Is mindfulness a useful next trend in doctoral supervision?

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A review of the trends in doctoral education reveals that the focus has been on what supervisors should do in supervision and very little on ways of being in the supervisory relationship. A new direction for doctoral supervision foregrounds the importance of mindfulness traits that well-regarded supervisors embody in their highly valued relationships with candidates, that tacitly establish rapport and create a supportive interpersonal environment that is conducive to the candidate's intellectual insightfulness and developing scholarly identity. These traits are capable of being learned by supervisors, regardless of the disciplinary setting, and may inform the professional development of doctoral supervisors.

Keywords: Liminal spaces and threshold concept theory; mindfulness traits of well-regarded doctoral supervisors; doctoral supervisory relationship; supervisor development.

Introduction

In Australia and most countries, the award of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) generally requires the development of a thesis that scholars will judge for its significance and originality as a contribution to knowledge in a discipline or field of education. Doctoral candidates must negotiate the intellectual and emotional challenges commonly associated with meeting the requirements for the award of a PhD. To this end, universities typically appoint one or more supervisors to guide and support the candidate. The desired characteristics and behaviours of doctoral supervisors have been extensively investigated, giving rise to the identification of a variety of models for best supervisory practice. Less well understood are the kinds of dispositional qualities of mind and character, which might be called mindfulness traits, that enable a supervisor to develop a strong intellectual and emotional rapport with a candidate within the supervisory relationship. This article suggests that there may be lessons from the rising trend of mindfulness in positive psychology, and particularly mindfulness in helping relationships, for promoting doctoral supervisory relationships that may assist candidates to negotiate the liminal space of candidacy. The article begins with an overview of trends in doctoral education in Australia and globally.

Trends in the doctoral education literature

In Australia, interest in doctoral education has been evident since the early 1980s. Issues of concern in the literature reported at that time included: the quality of doctoral supervision (Ibrahim, McEwan & Pitalbo, 1980; Barrett, Magin & Smith, 1983); a perceived lack of clarity about doctoral supervisory roles and responsibilities (Moses, 1984); deficiencies in the research and writing skills of doctoral candidates (Zuber-Skerritt & Knight, 1986); the lack of recognition given to doctoral candidates for their contributions to research (Powles, 1984); and poor retention and completion rates (Anderson & Johnston, 1983; Barrett & Magin, 1983; Hill, Johnston & Smith, 1983; Nightingale, 1984; Powles, 1989).

Interest in the quality of supervision intensified during the early 1990s, particularly as it pertained to improving on-time

doctoral completions. Moses investigated gender-related and discipline-specific barriers to doctoral completions (Moses, 1990a; 1990b); and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (1990) examined the progress rates of doctoral candidates over a seven-year period from 1983. There also emerged an interest in the nature of supervisory quality. Parry and Hayden (1994) investigated doctoral supervisory practices across a range of academic departments at a large metropolitan university in Melbourne; and Cullen et al., (1994), as part of a research project conducted at the Australian National University, surveyed doctoral supervisors and candidates in order to identify characteristics of effective doctoral supervision. A desire to see the research emphasis move away from administration, policy, finance, and governance also began to be expressed (Lee & Green, 1995). Green and Lee (1995), building on an earlier assertion by Connell (1985) that doctoral supervision is a highly advanced form of teaching and not simply a technical exercise, identified the need for doctoral supervision to be seen as a pedagogy that involved complex power relations between the discipline, research and teaching.

Later in the 1990s, a Commonwealth Government review of higher education financing and policy (West, 1998) expressed further concern about lengthy doctoral completion times. It saw a link between these and supposed deficiencies in the quality of doctoral supervision. In the policy statement that followed, the Commonwealth Minister for Education emphasised the importance of universities being responsive to the needs, interests, and circumstances of doctoral candidates (Kemp, 1999). These developments prompted further investigation of doctoral student dissatisfaction. Harman (2003) reported that PhD candidates were largely dissatisfied with their supervision due to the high supervisory workloads that had become prevalent as enrolments escalated nationally, together with weaknesses in supervisory practices. Neumann (2003), drawing upon a large-scale survey of doctoral candidates and experienced supervisors, reported similarly. She found that as many as 12 per cent of the candidates surveyed were dissatisfied with their experience of doctoral supervision, and five per cent of respondents expressed serious grievances (Neumann, 2003). Sinclair (2004) re-examined doctoral completion rates and reported marked differences between different disciplinary groupings, a finding that resonated with earlier reports by Becher, Henkel and Kogan (1994) in the UK, and by Parry and Hayden (1994) and Cullen et al. (1994) in Australia. Ways of improving doctoral supervisory practices were explored, including through professional development of doctoral supervisors (Pearson & Brew, 2002), the creation of models of facilitative supervisory practice (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004), and evaluating the quality of doctoral supervision (Zuber-Skerritt & Roche, 2004). The trend in much of the research at this time was to respond to national and institutional imperatives to improve doctoral supervision in ways intended to achieve increased efficiency.

