

# Appreciation of the research supervisory relationship by postgraduate nursing students

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## Abstract

*Introduction:* The quality of the relationship between postgraduate students and their supervisors often determines the progress of the students.

*Background:* Successful supervision according to students is associated with the expertise of the supervisors in research and the academic discipline and their willingness to share their knowledge and skills with their students. On the other hand supervisors expect their students to be knowledgeable in research methods and to be able to work to a large extent independently. Contradictory expectation of supervisors and postgraduate students can cause delays in the progress of students.

*Aim:* The aim of this study was to explore and describe the aspects of the supervisory relationship that postgraduate students in nursing science at a selected university in South Africa appreciate.

*Method:* A qualitative research design with an appreciative inquiry approach was used and 18 students under the guidance of an independent facilitator provided the data during group interviews.

*Findings and discussion:* Specific personal and professional qualities of the supervisors contribute to a valued supervisory relationship. Regarding personal qualities the supervisors should show their understanding of the unique circumstances of the students and portray a positive attitude to encourage them to persevere in challenging times. Supervisors should also be expert researchers who ensure that the students produce quality dissertations and thesis. The valued relationship refers to an open and trusting relationship between the students and supervisors.

*Conclusion:* The students' appreciation of the research supervisory relationship contributes to the understanding of the expectations of postgraduate students regarding support that they need to become scholars in an academic discipline.

*Implications for nursing and health policy:* There is a need for continuing professional development of supervisors to sensitize them about the expectations of students. The students should be orientated regarding the support that they can expect from their supervisors.

Key words: postgraduate students, supervisory relationships, supervisors

## Introduction

The most critical element for successful supervision of masters and doctoral students is a supportive relationship with their supervisors (Severinsson 2010). Major differences in the expectations of students and supervisors lead to students not finishing their research in time or not at all (Yarwood-Ross & Haigh 2014).

## **Background**

Successful supervision is associated with the subject expertise of supervisors, their willingness to guide students in the execution of their research (Evans & Stevenson 2011), their availability for consultations with students (Franke & Arvidsson 2011), and their willingness to build supportive relationships with students (Evans & Stevenson 2011). Students want to be supervised by hard-working expert researcher supervisors, as they believe that they then stand a good chance of being successful in their own research (Amundsen & McAlpine 2009). Supervisors are expected to display “compassionate rigour” (Manathunga 2005: 24). They should empathetically support their students and at the same time rigorously ensure that quality research is done. Students want to be in “safe hands” (Lee 2009: 645) in order to finish their research in the time allotted and to pass the evaluation of their dissertations and theses.

The expectations of research supervisors differ somewhat from the expectations of their students. They expect postgraduate students to have at the onset of their studies the skills to work independently to some extent. Supervisors want to further the development of their students and not to help them to develop research skills (Lee 2009).

When the expectations of the supervisors and the students do not match, students easily develop resentment toward the supervisors (Yarwood-Ross & Haigh 2014) with a detrimental effect on their progress, which runs counter to the current academic climate where postgraduate studies have to be completed within a particular time frame. Any distraction from the rigorous schedule leads to critique of the supervisors for not being able to support the students to finish their research in minimum time and the students for not being able to meet the requirements of the higher-education scenario. Postgraduate research has to deliver results in minimum time and a supervisory relationship conducive to quick research progress is pivotal (Roets & Botma 2012).

Postgraduate studies are no longer limited to small groups of top-level students who are capable of completing their research and masters dissertations and doctoral theses with minimum input from their supervisors. Growing numbers of students are admitted to postgraduate studies and they no longer represent an elite group. Many of them need intensive guidance to access literature, do research and write their dissertations and theses (Essa 2011).

In universities in South Africa supervision of postgraduate students in nursing science is even more challenging, as students from various academic backgrounds register for postgraduate studies. Some of them have studied for a 4-year bachelors degree to earn entry into the profession and after a few years of clinical experience get admitted to a masters programme and later to the doctoral programme in nursing science. These students have been exposed to research from the first year of their bachelors degree. Other students complete a 4-year diploma course to earn entry to the profession and thereafter complete a 3-year bachelors degree. This second group consists of students who have had limited exposure to research before their admission to a masters programme and eventually to the doctoral programme in nursing science.

