Underground murmurs: Disturbing supervisory practices of feedback

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Introduction: The mystery/transparency balance in supervisory feedback
With the pressures to produce timely and disciplined thesis texts, there is now an increase in regulatory measures and greater focus on explicating research/writing practices through “skills” training for students and supervisors. While universities stipulate what constitutes “scholarly” knowledge and the appropriate form in which the thesis should be presented, they are silent about the creative (and more mysterious) dimensions involved in its production. They are also silent about the ambiguities involved in any relationship, let alone one involving the asymmetrical power relations characterising supervision. The intersubjective nature of supervisory practice therefore causes uneasiness for those who value certainty and predictability.

In an effort to regulate this volatility the current institutional focus strives to demystify student-supervisor relations by promoting an ethos of transparency, equality and openness. This newer focus, as set out in institutional policy documents and in particular at the site institution’s “Code of Practice,” urges the recognition of clear communication, reasonable and harmonious conduct, straightforward transmissions from advisor to advisee, choice, autonomy, joint clarification of the candidate’s and the supervisor’s expectations of the process of supervision, and the efficient and punctual achievement of milestones. Transparency, privileges accountability, planning, explicit communication, truthfulness and objectivity, as well as faith in the affective elements of trust and honesty. Such hopefulness is also symptomatic of the technical-rational view of communication and a notion of social relations that assumes a highly generalised student and reasonable and rational supervision.

Further, the current neo-liberal orthodoxy holds that supervision is a co-operative effort between rational, organised, well informed (thoroughly orderly) speaking equals. In stressing transparency and rational collegiality without addressing the limits of what can be made explicit and how reciprocal accountability can be achieved in asymmetrical relationships, the current orthodoxy reaches for what it cannot obtain and masks its own limits.

In essence, an emphasis on either transparency or mystery alone is problematic: while one risks masking the politics of knowledge-production, the other may exaggerate them. I stress here that both transparency and mystery enable knowledge production and that both have limitations. On the part of students the desire for transparency is fuelled by anxiety about the research/writing and/or the examination process. On the part of supervisors it derives from various models of “good” supervision and their own desires to see a thesis through to successful completion. Transparency is integral to reassuring students and reducing uncertainty and anxiety about the process. But when it positions research/writing as a rational process to be negotiated and managed, it oversimplifies, even denies, the less tangible aspects of the process. This may lead us to seek facile

1 Codes of Practice for supervision are now widely used in Australia, New Zealand and the UK as a risk management strategy. These documents offer guidelines for appropriate behaviour and specify responsibilities to define ‘proper’ practice for supervisors and candidates (Grant, 2005b).

2 The neo-liberal discourse positions supervision as a contract, and the student as a consumer of services. Under it, the student is an autonomous chooser who negotiates the terms of supervision, and his or her supervisor is a provider of services.
solutions and/or direct inappropriate blame inward when the process is not subject to the prescribed norms.

The recognition of mystery can assist in the writing process by allowing for open-endedness, making room for uncertainty, creating a necessary and respectful distance between supervisor and student. However, it may also mythologise the more difficult aspects, create the illusion that the process is uncontrollable or beyond a student’s ability, or lead to a reluctance to request specific forms of help. Both elements, then, need to work in conjunction. By drawing on recently gathered data to understand the processes involved in negotiating meanings within supervision during transactions of writing and response, I will propose some ways of discerning what lies beneath what is often murmured. As Simon (1995) asserts, the intensity of such relationships creates a volatile mix because “a professor’s speech (what’s said and not said), writing (what’s written and not written), and actions (what’s done and not done) are made to bear considerable intellectual and affective weight” (p. 98).

A “worm’s-eye” view of supervisory feedback practices

This chapter is drawn from an intensive, longitudinal study in which 42 in-depth interview accounts were conducted during three phases: middle, middle-end and end stages of candidature (2000-2007). The methodology comprised a series of carefully staged readings and offers the field a more compelling and elongated view of writing supervision than has been previously provided. The study was undertaken primarily through interviews and it did not involve an analysis of mystery and transparency in the textual instantiations of supervisory feedback. Instead, my analytical focus foregrounds the supervisor’s and student’s spoken accounts as they reflect on their experiences of supervision and feedback while jointly working on the thesis text. The methodology for this empirical investigation thus provides a nuanced representation of the lived experiences of supervision and the pedagogical practices supporting them.

