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‘I won’t be squeezed into someone else’s frame’: stories of supervisor selection

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Using a collection of stories from a group of women who belong to a PhD support group, this article tracks the issue of choosing a supervisor. These women are all academics and therefore had some claim to an “insider” status but as novice researchers they were also “outsiders”. Their discussions around how and why they chose their supervisors highlight issues often underplayed or ignored in textbooks on postgraduate supervision. In particular, this article examines issues of knowledge, embodied subjectivity and power by following three questions that arise from the data: whose knowing is important; who should I be, and whose PhD is it?

‘Ek word in niemand se blik gedruk nie’: verhale oor die keuse van studieleiers

Deur gebruik te maak van die verhale van ’n groep vroue wat tot ’n steungroep vir PhD-studente behoort, ondersoek hierdie artikel die kwessie van die keuse van ’n studieleier. Omdat hierdie vroue almal akademies is, kon hulle in ’n mate daarop aanspraak maak dat hulle in die binnekringe van die akademie beweeg, maar as nuweling-navorsers was hulle tog ook “buitestaanders”. Hulle bespreking oor hoe en waarom hulle ’n bepaalde studieleier gekies het, laat die lig val op vraagstukke wat dikwels in handboeke oor nagraadse studieleiding onderbeklemtoon of buite rekening gelaat word. Die artikel is veral toegespits op kennis, beliggaaamde subjektiwiteit en mag. Daar word gesteun op drie vrae wat uit die data na vore kom: Wie se kennis en insigte is belangrik, wat behoort my rol en identiteit as navorsers te wees, en wie neem uiteindelik eienaarskap van die PhD?

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The story of this article begins with a writing getaway for a PhD support group. Dubbed 'PaperHeaDs', the group came into being in 2001, when nine female academics from various higher education institutions in South Africa came together to support each other in achieving doctorates. Since 2004, the Paper-HeaDs annually pack up far too much food, cumbersome laptops, unwieldy power cables and ridiculously optimistic piles of reading matter for a few days' intensive reading, writing and sharing.

This story arose out of our joint reflections after just such a day and took place on a beautiful deck overlooking the Indian Ocean off the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Our conversation roved over the reasons we each wanted a PhD, and the conundrums that our topics presented our lives and us¹. We noted a growing awareness of our own identities as doctoral candidates and began to wonder about how our developing sense of agency had influenced how we chose our supervisors (or in Liz's case, at that stage, had *not* chosen one at all). This led Sioux to note that our individual stories of supervisor selection were an excellent way of coming to an understanding of the supervision process – or at least a learner's perspective thereof. This article details some of that discussion about supervisor selection and indicates that supervision is a somewhat different process to that set out in Faculty documents or in textbooks on supervision.

The notion that we had a real choice in the matter of supervisor selection had only dawned on the group shortly before the writing getaway when we had hosted an inter-institutional workshop on Qualitative Research (Wickham 2002). Sharman discussed the need for a supervisor who was open to the ideas that lie behind qualitative research rigour. From the deck of the writing getaway house, we began to understand the discourses that were constructing us as postgraduate students and how we were using the choice of supervisor as a way to participate in the construction of our own subjective positions alongside or in tension with these discourses.

1 The story of the group's evolution and what it reveals about the quest for doctoral identity/identities is the subject of Liz's PhD.

There is a rising concern with the process of doctoral study and the nature of the supervisory process, in addition to an urgent demand for increased numbers of doctoral students. For many institutions improvement of research output, which includes PhD graduates, is almost the only viable way of increasing government subsidy where undergraduate intake has reached its limits (DoE 2006). A growing body of writing points to the postgraduate learner as a neglected issue in postgraduate pedagogy.² In fact, according to McAlpine & Norton (2006: 6), “the voice least heard in the debates about doctoral learning is that of the student”.

What we believe makes our stories interesting is that each woman in PaperHeads could be considered an “insider” to the academic discourses (Gee 1996) because our work academic experience is so closely related to our doctoral studies. We have all worked in higher education for a number of years and it is in this field that our studies are positioned. In some ways we held a position within the academic discourse of research as being half “in” (as experienced academic teachers) and half “out” (as novice students and researchers). This “half in and half out” position presents a lens for both supervisors and doctoral candidates (in the humanities and social sciences, in particular) to look towards the solid middle ground where the effective supervisory relationship may be constructed. The insights derived from this investigation suggest that the academic discourses of research differ from those of teaching and learning in higher education. As such, our experiences may add to the observation of Barron & Zeegers (2003) that “osmosis” is the dominant process in the pedagogy of supervision.

