

Coffee as a Supervisory Technique: Power, Formality and the Personal in Supervision

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Can coffee be considered to be a technique of supervision? This relatively simple question is not easily answered from the available literature on the supervision of higher degree candidates. A great deal of literature in recent years has focused on aspects of the supervisory relationship. The small amount of research that mentions supervisory meetings has concentrated on the frequency of these meetings, rather than their nature or content (for example, Heath 2002).¹ In order to illuminate the salience of coffee for supervision, this critical review locates it in reference to discussions about the models of supervision, and the different foci or facets of supervision, before reflecting on the potential risks of supervision over coffee.

Models of supervision

Differing models of higher degree supervision abound. Traditionally, the relationship was often conceived of in terms of an expert-disciple or master-apprentice model. In these conceptualisations, power relations were overt, with the supervisor having control over many facets of the higher degree process, and relations were seen as relatively formal (Bartlett & Mercer 2000; Frow 1988).

Recently, new ways of imagining the supervisory relationship have arisen. These include a shift from the traditional ‘grey-beard expert’ to an adviser or mentor (Dixon n.d.; see also Manathunga 2007), a collaborative relationship (Wisker, Robinson & Shacham 2007) or as like the relationship between older and younger sisters (Bartlett & Mercer 2000). These models portray supervision more as a partnership than a dictatorship. The aim is for less formality and more even power relations. Barlett and Mercer (2000) introduce metaphors of the supervisory process as being like creating in the kitchen, constructing a garden or even bushwalking; the linking themes in these ideas of supervision are of a continual process of sharing and co-creation, with supervisor as experienced guide. The style of supervision as

¹ Heath (2002) argues that candidates who met at least fortnightly with their supervisor were most likely to finish their PhD. There was no assessment of the content or quality of supervisory meetings.

‘guiding’ rather than ‘controlling’ is portrayed in the literature as being ideal, and as the most likely form of supervision to encourage independence and initiative (Murphy et al 2007:216-8; 229).

Dixon is one of a few authors who specifically mention the value of supervision conducted over coffee. For him, coffee provides “a neutral location” and the ability to “create the relaxed and friendly atmosphere into which I hope our relationship will develop” (Dixon n.d.:3). Supervisory meetings over coffee, then, appear to encourage more informal and collegial models of supervisory practice to come to the fore: coffee seems incompatible with more authoritative and formal models of supervision. For me, supervisory meetings over coffee indicate early in the supervisory process the nature of my expectations for my role as a supervisor; as a colleague, mentor and advisor rather than as a master or expert. This doesn’t mean that there are no power relations at work in the supervisory relationship. As Manathunga notes, operations of power are inherent in supervision, and mentoring is a site of ‘governmentality’ (c.f. Foucault; see Manathunga 2007:208). However it is difficult to maintain the overt power and formality of the ‘expert’ model of supervision over a cup of coffee!

Facets of Supervision

In addition to new models of supervision, attention has also recently been drawn to the differing tasks or duties of supervision. Hockey labels these ‘intellectual and affective obligations’ (Hockey 1995), while Murphy et al (2007) refer to task-focused and personal-focused supervision. Most writers now seem to agree that supervision requires “a blend of pedagogical and personal relationship skills” as Grant (2003:175) notes. While the production of a thesis is a key component of supervisory practice, often the aim is also the transformation of the student into an independent researcher, or said in a different way, the professional development of the student (Grant 2003; Murphy et al 2007).

In this context, coffee can provide a context or forum for open discussion. In my experience, meetings over coffee can allow students to express themselves more clearly or even raise personal issues which may be impeding their progress. Having coffee with Higher degree candidates indicates a level of personal involvement. Yet with that personal involvement can come risks for supervisors.

The risks of coffee

While authors consistently recognise the multifaceted nature of supervision as encompassing the personal as well as intellectual aspects of candidates, many authors raise concerns over the 'boundaries' that need to be maintained by supervisors. For Hockey (1994; 1995), these boundaries relate to the need to supervise and assist candidates with their intellectual work, yet also allow them to make an autonomous and original contribution to the literature. Hockey (1995) argues that social activities in the supervisory relationship (such as going to the pub) are often seen as a necessary part of the supervisory relationship, yet can lead to emotional over-involvement which can impair the supervisor's judgement of the quality of the candidate's work. Hockey contends that any personal or counselling facets of supervision need to be kept on a professional basis so as to maintain some distance and be able to adhere to official guidelines on the amount of intellectual aid proffered to students (1995). It appears that Hockey (1994; 1995) wouldn't oppose the idea of meetings over coffee *per se*, but would caution as to how emotionally involved a supervisor was becoming.

Such concern over boundaries may be particularly important in relation to relationships between certain candidates and supervisors. Older male supervisors, for example, who continually take younger female students for coffee in intimate settings may find they are the subject of innuendo or accusation. Yet for many supervisory relationships, coffee is casual and public enough not to raise too many concerns.

On quite a different note, Johnson et al (2000) caution against moving too far from models of supervision as master-disciple. They argue that newer models of supervision as mentoring which particularly portray women as infinitely patient, an intellectual role model and able to assist with personal issues, can leave women exhausted and burned out (Johnson et al 2000:144). Supervision over coffee should not, following from this idea, be an open invitation to candidates to expect supervisors to meet all of their intellectual and personal needs.

Conclusion

This brief critical review of the literature suggests that coffee can be a valuable supervisory technique to provide a context for open discussion, and to encourage a more informal supervisory relationship of mentoring or collegiality to develop. There are potential risks in engaging with students in this more open and sometimes personal way, yet with care, coffee can be utilised to enhance the supervisory experience. This review has also highlighted

the lack of research about the content and quality of supervisory meetings themselves; an area which is deserving of attention.

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