Notwithstanding the volume of research produced, there was still a lack of a robust conceptual understanding of what doctoral supervision involves (Pearson and Kayrooz, 2004). In a similar vein, Grant (2003) noted that while good supervision was widely considered to be central to the success of a doctoral candidate, it was a pedagogy that was poorly understood, with attempts to generate a unifying theory for supervisory pedagogy still limited. In Grant's view, supervision was meant to be an ethical practice in which there were productive power relations between a doctoral candidate and a supervisor (Grant, 2003). However, Manathunga (2005), argued that research to date had erroneously portrayed supervision as an unproblematic teaching relationship that was understood to be a rational and transparent engagement between two equally powerful, autonomous individuals.

As doctoral enrolments continue to increase, the Australian literature on doctoral education has come to accommodate a broad range of concerns. Pearson (2005) argued the need to link critical developments in research on doctoral education in Australia with what is happening in the global context in this area of research. Manathunga (2005), responding to a trend in Australia and elsewhere for universities to prescribe supervisor training and development programs, criticised the focus of many of these programs, arguing that they were concerned solely with administrative responsibilities and that supervisors would benefit more from a pedagogical focus that took account of the cognitive and affective demands of doctoral supervision. Parry (2007) provided a detailed analysis of the nature and significance of disciplinary differences and, in the process, identified the largely tacit ways by which candidates learn disciplinary conventions. Boud and Lee (2009) identified the need to frame doctoral education as an area of professional practice that accommodates the various types of doctorates increasingly on offer. Nulty, Kiley and Meyers (2009) produced a framework for promoting and recognising excellence in supervision. Vilkinas, Leask and Ladyshewsky (2009) articulated a business management approach to doctoral supervision. Brew and Peseta (2009) investigated mechanisms for institutional recognition of successful doctoral supervisors. Halse and Malfoy (2010) presented an argument for theorising doctoral supervision as professional work, advancing a model that provided a discourse, language, and theory to prepare academics for understanding the task and responsibility of supervision.

The need to develop more relevant doctoral supervisory training programs has also been a theme in the related Australian literature. Hammond, Ryland, Tennant and Boud (2010), drawing upon a large-scale empirical investigation of existing supervisory training programs in Australian

universities, identified a need to take account of the changing context of research education and of the impact that this change is having on supervisory roles and responsibilities. They argued the need for a more formal and a more professional approach to supervisor training. Kiley (2011a) also identified this need. Drawing upon national data, including national Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire survey data over the period from 2002 to 2009 that showed a slight improvement over time in candidate satisfaction levels with supervision, Kiley argued that although supervisory training and development programs had become better informed by the increased focus on the pedagogy of research education, there was only slight evidence that the quality of supervision had improved (Kiley, 2011a).

A more recent development in many Australian universities has been the requirement to establish supervisory teams or panels for each doctoral candidate. Manathunga (2012) argues in favour of this requirement, suggesting that it provides better support for doctoral candidates and their supervisors, particularly those in trans-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary fields where a broad range of intellectual expertise is required. This development has provided insight into the way the sector has responded with relative speed to the perceived needs of higher degree research candidates in the rapidly changing context of doctoral education in Australia, and globally.

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Parallels exist between the interests of Australian researchers and those of researchers in other countries concerning doctoral supervision. One broad area of interest concerns the requirements for high quality supervision. Wisker (2005), writing in the context of the UK, developed a comprehensive list of recommendations for supervisors to follow to provide effective supervision. Lee (2008), also drawing on experience in the UK, argued that a more conceptual approach to supervision was required in order to add a new dimension to doctoral supervisory relationships. Walker et al. (2008), drawing upon the results of a five-year project that sought to transform doctoral programs at American universities, reported that students who have had beneficial supervising relationships often refer to themselves as 'lucky', highlighting the almost random and haphazard access to high-quality advising and mentoring (Walker et al., 2008). They also observed that '... effective teaching and advising of doctoral students should not be a matter of luck!' (Walker et al., 2008). Pursuing a related avenue of enquiry, Barnes and Austin (2009, p.298) investigated the responsibilities, functions, and characteristics of exemplary doctoral supervisors in the United States with a view to providing empirical evidence that could be used to address the 'woefully uneven' quality of doctoral supervision. These researchers found that doctoral supervisor responsibilities were diverse: they included helping candidates to be successful, and to develop as researchers and as professionals. Supervisory functions were reported to include collaborating, mentoring, advocating, and chastising; and desirable supervisor characteristics were identified as including being friendly, collegial, supportive, accessible and honest (Barnes & Austin, 2009). According to Kiley (2011b), doctoral supervisors in Australia share many similarities with their American colleagues.