In using a “worm’s-eye view” (Blacker, 1998, p. 356) methodology, the various readings of the interview data explore some taken-for-granted assumptions about supervision while being attentive to the micro-level functioning of power in supervision. Through using finely-grained analytical and interpretive methods of the accounts of their privatised interactions the critical discourse analysis of interviews illuminated the perceptions and experiences of seven supervisor and student pairs from five disciplines in the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education in an Australian university. In drawing on these accounts, I wish to highlight the ways in which meanings are played out differently within every supervision relation and how these perceptions mediate the production of the text.

The seven student participants represent a group of five women and two men, aged between their late twenties and their early fifties, and of predominantly Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, with one student from a European background and one from a European and Chinese background. Participants were from the disciplines of Psychology, Education, Politics and International Studies, Women’s Studies, and History. Three students were part-time and the rest full-time, with most combining mixed modes of on and off campus study at different periods of candidature. Five students were on scholarships and three were co-supervised. Six were enrolled in

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3 A feature of supervision is its privacy (McWilliam & Palmer, 1995) in the sense that in single or joint supervision, which are still the dominant modes of supervision, they are characterised by intensely intimate interpersonal relations, often conducted in the privacy of the supervisor’s office. Even when supervision occurs outside dyadic relationships, when feedback on writing is transacted it constitutes a direct dialogue between the student writer and supervisor through oral and written feedback on the emergent thesis text or creative work.
traditional doctorates and one student was enrolled in a professional doctorate. All students were first generation university students. In the supervisor group there were five women supervisors and two men aged between 42 and 62 years. All seven supervisors were first language speakers of English from Anglo-Celtic, Anglo-American and European backgrounds. Their experiences in supervising post/graduate students ranged between seven years to 25 years.

The analysis engages the interconnected strands of language, discourse, subjectivity, power and pedagogy. The interpretive approach draws upon Foucauldian critical discourse analysis to elaborate the ways that student-supervisor relations are produced within, and mediated by, political, social, and local, contingent factors. In these views, socio-discursive régimes and overarching principles or larger meaning systems mediate the cultural practices of supervision (Grant, 2005b; Knowles, 2007). For Foucault (1976) power is located in the small places. By working at the micro-level of analysis and considering power from the bottom up I analyse the productivities of texts to reveal the strategies and techniques supervisors use via their feedback to restrict and prescribe the range of possible interpretations of their feedback. Moreover, in order to identify specific capacities that students acquire in establishing their academic subjectivities I explore the techniques of self-management that they use and the specific ways of behaving as a student and certain ways of thinking about knowledge which become normalised while “other ways remain hidden-impossible and inconceivable” (Wright, 2000, p. 169).

Supervisory feedback ideally teaches students about the craft of writing, yet this side of their work is discounted or played down because some supervisors themselves are uncomfortable about it as they see themselves as researchers first.

In performing the close readings of small fragments of text, the data was considered in terms of student; supervisor and text; and student and text. I draw on critical discourse analysis to offer illustrative data from supervisors and students to explore how the two elements transparency and mystery were actually experienced by placing the data within the discourses described by Grant (2005a, 2005b). I also suggest that as embodied, thinking and feeling beings, student subjects are not merely inscribed by their supervisors’ discourses. They are active participants, albeit constrained ones, in the partial shaping of the outcomes that arise. In concluding, I reflect on the effects of transparency and mystery in relation to student-supervisor relations, proposing that the practice of supervisory feedback will always involve opacity, inequality and intangibility.

Disturbing mystery and transparency in supervision practice
In the following brief account the main elements of mystery and transparency have been captured by considering supervisory feedback as a triangular relationship, as have insights of some of the ambiguities involved in discerning who is relating to whom or what at any given moment, and whether it is the student or the research, or both, that is/are being supervised.

Student-supervisor relations
It has been argued that supervision needs to be taken “out of the realm of mystery and metaphor” (Pearson, 2001, p. 93). This move is seen to enable productive relationships free of ambiguity and position supervision as, ideally, rational and orderly. In contrast, another view generally recognises that supervisor-student relations are subject to “mystery”, that is relatively unknowable, subject to doubt, ambiguity and uncertainty (Grant, 2005b). These elements are attributed to the blending of the intellectual and the personal, to the asymmetrical power relations that obtain between supervisor and student, to the nature of communication and its impact on decision-making, and to the ways that
desire and difference play out in the everyday practices of supervision. This literature recognises that supervision relations can never be fully known or articulated and are inherently unstable.

