comparative
29 C: right
30 S: analysis and I wasn’t intending to use the whole thing
31 C: (0.4) well (0.3) ok its just exploratory
32 S: yeah yeah
33 C: anyway it’s only if you wanted to (0.2) maintain there are a big difference between hospices and
34 hospitals you need a lot more material
35 S: yeah
36 C: I think my advice to you to focus on smallest bits whilst you got to get that right
37 S: yes
38 C: before you (0.3) analyse (0.3) large amount
39 S: yes that’s what I was
40 C: erm so (0.3) you know those two things go against each other here I mean
41 S: right
42 C: you know it is wise to concentrate on just a small bits
43 S: yes
44 C: while sustaining
45 S: yeah yeah
C: the status by small bits of data cos then you can start to do the same with bigger amount of data
S: yeah yeah
C: so as overall thesis you would need more data
S: yes I know that yes
C: I mean go for it that’s great, so maybe that ( ) the second thing would be to say you know
your own interpretations are well-supported
S: yes
C: and convincing
S: yes
C: but others not so
S: right
C: I’ve gone over it
S: ok alright
C: and that and you’re sometimes wanting to see things in the material
S: that’s very fair

C has been going through S’s written work, reporting her early efforts at data analysis (S was in her second year of Ph.D. studies when this interaction took place). The extract reveals a gradual production of shared alignment between C and S, ending (after many turns) with the production of a reward by S at line 60. This occurs in five distinct stages as follows:

1. setting the scene and establishing common ground (lines 14–15);
2. delivering praise as a foreshadowing device (lines 16–25);
3. delivering criticism (line 26);
4. repair work and tactical change (lines 33–36);
5. production of shared alignment and a reward (lines 37–60).

To begin our analysis, we note that at line 14 the use of a second-order term, ‘you’, in C’s utterance acts as an inclusive marker (Watson, 1981) to allow both parties to attend to the business agenda set by C. Displayed in C’s utterance is his understanding and prior knowledge of what S is trying to do (lines 14 and 16). This is a precondition for social alignment. In this instance, we note from S’s minimal uptake token (Heritage & Sefi, 1992) ‘yeah’ at line 15 that C succeeds in establishing an agreed agenda for both parties. S’s minimal response ‘yeah’ and the pauses of 0.3 and 0.4 seconds in line 16 allow C to monitor them as indicative of upcoming troubles in subsequent talk. C responds to this delicate situation in his next turn by delivering praise (lines 16–17, 19, 21). However, the praise is given in a measured and restrained manner, marked by the use of ‘some’, ‘quite well’ and ‘potential’.

The delivery of measured praise at this point receives only minimal responses of ‘uhm’ from S at lines 18, 20 and 22. Heritage and Sefi (1992) have described such minimal acknowledgements as tokens of listening, of non-uptake of turns and sometimes expressions of ‘passive resistance’ (p. 399). In this instance, the utterance ‘uhm’ indicates that S is listening but passes her turn. C monitors these ‘uhms’ as potentially indicative of passive resistance. Contrary to Cargill’s (2000) observation of the students’ use of ‘uhms’ or pauses to indicate their incomprehension or respect for
supervisor authority, pauses in this instance serve to pre-empt upcoming resistance (Greatbatch, 1992; Silverman, 1997). C’s utterance ‘erm’ and the 0.3 pauses at lines 19 and 23 suggest this orientation. Here, resistance is a face-threatening act which could threaten social solidarity. How does C manage this tricky situation?

C tries to move the momentum quickly on, seen in the use of the self-repair marker ‘so’ at line 23. In this instance, ‘so’ serves as a repair and a gap-bridging device (Drew & Heritage, 1992), which helps to close the otherwise embarrassing gaps marked by ‘uhms’ and pauses in previous turns. C then immediately delivers another measured praise: ‘there’s some good stuff in there’ (line 23). Here C’s delivery of praise is followed immediately by an assertion statement: ‘you are trying to do this comparison on the basis of very few cases’ (lines 23–24). While itself being a veiled criticism, this assertion foreshadows the explicit criticism that eventually emerges at line 26, also offering a potential face-saving explanation (Merrison, 2004). The earlier deliveries of praise can now be seen as pre-emptive moves, serving as a strategy to ‘break politely into the flow of talk’ (Cargill, 2000, p. 30). It serves to foreshadow and mitigate the upcoming criticisms emerging at line 26. The delivery of praise as a strategy of foreshadowing and mitigation can also be seen at later turns (lines 50, 53), before delivering further criticisms at lines 55 and 59. How, then, does S deal with C’s criticism at line 26?