Some pertinent themes and reference points from the literature on doctoral education include: how doctoral candidates achieve mastery of discipline-specific conventions for making and reporting knowledge; what the characteristics are of quality communication between doctoral supervisors and their candidates; and whether or not there are tensions arising from the power imbalance between doctoral supervisors and their candidates that have a potential to be disruptive. Important reference points on these themes include works by Parry (2007), Wisker et al. (2008), Arnold (2009), Doloriert, Sambrook and Stewart (2012), and Jasman (2012). Parry (2007) investigated the importance to doctoral completion of understanding field-specific cognitive and social conventions for making and reporting knowledge, which she identified as being communicated largely by tacit means. Wisker et al. (2008) identified the heavy reliance of doctoral candidates on the communication skills of their supervisors, including skills in communicating tacitly. Arnold (2009), building on research by Grant (1999), introduced insights from psychoanalysis as a means of exploring how doctoral supervisors might learn from taking account of the requirements of one-to-one relationships between psychotherapists and their clients. Doloriert et al. (2012), who investigated the nature of supervisor-candidate communications, identified the importance of emotion and how power within the supervisory relationship was managed. Jasman (2012) reported on an initiative to make tacit elements of communication practices more explicit in doctoral supervision so that these elements could be adequately questioned, reflected on, and changed.

Doctoral education continues to be an important area for scholarly investigation. Cuthbert and Molla (2015) suggest that governments in many countries are now demonstrating by their policies and auditing requirements that the management of the PhD is too important to be left to universities themselves.

Governments also have a vested interest in the efficiency and effectiveness of doctoral supervision. In Australia, at least, fees for doctoral candidature in public universities are publicly subsidised, and public funding is predicated upon expectations of timely completion by doctoral candidates. Attrition rates that are too high and completion rates that are too slow are routinely identified as being a drain on public resources. High attrition rates also impose a significant personal cost on doctoral candidates. In Australia, as in other developed countries, there has been growth over recent decades in the number of doctoral candidates. Associated with this growth, as noted by Hammond et al. (2010), is an increase in the diversity of doctoral programs. As documented by Neumann (2003) there has also been an increase in the diversity of the backgrounds and aspirations of doctoral candidates.

In Australia, doctoral supervisors report increased pressure both to assist candidates to complete in minimum time (Connell & Manathunga, 2012) and to supervise in areas that lie close to the perimeter of their spheres of knowledge (Manathunga (2012). There are also reports of an increased incidence of cultural and linguistic differences between doctoral supervisors and their candidates (Hammond et al., 2010), of pressure on supervisors to accommodate the increasingly trans-disciplinary and applied nature of knowledge production (Taylor, 2013), and of an increasing need for PhD programs to be tailored to meet specific labour-market needs (Muller & Young, 2014). These pressures impact significantly on doctoral supervision (Taylor, 2013) and they have important implications for the professional development needs of doctoral supervisors (Hammond et al., 2010). Though the circumstances of doctoral education are evolving, the fundamental need for quality in doctoral supervision remains.

Doctoral candidacy as a liminal space

One perspective through which the successful supervisory relationship may be examined concerns the notion of liminal spaces, a concept that is associated with the threshold concept framework (Meyer & Land, 2006). A central tenet of liminality is that in all disciplines there are conceptual gateways, or threshold concepts, that must be passed through to arrive at important new understandings (Land, Meyer & Smith, 2008). One way of describing the difficulties of negotiating conceptual gateways is by likening them to the experience of being in a liminal space, or 'limbo', described by Turner (1977, p. 37) as being 'between established states.' A liminal space is a space of transformation, but, as Land et al. (2008) argue, it can also be a suspended state, or stuck place, in which understanding approximates to a kind of mimicry and lack of authenticity. Various scholars have referred to the experience of doctoral candidature as being akin to a liminal space (see, for example, Trafford, 2008). Becher and Trowler (2001, p. 134) refer to it as a 'rite of passage to the scholarly life' in which the candidate is repeatedly confronted by conceptual challenges that must be addressed in order to make intellectual progress. In the liminal space of doctoral candidature, candidates negotiating threshold concepts are prone to experiencing feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity and a lack of authenticity (see, for example, Parry, 2007). Their intellectual challenges have emotional correlates, an appreciation of which is important knowledge for doctoral supervisors because of the relevance of emotions in candidature.

