Supervision as mentoring: the role of power and boundary crossing

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There is a current consensus in the literature and policy documents on postgraduate supervision that positions mentoring as the most effective supervision strategy. Authors suggest that this approach to supervision overcomes some of the problematic, hierarchical aspects embedded in supervision as a pedagogical practice. They portray supervision as an innocent and collegial pedagogy between autonomous, rational supervisors and students. However, mentoring is a powerful form of normalization and a site of governmentality. Therefore, I argue that rather than removing issues of power from the supervision relationship, describing effective supervision as mentoring only serves to mask the significant role played by power in supervision pedagogy. I have applied Devos’ investigation of mentoring to postgraduate supervision to highlight the work that mentoring does as a form of academic and disciplinary self-reproduction that can have paternalistic impulses located within it. In particular, I argue that supervisors need to be conscious of the operations of power in postgraduate supervision despite their best intentions. I have also begun to explore what implications this more nuanced understanding of supervision might have for people such as me, who are charged with the responsibility of providing academic development programs on supervision.

Many prominent authors argue that effective supervision is a form of mentoring (Pearson, 2001; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Price & Money, 2002; Wisker et al., 2003). According to this understanding of supervision pedagogy, postgraduate supervisors guide and facilitate their students’ gradual development into independent researchers through empathetic dialogue and by modelling appropriate disciplinary-based research behaviour. They socialize students into disciplinary research cultures, provide emotional support, and assist with broader career development (Pearson & Brew, 2002). In these ways, these authors suggest that positioning supervision as mentoring removes the hierarchical, problematic aspects of traditional forms of postgraduate supervision where the supervisor was the omnipresent master or guru and the student was a compliant and devoted apprentice or protégé (Frow, 1988; Giblett, 1992). They appear to suggest that being a student’s research mentor removes the operations of power from the supervision relationship.

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I argue, however, that the issue of power remains an integral part of any form of pedagogy and that portraying supervision as mentoring and therefore as an innocent, neutral practice serves only to mask the very real and inescapable role that power plays within supervision. I suggest that paternalistic impulses remain part of supervision even when it is conceived of as mentoring. Firstly, I explore some of the literature on mentoring and then on supervision as a form of mentoring. In particular, I emphasize the role of neoliberalism in giving the mentoring discourse such influence within debates about postgraduate supervision at this particular time. By neoliberalism, I am referring to the ideologically driven agendas of governments and others to create self-disciplined, competitive and individualistic workers who have the illusion of being autonomous but are actually formed to serve global economic markets (Davies, 2005). These neoliberal agendas tend to focus on the role of the rational individual and deny the subtle operations of power, desire, difference and the emotions in practices such as teaching and learning. The literature on supervision that draws upon neoliberalism positions both supervisors and students as equal, autonomous and rational adults and suggests that the operations of power no longer exist between them.

In putting forward the argument that we need to think much more critically about the role of power in mentoring our research students, I draw upon Devos’ (2004) helpful work in identifying mentoring as a ‘site of governmentality’ and in exploring how mentoring produces two contradictory subject positions for those who are being mentored. I apply these understandings of mentoring to the subjectivities or technologies of self (Foucault, 1988) that research students are required to develop as a result of supervision. Like Johnson et al. (2000), I challenge the concept that either supervisors or students are ever really ‘autonomous and rational’ beings engaged in a collegial and equal relationship (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 143). I argue that, if we accept that mentoring is a site of governmentality, then postgraduate supervision is even more so because of the additional surveillance mechanisms used by supervisors and the institutional powers and responsibilities invested in them.

