

Chapter

The Art of 'Sensitive' Supervision: Supporting, Sharing and Strengthening

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Abstract

The dynamic nature of research processes can mean even researchers who are highly experienced may struggle to make the transition towards supporting students working on similar topics. In sensitive research, the emotional responses we bring to these areas, mean effective and safe supervision are essential for robust and effective doctoral level study. In this chapter, three experienced doctoral supervisors will share their personal experiences of supervising students across a range of sensitive subjects, from suicide attempts and self-harm, to end of life care. The focus of this work are firsthand, revealing reflections on the challenges of this type of supervision, including issues related to setting realistic expectations, re-traumatization, boundary maintenance and risk management in both students and participants. Throughout the chapter, we also provide practical suggestions that can guide academics embarking upon this type of work, or those who want to learn more about how to better support their students.

Keywords:

Sensitive research; reflexivity; qualitative methods; emotional risk; thesis supervision

Introduction

The challenges of post-graduate supervision are well documented: the shift in role and the lack of formal training beyond the administrative role of supervision can mean many supervisors struggle to provide support to their students (Andrew et al, 2019). Students may also have multiple supervisors, each with their own approach and varying levels of experience and competence, leading one study to conclude that “accountability must be considered in expertise development program planning and decision-making” (Bazrafkan *et al.*, 2019: p.1).

As many of the contributions in this collection attest to, in sensitive research, the individual nature of research encounters and processes, in combination with the emotional responses we bring to these areas, mean effective and safe supervision are essential for robust and effective doctoral level study. However, even after many years of fieldwork as a researcher in a 'sensitive' area, some academics may struggle to transition towards supporting students working in similarly challenging areas. This chapter will explore how even a very knowledgeable and experienced academic can feel unexpectedly vulnerable within a supervisory team, particularly if their own experience of being supervised took place prior to some of the more recent acknowledgements of the emotional tensions of this work (Borgstrom, Mallon and Murphy, 2022).

In the chapter, three experienced supervisors share their personal experiences of supervising students across a range of sensitive subjects, from suicide attempts and self-harm, experiences of illness, to end of life care, and bereavement. It provides honest reflections on the challenges of this type of supervision, including issues related to setting realistic expectations, re-traumatisation, boundary maintenance and risk management for both students and participants. We conclude with a commentary that encourages supervisors to consider a framework of 'Sharing, Supporting and Strengthening' when embarking upon supervising this type of work.

Sensitive research and supervision: Some background

The literature base advising supervisors on how best to oversee doctoral level studies has grown considerably over the past two decades. Early texts focused on the individual tasks of supervision, with the various stages of a thesis being treated as distinct areas, each with their own challenges (Wisker, 2004; Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 2004). However, there has been a noticeable shift towards texts with extended commentaries acknowledging the inherently 'messy' nature of doctoral-level study. These include first-hand accounts from students who have "happily and successfully" made it through their studies but are willing to speak frankly about the challenges of what are described as "complicated, rewarding experience(s)" (Peabody, 2014 p.ix). This emergence has gone hand in hand with an increasing awareness of, and concern about, the levels of mental health distress among doctoral students (Jackson, Sanderson and Jacobs, 2021).

Thankfully, the recent discussion of the stresses has been far from simplistic and has included an acknowledgement that supervising students researching sensitive topics, is likely to involve responding to multi-layered responses (Mallon and Elliott, 2021). Collectively and individually, we have written about the emotional consequences for researchers involved in sensitive research (See Borgstrom, Mallon and

Murphy, 2022 for a discussion; see also Chapter (Esmee) in this volume). Our analysis suggested these researchers' sensitivities were closely linked to the context of the research. In addition, they described how issues of identity, as well as political motivations, meant there was a strong personal and professional investment in the research. Included in these accounts are details of how to manage participants' emotional reactions, and how this can overlap or diverge from that of the researcher (Jones and Murphy, 2022). One recent scoping review of dissertations and theses identified a risk of secondary distress for graduate students who are conducting qualitative research on sensitive subjects (Orr, Durepos and Jack, 2021). The same study also highlighted that less than 5% ($n = 11$) of the dissertations they reviewed included a plan to mitigate psychological risk to the researcher.