Delamont *et al* (1997: 21) offer advice to supervisors:

Try to be as explicit as you can about what you hope to provide for the supervisee: methodological help, advice on the literature search, theoretical ideas, help with computing, visits during foreign field-work, debugging of equipment [...] or tea and sympathy.

Phillips & Pugh (1987) claim that in choosing a supervisor “The key factor is whether the academic has an established research record [...]”

2 Cf Chapman & Sork 1998, Sork *et al* 1999, Johnson *et al* 2000, Balatti & Whitehouse 2001, Peseta 2001, Jansen *et al* 2004, Grant 2005.

Have they published research papers recently?” Grant (2001: 4) would view this as part of the “traditional supervisory discourse” where the “Trad-Supervisor is a proven scholar and master of the discipline; the Trad-Student is the disciple who wants to learn what the scholar knows, eventually (perhaps) taking up their mantle”. She acknowledges that this discourse is often intermingled with other discourses about supervision. It is perhaps this traditional understanding that has the strongest undercurrent within most understandings of supervision, either explicitly or implicitly.

1. Methodology

Following our conversation on the deck of the getaway house that evening, members of the group wondered how to capture the thoughts we had had in a more formal manner. The three of us agreed to undertake the task – combining Sioux’s interest in critical discourse analysis, with Ruth’s investigation of supervision practices and Liz’s investigation of the student learning process. Ruth suggested “formalising” our insights by recording the stories of each member of the group about their choice of supervisor. The other six members of the group agreed that the question we were asking, “How did you choose your supervisor?” would be the stimulus to which they would respond with a short account of the way they were “storyin” their choices (Connelly & Clandinin 1994: 404-6), well aware that the story might change as our studies progressed.

Table 1 shows at which stage of their studies each group member was at the time of the recording. In fact, the group members constructed the approach to the inquiry. As the “analysers”, Ruth, Sioux and Liz were the first to record our responses.

Table 1: Research participants and stage of doctoral study

Group member (pseudonyms)	Stage of study
Karen	Proposal preparation
Ingrid	Data analysis
Catherine	Data gathering
Elsie	Proposal preparation
Cheryl	Data analysis
Barbara	Contemplating registration
Faye	Completed
Jenny	Data analysis
Hazel	Contemplating registration

Like Clinchy (2003) we used anecdotes rather than more traditional interviews because we were “looking for stories not abstractions”; this is based on the belief that stories are constructed by participants’ epistemological viewpoint within the constraints of available discourses. We share the understanding that people are “usually unaware that they are [constructing stories] on the basis of their own implicit epistemological premises” (Clinchy 2003: 30). The value of this type of research is that it places the focus on the experiences of the individual (Josselson & Lieblich 1999: 4). The revisiting of the specific can therefore allow for the validation, expansion or even reconstruction of theory.

We elected to use thematic analysis and worked inductively, coding individual transcripts to identify the underlying metaphors and subjectivities of each individual. Similarities and differences across the stories were examined thematically using Nvivo software. We became aware of three emerging themes related to doctoral identity construction: knowledge, embodied subjectivity and power relations. The themes will be discussed separately, but are in fact overlapping frames through which each of us individually and as a group have constructed the supervisory process.

This article is concerned with the way in which the power of a discourse constructs or excludes its members by “determining how they can behave and what they can say, [and] the members, by acting

and saying in those ways, reconstruct the discourse” (Boughey 2002: pp?). The way the individuals in the study position themselves in relation to the discipline, the processes and the supervisor was viewed as the focal aspect. It was important that each individual’s voice be allowed space rather than to foreground received texts. Thesen (1998: 38) states “... discourses do not only reflect social relations, but shape them by positioning people in certain ways”. This piece of research offers a South African contribution to the work of others in researching academic positioning.³