In particular, I seek to track some of the operations of power inherent in supervisors’ talk about supervision. Using a combination of thematic and discourse analysis (Lynn, 1998; Meyer, 2001; Roulston, 2001), I analyse instances when some of the supervisors that I interviewed describe how they acted upon the identities of students to produce particular disciplinary-based or other self-regulating behaviours. The data I draw upon in this article include transcribed interviews with eight experienced supervisors at a research-intensive Australian university. These interviews were collected for a study about how effective supervision contributed to producing timely research student completions (Manathunga, 2005a). These supervisors were from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and genders and many of them had supervised large numbers of international as well as domestic research students.
Mentoring and postgraduate supervision

In order to explore how effective postgraduate supervision has come to be described as mentoring in government and some educational research discourses, it is necessary first to define the purpose and philosophy underpinning mentoring generally. Mentoring is represented as a productive form of professional development and pedagogy in the literature. It is often selected as a form of professional development for women. General texts on mentoring, however, acknowledge that there remains no commonly accepted definition of mentoring and no unified, clear aim for mentoring programs (Wunsch, 1994; Conway, 1998; Grant & Hope, 1999; Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002). One sufficiently broad definition of mentoring suggests that it is ‘the act of providing guidance, wisdom, knowledge, and supporting a manner in which a protégé can receive it and benefit from it’ (Slater, 1998). A number of authors have emphasized that it provides both instrumental, career-related guidance and psychosocial support to the person being mentored (O’Leary & Mitchell, 1990; Kram, in Kerka, 1998).

The philosophy and rationale behind mentoring is that the mentor is wiser and more experienced than those they mentor and can share these knowledges with their mentorees. Even this assumption, while it may be true in some cases, hints at some of the power dynamics, desired subjectivities and risks associated with this professional development strategy. Some of these issues have surfaced in what Grant and Hope (1999, p. 3) describe as the ‘growing sub-literature on failed or negative mentoring’ (O’Leary & Mitchell, 1990; Otto, 1994; Wunsch, 1994). Otto (1994, p. 18), in particular, highlights the possibilities of a ‘struggle for control’ developing between mentor and mentoree. Another level of ambiguity about mentoring is inherent in deciding upon which label to apply to s/he who is mentored. Are they mentorees or mentees or something else? This lack of comfortable language about the mentor/ment[or]ee pair reflects ambivalences and unresolved tensions about the pedagogy behind the pair. I have chosen to use the term mentoree throughout the article for consistency.

As indicated above, many authors position effective supervision as a form of mentoring (Pearson, 2001; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Price & Money, 2002; Wisker et al., 2003). According to this representation of supervision pedagogy, mentoring research students involves orchestrating their evolution into independent researchers through ‘collaboration and interaction as collegial equals’ (Wisker et al., 2003, quoted in Grant, 2004, p. 2). Supervisors acculturate their students into disciplinary research cultures, provide emotional support, and assist students to achieve their career goals (Pearson & Brew, 2002). In the interviews I conducted with eight experienced supervisors for a study of effective supervision, it was possible to identify all of these activities in their descriptions of supervision. In particular, these supervisors provided helpful descriptions of how they nurture their research students. These supervisors and I have bottled some of these strategies up and ‘sold’ them off in professional development workshops and articles (Manathunga, 2005a, b). Many supervisors have tried them out and found them useful.
There is a great deal of pleasure for the supervisors in my study and for me in sharing these effective strategies. But, if you look more closely at their interview talk, some of this mentoring is a risky business for both students and supervisors. By mentoring our students we also give ourselves permission to regulate their identities. The boundaries become blurry. In supervision as mentoring, it is generally assumed that the supervisor is wiser about research and is able to share their experience with their students. They may not necessarily be wiser about other areas of life and yet, as supervisors, we are helping students to develop disciplinary-based and other self-regulatory behaviours. We are assisting them to develop particular technologies of self (Foucault, 1988) that we need to pay greater attention to if we are to more critically understand the work that we are doing when we act as research mentors.