In addition to the challenge of the academic diversity of the students is their competence in writing scientific English. Students have to write their dissertations and theses in English, which is a second or even third language to them (Essa 2011).

Information about the appreciation of the supervisory relationship by postgraduate students in nursing science in South Africa is not available and prompted the research question: What aspects of the supervisory relationship do postgraduate students in nursing science in South Africa appreciate?

### **Aim**

The aim of the study was to explore and describe the aspects of the supervisory relationship that postgraduate students in nursing science at a selected university in South Africa appreciate.

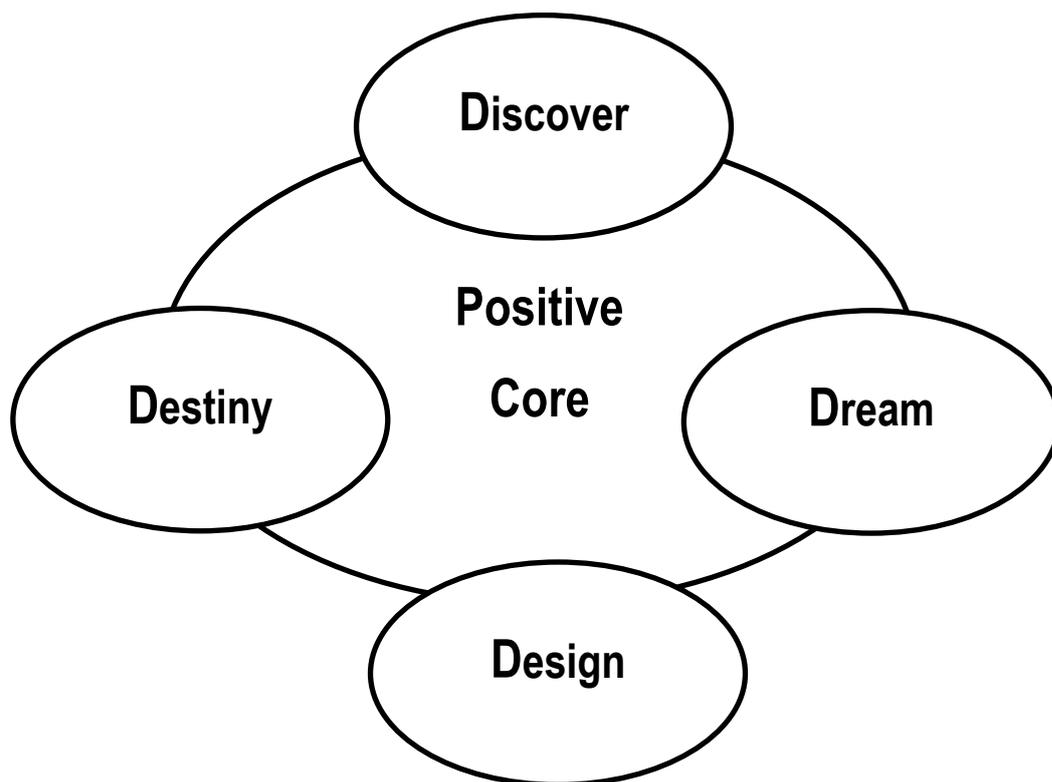
### **Method**

The study focussed on discovering “*what is*” the students’ most satisfying experience regarding the supervisory relationship; exploring “*what could be*” the ideal supervisory relationship; and describing “*what should be*” the characteristics of the supervisory relationship to strive to excellence in research supervision.

The sample of the study consisted of 18 postgraduate nursing students with at least one year of their masters studies completed, who accepted an invitation to take part in the study. A

data-gathering workshop that consisted of group interviews based on the principles of appreciative inquiry was conducted in 2012. The purpose of the workshop was to explore what these postgraduates considered as a supervisory relationship that would support them in their development as scholars in nursing science. In appreciative inquiry research the focus is exploring the positive attributes of the studied phenomenon (Reed 2007).