Doctoral candidates, by virtue of being in an extended state of liminality, are prone to feeling uncertain and apprehensive about the knowledge-making processes in which they are engaged. In these circumstances, the ways in which supervisors relate to and are perceived by their candidates becomes important. According to Spinelli (2005, p. 112), there are 'ways of being' embodied in a helping professional that are conveyed to and perceived by the client. In the same vein, Becher and Trowler (2001) employ the notion of 'ways of being' describing the process in which individual academics adopt a particular way of being, a personal and professional identity, set of values, taken-for-granted knowledge and recurrent practices.

Insights from helping relationships

Some studies have drawn parallels between doctoral supervision and the helping professions, which include, for example, coaching, counselling and psychotherapy (see, for example, Arnold, 2009; Grant, 1999; McMichael & Garry, 1990). Bartlett and Mercer (2000) argue that many aspects of the doctoral supervisory relationship are to be found in a range of other professional relationships including those in mentoring, personnel management, and supervision between psychoanalysts. Similarly, Wisker et al. (2008) note that supervision has in common with mentoring, coaching and tutoring a one-to-one relationship intended to support a candidate and empower learning. Further, Arnold (2009) argues that supervisory pedagogy may benefit from interrogating the pedagogical aspects of psychotherapy, to enable a deeper understanding and richer practising of postgraduate supervision.

Rogers (1961) drew on his experience as a psychotherapist to argue that people are positive, constructive, moving towards self-actualisation, and growing towards maturity, and socialisation. Based on this positive view, Rogers (1969) advocated a facilitative way of teaching that gave expression to three conditions: congruence, where the facilitator is sincere rather than inauthentic in the role adopted in the relationship; unconditional positive regard, where the facilitator unreservedly accepts the learner without judgement; and

empathetic understanding, where the facilitator identifies with the feelings, thoughts and attitudes of the learner. Rogers' perspective provides an insight to the mindfulness traits of doctoral supervisors.

In order to effectively establish a working relationship with a candidate, the doctoral supervisor is required to have a mix of attitudes, behaviours, and skills in both the educational and interpersonal aspects of teaching and learning. Consistent with this idea is Grant's (2003) argument that supervision is different from other forms of teaching and learning in higher education because of its peculiarly intense and negotiated character, as well as in its requirements for a blend of pedagogical and personal relationship skills in the supervisor.

According to Rogers' (1961) definition of the helping relationship, the supervisory relationship is a helping relationship. By this term, Rogers means a relationship in which at least one of the parties has the intent of promoting the growth, development, maturity, improved functioning, improved coping with life of the other. Clearly, this definition covers a wide range of relationships, including the supervisory relationship. It is important to note that doctoral supervisors are not helping professionals, and a supervisory relationship is, therefore, fundamentally different from a helping relationship, particularly in that it is not a healing relationship. There may, however, be merit in interrogating parallels between the nature of the doctoral supervisory relationship and the relationship that typically occurs between helping professionals and their clients.

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Important parallels between a client-centred approach to the helping professions and doctoral supervision are that both relationships typically involve learning conversations; both are constructed around one-to-one relationships that are developed over a long period of time; and both involve problem-solving, often in an atmosphere of emotional discomfort and an unequal power balance. Seen in this way, certain responsibilities may be attributed to doctoral supervisors in working successfully with individual candidates, including a responsibility to guide and support the candidate in negotiating the liminal challenges associated with doctoral candidature.

Useful insights about the quality of supportive doctoral supervisory relationships can be drawn from the broader therapeutic context of the helping professions. First, what is particularly noteworthy in making the comparison is that the qualities in communication required in the helping relationship might provide a deeper understanding of the nature of supportive interpersonal communication in the doctoral supervisory relationship. In psychotherapy, for example, important qualities of the therapist in communicating with the client are 'empathy, warmth, congruence, complex verbal skills, approval, supportiveness, optimism and respect' (Arnold, 2009). Siegel (2010, p. 180) refers to these qualities as 'mindfulness traits.' Richardson, Sheean and Bambling (2009, p. 72) draw attention also to the ethical aspect of the qualities that counsellors and psychotherapists should demonstrate, including: 'empathy, sincerity, integrity, resilience, respect, humility, competence, fairness, wisdom and courage.' Qualities such as these may be equally important for doctoral candidates to experience in their interpersonal communications with their supervisors.

