

# **‘Colleague postgraduate supervision’ and the production of space in higher education: A duo ethnographic analysis**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose-** In this paper we contribute knowledge to the postgraduate supervision discourses by reflecting on our socio-spatial experiences of being supervised by colleagues, a process that we refer to as colleague postgraduate supervision (CPS).

**Design/Methodology/Approach-** We followed a duo ethnographic research design by dialogically presenting and exploring our lived experiences of CPS and critiquing and questioning the meanings we give to those experiences. The experiences shared arose from two different contexts: a contact university and an open distance learning university.

**Findings-** The reflection suggests that social values of trust, compassion and care in CPS can outrun the spatial constraints for the benefit of the supervisees in the relationship. However, the colleagues in the CPS can also experience some subtle power dynamics and tensions, if the process is not well communicated.

**Originality-** While CPS is a common practice in some universities, there is limited research that pays attention to its socio-spatiality, that is, the interaction between the social and the spatial aspects of this practice.

**Keywords:** colleague postgraduate supervision; socio-spatiality; duo ethnography; created space; contextual space

## **Introduction and context**

A need for more doctoral graduates in some countries of the world has led to interesting dynamics regarding postgraduate supervision (PGS). Sometimes, academic staff members undertaking doctoral studies are supervised by their experienced academic colleagues, in a process that we (the authors) refer to as ‘colleague postgraduate supervision’ (CPS). While CPS is a common practice in some universities, there is limited research that pays attention to its socio-spatiality, that is, the interaction between the social and the spatial aspects of this practice. The few studies that have been conducted in relation to CPS focus on issues such as the multiplicity of roles implicated in the practice (Denicolo, 2004), the relationship between the colleagues in the practice (Kirton et al., 2011) and the completion of the study in this relationship (Baguley *et al.*, 2018). Limited socio-spatial analyses of CPS are surprising because such analyses have been found necessary for many issues in higher education, such as institutional identity (Ağlargöz, 2017), mistrust and managerialism (Madikizela-Madiya, 2018), changing perceptions from becoming a university community member (Pearsall *et al.*, 2015) and educational internationalisation (Pipitone and Raghavan, 2017).

Through a duoethnographic method (explained later) in this paper we use our experiences as data to analyse the socio-spatiality of CPS as we encountered it during our doctoral studies. We argue that CPS enables the production of space in conditions where such spatial production could be constrained. Similarly, when there is an interaction between institutional spatial configurations and social values, the opportunities for enhanced CPS are created. We believe that sharing our experiences about this argument can be a valuable resource for reflection where colleagues decide on CPS relationships.

Our doctoral studies were supervised at different institutional contexts. Author N was at an open distance learning (ODL) institution, where the supervisor had no office

on campus, but worked from home. As such, the face-to-face supervision meetings would be in the author's office. Author J was at a contact institution, where the supervisor had a residential unit on campus. Our reflections are based on these contextual conditions.

The paper begins by providing a conceptual analysis of space, with reference to Lefebvre (1991) and other spatial theorists. The second section reviews literature on the relevance of space in PGS. In the third section, we define duoethnography as a research design that we followed to develop data for this paper. Next, we present our reflections on the experienced CPS relationships and we discuss them in relation to the existing literature and the conceptual framework. The final section presents the conclusions and recommendations for further research and practice.

### **Conceptualising space**

Our use of the concept 'space' is influenced by Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the production of space. According to Lefebvre, production is not only an economic or a social process that takes place in space, but space itself is produced through social actions, relations and interactions. Lefebvre (1991, p. 38) identifies three moments in the production of space: the spatial practice, the representations of space, and the representational space. Spatial practice refers to the daily routines which slowly give an identity to that space. For example, a room is called an office because of the practices that take place in that room. The representations of space refer to the conceptions or imaginations about space, as presented through maps, plans, designs and policies. This dimension is dominated by ideologies and conceptions about what space is suitable for the users. The representational space is the moment of experience; the lived space according to the users. It is the "space which the imagination seeks to change and

appropriate” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Lefebvre refers to the representational space as the space of the users.