**Supervisor and text**
In the views that endorse transparency, supervisors are seen to provide feedback according to explicit and specified criteria in a context where research/writing practices have a specific disciplinary form. In this way, feedback is a matter of “exchange” and negotiation takes place in a relational, equal/reciprocal and collegial manner. The text is seen to be amenable to correction on the basis of explicit corrective feedback. In contrast, it can be suggested that mystery is always present given that there is perforce an unknowable element in the way in which knowledge is acquired and imparted, how the supervisor thinks and imparts the kinds of knowledge, attitudes and values she supports. Further, the supervisor cannot know how students will read the comments or ensure that they will be taken in the ways intended.

**Student and text**
Numerous mysterious elements surround the ways students produce text and develop a scholarly identity. Because each student’s learning process is unique, there is mystery surrounding the student’s struggle to become an authority. In this process, a student must construct his/her own sense of authority and use her unfolding process of learning to free herself of the need for the supervisor’s authority. This “becoming” affects the timeline in unpredictable ways as students acquire self-confidence and overcome self-doubt about the quality of their work at different rates. Against this, the transparency ethos suggests that if students acquire the “right” skills and make the “right” choices the research/writing process and emergent thesis text can be properly managed. Transparency is expected to give students a clear picture of who they are as pedagogic, literate and disciplinary subjects.

**Profiles of dominant and emergent discourses of supervision**
In discussing the interview data, I use Barbara Grant’s (2005a) pivotal analysis of supervision discourses to illustrate transparency and mystery in the respondents’ reflections on feedback practices. Grant (2005a) identifies seven supervisory discourses, four of which are dominant, and three emergent. The dominant four comprise: the psychological, the traditional-academic, the technical-rational, and the neo-liberal. The three emergent discourses comprise: the psychoanalytic, the radical, and Indigenous Kaupapa Maori. The last of these is excluded given its particular relevance to Aotearoa/New Zealand, coupled with the fact that there were no Indigenous participants in this study. In discussing the interview data in the next section, I set out suggestions relating to transparency and mystery in context. In this study, the most pervasive discourse was the psychological, with some evidence of the traditional-academic, psychoanalytic and radical. In comparison, the neo-liberal and techno-scientific discourses played a relatively minor role, so will not be used here.

**Psychological (Psy) discourse**
The Psy discourse under which supervision is persuasively constituted as an interpersonal relationship pervaded the interview responses. Because relationship is a constant concern under Psy supervision, transparency is sought around establishing and maintaining intersubjective relations. Here transparency operates through an injunction (on both parties) to be “honest”–with the supervisor providing critical feedback when it is
considered necessary, and the student informing the supervisor if and when she finds her manner of feedback difficult.

As already indicated, expectations of honest feedback are endorsed in the site institution’s “Code of Practice”. They and related documents require that students are to be taken seriously as scholars and provided opportunities to improve and learn. Psy-Students are focused on learning the “truths” of their abilities and expected to use this knowledge to construct their sense of identity. The Psy-Supervisor must have the capacities to know about students’ confidence, their stage of thesis progress, and be attuned to students’ changing psychological states to judge the “right” level of feedback.

As well as making the process open, transparency has the benefit of letting students know where they stand in relation to institutional norms and expectations. In the following, a student elaborates her supervisory expectations and provides a “wish list” in relation to her supervisors’ feedback:

Yes, so I want good advice about writing at every stage. I would like [my supervisors] to be able to remember what it is I’m doing and where it is I’m going, based on my proposal. And [...] to remember what we discussed and remember when I say: “This is where I’m heading”, I’d like them to remember that from when they’re reading the work. [...] so that they can say: “Yes, I can see that it’s on track”. And I want them to be honest, obviously that’s absolutely essential. (Student G)

Supervisors also acknowledged the importance of honesty but said that it needed to be used judiciously and flexibly. Working against the practices of transparency, they owned up to withholding or filtering feedback to protect students’ feelings. Such diffidence was underpinned by their desire to bolster students’ sense of authorship when self-confidence was lacking. For Supervisor F fundamental self-doubt was customary:

