

**Lost sleep and triumphant moments: emotion in learning to supervise (0106)****Background:**

The experiences of early career academics who are new to doctoral supervision are not well documented. Those who have recounted their experience report it as being hard work, undertaken with minimal training and practised as a solitary pursuit (Amundsen and McAlpine, 2009; Turner, 2010). Furthermore, they reveal that their learning of supervision was acquired informally, influenced significantly by their own time as a doctoral student, by co-supervision, and their relationship with their own supervisees (Turner, 2011). Overall they found they were ill-equipped and unprepared for their experience.

**Theoretical framework:**

In contemporary higher education logic and rationality are seen to be privileged above emotion (e.g. Johnson *et al*, 2000). Many prevailing theories of learning and teaching emphasise cognitive processes at the expense of the affective (e.g. constructivist approaches, Biggs, 1996; the experiential learning cycle, Kolb 1984; deep and surface learning, Marton and Saljo, 1976). And in educational development work with doctoral supervisors there is a tendency to concentrate on those aspects of supervision whose nature is relational (supervisor-student relationship), technical (e.g. giving feedback), procedural (e.g. upgrade) or administrative (e.g. central progress monitoring), rather than emotional. In contrast to these views and approaches, there is a literature which proposes and supports the existence and importance of emotion in academia, including in doctoral supervision. For instance, Neumann (2006) suggests that scholarship is emotional; Firth and Martens (2008) that emotion is not lacking in current supervision practices; and Manathunga (2005) that the affective domain should be, and in some programmes is, included in development work with supervisors. However, this literature either attends to emotion in the broad sphere of academic work or situates it primarily within the doctoral process itself, rather than within the supervisor's experience. What, if anything, a supervisor feels whilst engaging in doctoral supervision is under-examined, especially in the case of early career academics who are new to doctoral supervision. Consequently, the potential impact of a supervisor's emotional experience on their supervisory development and practice is invisible.

**Aims**

This paper considers what early career academics new to doctoral supervision feel when engaged in doctoral supervision, and how any emotional experiences may impact on the development of their supervisory practice or sense of efficacy of being a supervisor.

**Participants, data collection and analysis**

ECAs with no more than six years research supervision experience and currently supervising at least one doctoral student were recruited from one UK research-intensive university, either from lists of individuals who had attended introductory supervision seminars or via academics who had graduate training responsibilities. Eleven new supervisors volunteered representing

four disciplines – social sciences, humanities, medical sciences, and physical sciences. Each participant was sent a pre-interview questionnaire to provide background information on their experience as research supervisors, and then interviewed, at a time and location convenient to them. The interviews were transcribed then analysed for content of an emotional nature; both emotive words and the context in which such words were found were noted.

## **Findings**

All supervisors expressed feelings about their supervisory experience, revealing both positive and negative aspects of their emotional encounters. In relation to their supervisees they felt “proud”, “pleased”, “impressed”, “relieved”, “happy”, “deep satisfaction”, “delighted”, “enthused”, “surprised”, “optimistic” or “inspiration” when a student progressed in their studies; they were “worried”, “frustrated” or felt “anxiety”, “panic” if a student was struggling. In relation to their role as a supervisor they found it “worrying”, “frightening”, “stressful” or were “anxious” or “concerned” about not knowing whether they were doing a good job; had a “sense of responsibility” for getting things right; and felt “disappointment”, “aghost”, “irritation” when they, or co-supervisors, let students down. And, overall, their concern about their abilities as a supervisor predominated, feeling “inexperienced” and “unprepared”, and facing these in secret: “I don’t know if many people here would openly say it...”

Some supervisors also revealed how emotional events or outcomes impacted on the development of their supervisory practice or sense of efficacy as a supervisor. For instance, Ed was propelled into taking action to improve a co-supervisory arrangement because he “was fed up with losing sleep” over a system which was doing a disservice both to the student and to his own well-being; Brad felt validated and reassured in what he was doing as a supervisor when he experienced a “triumphant moment” as a result of his student winning a major academic prize.

## **Conclusions**

The existence and importance of feelings in the experience of doctoral supervisors should not be ignored.

Becoming a supervisor is an emotional journey consisting of a mixture of ups and downs, not necessarily in equal measures. For early career academics new to doctoral supervision it is largely unexpected. Furthermore, it seems that such emotional engagement is sometimes a prerequisite of learning the practice of supervision and knowing oneself to be competent in the role.

The implications for educational development initiatives, and even mentoring, of new doctoral supervisors are two-fold. Firstly, it is important to flag up the likelihood that their experience will be an emotional one, and especially one that contains a degree of anxiety and stress; advising of the potential emotional nature of that experience would be one way of forewarning them that they are likely to encounter a “trial by fire” (Amundsen and McAlpine, 2009) but that this is a common experience. Secondly, it is important to note that these emotional experiences can have a direct impact on supervisory development. In these examples their emotional experiences led to the “discernment” of a new way forward or the “creation” of a new sense of self-understanding (Neumann, 2005). However, it is well-known that emotions also can have a detrimental effect on performance (e.g. anxiety can affect memory, concentration, attainment, well-being). Encouraging new supervisors to

acknowledge their emotions and to reflect on the situations giving rise to them might aid how they tackle difficulties and perceive success, thus aiding development of both their practice and their sense of competence as supervisors.

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