Some scientists have engaged and interpreted Lefebvre’s propositions. For example, Molotch (1993, p. 887) states that Lefebvre’s conception of space means that “humans create the space in which they make lives”. In other words, as Massey (2008, p. 24) posits, space is not just a surface or land that stretches for us to cross, but “a dimension of multiple trajectories [and] a simultaneity of stories”. These stories and trajectories are subjective and construct uniqueness in space. Within a similar understanding, Soja (1980) differentiates between the contextual space and the created space. Contextual space is composed of the given, concrete, and objective properties that make it a “container of human life” (Soja, 1980, p. 209). However, “the organisation, use, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience” (Soja, 1980, p. 210). That is, the created space.

These conceptions of created and produced space are hardly the way people think about space. When space as a concept is mentioned, the first thought is the contextual space. As such, unlike ‘social’, ‘political’, ‘economic’ and ‘historical’, ‘spatial’ is hardly associated with human action, but it “evokes the image of something physical and external to the social context and to social action” (Soja, 1980, p. 210). Yet, the “social and spatial relationships are dialectically inter-reactive, inter-dependent” (Soja, 1980, p. 211). Allen (1999, p. 250) argues that there should be no mistake of regarding space as “a calculus for the linear production of thinking, behaviour, or social location in some teleological, deterministic way”. While social interactions and interrelations produce space, space shapes people’s interactions and interrelations (Massey, 2008).

Some researchers use this socio-spatial dialectic (Soja, 1980) to refer to larger geographical actions and relationships, such as the discourses on nationalisation or

globalisation. Our notion, however, is that the production of space can take place at a micro level such as the institution, a department or an office, which creates special socio-spatial practices and relations. According to Leitner *et al.* (2008, p. 307) such micro spaces uncover or reveal the dynamicity of the social beings. These authors argue, “Individuals may choose, whether consciously or otherwise, to present a certain aspect(s) of their individual and social identities in particular spatial contexts.” Our experiences in CPS relationships implicated these socio-spatial suggestions and we wanted to explore the topic further, to understand how it relates to the general PGS practice.

### **Methodology**

In writing this paper, we followed a duoethnographic research design. Duoethnography is a qualitative design in which researchers dialogically present and explore their lived experiences of a topic and critique and question the meanings they give to those experiences (Lowe and Kiczowski, 2016, p. 4; Sawyer and Norris, 2013, p. 2). We considered duoethnography the best design as we dialogically reflect together on the experiences of being supervised by our colleagues. Our reflection is meant “to create evocative and specific representations of the culture/cultural experience and to give audiences a sense of how being there in the experience feels” (Adams *et al.*, 2017, p. 1). In other words, we are explicit about our subjectivities, assumptions and perspectives regarding the CPS (Sawyer and Norris, 2013, p. 2). Thus, our lived experiences are “sites of analysis of socio-cultural meanings and influences” with “our perceptions, representations, and changing perceptions in the dialogic process [as] the objects of our research” (Sawyer and Norris, 2013, p. 2).

As we were engaging with our conversations as data for this paper, we realised that they could address two questions which were not necessarily predetermined. The

questions were: What kind of spaces did we and our supervisors produce during the CPS processes? How did we and our supervisors create spaces for the practices in contexts and how did spaces influence our practices?

### ***Data generation***

We constructed the narratives of our experiences of the CPS through varied forms of conversations. We started conversing at a workshop in 2014 while we were still doctoral candidates. From that first conversation, we decided to develop a paper for a postgraduate supervision conference in 2015, a process that took place through email interactions. Although that paper did not materialise, the conversations resumed in 2018 when we met face-to-face during the seminar of a research project on the dynamics of space, which was led by one of us. After that seminar, we continued conversing through emails and face-to-face meetings as co-investigators in the research project. In 2019 we decided to develop this paper among others from the research project. We started recording our verbal conversations and dialogues and filing the emails for further reflection.