At line 26, we can see that C tries to include S in an attempt to try to get her to align with his critical assessment of her work, seen in the inclusive marker ‘you know’, but with little success. The rebuttals delivered by S at lines 27 and 30 signify instances of interactional disagreement (considered by Merrison [2004] as a transaction-threatening act). The first rebuttal by S at line 27 can be seen as her attempt to regain the floor by marking her prior knowledge and competence (‘I thought I was’). Then she immediately changes her positioning, that is from ‘I’ to ‘you’. This is interesting because the shift from ‘I’ to ‘you’ denotes a transfer of responsibility: ‘you asked me to just look at a smaller bits of data’. This positioning shift from ‘I’ to ‘you’ enables S to regain the floor and prevent loss of face. As we can see, S’s assertion generates a strong agreement from C, seen in the marked acknowledgement ‘right’. The second rebuttal at line 30: ‘I wasn’t intending to use the whole thing’, serves to display her alignment with C’s perspective: ‘you asked me to just look at smaller bits of data’. The rebuttal, therefore, serves to strengthen and secure her ground. C’s utterance at line 31 is an explicit concession, collaborating with S’s strategy to save face, enthusiastically marked at line 32 with S’s ‘yeah yeah’. One might understand this as an instance of the co-creation and co-exercise of power described by Grant and Graham (1994).

The ensuing turns show no further instances of resistance from S, in spite of further delivery of criticism by C at lines 40, 55, and 59, culminating in a maximum reward delivered by S at line 60: ‘that’s very fair’. There are also instances of marked alignment of perspectives between C and S. The critical change of atmosphere from resistance and disagreement (lines 16–30) to alignment of perspective is brought about by the repair work done at lines 31 and 33. It is also brought about by a change of tactic from that of criticism-delivery to advice-giving by C at line 36: ‘I think my advice to
you …’ At line 31, the pauses and the contrast marker ‘well’ indicate that C is monitoring S’s potential for resistance. He deals with this situation firstly with the contrast marker ‘well’, serving as a device for regaining his ground. Then he tries to align with S’s perspective by delivering an agreement marker (‘ok’). The delivery of this agreement marker helps to downgrade the tone of contradiction. Secondly, he tries to minimise S’s resistance by offering a concession: ‘it’s just exploratory’. Thirdly, he tries to repair the breakdown in the relationship by tentatively offering S options to choose what she wants to do: ‘anyway it’s only if you wanted to’. Utterances of this kind are seen by Merrison (2004) and Phillips (1994a) as sensitivity markers used to mitigate threats to face or to the interactional task. In this way, both parties are able to save face. This analysis demonstrates areas of potential communication breakdown, as well as actions taken by participants to restore good communication of the sort discussed by Phillips (1994a, p. 134).

The extract demonstrates that repair work, advice-delivery (line 36) and praise-delivery (lines 50, 51, 53) serve as tools for creating a sensitive environment for comfortable communication, in which criticism and disagreement can be done in a context of mutual respect, openness and supportive friendliness (Phillips & Pugh, 1987).

(c) Criticism leading to disagreement and abandonment

Sometimes in the supervisions disagreement and criticism led to total abandonment in terms of terminating the face-to-face interaction. Extract B shows an example of this, taken from the penultimate year of the Ph.D. experience.

Extract B

126 C: but then you would need to show how the body relates to your analysis
127 S: ok ok
128 C: but your analysis is with talk
129 S: yes but in the talk nurses talk about the body though
130 C: (2.1)
131 S: (chuckled)
132 C: let’s drop it now
133 S: (chuckled) oh well I will try to convince you (laugh) in my chapter 4

In the above extract C and S refer to an ongoing dispute about the role of ‘the body’ in S’s thesis. First, we can note the use of contrast markers ‘but’ by both C and S (lines 126, 128, 129), indicating disagreement. The long pause of 2.1 seconds at line 130 marks resistance by C to S’s suggestion at line 129, which has itself been a rejection of C’s point made at line 128. Such rejection is a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987), so C attempts to avoid this by making a plea for both parties (‘let’s’) to abandon this debate and exit this difficult situation at line 132: ‘let’s drop it now’. According to Merrison (2004), abandonment of this kind is a strategy that preserves politeness, since it involves an agreement to cease prolonging the disagreement. Merrison (2004) and Phillips (1994a) suggest further that this demonstrates sensitivity and intelligent communication by both parties in an interaction. Line 133 offers the opportunity to return to deal with the situation later on. We also note that S
respects to C at line 131 with ‘chuckles’. Laughter and chuckles can be indexes of concealment (Jefferson & Lee, 1992). S’s chuckles at line 131 serve to conceal the embarrassment of hearing her suggestion disregarded in the 2.1 second pause at line 130, pacifying the situation by demonstrating to C that she is not treating the whole situation seriously. Here an instance of ‘avoidable communication breakdown’ (Phillips, 1994a, p. 134) is co-enacted, and an instance of mutual exercise of power (Grant & Graham, 1994) is demonstrated and made visible.