The need to actively plan to minimise the risk of emotional distress is something we have been actively working to highlight (See Mallon and Elliott, 2019). The responsibilities of universities to support early career researchers has also been highlighted by Velarado and Elliott (2021), who suggest that current research training processes and university support structures are not robust enough to protect novice researchers. Jackson, Sanderson and Jacobs (2021) suggest developing inductions to support mental health and wellbeing is key. Similarly, one of the authors of this chapter (SM) has drawn upon data from a roundtable with twelve researchers working across a range of 'sensitive' research areas to highlight how the academy might proactively work to improve the support that is provided to these students (Mallon and Elliott, 2021). This paper included guidance for supervisors; it is widely acknowledged that the supervision process is the dominant way in which the socialization of doctoral students into academia takes place (Andrew et al, 2019). Notably, few students see themselves as active agents in developing their own networks (McAlpine, Castello and Pyhältö, 2020). Significantly, empirical research has provided important knowledge about the different types of mentorship experiences in doctoral supervision, revealing how this can influence students' well-being (Al Makhamreh and Stockley, 2020). It is difficult to argue against the notion that supervision is a key part of the support that is needed by students. Some have focused, as we do in this chapter, on how successful supervisors can use their experience to ensure they help students avoid some of the worst mistakes and pitfalls of work in this area (Delamont et al, 2004). Here, each of us presents a narrative of our own experiences using it to reflect upon our concerns about the support provided to these researchers, including through their supervision processes.

Supervisor Narratives

Erica's Narrative: Being open to challenging assumptions

I have been researching palliative and end-of-life care for nearly 15 years; over that time, I have undertaken my own PhD and supervised, advised, examined, and mentored many others. Here, I discuss an aspect often not covered in PhD proposals (and sometimes not even the theses) on this topic – doctoral researcher wellbeing. Before I begin, I want to caveat that I do not presume that everyone will find every aspect of palliative, end-of-life, or death/dying research emotionally difficult; however, it can bring up a range of issues for individuals that they may not have considered before, including their own and other's mortality. Coupled with the stresses of doing doctoral work, what can feel like existential threats or even enlightenment can impact the doing of doctoral work, including fieldwork, communicating with supervisors, and writing the thesis or for publication. After sharing a personal experience, I use three examples to show the types of issues that can arise and how I approach them. I do not offer them up as 'perfect solutions' but as a way to think about how we support researchers, especially during the doctoral phase.

Let me first start with a personal example. Before my PhD, I was hired as a research assistant on an 8-month contract (See Borgstrom *et al.*, 2010, 2013, 2016). My job was to analyse 200 plus essays written by medical students after they had met dying patients. They were asked to reflect on the encounter, both in terms of what they would do professionally and how it impacted them personally. I remember one team meeting when someone remarked how 'difficult' it was for these medical students to do these visits and essays. The presumption was that it was difficult because 'death is difficult' and the students were young, with presumably little personal experience of death. The comment stuck with me as no one asked how it was for me to read the vivid accounts and hold space for the emotions shared. It especially struck me because the age of the students was explicitly stated as a reason for this suspected 'difficulty,' yet I was the same age. This encounter taught me much about assumptions that operate in 'sensitive' research and the presumed distance one has during analytical processes. Since then, I have sought to understand and question such assumptions and consider how experiences influence how we make sense of data, ourselves, and our own being in the world.

Now, in my own practice, one of the things I like to do early on when supervising someone is ask what support system they tend to have around themselves, whether this be people, practices, groups, or routines. This can require a bit of trust between us to have already been established, especially if they realise they have not thought about this before or if they feel unsupported by those who may be

considered ‘close to them.’ If they mention specific people, it can be helpful to query whether they’ve discussed issues around death and dying before with them – while some may have those they feel they can ‘share everything with,’ it turns out that sometimes they may still feel reserved about some topics, or view death as a ‘societal taboo’ (a view I try to help them challenge through the research). Many doctoral programmes require training alongside the research, and where appropriate, we develop training ideas or plans that may explicitly or implicitly strengthen their support systems.