According to Sawyer and Norris (2013), duoethnographers do not seek commonalities in the collaborative interpretation of their stories and memories, but differences. In our case, however, we do not exclude the commonalities because we intend to develop and co-construct a better understanding of both the commonalities and the differences towards common conclusions about space and CPS. At the same time, our reflection is not ignorant of the principles of trustworthiness which are as applicable to duoethnography as they are in all research methodologies.

### ***Trustworthiness in duoethnography***

The principles of trustworthiness in qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). In our paper, these principles are intermingled in our explicit, subjective, vulnerable and honest narratives about our experiences. We followed Breault's (2016, p. 779) "tenets of duoethnography" by, first ensuring that we do not focus the analysis to ourselves as the topics of research. Rather our experiences are the subject of analysis for a better understanding of the dynamics of space in relation to the CPS. Second, we are "dialogic" and "polyvocal" in our reflection by ensuring that each of our voices and stories is explicit and juxtaposed to the other. Third, we avoid the possible metanarrative of any of us by sticking to the dialogue and polyvocality. Fourth, Breault warns against forgetting the crucial aspect of duoethnography which is to be interrogative and disruptive. As such we interrogate each other on the differences and similarities in the experiences of the CPS. Fifth, we are careful not just to retell the stories of our past experiences, but to "question the meanings about and invite reconceptualisation of that past" (Breault, 2016, p. 779). We do this by critically analysing our reflections to identify themes of their meanings from which we draw conclusions.

In addition, we requested academics in our fields to critique the paper. Among these were our former supervisors whom we believed would identify biases and other possible inconsistencies. The feedback we received was not used as data, but for reflection on the quality of our contribution.

### **Reflections on our experiences of colleague postgraduate supervision**

The conversation between us started when N asked J where his study was registered. J indicated that the study was registered at his university, in his department. N

also shared that she and her supervisor were in the same college where her study was registered. J then said, “My supervisor and I are not only in the same department, but we share an office.” That was the turning point of the conversation because N’s doctoral study was on the role of higher education spaces in the construction of academic identities at a university. Therefore, she was drawn to J’s story of sharing an office with the supervisor, which also drew J’s attention and interest to the topic.

Six themes were identified from our reflection: (1) Trust, compassion and care in CPS space, (2) proximity and relationships in CPS do not alter spatial practice, (3) the dialectical space for CPS, (4) subtle power dynamics in CPS, (5) special benefits in CPS and (6) tensions in CPS.

### **Trust, Compassion and care in colleague postgraduate supervision**

In some universities, the development of infrastructure is not in proportion to the growing number of students and staff. Particularly, the provision of office space for academics is insufficient (see Madikizela-Madiya and Le Roux, 2017; Madikizela-Madiya, 2018). This situation is a contextual space (Soja, 1980) in these universities. However, our reflection indicates that trust, compassion and care can outrun such contextual situations in producing favourable spaces for CPS. We identified these values from the following conversation.

N: J, you told me that you shared an office space with your supervisor. Was this the choice that the two of you made, or was it because of a shortage of office space in the university?

J: The shortage of space may not be over-emphasised here, but I was new in the department and did not know many people. I was welcomed by this senior colleague who offered me a sitting space in his office. The school’s higher degrees



committee took advantage of the fact that we were already sharing the office, and they selected him to supervise my study.

Our joint interpretation of J's reflection is that it shows a socio-spatial scenario. While the contextual space in this institution could condition J and his colleagues' practices differently, compassion and care (the social values) became a foundation for the creation of the CPS relationship. On the other hand, the contextual space (insufficiency) led to the sharing of the office on the foundation of compassion and care. The higher degrees committee acted on the already existing space which had been produced through the social interaction between the two colleagues. The office space, which could have been understood as a container for the two colleagues to sit and work, was translated, organised and transformed into a space of a different rhythm (Lefebvre, 1991); a space for a CPS relationship.

However, it was also interesting to observe the affirmation of Massey's (2008) argument that space is a cluster of stories and trajectories and that it cannot be taken for granted. This observation emerged from the following conversation about the relations between the colleagues who shared an office.