Thus, there are strategies for collaboratively managing criticism and disagreement in supervisions between a supervisor and a student. These include the delivery of praise, opting for advice-giving, restorative work, humour and sensitive abandonment. They help create a relatively trouble-free environment, in which the educational activities of criticism and disagreement can proceed without threatening social solidarity. Both participants are capable of exercising power, and can be seen to work at minimising disagreement and mitigating episodes of resistance. Such strategies are important in maintaining face and in achieving mutual positive regard.

Discussion

Goffman (1967) has shown that, in general, participants in social interaction mutually engage in activities of presenting acceptable personal ‘fronts’ to one another. Thus, individuals will, most of the time, adopt norms of good manners and mutual respect by displaying sensitivity and avoiding situations or events which could cause embarrassment or loss of face. The analysis of supervisory dialogues in this article reveals that producing criticism and disagreement involves a skilful management of face and transaction-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Phillips, 1994b; Cargill, 2000; Merrison, 2004) in order to produce a successful educational relationship. These skills include:

1. using the linguistic strategies involved in achieving ‘politeness’ in general social interaction to display supportive good manners (e.g. praise and gratitude);
2. demonstrating mutual respect and sensitivity by listening for sources of embarrassment or misunderstanding (hesitations, silences or pauses), or displaying acknowledgement markers (‘uhm’, ‘yes’, ‘right’, ‘ok’, ‘sure’), or using inclusive markers such as ‘you know’, ‘you are trying to …’, ‘you’ve got’;
3. avoiding or ignoring situations or events which could cause embarrassment or loss of face (e.g. the abandonment of a controversial topic with ‘shall we leave it?’);
4. maintaining a balance of power by, for example, the supervisor unpicking questions when the student does not take up a turn at talk;
5. preceding constructive criticism with praise and encouragement and expressions of caution (e.g. ‘it seems’); and
6. replacing criticism with advice delivery (e.g. ‘perhaps you could …’ etc.).

Our earlier review of literature showed that some students experience criticisms delivered by supervisors as damaging to their self-esteem and confidence (Phillips & Pugh,
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1987; Wajryn, 1993; Burgess et al., 1994). We can attest to this: when S received a copy of the Year 1 supervisor’s report, her confidence and self-esteem reached rock bottom as her diary entry on the same day testified:

after seeing C’s comments, a total destruction on my confidence. Made me feel totally incompetent. I felt totally deflated. (Diary, 18 November 1997)

At that time S tore up the offending piece of work, which was her first literature review chapter. S was able to ‘resurface’, in her view, because she made a conscious attempt to suppress the undesirable emotional reaction and accept humiliation and challenges in the early stages of her Ph.D. (Moses, 1985; Cryer, 1996). She felt that she appreciated the gentleness of her supervisor in his sensitive delivery of criticism (Phillips, 1994a; Cargill, 2000), and she continued to work and make progress on her research project. Her supervisor, too, remembers this episode as an important early marker of S’s capacity to receive and learn from criticism, and to avoid ‘blaming the messenger’ (Moses, 1985; Cryer, 1996). He remembers being apprehensive about delivering such criticism, and being impressed with S’s resilience and cheerfulness in the face of discouraging news.

But alternative explanations of these events are possible. S’s failure to produce a credible literature review may have been due to linguistic barriers, because English was not her first language (Cargill, 2000). This might have hampered her ability to understand and interpret culturally specific knowledge which was alien to her at the time (Aspland & O’Donoghue, 1994, Cargill, 2000). It might also be true to say that S’s willingness to accept challenges may have been due to her own culturally specific values (Chinese) which place a high regard for her supervisor’s authority in intellectual expertise (Aspland & O’Donoghue, 1994). Thus, it is possible that our interactions were in part determined by intercultural factors. From our point of view, though, this feels like a rather deterministic explanation of our behaviour, which denies the felt sensation of personal agency that we experienced during these events.

