

9

Gender

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9.1 Introduction

Considering gender within PhD supervision is arguably one of the most important unspoken aspects of forging a relationship between supervisor and student. An appropriate working relationship between these roles throughout the PhD process is essential to its overall success and completion. In this chapter, we focus on the way gender shapes the supervisor-student relationship.

Gender itself is a complex socio-cultural arrangement and this further adds complexity to the establishment and maintenance of a successful PhD supervisory relationship. In thinking about gender relations in PhD supervision it is important to be alert to potential points of tension and contradiction in this relationship as they are cues to future potential changes in individual PhD programs as they evolve over time.

In negotiating the supervision role within the PhD process it is important to acknowledge the role of gender in creating dilemmas (some insolvable), provide resources (or restrict them) and suggest solutions (some of which won't work). These are issues to which the supervisor and student must respond collectively. Importantly the practices followed by a supervisor for this particular parameter of human relations must be seen as creative responses to situations that are influenced by still wider social forces.

The negotiation of gender relationships creates particular challenges for students and supervisors alike and this chapter is devoted to describing the experience as well as to suggest creative and dynamic strategies for both students and supervisors. Specifically we focus on the issues of negotiating gender roles, how to approach and manage gendered authority, and finally make some practical and strategic supervision suggestions based on PhD supervisors' own experiences.

9.2 Negotiating gender roles

We begin with a practical suggestion that two foundational steps are taken at the beginning of the supervision process and then regularly returned to throughout the project to negotiate individual gender roles:

- 1 The supervisor enters his or her role with a clear understanding and assessment regarding his or her ability to work and interact with women and/or men. Specific consideration must be taken, for example, of existing gender-biased attitudes regarding the intellectual, social and personal capacities that they hold. This consideration should not imply any specific overtones and should be conducted without the preconceptions of one's own sexual preferences and gender identification. To achieve this objective the supervisor should examine their academic and work-related success and realistically consider whether there has been more success and greater fulfillment when he or she has worked with men or women.
- 2 The supervisor should determine and clarify the form and style of the supervision strategy he or she will utilize. Will supervision be conducted at a purely professional level with minimal personal and social interaction? Alternatively, will supervision occur within the context of an established friendship or is this a new relationship? Is the existing (or potential) friendship based on an association that is distinct from the PhD topic itself?

Once these decisions are made, the supervisor needs to establish an understanding with the student about the distinctions between ‘everyday’ issues that directly relate to the PhD research project such as administration, write up and completion (discussed in other chapters in this book) and to clarify to what extent the supervisor is willing to discuss those issues that are not involved in the PhD process and more likely to be personal and pastoral in nature.

9.3 Clarifying the complexity of the supervisor-student relationship

Clarifying these positions early in the project minimizes any possible source of confusion between the supervisor and student about the form and nature of their interactions. It cannot be ignored that in many situations the supervisor and student will establish a variety of relationships, both friendly and antagonistic. The full breadth of supervisory styles can be bridged with the application of clarity and openness about individual expectations and the boundaries within which each part is working.

This female student discussed her experience with her male supervisor and the confusions that can arise: Supervisors, let me tell you about one of the supervisors I had. It has taken me a long time to find a supervisor. My first [supervisor] was good but sent many mixed messages about how I was to engage with him. He was casual and open when we spoke face to face, he liked me to drop in to see him even sometimes without an appointment time. But often he got very worked up in email correspondences; he, on one occasion, went mad at me for not addressing him in the appropriate formality required by a supervisor from a student. He never clarified this so I never knew how to appropriately talk to him or if he was only referring to the emails? Luckily he changed post and I didn't have to deal with him any more.

The above example highlights the ways in which confusion can and does arise. Significantly, this example also highlights the propensity for confusion to occur between men and women interacting with one another.

This male PhD student illustrates an alternative perspective from a male point of view: I had three principal supervisors during my candidature – two women and a man. In general I felt it was more difficult to interact with the female supervisors. However, I don't entirely identify this as a gender issue as I had known my last (male) supervisor for at least 10 years, had worked as a teaching assistant with him and share a number of interests. I also felt that neither of my first two supervisors were particularly excited about my project and resorted to a very mechanical and process-oriented form of supervision. I wouldn't dismiss it as a tick box approach but I did become quite frustrated many times with both these supervisors.

Issues relating to personal communication and interaction are more complex when they occur between males and females. Cultural cues, social norms and appropriate behaviors all intertwine to aid in the social construction of gender. An individual's own gender is developed via those experiences that are shared and understood, therefore misinterpretation and misunderstanding often occur when no common social reference point exists.