The 4-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry designed by Cooperrider and Avital (2004) was used to guide the group interviews. The participants were asked to describe their best experiences in their relationship with their supervisor (discover phase of the cycle); followed by descriptions of what the supervisory relationship could be (dream phase of the cycle) and should be (design phase of the cycle). The participants' input enabled a description of the ideal supervisory relationship (destiny phase of the cycle) (Refer to Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros 2005:5)

The group interviews were interactive and lasted approximately four hours each. In the discovery phase the facilitator of the workshop divided the participants into pairs with the instruction that they interview each other in a quiet, respectful tone. Other instructions were:

to listen without prejudice to the other; to clarify any misunderstanding; and to take notes of the information that was shared. The affirmative assignment that the paired postgraduates had to do was: “Reflecting back on the research supervision you have received during your enrolment as a postgraduate student, share your story about your most satisfying / peak experiences relating to the supervisory relationship.”

On completion of the paired interviews each pair of participants joined two other interview pairs to form a cluster and to share their stories. One story that captured all the common themes of the 6 stories of the cluster was selected and shared with the other clusters. Once all the clusters had reported, the common themes of all the stories of the clusters were recorded on a flip chart.

In the dream phase of the data collection the participants remained in their clusters and had to answer through discussion: “What are your wishes for an ideal research supervisory relationship?” and “What is your dream for a research supervisory relationship?” The data that each cluster generated were summarized on flip charts and shared with all the other clusters.

The clusters discussed this question in the design and destiny phases: “What actions should be implemented to meet your expectations regarding a research supervisory relationship?” The data were once again reported on flip charts to the other clusters. The workshop facilitator kept notes on the discussions of the clusters and also compiled theoretical notes to add to the understanding of the data.

A thematic and holistic analysis approach was used to analyse the narratives of the paired participants (phase one) and the reported data on the flip charts (phases one to four). The data were organised, labelled and grouped together in themes and included verbatim quotes (Freschman & Holloway 2010).

### **Ethical considerations**

The research ethics committee of the faculty of health sciences of the selected university approved the study protocol (Reference number 54/2012). The head of the department gave permission for the involvement of the students in the research and the participants gave written informed consent to take part in the research.

### **Trustworthiness of the findings**

The group interviews were facilitated by an independent person who was not involved in the supervision of students and who is not one of the co-authors of the manuscript. She analysed the data in cooperation with the participants. The data analysis happened simultaneously with the collection of the data in the tradition of appreciative inquiry. The themes were identified by the facilitator and participants.

### **Findings**

The themes identified on the supervisory relationship refer to the personal qualities of the supervisors; the professional qualities of the supervisors; and a valued relationship between the supervisors and the students.

#### ***Personal qualities of supervisors***

The participants emphasized the importance of having patient supervisors to guide them through the uncertain processes of conducting research and compiling dissertations or theses: “*supervisors to be patient and understanding*”. In their pre-graduate years they had clear guides on how to prepare for tests and examinations, which are not available to postgraduate students. Inherent in each research project is the possibility that the expected results might not be obtained, which means that degrees may not be conferred. The participants appreciated supervisors who are available and willing to help: “*supervisors to be always prepared to help*”.

The participants expected their supervisors to be committed to the supervision of their students: “*commitment.....is required*” and to arrange frequent contact sessions with the students in an atmosphere that encourages the students to discuss their concerns: “*non-threatening environment..... with supervisors who do not criticize negatively*”. The participants wanted to be “*kept focussed*” by their supervisors. The commitment of the supervisors is displayed when “*supervisors are willing to give some of their own time*” to meet their students, which can be “*even after office hours.*”

Supervisors who show their understanding of the unique and sometimes challenging circumstances of their students and adapt their supervision accordingly meet the needs of their students: “*supervision should not be done to all students the same way.*” The

participants appreciated such individualized supervision, as that helped them overcome obstacles: *“they encourage me when I am frustrated.”*

The positive attitude of supervisors encourages students. When the participants felt overwhelmed by challenges they needed positive reinforcement from their supervisors: *“It kept me.....motivated to complete my research journey.”* Supervisors who had a positive attitude helped participants to view obstacles in their research as challenges and opportunities for growth instead of problems that might derail the research.