In particular, we need to reflect carefully upon why postgraduate supervision has been positioned as mentoring currently in government and some educational research discourses. Drawing upon the work of Davies (2005), I believe that the mentoring discourse has emerged so powerfully at this particular juncture because of the prevalence of neoliberal agendas in government and university policies and in some of the research on postgraduate supervision. Some authors like to suggest that perceiving supervision as mentoring removes the hierarchical, problematic aspects of traditional forms of supervision (Pearson, 2001; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Wisater et al., 2003) where the supervisor was accorded the august and powerful position of master or guru and the student was cast as the obedient and devoted apprentice or protégé (Frow, 1988; Giblett, 1992). In keeping with similar neoliberal discourses, these authors do not acknowledge or recognize the subtle operations of power within supervision pedagogy. Instead, they construct students and supervisors as ‘rational, autonomous’ (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 136) individuals and depict very clear professional boundaries around the work-based supervision relationship. Describing supervision as mentoring is a neoliberal attempt to smooth over the jagged edges of power that are inherent in supervision and its engagement in the (re)production of disciplinary subjects. It is an attempt to resolve tensions created within supervision pedagogy and in western conceptions of education that are characterized by conflicting desires for autonomy and regulation (Johnson et al., 2000). It is posed as a solution but, as I will show, mentoring really only masks these tensions. One of the key texts that has problematized arguments that mentoring is an innocent practice is Devos’ (2004) work on mentoring as a site of governmentality.

**Sites of governmentality**

Devos (2004) employs Foucault’s notions of subjectivity and technologies of self to explore the mentoring of women academics. Foucault’s definition of technologies of the self also contains a great deal of relevance for understanding supervision. He suggests that technologies of self are those ‘which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being . . . to attain a certain state
of ... wisdom’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Supervisors encourage students to shape their minds (and bodies) through a range of self-disciplining techniques, such as reflective practice, engaging in thinking and writing tasks within disciplinary paradigms, drafting ideas and gaining expert feedback, so that they will become credentialed as wise scholars. This is not only the work of supervisors but also of broader disciplinary research cultures, both local and those represented by the ‘absent masters of the discipline’ (Grant, 2003, p. 177). This is usually achieved not through coercion (or at least mostly not!) but through a subtle process where supervisors help students to shape their thoughts, actions, knowledge and ways of being so that they can display their identity as a socialized disciplinary scholar. In this way, students are encouraged to develop certain subjectivities.

Devos (2004) argues that mentoring necessarily entails the production of two contradictory subject positions for those who are being mentored. They need to be both an active subject and a subject that desires to be acted upon. They are at once ‘she who is in control and career orientated, and she who is to be taken in hand and who may be needy at times’ (Devos, 2004, p. 78). Mentoring, by its very nature, includes both ‘a form of paternalism and ... “supported self-direction”’ (Devos, 2004, p. 77). Supervision inherently contains these implicit contradictions as well. Supervisors employ a subtle ‘regime[s] of person formation’, where they are ‘caring and solicitous ... but nevertheless “master” in control’ (Johnson et al., 2000, pp. 141–142). So too, students, like the mentorees in Devos’ (2004) study, desire both autonomy and regulation. Like most conceptions of western education, supervision pedagogy embodies the twin paradoxical urges towards ‘liberty and regulation, autonomy and restraint’ (Johnson et al. 2000, p. 141).

Therefore, if we accept that mentoring generally is actually a site of governmentality and power, supervision is even more so because of the additional surveillance mechanisms used by supervisors, which demonstrate the institutional power and responsibility invested in them. If we carefully compare supervision and mentoring, these additional dimensions of supervisor power become more apparent. For example, mentoring programs emphasize listening and exploring career development options with the mentoree. By comparison, postgraduate supervisors, no matter how gently they facilitate students’ thinking, are required to help students achieve particular identifiable outcomes (the thesis) within a fairly prescribed form and timeline. They enforce the achievement of these outcomes through surveillance mechanisms such as completing annual progress reports and ensuring that their students adhere to institutional completion requirements. Disciplinarity in terms of both academic field of study and disciplining the subject into a particular scholarly way of being is not the focal point of mentoring programs unlike postgraduate supervision. Some mechanisms are put in place to allow for a less problematic exit of either party from mentoring relationships that do not work, although there are some instances where this remains difficult (Otto, 1994). In postgraduate supervision ending the relationship is fraught, especially for the student. It is usually stressed in the literature that mentors should not be mentorees’ line managers or work supervisors (Conway, 1998). In postgraduate supervision, however, supervisors are
expected to combine the contradictory roles of facilitator and guide as well as disciplinary gatekeeper and critic. As a result, supervision is even more clearly invested with power dynamics and mechanisms that go well beyond those more implicitly inherent in mentoring.