The particular needs of doctoral students with children may be overlooked by PhD supervisors who do not themselves provide primary care for children. Students with children experience special difficulty managing multiple competing demands for time and emotional energy. Not only must they cope with demands made by insensitive colleagues, they can be systematically disadvantaged by institutional traditions such as early morning classes and evening or weekend social events. Often, demands such as caring for an ill child occur unexpectedly at the most inopportune times. Challenges such as these are illustrated by a female colleague who recounted her experience.

The first two years of the PhD requires attendance and participation in seminars, classes and meetings, many scheduled in the mornings or late evening. As a practical matter, children cannot be dropped off at child care or school before 8 am and must be picked up after school at 3 pm or extend-a-care at 5 pm. Yet there is little understanding about the scheduling of seminars that begin early or do not end until 6 pm or later. In my case this problem was compounded when, to pursue the PhD, I moved to an unfamiliar city in which I had no support system from family or friends. In this city all the child care options started at 8 am and ended at 5 pm. In the first year of the program classes began at 8:00 and did not end till 6:00. I was in a terrible bind. To make matters worse the culture was such that women simply could not complain or ask for help.

9.4 Issues of gendered authority

All gendered interactions are fraught. This is a result of established social norms, expectations and hierarchies. Successful social interaction demands appropriate responses between individuals. A substantial component of these social expectations and role formation for the supervisor and student operating in a PhD program is the impact of power and, in particular, the negotiation of the location of specific forms of authority. The full scope of authority power relations cannot be encompassed in this discussion. Nevertheless, it is important that the supervisor acknowledge or at least be aware that academia is an educational system that perpetuates wider social patterns of separation and association between males and females.

Compounding this situation is the fact that a teacher's authority is constructed in isolation, through the supervisor's own resources and as an extension of his or her own experiences.

The extent that a student resists challenges or subverts his or her authority can be perceived as a personal threat to the supervisor. Consideration to the negotiation of authority and power by the supervisor can be practically addressed by applying the earlier suggestion of this chapter, that the supervisor needs to establish an understanding with the student about the distinctions between the 'everyday' issues that directly relate to the PhD research project and to clarify to what extent the supervisor is willing to discuss those issues that are not directly involved in the PhD process and are more likely to be personal in nature.

The following example provides a personal account of the negotiation of power and authority from a student's perspective: My interactions with my first supervisor often felt like I was being pigeonholed into the PhD she wanted to see rather than exploring and developing my own agenda. This supervisor's own research interests were very close to my original research topic – in an area that is often positioned as an extension of feminist human geography. This seemed to influence our interactions. My own naivety of the research process in the early stages of my candidature also had a bearing on my attitude. At the time I felt that my frustrations were at least partly the result of a negotiated gendered relationship and in hindsight this does have some truth but it was also the relationship of an experienced researcher and a new research student overly confident of their own abilities and ideas.

I would also stress that in at least some of the interactions with my last (male) supervisor I was also conscious of an authority relationship but it was an authority exerted with a more clearly understood (for me) purpose. My last supervisor would tell me I 'had' to do 'x' or 'y' in order to finish the thesis.

Social cues play a major part in negotiating the supervisor/student relationship. Dominant social cues enable both parties to interact and engage in an appropriate manner. The complexity of social cues such as gender and hierarchical authority can lead to misinterpretation regarding the appropriate ways in which to socially engage and progress in the PhD process.

The following example is a personal account of what happens when a student is unsure of the social cues the supervisor offered: Not being able to have a flowing conversation was clearly an issue – to the point that some meetings were simply frustrating and possibly even detrimental to the establishment of a positive supervision relationship. This went so far as finding it difficult to simply communicate 'in the corridor'.

The complexities of authority and power cannot be reduced to individual rules and regulations or to considerations of curriculum and course

development as suggested by Robertson et al (2001). Instead we advocate that the supervisor and the supervisors' own strategies must be seen as creative responses to their current situation and wider socio-cultural environment. As a guideline, consideration to past supervision experience and existing gender-biased attitudes regarding intellectual, social and personal capacities can ultimately guide the supervisor about what they should do individually. The additional consideration to the complexity of gendered authority can further exasperate the supervisory process.

When males manage female PhD candidates

Information systems has significantly less women than men in all areas of the industry including academia (Robertson et al, 2001; Hewitt, 2001; Wajcman, 1991; Webster, 1996). For this reason it is highly likely that many men will have to supervise female candidates through their PhD. This gender imbalance makes these suggestions all the more important for the production of successful PhDs and lasting professional relationships (Wilson, 2002; Webster, 1996: 5). Successful relations between female PhD candidates and advisors do in fact occur when all parties acknowledge and work through their respective roles and expectations. It is important to note that supervisors will have different styles, and these styles may be exaggerated or diminished by gender disparities.

