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Across Diverse Contexts: Collaborative Approaches

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## BOOK REVIEW

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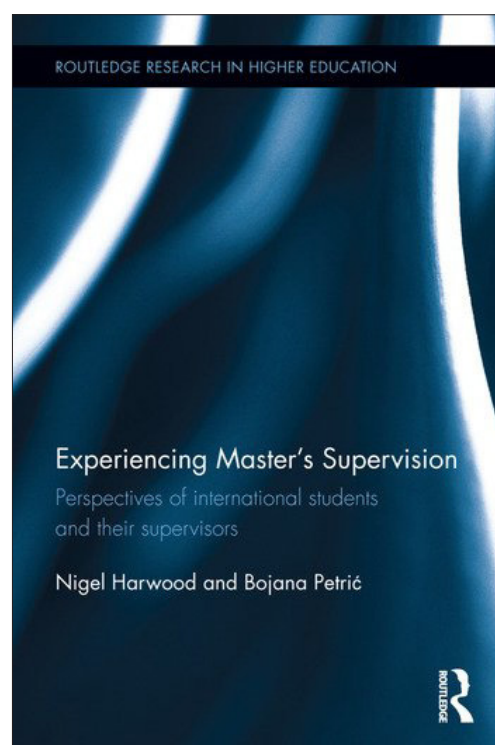
Review of “Experiencing Master’s Supervision: Perspectives of International Students and Their Supervisors” by Nigel Harwood and Bojana Petrić, 2016, Taylor & Francis Group (Print ISBN: 9781138929807, Ebook ISBN: 9781317398653)

Jang Yuan Chao, University of Sheffield

In this book, Harwood and Petrić share their findings from a study of the discourse between master supervisors and supervisees from four different departments in the social sciences and humanities faculty at a UK research-intensive university. The authors’ motivation for the research was threefold: a desire to share their personal experiences supervising international master’s students; to explore an increasingly important educational context in which there has been insufficient research; and to propose research-based interventions to improve supervisory pedagogy. The focus of the authors’ study is precisely what the title indicates: international master’s students. But this book is valuable for supervisors and supervisees, regardless of their ethnicity and the context of their relationship. It is shocking that there has been so little research on this educational context, considering the fact that the supervision of postgraduate students is one of the core responsibilities of academics and a measure of academic outcomes. By revealing the discourse and dynamics that occur within the supervisory relationship, the authors challenge both parties to take a step back and think twice before assuming that the other is to blame for any failure or shortcomings in the academic research experience.

Both authors are highly involved in the learning and teaching of international higher education students for whom English is a second language. Their extensive experience working with students learning and using English as a second language, and researching about them brings relevance to the work they are describing in this book. As a reader and an international doctoral student, I can identify with many parts of the participants’ experiences and these remind me that I am not alone in what I went through and am going through now.

An initial chapter in the book is dedicated to explaining the methodology of their study which was highly informative and well-explained. Harwood and Petrić adopted a multiple longitudinal case study approach, with each “case” being one supervisee or supervisory dyad. The authors define their study as “longitudinal”, but in fact the duration of each case was only five or six months, the time typically taken to complete the research and dissertation writing required at the four research sites. For each case, the authors analyse the stages of the



supervisory journey in detail, from the development of the students' proposals to determining research questions and submission of their final dissertation. The authors used multiple methods, i.e., semi-structured interviews, diary/log entries and supervisors' think-aloud to collect data from ten supervisees and four supervisors.

Five "richest cases" (p. 32) are featured in this book. Two out of the cases were from South Asia, while the rest of the participants came from Eastern Europe, the Americas, and East Asia. The criteria for the choice of those five "richest cases" are not explicitly described in the book. However, I could relate with some of the experiences recounted by all five participants, such as needing more guidance in starting an assignment, which shows that some learning experiences need not be confined to different ethnicities and cultural background. In particular, I could specifically relate quite closely to *Janet's story* because I had similar problems when I was doing my master studies. Like Janet, I initially expected that my supervisor would give me clear instructions and that I would have frequent opportunities for consultation. This may be a common cultural misunderstanding for students, like Janet and me, who come from East Asia. Reading about the frustration Janet experienced was a *déjà-vu* moment for me, it was bitter but definitely there is a sweet endnote to this experience as I have grown to understand and appreciate the merits of a more autonomous way of learning.

There are several conclusions that are put forward in this book. Ultimately, the authors believe that the supervisory experience could be improved upon and they list several points for supervisors to consider when planning supervision. One point where I would absolutely agree with the authors would be that the supervisory journey is filled with a range of profound emotions. The study recognises the importance of managing emotions of supervisees for successful outcomes of the supervisory journey. Another important aspect is seen in Jay / Billy and Clara's story - the issue of the lack of alignment of supervisor's expertise and supervisees' projects. However, the researchers concluded that even if such misalignment can be lessened or avoided, it appears that each party would still have divergent ideas on supervisory roles (p. 198). Hence, it seems at the end of the day, successful supervision is a balance between "supervisor and supervisee pedagogies and preferences" (p. 198).

One of the main strengths of the book for me was the way in which it is written. The findings are written in a very readable narrative style, making comparisons between case studies with the primary objective of identifying "common and disparate themes and patterns across supervisory journeys" (p. 25). What makes it particularly appealing is the authors' comments and observations provided at the introduction of each case study for each participant featured in the book. Though they appear trivial, these personal notes are crucial for helping readers make sense of the findings described and concluded. The writing style intrigued my natural inquisitiveness and kept me moving from case to case. I enjoyed it so much that I forgot that I was reading the findings of a research study. The description of the emotions as experienced by the participants hit a raw nerve in me. In particular, I could relate to Laura's account of dropping by her supervisor's office without any clear purpose or goal. Similar to Laura, I would doubt myself and make many "spur of the moment" decisions and scheduled meetings aimlessly with my supervisor just to chat in the hope of gaining some assurance and direction. It was my supervisor's firm but gentle approach and clearly articulated feedback on all my writing assignments that eventually built my confidence in my learning journey.

There are weaknesses in this book too, however. I would have liked to have read about other possible influencing factors, such as gender in relation to the discourse of a supervision relationship (Smeby, 2000). Besides, the title states, "Perspectives of...and their supervisors" and yet the supervisors' perspectives were addressed only via a concluding interview, which I thought was insufficient. Though the authors explained that it was due to many supervisors' reluctance to participate in their study that made them reduce the number of interviews, it

does not justify a deflection from an emphasis on the importance of their accounts. I think a lack of representation of the supervisor's point of view can make the study appear to have placed all responsibilities for improving the learning and supervisory experience solely on the supervisor alone, making the power relations between the supervisor-supervisee one that is asymmetric. Overall, I should think the research described in this book is only the beginning of more studies to come.

Nonetheless, this book is worth reading for everyone involved in a supervisory experience at the postgraduate level because it raises pertinent issues and serves as a launchpad to a better understanding of this important educational practice. Harwood and Petrić's work brings hope to the possibility that, ultimately, the supervisory experience is changeable and that supervisors and programme policymakers can change the circumstances of supervision to ensure clarity and satisfaction for both supervisor and supervisee. Although supervisory discourse occurs in various forms and, hence, the findings cannot and should not be readily generalised, their work addresses genuine issues and serves to illuminate new possible directions for supervisors, supervisees, and the higher education programme policymakers to better manage this highly complex academic relationship.

## Reference

Smeby, J. (2000). Same-gender relationships in graduate supervision. *Higher Education*, 40(1), 52-67. doi:10.1023/A:1004040911469