Therefore, there is a need to carefully explore, problematize and discuss the inherent operations of power within postgraduate supervision so that, as supervisors, we become fully aware of the risks and tensions involved in shaping students’ disciplinary identities. This investigation allows us to challenge notions that supervision as mentoring removes the power dynamics involved in supervision relationships and helps us to delineate why supervision is such a challenging and ‘chaotic’ pedagogy (Grant, 2003, p. 189). As a result, this article seeks to explore how tensions involved in developing disciplinary-based self-regulatory behaviours in research students are evident in the interview transcripts of eight experienced supervisors from a research-intensive Australian university, who were involved in a study of effective supervision.

**Supervisors’ talk**

I interviewed eight experienced supervisors at an Australian university from a cross-section of disciplines, including health sciences, engineering, social sciences, humanities, agricultural science, and science, in order to explore the key elements of supervision that contributed to producing timely completions. These four women and four men were from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England and were mostly in their 40s or 50s. They had supervised a wide range of students of different age groups, levels of professional experience and ethnicities. Two of the supervisors, whom we shall call Sarah and Sam, had supervised large numbers of international students. In this article, I particularly draw upon interviews with two health science supervisors (referred to as Sarah and Sam), one social science supervisor (Mary), one engineering supervisor (Daniel) and one science supervisor (Sam).

I used a semi-structured interview process to ask these supervisors how they detected and dealt with warning signs that their students were experiencing difficulties. As I began analysing the data using content analysis and writing publications outlining the results of the study (Manathunga, 2002; Ahern & Manathunga, 2004; Manathunga, 2005a), I became aware that the interviews contained many layers of meaning. In particular, I was increasingly keen to draw out the intriguing insights these supervisors offered about the tensions and ambivalences involved in mentoring their research students.

I recognized that, in order to effectively and systematically analyse these insights into the ways in which power and desire played out in mentoring research students, I would need to employ a more nuanced form of thematic analysis and some elements of discourse analysis (Lynn, 1998; Meyer, 2001; Roulston, 2001). I also re-applied for additional ethical clearance from the participants, indicating specifically that I wanted to explore some of the power issues that had emerged in their interview
data about effective supervision. Each of them agreed to these different forms of analysis. As a result, I first conducted a thematic analysis about how each of these supervisors mentored their research students. I then sought to apply Devos’ categories of supported self-direction and paternalism to each mentoring example outlined by the supervisors. In particular, I sought to determine whether it was possible to tease these contradictory aspects of mentoring apart. I was also trying to uncover how these supervisors felt about these aspects of mentoring, particularly looking for the use of hesitancies or repairs in their language and instances of reported speech that might highlight tensions or ambivalences they may have had about the mentoring strategies they were describing (Roulston, 2001). In this way, I was hoping to investigate how, in supervision, apparently neutral mentoring strategies could contain operations of power. I also wanted to investigate where supervisors might draw the boundaries of their mentoring role and whether they believed that being a supervisor gave them the right to give students advice about their personal lives.