Issues of authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility (Denzin & Lincoln 2000) were particularly relevant, given that the three of us were members of the group providing the narratives. However, as Oakley (1981: 58) writes: “personal involvement is more than a dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and admit others into their lives.” As group insiders we had access to a “backstory” of each group member, but because of the nature of our inquiry we wanted to focus on the story each individual was telling at that moment in time. Our unit of analysis was each woman’s story of supervisor selection, rather than a live narrative. The account each chose to give was always only ever going to partially represent her experience of her positioning at that moment in time. This research was opportunistic and serendipitous. We had noted that the geographic space of the getaway had enabled us to consider our positioning in the discourse/s of doctoral learning in a more open, less time-pressured environment than those of our everyday lives. By the same token we recognised that the transcriptions of the five-minute stories were “abstractions, as topographical maps are abstractions from the original landscape from which they are derived” (Kvale 1996: 165). They could never represent objective reality. Our intent was “to develop philosophical accounts [...] that treat[ed] women’s [...] experience respectfully, though never uncritically” (Jaggar 2001: 528) in a way that would serve other doctoral learners and their supervisors in understanding the experience

3 Cf Bartlett & Mercer 2001, Chapman & Sork 2001, Raddon 2002, Grant 2005, Søndergaard 2005.

and influence of discourse positioning. Knowles (2001: 1) reports a supervisor commenting:

I'd also love to know what students want. What do students want from their supervisors? That would be quite interesting to know [...] because there's a whole lot of uncertainty being a supervisor and knowing whether you are doing the right thing by students.

The test of authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility in this account therefore lies in what Saukko (2005) refers to as contextual, dialogic and self-reflexive validity. The reader should have a sense of the social realities (the contextual dimension) of our lives as South African academic women, the local realities (the dialogic dimension), and the social shaping of reality (the self-reflexive dimension) through which doctoral identity may be negotiated.

Our verifying methods have gone some way towards counteracting any negative effects that such partial representations of story, transcription and ethics may have had. "The point is not to seek a certain 'truth', but to uncover varieties of truth that operate, to highlight the nature of truth as transitory and political and the position of subjects as fragmentary and contradictory" (Lupton 1995: 160-1). Richardson points out that "Language does not 'reflect' social reality but rather produces meaning and creates social reality [...] it is the place where one's sense of self – one's subjectivity – is constructed" (Richardson & St Pierre 2005: 961).

The three of us discussed the literature on supervision and the transcripts themselves and then presented our findings to the group. The participants were thus actively involved not only in checking the data but also in critiquing our analysis. This process raised a number of issues of representation and interpretation and issues related to how the data was presented.

It is not always possible to undertake this form of authenticity and "shared meaning" checking. However, in this case, the combination of the friendships between the members of the group (Tillman-Healey 2003) and the similar research backgrounds of all the PaperHeads members made this type of engagement by research participants not only possible, but also ethically important. In this, we valued the feminist tenet that "research should be empowering

for participants and that there should be equality in the research relationship” (Pamphilon 2002: 35).

While a range of issues, such as bureaucratic obstacles (for instance, registration from a distance, matters of funding between institutions, access to resources) were identified in the analysis of our stories, which in a Foucauldian sense could be regarded as sites of resistance at an institutional level (Gee 2000, Rau, 2004), this article focuses only on those concerning identity development that relate directly to the supervisor-student relationship, and the ways in which the power relations of supervisory processes feed into this.

2. Knowledge: whose knowing is important?

The common assumption is that supervisors need to be experts in their discipline so that they have a sound theoretical base, and know the area of study thoroughly. It was thus surprising to us that the data indicated that we valued knowledge in a range of unexpected ways, valued different kinds of knowledge, and insisted on valuing our own expertise. While some viewed the supervisor’s discipline knowledge as important, there were clear indications that this was by no means either necessary or sufficient:

I mean look at [Professor A], his students publish books and things and all that kind of thing. And I thought well I know [Professor X] and he’s too busy and I don’t want to just simply have somebody say well there’s your project, go away and do it and write it up as a chapter [of his book]. I mean I think if [he] engaged with you, you’d get a really good conversation [...] challenging and I think in some ways he’d scare the living daylights out of me, but the fact that he would challenge you and then disappear [...] I [didn’t] want somebody who was so busy and so high powered whereas [Dr B], I think is a nice combination. I think she’s got the background, she’s got the experience, but she’s not yet so busy that she doesn’t have time to interact with you. – Karen

It was interesting to note that while the value of high academic standing was recognised, the aspects of growth, recognition, affirmation and particularly reliable, regular interaction seemed for many of us to be much more valuable. This tension emerges on a number of occasions:

I [...] was looking for academic credibility and the right name on it; you know that I could put the right name on the dissertation and all that sort of thing. [But] It's changed dramatically and [...] I've formulated my own opinions, and I don't want them to be just subverted by somebody else's views on things. – Ingrid