Another issue that is not uncommon, especially given the length of doctoral studies, is managing personal loss while studying about dying and death. What this looks like, and how it impacts the student will vary for each person and the context(s) they find themselves in. During my own PhD, I experienced several family bereavements and took some time (as an informal break) to care for my dying grandmother in the USA shortly after I had finished data collection about end-of-life care in the UK. Some students may need to have a study break to care for others or to have some time off following a bereavement; this can be a helpful strategy to reduce doctoral study programme expectations, but it can raise other issues in terms of longer-term (student) concerns about progress and financial strain if study breaks are unfunded. Discussing these options and having ‘return to study’ conversations can support students experiencing loss. Regardless of the amount of time away from study, it is constructive to remember that there can be what I call ‘tentacles’ of grief – long, perhaps at times stuck, trails of feelings and impacts that last beyond the initial death and bereavement period. This can show up in doctoral studies as something that impacts motivation or focus or can make specific project-related tasks (such as data collection or analysis) emotionally complicated. Not everyone can be self-aware that grief can have such impacts, so it can be helpful to have non-judgmental ways of discussing loss and to know where to direct students should they benefit from conversations that extend beyond the student-supervisor relationship.

The last example I want to highlight is similar to the previous one, but the loss or experience occurred before the studies began and may indeed be why someone took up the doctoral study in the first place – a kind of personal motivation driving the research. Here, I have encountered students who are steadfast in their assumptions about how things are in their area of study (often based on their experience) and may struggle to ‘unpack,’ question, or challenge these, whether that be in their supervision, their analysis, or even their writing. There can be psychological and emotional safety in holding one’s beliefs as true. For supervisors, spotting when this is occurring is vital for helping the student learn how to critically reflect in a supportive manner. This can include teaching critical analysis on an unrelated topic first to embed the skills, encouraging reflective journaling, and exploring assumptions in

supervision. Sometimes exploring 'how would you feel if your data did not support this idea' early on in training can prepare students to be open to multiple interpretations and to practice how they respond in a relatively supportive space (as compared to at a conference or in an oral exam/viva).

Sharon's Narrative: Wisdom not trauma

I struggled throughout my PhD studies but feel that much has changed since this time; both individually in my personal understanding of the experience, but also collectively in how we as academics respond to and understand researchers' emotions in sensitive research. At the time of doing my research, I felt I had to remain largely silent about how tortured I felt by the writing process and the challenging subject matter. I hope that by writing honestly and reflectively about my experiences, I have contributed to this change.

Here, I want to focus on areas of personal change and professional development that I noted have been most useful to my reflective practice as supervisor; this includes a range of subject areas related to mental health, but the bulk of the reflection undertaken here relates to those who are studying in areas related to self-harm and suicide.

My first learning point is that the creation of knowledge that takes place is often not only in relation to the topic, but also in relation to the students' understanding of themselves, including their reaction to the subject under study. While there is increasing awareness of the impact of this type of work on the researcher, it can be more difficult to predict how and when students might be impacted. This may be partly because as Erica has already indicated, unexpected life events may occur in the student's life which connect with the area being studied. However, you can never tell what part of the world will be dislocated in the efforts to examine the philosophy of knowledge itself, or the particular topic under investigation.

Related to this is the awareness that it is not necessarily just a research topic which makes a subject 'sensitive'. For example, when the topic is one that is as 'sensitive' as suicide, it is often assumed that providing support for students is dominated by managing emotions around the topic itself. However, one can never really know what emotions a PhD will bring forth. My personal PhD journey has allowed me to recognise that emotional naivety can sometimes be confused with emotional stability. This has been backed up by my experience of supervising students, as I have found that regardless of the mindset, resilience or fortitude of the student at the outset of the PhD journey, the reaction to the subject, over the length of time and depth of thought required for doctoral level study, can be unpredictable.

Exploring with the student where the sensitivity and emotional response are coming from is crucial – as is not making any assumptions about either resilience or vulnerability. Learning to listen and respond to emerging sensitivities is important in recognising that life events can perpetuate a reaction, or that the student may simply get ground down by the study, or by the meaning that is bound up in the doctorate. While this can be challenging to the inexperienced supervisor, with reflection and increasing confidence over the years, I have found this is part of the charming nature of supervising a student. I have an acceptance that one comes to *know about* something, and oneself, through doctoral study and that it is my job as supervisor to ensure that this knowledge is safely integrated into the lives of the student.