**Paternalism: socializing research students to ‘fit in’**

One of the important ways that these supervisors described mentoring their research students was helping them to become part of the disciplinary research culture. I analysed their discussions about this aspect of supervision in order to tease out the contradictory elements of paternalism and supported self-direction that Devos (2004) argues are inherently present in mentoring and are also significant aspects of supervision. Several of the supervisors chose to focus on helping international students fit into the disciplinary research culture in particular, which I think is particularly significant. Reflecting on the question of whether her students were able to access the research culture, Sarah, a supervisor in the health sciences, talked about international students ‘fitting in extremely well’ after she had a ‘sort of . . . a little talk . . . [saying] that they really should try to live in a household with Australians, listen to the radio and watch television’. One student in particular followed her advice—‘she did everything I told her to do and now it’s just delightful’—which seems to imply that before the student was ‘Australiанизed’ in this way she was not necessarily a delight (health science supervisor, interview, pp. 12, 13). While some might argue that the supervisor was merely trying to encourage the student’s behaviour towards learning to speak fluent English, I think this latter quote suggests embedded aspects of paternalism in this supervisor’s attempts to fit her international student into the disciplinary research culture. So too, Bill, another supervisor in the health sciences, believed that international students required ‘a little bit more nurturing and [you need to] explain things . . . again the culture . . . means they may need a bit of extra guidance’ in order to be socialized into the research culture (health science supervisor, interview, p. 1). His comment that having group meetings with his students ‘gets them into a mould’ mirrors Sarah’s ‘fitting-in’ talk.
Daniel, an engineering supervisor, indicated that in his discipline Asian students were generally supervised by Asian supervisors. His description of this strategy revealed his ambivalence about it—‘I don’t know whether that is an appropriate solution. But it seems to be ... a workable solution.’ He felt it was preferable to situations where the student’s expectations of the supervisor were not being met—‘they’re much more comfortable with a professor being the boss ... I got the impression that when I wasn’t doing that, that was a way of me failing’ (engineering supervisor, interview, pp. 9, 10). This example seems to indicate that cultural differences are insurmountable in supervision and that a form of cultural determinism and exclusion is preferable to intercultural supervision. There are elements of paternalism in this kind of approach, which appears to exclude international students from the local disciplinary research culture and to absolve Anglo-Celtic supervisors from any responsibility to work across cultures.

In this study, there was one exception to this focus on the need to socialize international students in particular to fit into the dominant research culture. One supervisor from the social sciences, Mary, believed that all students experienced culture shock to some degree in being socialized into a discipline—‘It’s like entering any kind of new culture, you need to figure out how A goes with B and that sometimes you can waste a lot of time trying to figure [this] out’ (social science supervisor, interview, p. 6). This comment reveals Mary’s awareness of the new identity formation required of all research students and suggests more of a supported self-directive approach.

Supervisors in this study reflected upon the pleasures of developing students into ‘certain kind[s] of regulated, “disciplined” subjects’ (Green & Lee, 1999, p. 211). ‘You can take a good person and they come out really outstanding’, Daniel suggests (engineering supervisor, interview, p. 2). There are, however, risks in exercising this kind of paternalism. The principal danger of socializing students in these ways is that it can become a form of disciplinary (and cultural) assimilation. This raises questions about the flexibility and cultural responsiveness of disciplinary cultures and of supervision more generally. Is this a one-way process of cultural and disciplinary assimilation/normalization or does a cultural exchange occur?

In particular, many of the supervisors in this study emphasized this element of socialization in relation to international students. This is highly significant because, while this paternalistic dimension of governmentality is inherent in supervision generally, it surfaced more explicitly when overlaid with the cultural dimensions of working with the Other. While two of the supervisors did have particularly large numbers of international students, I do not believe this was the only reason why the fitting-in discourse was applied mainly to international students. My analysis suggests that this focus on socializing international students to fit into the dominant research culture was primarily a function of disciplinary identity formation made more obvious by disciplining students with Other cultural subjectivities. In these ways, helping students become part of the disciplinary research culture contains inherent aspects of paternalism.
Cultural responsiveness: socializing students by ‘bringing them out’

There is, however, a contradiction at work here in supervision, as Devos (2004) argues there exists in any form of mentoring. While supervisors are engaged in fitting student identities into disciplinary cultural practices and norms, they are simultaneously ‘bringing out’ students’ innate abilities and talents, which is a form of supported self-direction (Johnson et al., 2000; Bills, 2003). Sarah provides a few examples of this ‘bringing-out’ talk. She describes one of her international students as ‘so quiet in the beginning’, but, once she was exposed to the research culture (and to Australian culture?), she’s

actually [become] the boss in the lab in terms of her um ability, nice way to get everybody to do what she wants [laughs] them to do . . . she's not the most senior person but she's sort of like the natural leader. (Health sciences supervisor, interview, p. 13)

Sarah also describes how a number of her students were perceived by other supervisors ‘as cast-offs, shall we say being pigeon-holed as not being PhD material’. Once you ‘have a few conversations with them’ and ‘rebuild [their] confidence’, you can ‘let them out of the pigeon-hole’. Sarah uses reported speech to emphasize this bringing-out process. She says to her students ‘You can do it. You know you can do it. You know you can do it. I’ve seen you present. You ARE very capable so allow it to show through’ (health sciences, interview, p. 9). Usually, reported speech is a discursive tactic used to highlight how the speaker would like the listener to interpret their message (Roulston, 2001).