Ingrid's starting-point in selecting a supervisor, now revised, shows her awareness of the discourse of employability of doctoral graduates (Cooper & Love 2003): the tension between the development of new academics and the "supply chain" of "knowledge workers" for economic growth (Park 2007) Neoliberal discourses on globalising higher education construct it as a tradable commodity ("public service" to the knowledge-economy) as opposed to an expression of local learning in service of the public good. This translates into questioning whether the doctorate should be a qualification that expresses advanced levels of research skill in service of the economy by the creation of tradable knowledge, or a qualification that expresses the individual's ability to operate as an autonomous scholar and thinker. Out of this thinking have developed the notions of the Professional Doctorate as opposed to the Doctor of Philosophy, respectively.⁴

Ingrid's comment also testifies to a contradictory discourse – one in which autonomy and independence of thought is supposedly valued (DoE 2004). Yet her fear of subversion of her independence talks to beliefs about the supervisor's superior agency that may stem from strongly hierarchical educational relationships. Ingrid's valuing of her own voice (Belenky *et al* 1986) and knowing was echoed by other members of the group.

A number of us were intent on laying claim to our own areas of expertise, seeing the supervisor's role and the expertise brought somewhat differently. We valued different potential knowledge contributions that supervisors could make:

But I really wanted somebody who could teach me or take me down this path of stories and narrative [...] I really am into stories and narrative and that's what I want to do [...] he doesn't see himself as a sort of on-line technologist and originally he'd spoken

4 Cf Evans 2002, Usher 2002, Cooper & Love 2003, Ellis 2005, Neumann 2005, Boud & Tennant 2006, Lee *et al* 2009.

about 'What about co-supervision about the technology aspect?'
And I said to him 'Look, I'm the technology expert so don't worry
about that [...] if I don't know it I'll get it from somewhere else.'
– Catherine

In this example, Catherine indicates her confidence in her own discipline knowledge, rather focusing on the need for the individual supervisor to contribute to the research methodology, and act as a guide in this sense. Similarly, Elsie notes that there are qualifications that bind and demarcate issues of expertise. In this extract she highlights issues of age and youth, of experience and inexperience, of generational distances, of discipline versus process expertise – often valuing aspects that contradict the accepted wisdom:

Somebody suggested [Professor C] from [institution D]. Um, I quite liked the fact that he was fairly newly qualified as a PhD. He's still full of enthusiasm [...] and developing himself, so that was quite interesting [...] I decided it wasn't that important that he had the exact knowledge that I have or that he's in the exact field that I am [...] But I think he'd just been through the processes of a PhD himself and I think he was quite astute and knew quite a lot in terms of methodology, so I was happy to make that choice. – Elsie

Each of these extracts talks to an “insider” discourse of teaching that knowledge is constructed and dynamic and needs to be personally meaningful for these women (Boomer *et al* 1992).

There was a strong resistance to having a supervisor impose ideas or frameworks, or being too directive:

That was why I was attracted to this supervisor, because he doesn't know a lot about [topic] so he hasn't got pre-formulated ideas about what I should be doing [...] I realise there are pitfalls in that, but I'm going to rather compensate for those problem areas [...] but the fact that he actually motivates me is more important. – Ingrid

Issues of quality, accountability and simple logistics need to be negotiated. These issues are often dealt with by means of normative “rules” governing both supervisors and students where institutional regulations about time to completion and who may and may not supervise, structure the process. International literature advocating the development of a supervision contract (Brew & Barrie 1999, Delamont *et al* 2004, Felton 2006) inscribes roles of a supervisor in

service of increasing the completion rate of doctoral students. It is interesting to consider the move to repositioning the supervisor as “promoter” of a candidate in this context.

Several institutions have introduced measures to ensure that supervisors are suitably competent. Individual supervisors bring to the process different strengths and weaknesses, to which students respond. The rules and regulations have embedded within them certain assumptions and views about the participants, and the process. These assumptions were resisted in our data:

Our [Vice Chancellor] is adamant you don't finish [quality] doctorates in under four years part-time and things like that. But that doesn't take into account how much work you've done before you actually registered. – Ingrid

Global and, in particular, South African funding frameworks regard completion rates of three years and less as reasonable indicators of suitable progression, regardless of whether the study is full-time or part-time (DoE 2003). Ingrid's VC's statement is contrary to this dominant discourse, but is in keeping with the finding that the only reliable predictor of completion in either four or ten years was whether the student was studying Science or the Humanities, respectively (Wright & Cochrane 2000). Her comment questions the assumption that knowledge construction can be “normalised” into a generic production line without considering who and where the learner is.