That said, sometimes a sensitive subject is challenging in all the ways you might imagine it to be. For example, my own doctoral work on suicide bereavement led to intrusive thoughts about suicide, dreams of those who had died, as well as a sense of existential hopelessness and futility that at times caused misery. I have found a similar pattern in some of my students; to see one's own painful experience played out repeatedly, particularly among students who display emotional resilience at the outset of projects, requires significant internal strength and compassion. Yet, it can be a tremendous strength if boundaries around your past emotions are in place, as one can utilize them to bring empathic sensitivity to the supervision encounter and conjure a sense of competence that can inspire the student in the management of their own emotions.

In order to support these students, and transfer wisdom not trauma, it is important that you make peace with your own experiences. I have reflected, at times with a therapist, on the psychological pain I experienced during my PhD. This has been invaluable in allowing me to supervise and engage with students, many of whom come to the area with the same passion. My supervisory relationship with students, works with my co-supervisors to make it clear that I reject the idea that engaging in sensitive research is ever an 'unemotional' task. I make it clear that within the boundaries of my role as supervisor, I have an expectation that emotional support is part and parcel of the work of them. This relies on students being encouraged to see the distinction between these traumatic lives and their own, to be reminded that the creation of knowledge is often the creation of hope.

Sam's narrative: On being kind in supervisory meetings

My own PhD was in stillbirth. I chose this subject due to my personal experience - I remember clearly being warned by a fellow student who told me 'not to do it' as she was worried for my wellbeing. I went ahead, albeit with a former therapist of mine on hand in case I needed her. In the event I found the PhD

study itself more traumatic than any revisiting of my own stillbirth experience, but at no point did I resort to counselling. In terms of the trauma of study, it was a lonely journey fraught with self-doubt and worry. At one point, I felt that the data I was collecting was something everyone would know anyway, so what was the point of it all? It was determination, motivation and sheer bloody-mindedness that got me through it. I was clear, then, that when being a supervisor myself I would be conscious of my students' sensibilities and be kind to them.

I hope that I have, to a certain extent, achieved this but I often reflect about what it means to be 'kind' in a supervisory relationship. The nature of the supervisor role is to engage with students and their projects, support them as they grapple with theories and methodologies, and challenge them when necessary. It is not our role to be their friend and they certainly don't have to like us! But that does not preclude being kind. While challenging a student might be relatively straightforward when supervising an innocuous subject, once the student is fully immersed with interviewing, analysing and reporting on subjects that cover dying, chronic illness and bereavement, I believe it becomes trickier to do. In terms of my experience, I believe this is because impartiality can never be achieved, especially where students have participants who they perceive to be like themselves or with whom they quickly bond. This can either mean they over-rely on particular participant(s) (a trap I fell into while a student) or, more worryingly, find it difficult to engage with data that is collected from people who remind them of themselves.

In circumstances where the students find themselves dealing with interviews and experiences which are 'too close to home', what does it mean to be kind? Is it to say 'don't worry, leave that interview out', or do you insist on that voice being included? The answer, of course, is easy: you have to insist on its use. The participant has given freely of their time, sometimes at an expense to themselves in respect of time, physical reserves and emotional energy. To respect that participant is to ensure their inclusion in the thesis and their voice to be heard.

Thus, what I want to reflect on here is not the nature of the messages that as supervisors you might have to deliver to students, but how we deliver those messages. You might already use phrases such as '*we understand how hard you've worked*' or '*obviously your ideas here are important*' to preface the difficult message you are about to give. However, by the time you reach the end of such phrases, students will then be expecting the 'but' that comes next. Such phrases are excellent, but once the difficult message is given, the supervisor needs to do to soften the blow. Our job is about constructive criticism not destructive, so the next step then is to help the student work positively to take and use the criticism. This, of course, has implications for all supervisors, no matter the topic, but we need to remember to be

kind to our students. To deliver those difficult messages with kindness, without brutality, is a skill in itself. So how to do that?