One female faculty member reflected upon her experience of working with two male co-chairs on her dissertation: I actually didn't think about gender when I chose a supervisor. There were so few women faculty that I just took for granted that I would have a male advisor. Plus, working in the IT industry for ten years before working on my PhD, I was quite comfortable with male colleagues. My main concern was finding someone who would value my research topic as it was not considered 'mainstream IS research. My initial advisor made it quite clear that I would be in charge of managing this relationship. I was to schedule the meetings and the agenda. I was to provide drafts, and he would comment. This was fine with me. I don't like to be micro managed, and I am quite self-directed. My advisor never questioned my ability or commitment, and issues such as work-family balance never came up in conversation. I suspect that this is because I worked hard to keep my personal relationships to myself. However, shortly after I started my research, my advisor assumed the role of department chair. He suggested that another committee member assume the role of co-chair of my PhD. I was quite concerned about this (how do you ever complete a thesis if you have to please two supervisors), but the co-chair made it clear that he would defer to my initial advisor. He remained true to his word, so I never had to deal with battling advisors. I also found that the co-chair had quite a different style. We had weekly meetings, and each meeting started with me sharing my personal well-being. It was extremely hard for me to share my personal struggles, but over time, I began to open up. Gender became important in this relationship since we often talked about the stresses of the PhD process on marital and parental arrangements. We also talked about my pressing need to finish my dissertation rather quickly. Whereas my initial advisor kept me focused and on

task, my second advisor let me wander and explore. This worked to my advantage because I read broadly and at the same time, I didn't fall into the trap of wandering aimlessly. Although my PhD research used theories and research methods that were somewhat unfamiliar to both advisors, they trusted me enough to let me find my way. I included faculty from other departments to provide the requisite expertise, and took a faculty position before I actually finished the thesis. My co-chairs supported me as best they could, and for that, I am grateful. I was able to complete my thesis during the first semester of my faculty position, and maintain a close collegial relationship with both advisors.

When female faculty manage male PhD candidates

When female candidates complete their PhDs and take on faculty positions there is the very strong possibility that they will find themselves in the position to supervise male PhD students.

A female professor reflected upon the difficulties and tensions that surface within this relationship: I was just one year out of my PhD program when I took on my first PhD student. The student had just finished his Master's thesis, and had research interests quite similar to mine. We got along great, and initially had much success with our research. However, we faced many challenges. For one thing, we were the same age and were often mistaken for husband and wife. At other times, people assumed that he was the professor and that I was the student. I also found it hard to direct a 6-foot tall, male student who formerly served in the military. He was having a very difficult time settling down on a research topic for his PhD, and I wasn't having much success directing him. In addition, the student had made some major political missteps and some faculty felt like this student didn't want to follow the rules. When I asked senior faculty to help, my colleagues perceived that I was either not intellectually up to the challenge (she's not smart enough to supervise a PhD student) or that I was not being treated fairly because of gender (no one would ever step in the middle of a supervisory relationship if you were a male professor). For these reasons, I had senior faculty encouraging me not to work any longer with this student. I was funding this student out of a major research grant and I was not tenured. I was really quite stressed about the whole situation, and eventually I decided to share my predicament with the student. We jointly decided that it was best that I remain as a co-chair on his PhD committee, and that he find a more senior member of faculty who could help with the political aspects of the research. We remain good colleagues, often using email and phone calls to keep in touch socially. Luckily, I was dealing with a mature student who understood that the situation was larger than either one of us.

This example highlights the power dimensions that complicate the supervisory position for female faculty. Even when the individual supervisor and student manage to cultivate a relationship of mutual trust and respect, broader institutional forces can strain these relationships. If a female supervisor asks for help, for instance, is it seen by colleagues as a sign of weakness? If a male offers assistance, will this be perceived negatively? Since relatively fewer females have achieved senior faculty status, female supervisors tend to be less experienced. Well-meaning colleagues may in

fact stymie opportunities for gaining further supervisory experience with students that they perceive as hard to manage while providing genuinely supportive opportunities for gaining this type of experience with those students that they see as more malleable and manageable. In this situation, the female faculty negotiates the subtlety of being assertive about the students that she chooses to work with, and at the same time gaining the respect of more senior colleagues.

In a similar manner, gender relations and the early establishment of a supervisor's own research agenda can be problematic if not clearly communicated with the student being supervised: This did seem to be a problem particularly with my second supervisor where the combination of ethnicity, gender difference and my supervisor's own pressures to establish herself (as she was a new staff member who adopted me after my first supervisor left the university). My second supervisor was also very insistent that I should consult with her during her 'normal' student contact hours. These were always the same times and during the entire time she was my supervisor I was teaching a three semester program which always involved lecturing at this time. This was doubly frustrating because of what I saw as a lack of flexibility on her behalf and the lack of consideration she gave to my own attempts to establish a career in the same field.