### ***Professional qualities of supervisors***

The participants wanted to be supervised by subject specialists with *“hands-on”* experience in the sub-disciplines of nursing. They wanted to learn from experts: *“(We) found value in a supervisor with experience in the field of study.”* When students do postgraduate studies they not only develop research skills (in the case of masters students) and contribute to the development of theory (in the case of PhD students) they also learn how to be scholars in the specific sub-discipline. It is thus important to learn from a master in the field of study.

The participants valued the professionalism and the critical thinking skills of their supervisors: *“my supervisors became my critical friends”* and they indicated that they wanted to work in a close relationship with their supervisors so that they could learn these valued skills: *“building an academic relationship with your supervisor.”*

When supervisors themselves are involved in research and are publishing research reports frequently they gain credibility: *“my supervisors maintain high research standards by actively participating in their own research.... thus leading by example.”* Supervisors who are dedicated researchers are familiar with the frustrations that delays in the research process cause and can support their students to manage these and to stay committed to the process: *“their positive trust and belief (in the students’ abilities) make the research journey more bearable.”* The participants indicated that they can easily identify with supervisors who are dedicated researchers as *“they are going through exactly what we are going through.”* The ease with which their supervisors managed their own research encouraged the students as the supervisors *“made it look easy.”* On the other hand supervisors also know that much work is required for each small part of the end product (dissertation or thesis): *“at times the output does not quantify the mental, physical and emotion input.”* One of the participants described

the encouragement that she got from her supervisors as: “*a reinforcement value.*” She was convinced that only supervisors who do research can acknowledge the hard work of their students and encourage them to stay focussed notwithstanding slow progress.

The participants pointed out that they require substantial guidance regarding the administrative process that needs to be followed. They wanted guidance from their supervisors on how and when documentation should be prepared for the various committees that have to approve their research proposals and manage the evaluation of their dissertations or thesis: “*Supervisors should be well-equipped with the regulations of the university.*” They trusted their supervisors to know the processes and to guide them in meeting the expectations of the committees. Supervisors can ease the anxiety of the participants’ uncertainty and help them to consistently work towards the due dates of submissions to postgraduate committees and thus the completion of the research.

#### ***Valued relationship between the supervisors and the students***

The participants appreciated reliable relationships with their supervisors to the extent that they could trust them to: “*never give up on them.*” When they experienced periods of very slow progress with their research they wanted to know that their supervisors would not lose faith in them and would keep on encouraging them.

The participants believed that supervisors and students should be matched according to “*the...study field and they should (also) know each other well.*” They should “*speak the same language*” (South Africa is a multi-language country) and should also share an interest in the same research methodology: “*match student and the methodology and the supervisor.*” The participants felt very strongly that the relationship between supervisors and students should be very stable. One of them compared the relationship with a marriage and referred to it as “*marrying two minds*”.

When more than one supervisor is involved in the guidance of a student it is necessary that the match between supervisor and student be extended to include a match between supervisors: “*match supervisor and supervisor.*” The participants recommended that the supervisors should be on the same level of “*superiority based on experience.*” One of the supervisors should not be able to overrule the other as it could lead to the confusion of the student.

An open and trusting relationship between supervisors and students was appreciated by the participants: *“there must be respect between the two parties and they should value the views and opinions of the other.”* They also emphasized that such a relationship could only be built when there is mutual agreement: *“it is a two-way situation.”* The onus is not on one person only to establish a trusting relationship. A prerequisite for such a relationship is, however, according to the participants an approachable supervisor: *“her attitude should be welcoming.”* Supervisors should create a relaxed atmosphere when students are consulted: *“contact sessions with the supervisors should be relaxed; it should not be torturing.”* When they fear to discuss their research plans and the challenges that they experience the progress of their research is hampered.