And I think the depth of some people’s lack of self-confidence and lack of self-esteem, the strength of that voice of self-doubt that can trip up even the most competent person who can’t rest easy with a sense of confidence about their work. I’m constantly surprised about how many times you go back over those same conversations because [students] do produce very good work. So, again, it’s about the relationship. You can’t get away from the need to be constantly thinking through the relationship you have with somebody, who they are, and what they need, what you are able to give, and about what kind of feedback. [...] but figuring out what, why I need to give them [...] (Supervisor F)

As this foreshadows, an inherent tension within the Psy-relationship is that the requirement to “care” for the student can sit uneasily with the need for formal feedback and assessment along somewhat standardised guidelines. The “intimate” elements of the relationship may jar with the requirement to ensure a well-written thesis. Intangible qualities in the Psy-model provide plentiful opportunities for mystery. Chief among these is the element of trust. Maintaining confidence in the supervisor is central to Psy-Supervision. And trust is an intangible and ineffable thing. Its elements are well captured by the next student:

I didn’t mention that what’s really important is trust. And clearly X trusts me to do the work. And she trusts that when she finally does get it that the quality’s going to be reasonable. So I think that’s an important thing between a supervisor and a student. And you have to trust in them that your supervisor values what you do
and is really engaging with what you’re doing. And is looking out for your best interests. But is allowing you to do it your own way, and not trying to fit you into some kind of box. (Student H)

The hierarchical relationship between supervisor and student complicates the Psy model and the assumptions that underpin it. Psy-Supervision has all the risks attendant on any attempt to establish a satisfying interpersonal relationship in a context of significant institutional and social differences and limitations. While egalitarian orientated Psy-Supervisors may believe they can conduct an equal relationship with students, the following supervisor’s comments capture some of the factors constraining this. They also introduce elements of the more “traditional” elements of supervision into the Psy calculus:

I firmly believe that the supervisory relationship is an equal one, and that at times the student is teaching you; and at times it’s the other way around. And these roles go backwards and forwards, but basically you’re really trying to facilitate that student. Rather than saying this is how it’s gotta be done. But, of course, there are constraints. I try as much as possible to let the writing come from the student. But, you are also trying to model a process of thinking, which is what the writing is [reflecting] so it can’t be totally just what they want to do. [...] the freedom is not licensed like A. S. Neil said. No matter how independent they are, they are still dependent on you to [judge]: Is this acceptable, is this really going in the right direction and so on? I still think there’s a residue where they may say: “Well, this supervisor may know best”. (Supervisor B)

The same kind of difficulty is acknowledged by Supervisor Q who emphasised that:

[…] it’s a very tricky relationship because it’s still a relationship of supervisor and student so it’s not an equal relationship and I think to pretend that it is [...] is really wrong because then when you give feedback which says: “Look I think you just have to reshape this chapter, I can’t see how it’s going to be acceptable to examiners that way, or you’ve got to go out and do more research in this area”, I don’t think it’s going to work. Thinking in terms of successful examination of the thesis, [students] have to remain I think accepting of your judgment in that. And so it’s not an equal relationship, but as far as possible I try and make it a friendly one. (Supervisor Q)

This supervisor thus voices a combination of psychological (friendly/supportive aspect) elements with traditional-academic (corrective and directive aspect) elements. This fusion, with all its tensions and ambiguities, is well accepted in contemporary supervision. The supervisor has to be:

very tough and let the candidate know when things are not going right. [...] A balance has to be struck between being supportive and caring, yet tough on the problem. The student has to hear that the comments are not intended as a personal attack [...] At the same time, acknowledging what has been done well is also an important part of positive feedback. (Love & Street, 1998, p. 155)

Curiously, when supervisors acknowledge students as having done something well or got it “right”, students are often surprised, with the acknowledgment appearing as something of a mystery. It would seem that students are puzzled by the perceived strengths in their
writing. This perhaps explains the thread of anxiety that peppers the student data in this study. Students had difficulties trusting in their ability to do their research/writing. Indeed several responded that the most surprising aspect of their candidature was that they could in fact do it.