Similarly, uncertainty about appropriate social responses can lead to tense and uncertain moments: It is a fairly long time ago now but I do recollect some strangely tense moments. I am probably most conscious of our seeming inability to have a flowing conversation. I am conscious of how men often speak over women and know that I do this myself. In our supervision meetings I feel that I often overcompensated.

This section presented a brief overview of the complexities associated with the gendered authority and power relations that exist in the supervisor/student relationship. Although this is not an exhaustive list of 'all' forms of negotiated supervision, we have attempted to illustrate that regardless of the complexity of the role formation, social cues or the life situation of supervisor or student, the best approach for the supervisor is to follow a clear and realistic assessment of their supervisory abilities and then utilize further consultation between the supervisor and student in order to minimize misunderstandings brought through attitudes of resistance, challenges and daily changes in events associated with the social life.

9.5 Gender and the PhD assessment process

Supervisors, or at least most supervisors, most of the time, find ways of surviving from day to day rather than once and for all. Relationships are constantly being negotiated in the flux of daily academic life, and this is so much a matter of how supervisors and PhD students get on with each other

as people. The student's relationships with the curriculum and PhD administrative process are contained within the structure of practices that they construct. It can be very disappointing for a student if no clear direction or understanding of where they are in the progress of their PhD is conveyed by the supervisor.

One student explains their experience: I felt that with my second supervisor she was never clear of the point in the process where I was currently situated. I feel I picked up 'learning the process' of crafting a PhD largely from observation of other students around me and learning from their (and my) experiences.

These experiences that may extend over years and years, precipitate the attitudes and traits that is the 'PhD life'. Because these attitudes and qualities are the result of complex practices they are hard to strategically plan. We, therefore, suggest a periodic yet continuing collective reassessment to be carried out by both the supervisor and the student about the current status of their relationship.

9.6 Conclusion

The key recommendation of this chapter is that communication and realistic self-assessment of supervision skills and ability is core to overcoming those negative aspects associated with the complexities of managing the personal elements of a supervisory role. These strategies should also mirror those recommended for students. For example, specific consideration must be made of existing gender-biased attitudes regarding intellectual, social and personal capacities in the supervisor possesses (see Figure 9.1).

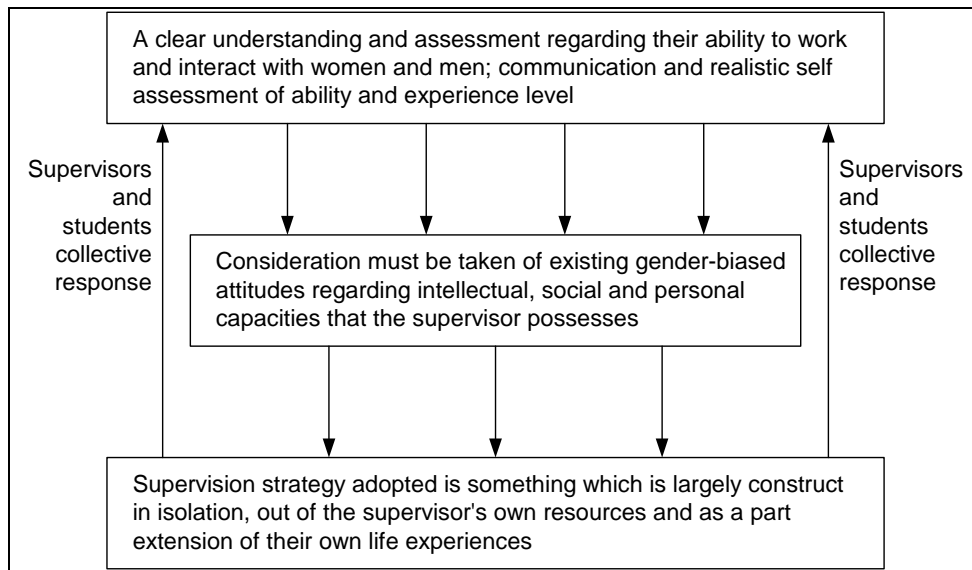


Figure 9.1 *Developing gender sensitive supervision*

In conclusion, we suggest the following bases for developing gender sensitive supervision:

- The supervisor enters their role with a clear understanding and assessment regarding their ability to work and interact with women and men.
- Consideration must be given to the existing gender-biased attitudes regarding intellectual, social and personal capacities that the supervisor holds:
 - * Such consideration should be conducted without the preconceptions shaped by their own sexual preferences.
 - * Supervisor should examine their academic-related and work-related success and realistically consider whether there has been greater success when they have worked with men or women.
 - * Establish clear demarcation between 'everyday' issues that directly relate to the PhD research project, administration, write up and completion.
 - * Clarify to what extent the supervisor is willing to discuss those issues that are not involved in the PhD process and more likely to be personal in nature.

- * Clarify these positions early in the project to minimize any confusion between supervisor and student about the form and nature of their interactions.