The participants wanted to feel free to discuss their research with their supervisors. They expected their supervisors to tell them how to implement their plans and to overcome the challenges: *“students discuss ideas for research and the supervisors give tips on how to get there (do the research).”* The role of supervisors is, according to them, to ensure that the students make use of the correct research methods. Through regular scheduled appointments the supervisors should through *“positive critique”* and *“stimulate the progress”* of their students. When supervisors point out what progress has been made and make suggestions to improve the quality of the work they contribute to the progress of their students. One participant described her supervisors’ appreciation of the work that she has done as: *“they celebrated the worth of my research.”* She described the experience as *“emotionally gratifying”* and indicated that it encouraged her to *“take ownerships of her research.”* She started viewing the supervisory relationship as *“commitment from both parties.”* She no longer expected her supervisors (as some of the other participants did) to *“push her to reach the targets.”*

The participants appreciated prompt electronic feedback from their supervisors: *“feedback should be through electronic tracking processes”* to enable them to work on the recommended changes and not to revise the whole document *“so that our changes and corrections are not in vain.”* According to the participants prompt feedback was only possible when supervisors do not have too many students and too many teaching obligations. They recommended that supervisors should have a *“maximum of 4 postgraduate students”* to supervise so that the supervisors can give their students *“undivided attention”*. A personal relationship with 1 or 2 supervisors is preferred on condition that the supervisors consolidate

their feedback: “*supervisors to discuss their recommendations before consulting the students.*” They also rejected any form of group supervision where a group of students is supervised by a group of supervisors and the feedback to the students is discussed in the group. They experienced such supervision as intimidating: “*group supervision is intimidating in the sense that one talks about something that one is not sure of in front of other people.*”

## **Discussion**

Supervisors of postgraduate students are expected to develop a personal interest in their students in order to guide them through the challenging process of managing large volumes of information during literature searches (McBride, Tietze & Fenton 2013), in accessing support resources (Calma 2011) and conducting research (Evans & Stevenson 2011). Their students expect them to be mentors who could counsel them regarding their own personal problems and who at the same time guide them to do valuable research (Franke & Arvidsson 2011). The outcome should be empowering as the students want to develop into independent researchers (Carr, Lhussier & Chandler 2010) and to be able to contribute to the generation of knowledge and the improvement of practice through research (Smith, Crookes, Else & Crookes 2012). Students want to feel secure in their interaction with supervisors (Roets 2012), but do not want their supervisors to act from a position of authority (Lee 2009), as a power relationship can provoke anxiety among the students (Franke & Arvidsson 2011). A study that was conducted by Yarwood-Ross and Haigh (2014) in the United Kingdom revealed that some of the participants were bullied by their supervisors to the extent that they considered it to terminate their studies.

Although the participants of this study valued the professional qualities of their supervisors they also wanted to have close relationships with them. Post-graduate students want their supervisors not to be too professional (Evans & Stevenson 2011) as it can create a distance between them and their supervisors. The accessibility of supervisors is what is valued. Contact between supervisor and students should not be limited to scheduled meetings as these might be too far apart (Essa 2011).

The supervisors’ professional qualities that the participants of this study expected relate to their scholarly abilities and their experience in supervising. Supervisors should be experienced active researchers (Lee 2009) and experts in their academic disciplines (Evans

& Stevenson 2011). Not all good researchers are good supervisors. Effective supervision requires more than good research skills. Calma (2011) found in a study with university management and supervisors in the Philippines that intensive training of good researchers to become good supervisors is of utmost importance to ensure that students are successful. Baptista (2011) analyzed the Bologna Process to enhance the throughput of postgraduate students in Portugal and came to the conclusion that both the supervisors and their students should be trained to ensure that they benefit from the supervisory relationship.