First, comes the understanding that the message being given might be difficult to hear. This requires the supervisor to have more than a cursory understanding of the student's positionality within the research. It also means that prior to meeting, the supervisor needs to have had time to reflect on the work submitted and, if there is a difficult conversation to be had, then to think about the messages to be given. This is not always easy in the academic world where many colleagues are overloaded with teaching and research. This is further compounded if delivering such news requires a meeting with other supervisors beforehand. While it is okay for supervisors to disagree within the meeting, there are some points at which they need to sing from the same hymn sheet. Hence, time to meet and discuss the approach needs to be carved out. I have had to do this with several students since being a supervisor, and these meetings have proved to be immensely useful. On occasion, it has meant that the problems I thought I saw were not as troublesome as I presumed, at other times the other supervisor has been relieved to mull over how best to feedback. Sometimes we have decided who will be 'bad cop' and who will be 'good cop' - dividing up who provides which kinds of feedback and support. I see nothing wrong with this approach as the student will need an ally in the meeting – and someone the student feels able to check in with later. Indeed, if it becomes a very difficult meeting, it is useful for one of the supervisors to check in with the student afterwards.

If problems are raised within the supervisory meeting itself, then supervisors need not rush in to comment. We are allowed thinking time too, and words said in haste cannot always be retracted later. It is a fine balance – at the same time as saying to a student that they need to improve, think differently, work harder etc., we also need to shore up their resilience and not break their confidence. We have a duty of care, indeed, we have many conflicting duties of care: not just to the student but to our fellow supervisors, the research community, the discipline within which we work and to the academy. Being kind to our students is not always easy, but it is an effort worth making. And a box of tissues in the meeting room is a never a bad shout.

Conclusion and future directions

Here, using personal testimony, we have identified key areas of tension when supervising a student who is doing research on a 'sensitive' topic. These included; being unable to protect students over the emotional challenges of this work, finding a balance between supporting and pushing, and responding to ongoing or emerging crisis and emotional sensitivity. Alongside, this is the recognition that there may be emotional challenges (expected and unexpected) and that as supervisors, one needs to be prepared for

this, particularly if the issue relates closely to one's own experiences. Additionally, students need kind support to enable them to progress and challenge their own assumptions, but many supervisors do not have training in how to do this effectively. Lastly, students may at times experience events and emotions that result in a crisis, and it is the role of the supervisor to help them navigate this to continue to be able to safely undertake their studies. In summary, we believe much of this work can be helpfully summed up using a framework of supporting, sharing and strengthening.

Supporting: Each of our narratives highlights how we each see emotional support as a crucial part of doctoral supervision. However, we acknowledge that this support is not solely the responsibility of the supervisor, rather they must also draw upon wider support systems, services, training plans, and those resources students can develop for themselves. In addition, we can appreciate that life events can happen during PhD that can impact upon even the most resilient student. Study breaks can be helpful but can also add other stressors. Sharing the wisdom we have about the consequences of each of these options is crucial in allowing students to make decisions.

Sharing: We should enter supervision relationships with an appreciation that, as we each were, students may be affected by what they study for a wide range of reasons, some of which they may not be able to self-identify but which they may come to appreciate through gentle sharing of our stories. In addition, we urge other supervisors to be mindful of assumptions in this area, in the sense that they must be at pains not to assume what topics will be sensitive and why/for whom. Rather, we must be open to exploring this within supervisions, role model what supportive care looks like, as well as challenge assumptions and learn how to think critically about topics that may be 'close to home'. Above all, we should be willing to listen and to share the load.

Strengthening: Finally, being a supervisor involves strengthening oneself, resolving past traumas and learning how to use them to encourage growth in others. We must also acknowledge that strengthening students comes hand in hand with being critical, but this does not preclude kindness, which is crucial to embedding and inducting our students into the academy.

We have several recommendations to support supervisors in this type of work.

1. Researchers should reflect upon their personal experiences of undertaking research to ensure boundaries are in place prior to the embarkation of supervision.
2. Supervisors should educate students on the support that their university, professional organisations and informal networks can offer.

3. Doctoral students should be encouraged to keep in contact with their peers, as well as researchers who work in the same or similar fields, for informal support.
4. Supervisors must work as a team to help support the student and recognise that at times the supervisor(s) may need some space from the project or topic.
5. Know that study breaks can be supportive but that they can have consequences for students that they may not be helpful (i.e. delayed deadlines or unfunded periods of study that can make the student financially precarious).
6. Supervisors should be aware that, while they need to be critical of their student's work, that does not preclude being kind to the student.
7. Help students challenge their own assumptions but also be willing to challenge one own's assumptions.
8. Finally, emotional support for these students is non-negotiable, they should be encouraged to make contact so they are not sitting with challenging thoughts and feelings. However, it is important to be clear about expectations/boundaries around contact so that students know what is reasonable.

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