**Traditional-academic (Trad-ac) discourse**

In the Trad-ac discourse the drive for transparency stems from the privileged status of knowledge and the certainties bestowed by its specific disciplinary form. It also lies in the fixed and differential power relations between student and supervisor. Supervisors are vested with the power to assert knowledge claims as disciplinary guardians so their authority is inescapable.

Students spoke more readily of the explicit and fixed power relations characteristic of Trad-Supervision than did supervisors. Students were at times comforted by the supervisor’s expertise, believing that their professional authority would strengthen the thesis:

> [...] and you tend to accept [the feedback] because well [...] there is a sense in the relationship that you are getting a professional opinion. And a sense that what is being said has to be negotiated with or understood on its merits.
> There’s a reason you go to a professional for advice and this professional is giving you advice, so to a large extent you accept that. (Student Y)

Critics contend that under Trad-Supervision the student may passively absorb knowledge from the all-knowing supervisor through “a sort of intellectual osmosis” (Connell, 1985, p. 53). A certain mystery then attaches to supervision given its aloof, unknowable, indifferent and sometimes charismatic qualities, which set the supervisor above and beyond the student. The Trad-Student is “responsible for how he [sic] takes up into his own creative powers the exemplary virtues and skills of the master” (Yeatman, 1995, p. 9). This (in conjunction with belief in the pressures on supervisors’ time) may make it difficult for students to request meetings, clarification, or particular forms of feedback, with this working against transparent, open relations.

Even though the detached ethos of Trad-Supervision implies impartiality and objectivity, its distance and aura mean that there is an untouchable (mysterious) element to it. This drives students’ anxieties about the process, not so much in terms of gaining the supervisor’s respect for them as persons (as in the psychological discourse), but in proving their worth intellectually. The student has to focus efforts on asserting their cleverness and demonstrating they can get things “right”; thereby creating the conditions for the mystifying and elitist practices of “second guessing”. While Trad-Supervision was far less evident than the Psy-model, it did appear and certainly worked in conjunction with it, given that this discourse is embedded in institutional policies and practices it never entirely disappears.

**Psychoanalytic (Psycho) discourse**

Transparency in the emergent psychoanalytic (Psycho) discourse takes effect in the effort to foreground the intersubjective, intensely felt nature of student-supervisor interactions. The focus on these dimensions distinguishes this discourse from the Psy and Trad-ac discourses, both of which are more likely to rely on transparency in the sense that they assume an open, “rational”, discourse. Given this, in Psycho-Supervision transparency is only ever glimpsed momentarily and mystery is always assumed to be at work.

Zoe Sofoulis (1997) argues that in intersubjective encounters both parties may strive to infer each other’s psyches and impute each other’s intentions. This necessarily
introduces indeterminacy into the process. As this next supervisor explains, each party’s reaction can never be predicted and known, and each situation eludes facile solutions or techniques. This supervisor concurs that providing feedback is the most complex and the most difficult function to perform well.

And of course it varies with your own mood, externalities and other sorts of things, how much sleep you’ve had. So you make mistakes. But PhD students really listen and they’re really sensitive. And you’ve got to be careful and I’m not always as careful as I should be. But sometimes it works OK because sometimes it’s driven by sort of intuitions, gut feelings of particular moments, and sometimes you go out on a limb and sort of try something and say something that you know is going to be a bit provocative and you just don’t know whether it will work or not. No matter how hard you try you never quite get their psyche. And then even if you did you wouldn’t know what sort of moment they’re in, so [knowing] what’s the right thing to say is so hard. (Supervisor M)

Sofoulis (1997) also suggests that in student-supervisor relations the student seeks to be recognised by the authoritative supervisor who is esteemed as the “one supposed to know” (the transference object), “but also as the “one who knows me” ... who endorses me (recognises and legitimates), who discovers and trains me, who knows my work, who takes it seriously, the one with whom I co-discover and realise my thesis” (emphasis as in original, Sofoulis, 1997, p. 10). These highly invested relations are sparked by supervision’s structural inequality and negotiated over the course of the supervision. Risks lie in the possibility of misrecognition of the supervisors’ attributes and/or misreadings on the part of either student or supervisor of what the other desires. To counteract this, the supervisor cited below aims for transparency to prevent potential misunderstandings:

