

PREPARING THE SUPERVISOR AND STUDENT FOR CROSS CULTURAL SUPERVISION

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ABSTRACT

Supervision is often viewed as an adjunct to many other academic and administrative responsibilities. The underlying values that act as a bedrock to Western culture are manifested in the traditions and protocols of what is considered to be good doctoral research. We often overlook that some of these values have been handed down as philosophies over the centuries (Tarnas 1991; Mahoney 1991; Scruton 1997). The same values are informally accessible to supervisors who have been trained and who supervise within the Western culture. When the supervisory task includes offshore supervision, and especially in cultures that are dramatically different across several dimensions, then she needs to articulate her home culture's embedded values and traditions in order to place them alongside those of the student. Abilities such as standing back and taking a detached view of the (in this case) Western culture, together with learning and embracing other cultures as they enter the supervisory scene are necessary before synergies can be (if they are to be) found. Preparing the student entails encouraging a degree of self-awareness so that personal characteristics can be mapped against those likely to be found within the research context. This is particularly so when the research entails substantial researcher/respondent interaction. The concept of relationship is very different across cultures and this can be problematic when a functional approach is taken to the supervision task. A key role for supervisors is to help decide whether an instrument (such as questionnaire) that is constructed in one culture can be meaningfully employed in another. Here the supervisor can draw on various techniques, such as de-centering, to establish how much meaning is lost when a question has been made culturally intelligible and acceptable.

INTRODUCTION

The research and supervisory training of the writer was conducted within the Western framework, and the organizational/business setting (Linstead 1997; Chapman 1996/7). Exposed to modern ((Durkheim 1985/1958; Parsons 1949) and postmodern (Foucault 1972; Calas & Smircich 1999) theory, there was little doubt that, notwithstanding nuances in the debate, the writer was comfortable in the traditional setting. The first twelve doctoral graduates shared with the writer the Western research culture. Her performance (to Western doctoral thesis standards) has been consistently validated in several ways and this has had a reinforcing effect on the cultural (Schein 1991) and supervision norms adopted. Concomitant with this, the writer's area of expertise is in the qualitative ((Denzin 1999; Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 2000) 'in the field' area (Filstead 1972). From a supervision point of view, contemporary debates such as those on multi-paradigms and commensurability ((Hassard 1991; Gioia & Pitre 1990), and such as the work of Knorr-Cetina (1999) on epistemic culture,

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needed to be introduced to students so that they could appreciate the complex nature of qualitative research. Still, these were framed within the Western academic setting.

Offshore supervision has now become part of the writer's responsibility. Currently, there are three Chinese doctoral students. One has graduated, two are ready for examination, with two more to follow in 2004/5. There are two Thai and two Indonesian students who are at various stages of thesis development. These range from recent approval of candidacy to data-directed second literature searches for theoretical sensitivity (Glaser 1992). It is easy to talk about adapting to other cultures and very often the effort is broad brush. Adaptation can range from showing an interest in the other culture's etiquette to taking almost an anthropological interest in the culture and more—sometimes to the point of immersion. In today's world, we as academics are expected to have multiple supervisions within our responsibility. The days of an environment that allowed one or two supervisions over several years and time to develop deep knowledge of another culture are fast disappearing and this is partly due to the speed with which supervisors and students can access scholarly literature. This is especially the case in the business setting where the writer is located. Yet instinctively we know as supervisors that it is mostly our responsibility to go to where the student is and help him or her across any cultural divide. In this way, the conventions of the thesis can be upheld whilst minimizing discomfort for the student.

PREPARING THE SUPERVISOR: A WESTERN/ASIAN EXAMPLE

This proves to be a fascinating exercise as we soon come across the anthropological truism that it takes a special cause to make us stop and think about our own culture. Yet there is little doubt that theses, especially within the business setting, somewhat reflect Western cultural norms. Table 1, below, written with a doctoral student comparing Australian and Chinese management approaches (Liang & Whiteley 2003) illustrates a basic difference in cultural orientation (passion versus mind). There are differences in the way that many dimensions of social life are perceived (Table 1).