As a result, ‘bringing out’ students’ individual talents and abilities incorporates at least some measure of respect for students’ identities and along with it some degree of cultural responsiveness. For example, Sarah tells a story of cultural exchange in interactions with an international student—we picked up his slang and vice versa. Sarah also suggests that ‘you just try to put yourself in their position’. In discussing writing with international students, she also comments ‘I say “I can’t write Malay, I can’t write Mandarin” . . . so you would want help too’ (health sciences supervisor, interview, pp. 13, 9). As a result, Sarah has developed a comprehensive method of scaffolding students’ learning about writing academic English (Manathunga, 2005a).

Bill’s school has an international committee, which organizes social functions. They also have a policy of ‘co-locating them with other students [and having] joint meetings [with all my students] when . . . we sit down for a whole meeting and talk about how things are going. That . . . gets them accepted as part of the overall group’ (health science supervisor, interview, p. 6). In this way, the contradiction between fitting students into disciplinary norms and cultures and bringing out students’ abilities seems inherent in the process of supervision. It is in some respects part of the overall paradox of acting upon students while simultaneously recognizing them as active subjects or ‘assuming “liberty” under . . . surveillance’ (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 143).

In ‘bringing-out’ work, supervisors give themselves permission to delve into students’ minds and sometimes their bodies to bring forth their research capabilities
(e.g. Sarah discusses her students’ abilities to perform lab-based research techniques requiring precision and dexterity (health science, interview, p. 7). A supervisor in Johnson et al.’s (2000, p. 141) study exemplified this pedagogical agenda by saying that ‘my task as a supervisor is to try to find out what [students] are ... I guess that’s what I mean by trying to get inside their minds’. ‘Bringing-out’ work reflects that contradictory desire to help students become active subjects, just as Devos (2004) argues mentors seek to achieve with their mentorees.

In this way, these ‘fitting-in’ and ‘bringing-out’ discourses in supervision invoke certain students’ disciplinary subjectivities and appear to mirror the contradictory forces of paternalism and supported self-direction that Devos (2004) argues are present in mentoring. In these ways, the supervisors in this study both acted upon students and sought to facilitate their evolution into independent scholars. In teasing apart these intertwined aspects of governmentality in supervision, I have sought to highlight how power circulates through supervision even when it is constructed as mentoring rather than as a form of hierarchical apprenticeship.

Going beyond the boundaries: providing advice about personal issues

There are additional hidden dangers in constructing supervision as mentoring because it may encourage supervisors to transgress boundaries and offer advice on a range of personal issues that may only tangentially relate to research. For example, Sarah argues that supervisors

Have to know when to draw the line but I think students appreciate you being interested to a certain level in the whole, whole PERSON.2 And, and then, you quickly know when you have drawn the line, say look I really don’t have the expertise in this particular area but over here at counselling services they have all the people who can help you in that dimension. So, so, I think that, umm, if you’re not interested in the whole person it’s not going to go well. You can’t have a distant relationship. (Health science supervisor, interview, p. 3)

For Sarah, this interest in the whole person extends into providing advice about a range of personal issues. For example, she discusses with the ‘young females’ her belief that ‘a PhD is like having a baby with a long gestation like an elephant and it’s not really compatible with having a human baby’.

Simultaneously, ambivalences about regulating students’ personal lives are revealed in her talk. In the detailed example above, she qualifies her statement about being interested in the whole person by saying ‘to a certain extent’. She begins this part of the interview with the orderly line about knowing ‘when to draw the line’ and quickly repeats this and extends it by talking about directing students to counselling services. In saying this, she switches to the first person and uses direct reported speech to emphasize how she would like me to interpret her remarks. In particular, Sarah seems to use reported speech here to tidy up or make acceptable her interest in students’ personal lives.
Her description of how she advises students not to get pregnant during their studies is also preceded by a nervous laugh and the comment ‘even though I shouldn’t probably do this’. Interestingly, her talk about Australianizing international students contains only one indication of hesitance or ambivalence (‘I sort of have a little talk to them’) (health science supervisor, interview, p. 12). This suggests that, while she acknowledges the risks of intervening in some aspects of students’ personal lives, she has fewer doubts about her right to intervene in international students’ cultural identities.