I think, partly it’s not being misunderstood, misrecognised or treated as if I’m somebody that I’m not. I bring particular things to supervision, but I don’t bring everything to supervision. In some instances I don’t bring the highest level of knowledge about this field. [...] part of it is just being clear in my own mind and getting it reasonably clear [to students] the sort of person I am and the sort of things I can contribute and what I can’t. OK, I have to say to people: “Look this is what I do and there are limits to that. Other people give all sorts of other stuff that you need. But there’s only so many things that I am and can be”. And most of them know me and they know what I can do. (Supervisor M)

These comments suggest that “knowing” this supervisor includes apprehending his limits and that this gives students realistic expectations. Even so, the supervisor has little control over how students choose to position him and themselves in relation to his power and authority. He struggles with his projected image as “ogre” and elaborates his strategy to avoid being construed as an authority figure:

I mean trying to moderate the extent to which [this occurs]. I have to live with the fact that coming to see me about their thesis is one of the most stressful events in any month or week, or whatever, and we go down and have coffee, we chat. [...] I mean I don’t mind a level of apprehension. I have to make sure it doesn’t get out of control. And people aren’t using me as an ogre for no particular reason. “Like, I just want you to be there to be an ogre”. “But, but why am I? Why do you want to be frightened of me?” “We have to be”. I have to be careful not to be […] set
up too much with that sort of thing, an authority figure who makes them or who’s somehow responsible [for delaying their progress]. I am responsible to an extent and I can be used as an ogre [...] and they know that and in one way they talk about: “Oh, oh, oh. You’re going to see [names self] are you? Oh, oh, oh!” And they laugh about it. Because it’s also part of the strategy, and that’s an interesting [dimension], the duality of the supervisory relationship. I think that’s a really fascinating part of it. (Supervisor M)

Sofoulis (1997) suggests that the supervisor needs to find a balance between their various roles of “mastery and mothering, authority and collaboration, to properly fulfil their role as mentor or guiding expert” and to simultaneously allow the student’s voice to emerge. This does not preclude “domains of mastery, expertise, authority, or discipleship” (p. 10). In the previous example, the supervisor appears to be struggling with this issue, with the notion of “ogre” representing the authority of the father/tough coach/disciplinarian, involving, apparently, appreciation and fear on the part of the students (and a certain amount of pleasure or amusement on his) to be offset by “relaxed” meetings over coffee. Friendship adds a further layer of complexity:

Well to an extent because X [my student] and I have a sort of closer relationship than other students that I’ve got. And so negotiating transfer between just chatting as sort of friends and people in the department, and chatting with supervisor/supervisee is a real transition. And so for us, it’s had levels of complexity that aren’t always pleasant. And it’s sort of weird because you keep forgetting the Oedipal dimensions of the supervisory relationship. And you forget and so stuff that might be with just a friend like light-hearted ribbing has an importance that if you’re not really careful you forget. Oh no, this is just us hangin’ around shootin’ the breeze type conversation. And you can’t do that. Because to a certain extent I guess it always is present and you try to sort of mark the two interactions but it’s really hard. (Supervisor M)

When this supervisor describes his efforts to help students find their voice, the psychoanalytical element is again evident and he explains delays in roughly psychodynamic terms:

I think some of the delay we’re experiencing now is a function of that voice moment. She/[X] doesn’t ask me for permission as much as she used to. [...] I have absolute confidence [that she will finish], but I think we’ll hit another moment of doubt and her confidence will [dive] because these things are cyclic and you just go through doubt moments. (Supervisor M)

Here Supervisor M refrains from intervening in the student’s own process/struggle to become “an authority”. 4 He presents the student’s journey as a unique learning process and acknowledges that he must rely on her to construct her own sense of authority and free herself from his. Drawing from this, and in Sofoulis’ (1997) words, it can be suggested that Psycho-Supervision goes about creating “a space in which two subjectivities/intellects must necessarily interact so that the project of one may be brought to completion” and that “through the supervisory process it is possible to fulfil the goal

4 Perhaps the supervisor is endorsing the psychoanalytic idea of letting the student reach an optimal frustration level in which the student has to face their demons/shadows to be transformed. This notion of authority suggests that they may be becoming authorities with a masculinist sense of autonomous authority.
of enabling students to discover their “own standpoint”, to be given recognition for their “own work”, and to express ideas in their “own voice” (p. 11).