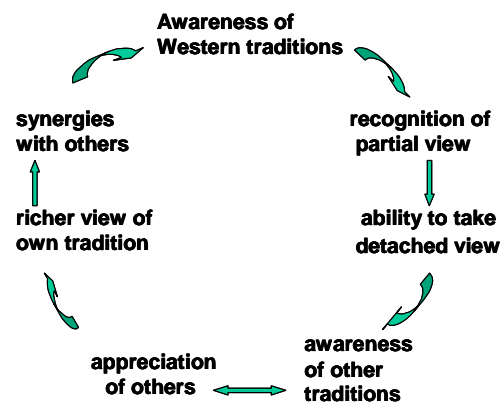
Table 1—Cultural differences

Differences	Australian—greater emphasis on Mind	Chinese—greater emphasis on Passion
Organizational		
Hierarchy	Egalitarian	Respects for and obedience to superiors
Training and education	Problem solving and technical skills	Basic knowledge and basic skills
Planning	Short term	Long term
Controlling	Result-oriented	Process-oriented
Organization structure	Flat, clear-cut	Tall, ambiguous,
Individual		
Ways of thinking	Linear	Circular
Prioritising	Efficiency	Harmony and human touch
Risk-taking	Experimenting	Risk-avoiding
Patience	Efficiency	Effectiveness
Flexibility	Absolute	Situational
Responsibilities and initiatives	Absolute	Situational
Loyalty	Organizational	Personal
Motivation	Self-started	Passive
Self-confidence	Inner-directed	Outer-directed
Time reckoning	Efficiency	Situational
Power	Organizational	Personal

Key insights that came from such work stimulated the need for the self-diagnosis and self-development reflective model which is in figure 1. The model was built primarily as a self-reflective device, the aim being to prevent accidental ‘dumping’ of Western culture on the processual elements of the supervision activity. Such dumping might still achieve thesis aims, but it would undoubtedly lessen the student’s comfort. As the student is often feeling under pressure from the increasing scholarly demands of the supervisor, this has always been an important consideration for the writer.

Information such as the two sets in Table 1 was useful in reminding the writer that although the conventions of the thesis were undeniably Western, the Western view reflected a partial reality when it came to supervising students in other cultures. The notion of ‘partial reality’ was inspired by Morgan (1980; 1997). Probably the most challenging of the activities in the model was the ability to stand back and take a detached view of the supervisory task and the relational element in particular. This brings us to the activity of developing awareness of other traditions.

Figure 1: Expanding the supervisory horizons



Adapted from Whiteley (2001)

Using Table 1 as a guide, it became immediately apparent that in the writer’s case the mind-orientation predominates. The egalitarian relationship with the student is comfortable as is a problem solving and solutions oriented approach. There is a natural inclination to be results oriented, efficient, and self-organized. This matches the implicit assumption of the student in the doctoral undertaking as ‘self-directed and self-motivated’. Relational cultures, and particularly those in the students’ cultures being currently supervised, demand something very different from the Western supervisor. S/he must become used to the respect norm and operate in a way that allows any academic title to become an item of ‘face’ for the student. Because of the collective nature of many Asian countries, the student’s business is family business and so being put on show for family visits is incorporated into the thesis venture (which seems to expand as the journey goes on). The norm of obedience gives the supervisor some immediate challenges because here, whilst it is desirable to appreciate the culture, the nature of the task requires the student to be self-reliant and original. Solutions such as giving certainty on things like meeting dates, task requirements and deadlines allows some of the

comforts of obedience whilst allowing the supervisor to wean the student away from the 'taught solutions' ambience of his or her previous studies.

Two dimensions are central to the supervisory process and they mean something very different in the Western and Asian lexicon. These are the relational orientation and the human heartedness (ren) requirement. On reflection, there is separatism about Western culture that is not in harmony with some Asian settings (Scarborough 1998). It seems to be very difficult for the student to separate the thesis journey from the supervisory relationship. During the thesis, supervisors may work very hard on relationship maintenance so that the supervisor and student do not get too frustrated with each other. However, it is unlikely that the student will be seen as part of 'life after thesis' by the supervisor (or the Western student). In the West, there may or may not be a continuing relationship after graduation. If there is, this may range from the perfunctory to the warm and personal. There is no cultural norm circumscribing the choice, more a sense of two individuals growing to like each other. In the Asian—and especially the Chinese—setting, once the supervisory relationship begins, *Quanxi*, considerations kick-start. The *quanxi* concept does not translate easily, but approximately, it connects the supervisor in a web, (could be weak or could be strong) of reciprocal relationships (Wood, Whiteley & Zhang 1999). The responsibilities range far outside of what might be expected when supervising a Western student. When 'dredging the *quanxi*' for a particular 'family member' (also an expanded concept from the Western nuclear family structure) the supervisor can be put in the position of being expected to be a part of non-supervisory events. Given this supervisor's time and efficiency cultural preferences, there is some accommodation required here. That is not to say that the supervisor will always agree to the student's requests, but that they are considered alongside the cultural implications of not doing so.