Another supervisor in the study, Bill, was also prepared to check with students whether they were experiencing personal difficulties. He commented: ‘I am fairly direct and just ask them “is there something problematic relating to the research you are not happy with or is the topic or something not working or is there something personal?”’. He also uses direct reported speech, but this time he seems to be signalling his comfort with asking students questions about their personal lives. Interestingly, unlike Sarah, he switches back to non-reported speech when listing the options that students have to address this range of problems—‘they can talk to someone or they can talk to me or they can go to counselling’. This seems to indicate that he was less concerned than Sarah about how I would read his involvement in students’ personal problems. He follows this up with the comment that ‘I must admit that doesn’t happen too much. Most of the time my students will come out and say “I’ve got a problem at home …”’ (health science supervisor, interview, p. 3). He seems quite proud of the fact that his students trust him enough to discuss personal issues with him.

Later in the interview he tidies this account up by repeating phrases about not prying. He indicates ‘Well, first thing to find out is, is there a problem of a personal nature without prying. You certainly don’t pry …’. It is also at this point in the interview that he uses direct reported speech, as Sarah does, to describe how he directs students to counselling services: ‘say “look, I can organise some other help for you, some counselling services or whatever is necessary”’ (health science supervisor, interview, p. 10).

Another supervisor from the sciences, Sam, reflected on the need ‘to walk a fine line between sort of being a positive supervisor and not being too much of a MATE’ (science supervisor, interview, p. 9). Again his talk reveals his ambivalences about the boundaries between effective supervision and friendship or mateship.

I have noticed a colleague of mine whose attitude was to be a mate and then be a supervisor. And um, for some they work perfectly particularly the Australian but it didn’t work so well for the overseas student. And um, I, I try and: determine where that line is for a certain student and um clearly the more of a mate you can be the better the relationship becomes and the better you can get through the program but of course you don’t want to overstep the line. (Science supervisor, interview, pp. 9–10)

He suggests that his colleague erred more on the mateship side and had mixed success with this as a supervision strategy, particularly with his international students. He then appears to argue that if you take on the role of a student’s mate, they will progress through the candidature more effectively but then he concludes
with the tidy line about not overstepping the line. For him, though, mateship was more about going to the football, the bowling alley or local tourist attractions together than discussing personal issues.

There are a number of intriguing gender and cultural issues enmeshed in this. To begin with, particularly in the Australian context (although this supervisor was originally English), mateship is essentially a masculinist construct. The choice of these activities also assumes that they are equally interesting and accessible for male and female and for local and international students, which may not be the case. Later in the interview, he talks about his awareness that some international students feel uncomfortable during social activities with their supervisor because ‘in their own country their supervisor wouldn’t be seen dead with their students’ (science supervisor, interview, p. 10). He also discusses different cultural obligations and norms of reciprocity where some students may feel that they are required to return his invitation to a BBQ at his home and are concerned about the financial and other implications of this.

In these ways, several supervisors in this study found it difficult to negotiate the boundaries between providing mentoring about students’ disciplinary subjectivities and providing advice about a range of personal issues. They were ambivalent about the boundaries between supervision and friendship. The desire to provide advice about personal issues is compatible with the therapist–client relationship identified by Grant (2006) as part of the Psy-Supervision discourse. Acting as a ‘source of motivation and support’, the therapist Psy-Supervisor involves him/herself in the student’s life as a ‘whole person’ (Grant, 2006, p. 340). They provide Psy-Students, who are ‘inexperienced ... [and] in need of help’, with a ‘sympathetic, wise and professional ear’ into which Psy-Students may ‘confess her/his struggles and failings’ (Grant, 2006, p. 341). Many of the supervisors in this study adopted a Psy-Supervision discourse to describe their practice.