In the psychoanalytic discourse, because transparency is momentary and the mystery element is pervasive, the intensely-felt nature of student-supervisor relations remains somewhat unfathomable. If and when a student experiences the supervisor’s authority as overbearing, they may well decline to ask questions or challenge that power, and/or become passive and detached.

**Radical (Rad) discourse**

Efforts to be transparent in Rad-Supervision are accomplished by opening up social differences and explicating their impact on supervisor-student relations. In parallel with this, feedback is offered in a “conversational” way in which the supervisor, as well as affirming the student, situates her own train of thought beside that of the student:

> X tends to use a whole range of different feedback strategies. Sometimes X’ll just put a happy face: “Yeah, this is a good idea, I like this”. [...] What I really like about the way X gives feedback on writing is that she’s obviously thinking aloud while she’s writing. [...] So she doesn’t direct you in where you should be going. She more explores it with you and thinks aloud and goes off on her own little paths and if you choose to follow that path, or if you can see something that’s valuable in heading off in that direction. So she’ll write a whole screed, a whole page of something and within that she’ll say: “You really need to go and look at so and so”. Sometimes she’ll say: “No, you’ve got this all wrong, go back and re-read that, because what you’ve said so and so is saying isn’t really what they’re saying at all”. You can go back and you can argue with her - you can say: “Well this is what I mean they’re saying”. But more often than not, she is right [...] or, she’ll sort of wander off [...] It’s almost like having a conversation on a page. Where she leaves room for you to [decide], where she could go off in three different directions on the page and you can choose. [...] So you get lots of little entry points if you like. (Student H)

Mystery plays out in this terrain in the sense that the power relations that are at the heart of supervision can never, in fact, be fully known or articulated, are inherently unstable, and are not amenable to rational inquiry. They thus threaten to disrupt the efforts of both supervisor and student in unpredictable and possibly unrecognised ways. The supervisor may be oblivious to or disconcerted by the impact of her power and how it may disrupt communication:

> I’m also therefore often unconscious of the institutional status that I might have and the awe. It shocks me to the core really. “Hey? Me? Don’t be silly!” So, that’s so alien to me, I don’t have a feel for that, which means of course it’s highly possible, that some of my honours, some of PhD students may well be unable to say [what doesn’t work]. They’re all bloody stronger than me, they’ll come and beat me up [laughter]. (Supervisor F)

Effort may be made on the part of the Rad-Supervisor, and sometimes the Rad-Student, to establish a non-hierarchical, even power-free, relationship with the other. This is again reflected by Supervisor F who says:

> I expect my students to shape the agenda around meetings. I expect them to come in with their issues and questions. I don’t expect to have to set up some kind of
exam or test to see what they’ve been doing. I will repeatedly, boringly probably reiterate again and again and again. “I am just an intelligent reader, this is how I read it, you take from this what you think works for you. It is your choice, it is your decision, it is your thesis. You must be happy with the decisions that you are taking, my role is to give you advice”. So I constantly do that kind of talk that reminds them all the time that they are not there to get a tick from me, or a gold seal of approval or whatever, and then it’s done. And often we will be working at cross purposes, students will say: “I can’t submit this”. And I’ll say: “Oh, yes you can. It’s fine”. Their doubt is fairly acute on occasions. (Supervisor F)

It is noticeable that in this extract a protective/encouraging tone operates alongside the collegial “egalitarian” one. In the former, the supervisor is heard encouraging and directing her students both to rely on their own judgments and trust her assurances that the thesis is ready. In the latter, she offers choices and lets the student make decisions about topics and arguments. Added to this complexity, this supervisor also recognises that the feedback process can never be transparent because she cannot know how students will read her comments or ensure that they will be taken as she intended:

It’s not often that students will come back to me and say: “I didn’t like what you did to me”. On the flip-side they will come back and say: “I tried that and it worked really well”. So, maybe I ought to take some comfort that some things are working. [...] but one of the intangibles there is I have no way [...] little way of ensuring that students read me the way I want to be read. (Supervisor F)

In these excerpts we see evidence that mystery remains a constant companion. Here again, the inescapable power relations produce expectations that may remain invisible to students and even more so to the supervisors themselves whose blind spots become entangled. Due to different personal, disciplinary and institutional agendas, supervision is prone to multiple strains and tensions. Overall, my framework of analysis suggests that supervision involves close watching and surveillance, intimate relations that rely on intersubjective and intellectual capacities, and brief moments of equality.