***Proximity and relationships in colleague postgraduate supervision do not alter spatial practice***

In our experience, proximity and the relationship in CPS did not alter the normative daily office practices of the colleagues. Instead, the colleagues produced the space through ongoing interaction (Zygouris-Coe and Roberts, 2019), communication, negotiation and trust. This situation became evident in the following conversation.

N: I suppose it was good to share an office with your supervisor, J, because you could talk to him about your study at any time. I would have loved that for my

study because, you know, doing a PhD can be a very lonely experience. Sometimes you want to share ideas that come to your mind about your topic with someone. But there is no one who will understand you, not the same way as your supervisor can.

J: No, N! On the contrary, I would make an appointment like any other postgraduate student. I also thought that I would be that lucky, but no.

N: Oh, really?

J: Yes, my PhD research meeting with him was on appointment, and not in the office, but at his home on campus.

The proximity between the supervisor and the supervisee did not necessarily produce an advantage for the author in this case. He was one of the postgraduate students and was treated as such. However, at face value, the observer would miss these trajectories (Massey, 2008) and assume that there was daily supervision in that office while these colleagues produced a controlled space in which their office was not to be used as a supervision room. However, our analysis showed dialectics or contradictions in the dynamics of the production of space for CPS.

### **The dialectical space for colleague postgraduate supervision**

While proximity did not alter the spatial practices in J's office, N and her supervisor created a face-to-face supervision space in an ODL context. Similarly, J and his supervisor also created an alternative space to avoid working on his study in the office they shared. These were dialectic spatial arrangements where both space and people were not deterministic of each other. The conversation continued:

N: Well, I really assumed you were at a better space than me. For me, my office was our meeting place because my supervisor did not have an office on campus.

I would organise the meetings for the days when she would be on campus. Other than that, our communication was through emails... Did you say you were supervised at your supervisor's home?

J: Yes. Fortunately, his home was in the university and with a good academic environment. He is elderly, so no babies would be running around the house. We had maximum concentration while at his home.

Both these narratives show the dialectics of space. N and her supervisor did not allow the ODL condition, in which some students never meet their supervisors face-to-face, to dictate their relationship. We see the CPS relationship as having made this arrangement possible because if N was in a different work environment as a student, she would possibly not have been able to allow supervision (a personal practice) in her office (the employer's space) during working hours. Similarly, J and his colleague supervisor created space. While it is not impossible for supervisors to invite their students to their homes, we believe that this possibility was strengthened by the CPS relationship in this case because J later commented, "... I would meet my supervisor any day we agreed to meet, but the politics of the university would make it difficult for the other students to meet him all the time they needed to." Therefore, in both cases, "the social and spatial relationships are dialectically interactive and interdependent" (Soja, 1980, p. 211). These were micro spatial (Leitner *et al.*, 2008) arrangements where colleagues' relationships were not determined by the contextual spaces.

### ***Special benefits in colleague postgraduate supervision***

The PGS literature identifies benefits in the practice in relation to different supervision models and practices (Bitzer and Albertyn, 2011; O'Neil *et al.*, 2016; Rambe and Mkono, 2018; Snowden and Halsall, 2018). This literature, however, does not pay

much attention to the benefits we identified as we reflected on our experiences of the CPS. We realised that we enjoyed special benefits from the relationships as compared to other graduate students in our contexts. The first benefit we identified was what we refer to as multiple supervision due to the supervisor's presence, which we identified from the following reflections.

N: It was an advantage for me to be a colleague to the supervisor. You know, at my university, some students never meet their supervisors until the graduation day, some never do, because of the ODL context. She [the supervisor] did not have to meet me anywhere. But my advantage was the fact that, according to the university policy, she had to be on campus, where my office was, for at least once a week.

J: I see. As far as I am concerned, that was a real advantage for you because I consider the physical meetings important. There is a lot you learn from facial expressions and explanations ...

N: Exactly. That is true, J. I would not have had that opportunity and I attribute it to having a colleague for a supervisor in an ODL context.