Manathunga (2005) describes an effective supervisor as one who has empathy with students' challenges while he or she at the same time is very strict with the students and does not shy away from rigorous feedback on their performance. It is expected of supervisors to guide students, especially their PhD students, to become independent scholars (Severinsson 2012) and they can therefore not allow students to become too dependent on them. Postgraduate students need to be constantly challenged to figure out the problems that they experience with their research and to come up with solutions to the problems. Franke and Arvidsson (2011) involved supervisors from two universities in Sweden and emphasized that their research revealed that supervisors should be mediators who guide their students and not people who control their students' research.

The relationship between supervisors and their students has many pitfalls according to the responses of the participants of this study. The role players may have completely different expectations of the relationship (Roets & Botma 2012). All students who enrol for postgraduate studies do not have the abilities to meet the expectations of their supervisors regarding supported but independent research (Essa 2011). Others do not have what Lovitts (2008: 302) calls "practical intelligence", meaning that students are not able to set goals and standards for themselves and do not know how to work towards achieving it. These students expect their supervisors to take control of the whole research process and to guide them towards the completion of it, while the supervisors are only willing to intervene when necessary so that the students when they finish the research will own the dissertation and thesis.

Not all postgraduate students adapt easily to the "practice of criticality" (Evans & Stevenson 2010: 245) that are associated with scholarship development. They find it distressing to have to defend their research plan to their supervisor and peers, which is a necessary step to becoming independent scholars. The participants in this study experienced situations during

which they had to defend their research very negative. The more people who were involved the more uncomfortable they became. They therefore preferred supervision by one or at most two supervisors only. They preferred to get structured feedback to address problems with their research. They wanted to be shown what is wrong and how it should be corrected. The expectations are similar than that of the participants (postgraduate students and supervisors) of a study that Severinson (2012) conducted in Norway. The participants indicated that substantive problems regarding the research and progress with the research should be addressed during consultations and constructive feedback should be provided to enable students to address the problems. Group supervision that implies that students get feedback from a group of supervisors and input from a group of students to improve their research and dissertations or thesis (McCallin & Nayar 2012) would thus not enable students to address specific problems (what is wrong) in specific ways (how should it be corrected).

The preference of the participants of this study to work with one or at the most two supervisors only is in line with the ‘discipleship’ supervisory relationship. In such a relationship one or two masters in research guide the novice to the point that he or she makes an original contribution to the knowledge base of the discipline. At that stage they become the masters and the process is completed (Lee & Green 2009). Another approach in a supervisory relationship that also implies individual close relationships of supervisors and students is that of authorship with the focus on the individuality of the student and his or her struggle to overcome limitations and achieve success (Lee & Green 2009). The participants of this study would not appreciate the ‘apprenticeship’ supervisory approach as that would have forced them into team research. The team meets often and the progress is discussed so that the apprentices learn from the masters to correct their work and to become masters themselves (Franke & Arvidsson 2011).

A valued supervisory relationship is viable when the expectations of the supervisors and students match. It is then that students proudly refer to their supervisors as ‘my’ supervisor, indicating that they have formed close relationships on personal and professional levels (Nulty et al. 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The appreciation of the students of the supervisory relationship is not unique to the context in which the study was conducted. The literature discussion confirmed the aspects of the

relationship that students identify as important and a larger population of supervisors can thus use the findings. Postgraduate students appreciate approachable supervisors who are experts in their academic disciplines and who can develop an enabling relationship with their students to ensure success.

### **Implications for nursing and health policy**

Supervisors should be sensitized for the expectations of their students and encouraged to develop skills to attend to it through programmes of continuous professional development. Frequent informal discussions with their peers can support them to manage unrealistic expectations of students.

Formal orientation programmes for postgraduate students should address the processes that the university or department apply to support students to develop scholarly skills. They also need to be oriented regarding realistic expectations of the supervisory relationship. Their contribution to their own development of scholarly skills should be emphasized.

At the onset of the supervisory relationship supervisors and students should agree in a memorandum of understanding what their expectations of each other are and how they will attend to it.

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