This brings the discussion almost full circle. The insights involved in making cultural decisions within the supervisory process allow a richer understanding of the supervisor's own cultural implications. There is strength in learning, in a deep and almost anthropological sense, one's own traditions. The supervisor in cross-cultural supervision is faced with many hermeneutic moments (Sayer 1998), often tacking between traditions whilst steering the path always towards completion of a critical and original piece of work.

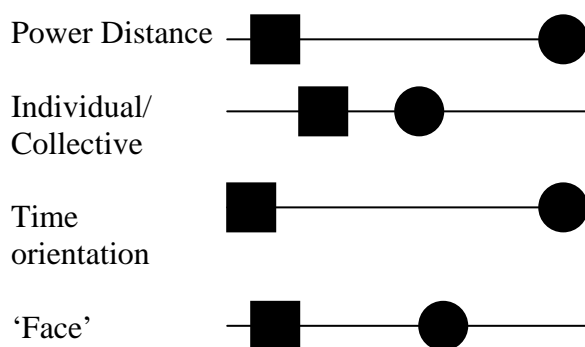
PREPARING THE STUDENT

Given the argument above, there is still homogeneity about the doctoral thesis that renders many elements *etic* (Pike 1967; Brislin 1976) or universal in nature. Traditional research activities, for example, follow a somewhat linear pattern where there is an introductory background culminating in some controversy or challenge that convinces the student (and the supervisor) that there are some research questions worth addressing at a deep level. It may be possible to state these in the form of a deterministic model or, in the case of qualitative work, to begin 'penetration of social space' activities (Whiteley & Whiteley 2004) by a familiarization study. These are then supported with a scholarly treatment of the literature in the field (and sometimes beyond it). Theories are presented that might be either confirmed or refuted in the light of the research findings. The research design is expected to be 'connective' in nature so that each step in the research procedure is connected from the initial conceptual beginning to the conclusions made at the end. It is when addressing the 'how' of these research activities and procedures that the supervisor needs to prepare the student.

A mapping device such as that in Table 2 has proved to be useful for students (Whiteley 2001). The aim is to sensitize the student to his/her own cultural behaviors in terms of the individual or group respondents who present themselves in the research context. Those that have been most used to date in the Hong Kong and China setting are power distance, individualist/collectivist (Roe & Ester 1999; Hofstede 1980, 1991) time-orientation universalistic/particularistic (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998) and 'face' (Bond 1989). In Thailand (Mulder 1999) and Indonesia, Buddhism and the Moslem religion respectively (Koller & Koller 1998) would provide some cultural imperatives in the way that research is to be carried out. Some of the cultural information is accessible in literature, but the supervisor sometimes needs to help the student to reflect on his or her cultural traditions (as in Figure 1) discussed earlier. The map in Figure 2 is designed to be a diagnostic device and also a matching one. It shows just two parties, researcher and respondent, but very often within the same study there might be several groups who differ from each other and who differ from the student in various ways. The task of the student, before any field-work or instrument administration takes place, is to plot himself and his respondent group along a continuum. In the extract below, the square represents the researcher and the circle represents respondents. The first task is to diagnose the researcher's own 'position'.

This is not always as easy as it seems for the reasons we stated earlier. Most students (like their supervisors) need a reason to reflect on their own cultural traditions. Although literature can give a rough guide, individuals are socialized in different ways. For example, the student who has risen up the ranks of a foreign-owned enterprise (European or American, for example) may be different from one who has always been involved in local, traditional (say Thai) businesses. Nor is it easy for the student to do self-diagnosis. Sometimes we ask students to obtain help from friends or colleagues. This exercise is also successful within the doctoral forum setting. Once the student is located, s/he needs to try to locate the participant group(s) on the continuum. In qualitative research, there is invariably a familiarization stage where diagnostic information about the emic (Brislin 1976) of the respondents can be gathered. The activity consists of becoming familiar with the ambience, communication and relational norms and other 'folkloric' (Gabriel 1998) patterns within the research context. A judgement needs to be made next about how great a distance the research will tolerate. Where the distance is considered to be too great, then the researcher needs to develop cultural sensitivity to that element. The need for sensitivity comes into sharp focus when the research is constructivist in nature as there is likely to be personal interaction between the researcher and respondents.