We reflected on this talk and realised that the ODL as a space for distance PGS determines the engagement between the supervisor and the student, as identified by the researchers (Lessing and Schulze, 2003; Manyike, 2017; Nasiri and Mafakheri, 2015). In this context, many students lose out on learning from facial and verbal clues as mentioned by J. Due to financial and social reasons, some students are not even able to attend the research seminars that the university often organises. However, N, her supervisor and the policy conditions produced a space within that context and she benefitted from that space. We understand the possibilities that technology can offer for such meetings in the ODL

context, but N benefitted in both technological and physical engagements because of the CPS.

The second benefit is the double identity in which one is both a student and a staff member. For example, N continued to say,

N: I am not able to think how it would have been like if we met in [the supervisor's] office at work. But in my office, I could easily search the internet as we were talking or would log into the library website to check the availability of the books we mentioned in the discussion. So, I really thought I was at a better position compared to my fellow students. I could imagine them struggling to connect [to the internet] even if they would want to do the same as I did.

We compared this reflection to that of J's accessibility to the supervisor's home for supervision and they both led us to conclude that multiple identities of students in the CPS bear special benefits for them. We also realised that the issue of multiple identities did not only apply to us as students in the CPS relationships, but we also identified it from the supervisors. The following situation emerged from J's reflection:

J: My supervisor was both intimidating, friendly and fatherly to me in the shared office.

N: I would have thought that to be friendly and fatherly meant his authority was not intimidating. But a combination of fatherly and intimidating does not make sense to me. Can you explain this further?

J: My professor was intimidating in terms of his scholarly accomplishments as well as his high level of scholarship, ethics and integrity. All my life I had desired to be supervised by a person that I would never take for-granted. He was a [discipline] household name, not only in the country but also on the [X] continent,

yet fatherly. He would counsel, guide and connect me to further my scholarship potentials.

From J's comment, we learnt that although the supervision process was occurring in the office, the authority figure of the supervisor was intimidating (in a positive sense) daily. The calibre and the daily presence of the supervisor were a form of supervision through indirect monitoring. Therefore, we realised that while literature identifies PGS as pedagogy (Emilsson and Johnsson, 2007; Manathunga, 2012; Winberg and Winberg, 2018), the indirect learning that we experienced because of being in the same spaces with the supervisors were not much part of the discourse.

The third benefit we identified from our reflections on CPS was the ability to make informed decisions in choosing supervisors. Abigail and Hill (2015) argue that students who choose appropriate supervisors are more likely to succeed in completing their doctoral studies. This statement, however, does not suggest that those who do not choose supervisors always fail; the university committees allocate students to suitable supervisors anyway (Mouton *et al.*, 2015). However, based on the reflection below, our subjective view was that to be an insider in choosing the supervisor was beneficial.

N: In my institution, students can choose who they prefer to supervise their studies. But, if you do not know the possible supervisors personally, you would still choose a wrong one.

J: Students did not have a choice in my institution, but I think I could try to change my supervisor if I wanted to because I was a colleague to the higher degrees committee members. However, I was satisfied with the choice they made for me because he was very strict as a supervisor and he kept his word. I liked that ...

N: Well, my supervisor and I had a collegial relationship before I was her student. We supervised a master's student together (a student who disappeared on us) and

we organised an international conference. We worked in the same academic committee. We worked well together, and I realised that she could make a good supervisor for me. In fact, same as yours, she was a strict character and I thought that would be a perfect trait for me to complete my study on time.

These reflections speak to the dialectic nature of the spaces in which we were supervised (Soja, 1980). The CPS relationship made it possible for us to produce the spaces of our supervision by identifying the traits we needed from the supervisors. In turn, the contextual conditions, in which we were both staff and students, allowed us to get the supervisors with those traits.

However, having colleagues as supervisors did not always allow our experiences to be positive. Some decisions and actions displeased us.

### *Tensions in colleague postgraduate supervision*

While the three moments of space as identified by Lefebvre (1991) are interlinked and overlapping, the representations of space became clear when we had disagreements with our supervisors. We both had unfavourable encounters with our supervisors. For professional reasons, some of those encounters are omitted in the paper, but we view the few that are mentioned in the conversations below as informative enough for reflections.