Second, each of the helping professions shares a requirement for practitioners to have highly developed interpersonal communication skills, together with supportive attitudes and behaviours, that need to be developed and learned by the practitioner in order to achieve a successful relationship with clients. Effective interpersonal communications skills seem also to be essential for doctoral supervision, but doctoral supervisors do not always innately acquire these skills, and the department, faculty or institution in which they work may not necessarily require them to receive relevant training. Indeed, supervisors may also need to develop emotional management skills. Most Australian universities have mandatory training for novice supervisors that, as Kiley (2011a) observes, are intended to raise awareness about candidate expectations, roles and responsibilities, and about the need to implement effective supervisory practices. Doctoral supervisors may, however, remain relatively untrained in interpersonal communications skills when compared to the helping professions, where, according to Richardson et al. (2009), professionals are typically trained in interpersonal relationship-building skills over a number of years. Therefore, just as the helping professionals are required to be skilled in the interpersonal dimension of the therapeutic relationship, so, arguably, might doctoral supervisors be required to be skilled in interpersonal communications in their supervisory relationships. The importance of training supervisors in interpersonal communication skills has implications for the quality of the supervisory relationship.

A great deal of research over the past three decades has produced models of doctoral supervision (see, for example, Cullen et al., 1994), lists of attributes of productive supervisors (Kiley, 2011b), and inventories of characteristics

and behaviours of exemplary supervisors (see, for example, Barnes & Austin, 2009). The purpose of much of this research has been to establish what doctoral supervisors should know and should do to be successful as supervisors, particularly given the pressures on them to accommodate changes in the context of doctoral supervision. Various scenarios have been developed, but their reach has not extended to take fully into account the importance of the dispositional qualities, or mindfulness traits, of supervisors in establishing rapport in the supervisory relationship.

The interpersonal communication between a supervisor and candidate, according to Lee (2008) and Wisker et al. (2008), is critical to developing a high-quality supervisory relationship. It might be expected that the non-verbal elements of communication play an important role in the development of such a relationship. By their nature, dispositional qualities are communicated mainly by tacit means, as Gerholm (1990) explains. It follows that non-verbal communication plays a pivotal role in how dispositional qualities are conveyed within interpersonal relationships, including in a doctoral supervisory relationship. According to Wisker et al. (2008), non-verbal communication in doctoral supervision is experienced by picking up unspoken messages conveyed by choice of words, emotional undertones, behaviours, and body language. Non-verbal communication creates a particular tone in the communication between supervisor and candidate. It is also used to establish rapport in the one-to-one supervisory relationship (Wisker et al., 2008). According to Parry (2007), the importance of rapport in a successful supervisory relationship cannot be underestimated. She noted, though, that its importance is not given much empirical attention in the literature.

Supervisors have been shown to facilitate, largely by tacit means, the learning of academic conventions that are rooted in disciplinary norms. An examination of the tacit nature of the practices of well-regarded doctoral supervisors may provide a means by which such practices can be made explicit. Other than in research by Becher (1989), Parry (2007) and Jasman (2012), there has been little acknowledgement to date of the role and importance of tacit cues, behaviours and conveyances of meaning between supervisors and their candidates. A central concern, therefore, is the nature of what is tacitly communicated between supervisors and their candidates, while acknowledging that not all elements of tacit communication may be described (Polyani, 1983).

Conclusion

This article has presented some trends in doctoral education over the last few decades showing how the focus has moved from financing and policy to models of supervision to the professional development needs of supervisors. Framing doctoral candidacy as a liminal space characterised by isolation, ambiguity, and uncertainty, and marked by anxiety for doctoral candidates, suggests that the doctoral supervisory relationship is highly important to the success of the candidate. This article has highlighted the importance of taking lessons from the helping profession, and particularly mindfulness in positive psychology, as a possible useful new trend in improving doctoral supervisory relationships. To the extent that the elements of tacit communication between supervisors and candidates may be described and documented, it may be possible to identify the mindfulness traits of well-regarded supervisors. Achieving this outcome would shed light on the ways in which highly valued supervisory relationships develop. Further, it may provide ways to inform the effective professional development of supervisors.

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