While mentoring research students provides them with a great deal of support and motivation and I have, like Grant (2006, p. 350), encouraged this approach in my supervisor professional development workshops, it can blur the boundaries of supervision relationships and enable Psy-Supervisors to seek to regulate Psy-Students’ personal lives. In particular, involvement in the personal carries with it the ‘asymmetry of dependent trust’ between the student and the supervisor and again involves the supervisor in an implicit pedagogy of normalization. When supervisors give themselves permission to provide advice about students’ personal issues, they are engaging in a form of paternalism that Devos (2004) suggests is part of mentoring generally. This is a particularly risky space for supervisors to engage in and an operation of power that can be quite problematic.

**Conclusions**

Supervision as mentoring, then, is not an innocent, collegial practice. It has emerged at a time when supervisors are seeking to move away from the more overt displays of
disciplinary power or neglect that were associated with traditional approaches to supervision. It is posed as a solution to the asymmetries of power inherent in postgraduate supervision. Yet it really only submerges these tensions and complexities.

This article has demonstrated that supervision as mentoring positions supervisors and students in contradictory and unequal ways. Supervisors facilitate students’ development of their evolving identity as independent researchers, while, simultaneously, regulating students’ disciplinary and other identities. In other words, they encourage students to be active subjects developing all of the appropriate disciplinary subjectivities, while at the same time acting upon students. These contradictions seem to be inherent in any act of mentoring (Devos, 2004).

In supervision, however, there is an additional, very powerful site of governmentality implicit in mentoring research students. This is involved in the process of socializing students into disciplinary ways of being a scholar. The interview transcripts analysed in this article reveal the contradictory impulses of paternalism and supported self-direction inherent in simultaneously encouraging students to fit into the existing disciplinary culture, while also seeking to ‘bring out’ their innate talents and abilities. In particular, this form of governmentality is applied explicitly to international students in these interviews. This suggests that the implicit paternalistic impulses buried within socializing research students into appropriate disciplinary subjectivities surface more explicitly when overlaid with cultural differences in supervising the Other.

There are a number of important pedagogical pleasures for supervisors in helping to shape research students’ minds and bodies into fully credentialed, disciplined independent researchers through supervision. Students also gain the pleasure of feeling supported in this often daunting process of becoming a knowledgeable scholar. There are, however, some significant risks and tensions embedded in this contradictory process for supervisors and students. Particularly for students, there is the inherent risk of losing parts of their identity that are normalized out during the process of socializing them into appropriate disciplinary subjectivities. For international students and other students from non-dominant groups, this risk is substantially increased. For both supervisors and students, there are additional risks associated with the blurry boundaries between acting upon students’ disciplinary subjectivities and providing advice and guidance about aspects of students’ personal lives.

While mentoring students is a positive supervision strategy and one that I have consistently recommended in my professional development workshops, it is important to make these contradictions and ambivalences visible to supervisors. This exploration of the intertwined paternalistic and supported self-directive dimensions of supervision allows us to better understand the complexities embedded in supervision pedagogy and extends some of the work other researchers have done on power and desire in postgraduate supervision (Green & Lee, 1999; Grant, 2003).

I think coming clean on these complexities is actually helpful for supervisors. It gives them permission to talk about why supervision is a particularly difficult, though
pleasurable, pedagogy (I say this as both a supervisor myself and one who studies the art of supervision as an educational developer). It also explains why rational, bureaucratic guidelines preaching a Seven Habits of Highly Effective Supervisors approach do not seem very useful. Most importantly, discursive work that highlights the inherent tensions and ambivalences in supervision as mentoring challenges the assumption that mentoring of any kind is a universal, unproblematic ‘good’ that should be promoted uncritically.

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Notes

1. All names have been changed.
2. Capitals are used when a person that is speaking places emphasis on particular words.

References


Bills, D. (2003) Discourses of pedagogy in research supervisors’ talk ‘are you growing talent or are you just taking talent?’, paper presented at the *Raising the Profile of Research Education ATN Conference*, Sydney, 3–4 February.