J: Would you identify the most unpleasant situations that you encountered from the supervision arrangement?

N: Well, I was offended sometimes when my supervisor kept my work for longer than I expected and when I emailed to remind her, the response would indicate that she expected me to understand why she was late.

J: In what way?

N: I remember one time when she told me that she was busy writing a paper in preparation for a conference and she had other students to supervise. My thought was, 'Why should I be the one to wait?' I thought this happened because I was also an academic, a colleague who might understand the pressure under which we all worked.

J: Probably, but I agree that the response you received sounded more of a colleague-to-colleague than a supervisor-to-student.

From this reflection, both N and the supervisor had conceptions or imaginations about how each should act in the CPS. Our view is that such imaginations could be related to the space that they shared; the academic space.

N: So, what were your unpleasant moments?

J: In my case, I needed to have submitted two papers for publication from my study by the time of finishing my thesis. When I approached my supervisor to guide me on preparing a manuscript from the study, he advised that I concentrate on the thesis and work on manuscripts later. That put me under intense pressure.

N: Well, he knew better.

J: Secondly, at a time I thought I was ready to alert the university of my intention to submit my thesis, my supervisor did not think I was ready to submit. This too put me under pressure and uncertainty of completion and raised my anxiety levels.

N: I do not think that your experience had much to do with being colleagues with the supervisor. I think, he would do the same for any student, if the study was not ready for submission.

J: I know now. I guess I had wrong expectations that our proximity would make him tell me that the study was not ready, before I indicated my intention to submit.



When we reflected further on J's comment, we realised that it was the wrong impression and expectations he had from the CPS that caused the anxiety and not necessarily the supervisor's response. From this reflection, we identified experience and expertise as a space that the supervisor created to ensure the success of the author's thesis.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

We drew four conclusions from this duoethnography. First, space matters in PGS but it is not always sufficient due to institutional contextual conditions. However, in a CPS relationship it is possible to produce the necessary space through shared values such as trust, compassion and care. While the representations of space (in the form of contextual conditions) could dictate the spatial practices (in the form of supervision relationships presented in this paper's narratives), it was also possible to produce a lived and favourable space through these shared values. Thus, we recommend that the supervisors and supervisees in the CPS relationships should not overlook its socio-spatiality within the contextual conditions.

Second, students enter the CPS relationships with impressions and expectations that may either prove true or cause disappointments and anxiety. This situation can create misunderstandings and it has the potential for strained relationships between the supervisor and the supervisees in the CPS. We recommend that students should not expect favours from their colleague supervisors because CPS may not necessarily alter the normative spatial practices between the supervisor and the student. Third, there are special benefits for students in the CPS relationships, including multiple supervision opportunities, multiple identities, and the ability to make informed choices and decisions. For example, the supervisor's presence and the facial expressions during supervision meetings are forms of supervision which we assume, based on our experiences, are more

possible in CPS than in other relationships. The presence of the supervisor mentors the student indirectly and the facial expressions can create opportunities for rethinking the expressions in the study. Thus, we recommend that both the students and the supervisors should consider that space for face-to-face meetings cannot be disregarded, even though doctoral candidates can work independently. This recommendation applies to both contact and ODL contexts.

The fourth conclusion is that the CPS can place the supervisees at a disadvantage if the supervisors expect them to understand and be mindful of the pressures of academia when the studies are delayed. Therefore, to avoid possible conflict, the supervisors and the supervisees may discuss the terms of the supervision process even if they are in a CPS relationship. The relationship may not be taken for granted.

In closing, we point out that this paper is based on our personal and subjective experiences. We believe that talking to other academics who experienced CPS could produce more knowledge regarding the dynamics of this practice. Yet, the knowledge we shared in the paper points to the socio-spatiality of postgraduate supervision in CPS. It indicates that while postgraduate students are mainly capable of working independently of their supervisors, sharing spaces still provides possibilities for better learning and reflection during the doctoral studies. Therefore, this paper can assist in answering the question, ‘Should my colleague be my supervisor/student?’

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