Figure 2: Mapping cultural differences



APPLYING THE MAPPING MODEL

In the figure above, let us say that the researcher is comfortable with a low power distance orientation. She needs to accommodate the research behaviours appropriate to a high power distance situation. From the very first contact with respondents, through to the procedures that follow, the researcher would need to 'bracket' the desire to be informal and familiar, adopting more formal and respectful behaviors. There is a core of introductory activities in research that need to be considered. They begin with the initial contact—should it be by telephone, letter, email? If in a letter, should the questions be sent as well or not? Should the researcher introduce him/herself formally or informally? If the respondent says 'call me Jim' does he mean the researcher to do this? Thinking of a research interview, it may be desirable to demonstrate respect to respondents by taking another researcher along to interview or research meeting, even if there is not a research task for her. Similarly, there may be a difference in the way that the researcher and people in the research context think of time. Let's say, for example, that the researcher, like the writer, was very present-oriented with the future only lasting until the research interview was completed. The research context, in contrast, was a highly relational one where time was not so discrete and took in the past, present and future in a fluid way. The likelihood would be that the respondents would feel more comfortable if the researcher facilitated some understanding of her 'past'. Giving some personal/family details about the researcher, thus inviting the respondent in a small way into her 'past', often achieves this relational goal. The respondent often wants to reciprocate so that the semblance of a relationship can be maintained. This makes the vision of the interview very different from 'I have one hour of busy executive time so I must make the most of it' often demanded within the Western business context. Also necessary when advising students on research design is the notion of 'endings'. In the Western context, the idea of natural endings is applied to parts of the study (such as interviews) or the whole study itself. However, once respondents become part of the *quanxi*, network of relationships, there is more a sense of continuity within the broader social spectrum.

Sometimes the mapping process shows differences that give the researcher pause, and correctly so. Using a survey design by questionnaire as an example, differences (not this time with the researcher necessarily, but the items on the questionnaire) in both semantics and acceptability would be the subject of the investigation. To test for suitability in a comparative study, each question would need to be 'de-centered' (Brislin 1976). We first met this need in Hong Kong when a performance appraisal survey was being back translated. The question: 'Do you buy in to this appraisal process' was translated as: 'Do you obey this appraisal process?' The high power distance in the organization would not countenance an employee 'buying in'. The question needed to be de-centred from this language and re-stated in a way acceptable to the culture. The question then arises: 'have we lost too much meaning in the new presentation for the question to be useful?' It could well be that in surviving the re-representation there is more loss of meaning from the original format than could be tolerated and still keep the research valid. Various researchers (Triandis 1976; Triandis & Albert 1987) and others have taken this issue very seriously. Doctoral candidates who present unmodified, or little modified, instruments come in for constant criticism at scholarly conferences. A major role for a supervisor of an international study would be to act as a gatekeeper as to whether an instrument developed in and for one cultural context can, even when modified, retain its validity in another one.

CONCLUSION

Supervision is a very personal undertaking. Very often it is part of the implicit or tacit framework where supervisors respond to either an individual proposal or a request from colleagues and this is done on an individual basis. This paper has taken an opportunity to share some of the reflections and insights that came from supervising across Asian cultures when the supervisor and thesis conventions are firmly entrenched in Western philosophy and culture. The cycle in Figure 1 evolved to become the current self-development plan of the writer. The most difficult element of this may be the ability to 'bracket' and take a detached view of one's own cultural traditions. They run deep and, unless there is a reason, they remain part of what Giddens (1984) calls a generalized sense of 'knowing'. Using ideas from social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann 1967), the supervisor and student co-construct meaning through their conversations and interactions. Without cultural adaptation it might be the case that a 1+1 conversation may often be the case, with the supervisor and the student each conducting a monologue, not recognizing that this is the case. This is all the more problematic in high 'face' supervisory contexts as the student will defend the supervisor's face by pretending that there is a mutual understanding.

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