Our relationship might generally have been characterised as being one of an ‘apprenticeship’, in which the apprentice moved from a position of dependence to independence (Acker et al., 1994; Aspland & O’Donoghue, 1994; Delamont et al., 1997). Although an apprenticeship model might be thought of as a one-way exercise of power, our evidence concurs with the view of Grant and Graham (1994) that it involved a mutual exercise of power. Through rebuttals, for example, S also exercised power. However, we acknowledge that different students may require different relationships and different communication styles with their supervisors (Aspland & O’Donoghue, 1994; Knowles, 1999), and that inequalities of power exist between male supervisors and female students in some contexts (Phillips, 1994b, Conrad, 1994, Johnson et al., 2000). We also accept Hill et al.’s (1994) observation that gender is an important consideration in supervisory relationships. Our findings, however, suggest that we may have had a low level of gender consciousness, rather than a perception of the ‘irrelevance of the issues’ (Hill et al., 1994, p. 60). Unequal gender relations may have been demonstrable had we had access to more conflict-producing supervisory dialogues.
Whichever set of explanations for our behaviour is preferred, in this article we have attempted to unpick the interactional skills that contributed to the achievement of a successful supervisory relationship. We have shown that managing criticism and disagreement in supervision involved contributions from both student and supervisor, so that both parties exercise communicative skills in detecting, revising, constructing and solving problems, as well as constructing competent moral identities. Skilful communication therefore involves a complicated process of what Goffman (1967) calls ‘face-work’, and we have shown how both participants successfully maintained ‘face’ in spite of criticisms, disagreements and resistance. The supervisor–student relationship is oriented towards the production of a thesis of sufficient quality, deliverable within a certain time period. It is different from an informal social interaction, yet it draws on many of the skills that are evident in the achievement of friendly sociability. In this respect it is similar to the professional–client relationship in other occupations, such as air hostesses (Hochschild, 1983) or nurses (Hunt, 1991; Jarrett, 1996; Li, 2002, 2005), being built up through an ongoing achievement of reciprocal politeness, involving mutual respect, shared obligations, shared goals and a recognition of mutual advantage. Thus it involves a symbiotic orientation towards the maintenance of a cooperative relationship.

**Implications for training**

Although our purpose in this article is not primarily to provide detailed advice on how our research materials might be used in training programmes (we do not ourselves have experience as trainers although both of us have been ‘trained’ at various times), we can offer some outline thoughts on this here. Plans to teach supervisors ‘supervisory skills’ appear often to be premised on an underlying assumption of asymmetrical interactional power in this educational relationship. This analysis demonstrates, by contrast, that a Ph.D. student’s interactional skill is also a crucial component. At the same time, our analysis reinforces the importance of supervisor training in interactional and communicative skills (Barker, 1990; Delamont et al., 2000; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Wisker et al., 2003; Wisker, 2005), and we believe research materials allowing the inspection of detailed linguistic strategies during actual supervisory encounters (spoken or written) are potentially helpful for trainers. Supervisor training using such materials might, for example, include learning how to cope with disagreement and how to give constructive feedback, by pinpointing the appropriate moments and linguistic methods for the delivery of criticism, praise, advice-delivery or sensitive abandonment of conflictual issues.

Some authors (Youngman, 1994; Hyatt, 2005) have identified a lack of suitable content for training purposes in this area. This study provides potential content for this purpose, and we hope that further observational research of this kind may assist in building up a more comprehensive body of training materials. These might include transcripts of talk, but might also include examples of written comments, whether handwritten on students’ scripts or in electronic correspondence (as is frequently the case in distance learning situations). Cargill (2000) has reported that her transcripts
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Managing criticism in Ph.D. supervision has been used to good effect as teaching resources for both students and supervisors. In student workshops, for example, she reports that selected extracts that involve communicative dilemmas in cross-cultural supervisions are displayed and read aloud. Students are then encouraged to discuss their thoughts about the intentions and interpretations that participants to the interaction might have had. This facilitates discussion of alternative strategies that students consider for use in their own meetings with supervisors.

Conclusion

In this article we have shown, through content and conversation analysis, how critical feedback can be delivered and received in a manner that contributes to an educational relationship. Following ethnomethodological precepts, we begin inductively (i.e. from the ‘bottom up’), rather than framing our analysis with a pre-existing model of supervision. Particularly in the conversation analysis, that forms the majority of our analysis, we eschew essentialist and deterministic explanations for our behaviour derived from sources outside the interaction itself (for example, ‘S is deferential because she is Chinese/female; C is directive because he is a man’), relying instead on an analysis that derives its claim to validity on a detailed understanding of turn-by-turn interaction and the self-evident interpretations made by speakers at each turn (see Peräkylä [1997] for an explanation of conversation analytic claims to validity).

We do not claim that our findings are representative of all supervisions, since they are based on a single case. We and others have made the argument that research based on observations of actual communications is in short supply in the literature on supervisory processes in higher education. We have argued that such material, appropriately presented and analysed, may add to the stock of available training materials, as well as generalisable knowledge about supervisory processes, and we have argued that more such data taken from a range of disciplines and supervisory settings needs to be represented in the literature. Our own case study, we believe, is unusual in that it is both longitudinal and covers a wide range of communication types (e.g. written comments, email, verbal interactions). Thus, the deficiencies of the data set in terms of representing a range of supervisor and student styles may be mitigated by it being comprehensive and rich. We hope that our findings will encourage other supervisors and students to record their supervisory communications and provide valuable resources for future research into the process of Ph.D. supervision.

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