Concluding reflections
A female professor of Sociology explains: “perhaps there also needs to be an acknowledgement, on the part of both supervisor and student, that precisely because of this seamless web, there are bound to be aspects of our practice/interactions that will remain invisible to us, just as our ‘personalities’ are” (Harris, 2001).

The relationship between the more “transparent” and the more “mysterious” elements that characterise student-supervisor relations and their textual relations ensures that supervision is a discursively rich pedagogy. Because of the unavoidable co-existence of transparency and mystery, an emphasis on either transparency or mystery alone is problematic. In terms of mystery, my data suggested that the power relations that epitomise supervision can never, in fact, be fully known or articulated, are inherently unstable, and are not amenable to rational inquiry.

The data also suggested that the notions of clear communication and reciprocity are challenging. While transparency is possible to the extent that there are matched expectations and feedback is clear, when there is murkiness, produced by student guardedness and supervisors’ prevarications, then we have the uncertainties of mystery. Students were pragmatic about their limited autonomy and constrained ability to

5 Here we see a neo-liberal discourse intersecting with a radical discourse.
challenge their supervisor’s feedback. Further, students sometimes expressed ambivalence towards their supervisor’s feedback, and spoke of developing diplomacy or devising other tactics to obtain the feedback desired. It was pragmatism that helped students manage the inbuilt opacity of the process, such as when the comments appeared to be pointing in different directions or requiring different responses. As appealing as they are as educational principles, clear communication and reciprocity are thus highly problematic.

For supervisors, I suggested that mystery derives from the fact that supervisors can never really know what feedback students find helpful or unhelpful, and they cannot ever really know if they are being read the way they want to be read. Their responses thus also highlighted how mystery persists alongside notions of communication, objectivity and equality. The gap between practice and intention means that a supervisor’s pedagogy is necessarily elusive. Indeed, supervisors saw supervision as having a dynamic nature - being highly variable, changeable and prone to mood swings. These splittings and slippages can also be seen as effects of the contradictory aims produced by institutional expectations and prescriptions. From this reading, I propose that the practice of supervisory feedback will always involve opacity, inequality and intangibility.

The current faith that transparency is (almost) completely possible is disturbing: it implies that supervisors and students can be in control of the research/writing process and that they should be able to manage the conduct of their relations in a rational and efficient manner. The risk is that this faith may suggest that these are the only ways of creating academic products and conducting student-supervisor relations. Hence it is important to recognise that doubt and uncertainty go with the territory of supervision. Mystery persists alongside notions of communication, objectivity and equality; hence, its presence needs to be recognised and accepted.

In conclusion, then, the current institutional focus on outcomes and thesis product risks reducing the research process with its inherent elements of mystery to a technical-rational and orderly experience of completing milestones. In this way, it ignores the fact that the research/writing process has unique and idiosyncratic elements in each and every case. Instead it imposes uniform assumptions about autonomy, authorship and originality on the highly differentiated. In thinking about supervision this way, it becomes possible to reconfigure the feedback process as one that needs to be flexible and open-ended and tolerant of ambiguity. Here there is an acceptance of the fact that supervision entails a constant process of reflection regarding such uncertainties (Aspland, 1999).

The “murmurs” alluded to in the chapter title point to the institutional silences around the difficulties of supervision. It suggests that the aversion to uncertainty pushes complexities “underground” and privileges certain kinds of behaviours and makes certain kinds of scholarly identities more likely than others. “Murmurs” refer to the hushed sounds we may overhear from students whose difficulties remain unarticulated and who are frustrated by what they cannot understand or speak about. Some of those murmurs refer to muffled voices competing to be heard over louder noises. Some are also from supervisors who want to transform traditional supervision pedagogies now long overdue for critique. Together these murmurings are unsettling the status quo and providing the means to shift the discursive realms of practice to transform the established boundaries between them. Understanding the processes involved through a finely-grained analysis that provides a nuanced representation of the lived experiences of supervision and the pedagogical practices that support them should provide new ways to think about and practise post/graduate writing pedagogies and research literacies. It is hoped that new modes of supervisory discourse will enter the pedagogical arena to unsettle dominant moods and quell the murmurings.
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References


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