Members of the group acknowledged the tensions that exist in making choices, and within the systems themselves. Such systems may well be necessary to structure and guide the process and ensure quality assurance on such individualistic pedagogies. However, what Grant calls the “dirty work” of supervision requires that post-graduate learners express their unique needs of supervision – a point that runs “against the grain” of the liberal discourse of supervision as a rational and codifiable practice (Grant 2005: 339). In manipulating the “rules” by, for example, asking friends without PhDs to act as critical readers rather than selecting qualified supervisors with the relevant expertise but with an “arrogant know-it-all attitude” (Jenny), these women expressed resistance to the discourse that constructed them as dependent on those constructed as the experts. The

data indicates a search not for a knowledgeable supervisor *per se* but for someone who would allow us to have the kind of experience that we believed would contribute to our growth and development.

3. Embodied subjectivity: who should I be?

One of the most powerful discourses evident in the data was that of “embodied subjectivity” or the need for recognition of self as experienced by self. This supports Waldby’s (1995: 17) critique of the

... fiction of the disembodied scholar [...] the assumption that the scholar is simply a properly trained mind, unlocated in the specific historical experience and social position of a sexed, classed and racially marked body.

It is thus strange that the development of doctoral identity through induction into the requisite discursive practices is not considered in detail in guiding texts about supervision (Phillips & Pugh 2000, Mouton 2002, Wisker 2005). Some texts mention “getting to know the student” in terms of their needs:

As a supervisor you need to know: what knowledge and skills students bring to the project, the areas in which they will need special assistance and how they are likely to approach their research. The last is determined by a complex mixture of factors, both personal (motives for doing the research, preferred learning style, confidence, past learning experiences, ideological perspective) and social (cultural background and gender) (James & Baldwin 1999: 9).

A number of recent studies⁵ reference the range of discursive practices required of the successful doctoral candidate; of these, a few consider how these are affected by the “embodiedness” of the candidate.⁶

Peseta (2001: 84) writes about a caution she received during her candidature that matters she was raising

... were perhaps more appropriate in therapeutic discussion [...] the effects of this warning were profound and indicated to me that these questions surrounding my identity as the writer of a PhD were clearly ‘unscholarly’.

5 Cf Jarvis & Zukas 1998, Johnson *et al* 2000, Manathinga 2003, Jansen *et al* 2004.

6 Cf Lee & Williams 1999, Bartlett & Mercer 2001, Harrison 2009, Phillips *et al* 2009.

In more general terms, many researchers have studied the association between identity and the acquisition of discursive practices.⁷

In undertaking a PhD, students need to become accustomed to what constitutes “good” research in their discipline; they need to be familiar with their field’s particular notions of knowledge; they need to become adept at the writing practices of the thesis – and so the list of discursive practices goes on. Gee (1996: xv) explains that simply taking on discourses is insufficient because ...

It’s not just what you say or even just how you say it. It’s also what you are and do while you say it. It is not enough just to say the right ‘lines’, one needs to get the whole ‘role’ right.

Taking on the PhD process, constructed by various discourses, is thus about taking on a new role or identity:

I really do trust process but when you’re in totally alien ground you don’t know [...] it’s like you’re in this [...] it’s like you’re in quicksand [...] There isn’t anything to trust, you lose all your [...] Everything that gives you any kind of stability just isn’t there. You’re just completely; you know [...] hanging in some sort of place or state and then what do you trust then? So, it’s like you lose that sense of your own process. – Catherine

When I did my Master’s I had an experience with quite a conservative supervisor and I didn’t fit into his frame and he tried to squeeze me into his frame and it was very painful for me. – Barbara

Guides about the supervision process seem to assume that doctoral students have fairly fixed identities in keeping with the still dominant modernist discourse in developmental psychology (Spatig 2005). The supervision process is thus about the unproblematic acquisition of specific discursive practices. This assumption was not borne out in our data. The multiple identities of each PaperHeads member presented tensions in the acquisition of a doctoral identity. Gee (2000: 107) adds the idea that the adoption or ascription of an identity has to be “underwritten by an interpretive system” which allows others to recognise the identity and act appropriately. He calls these systems discourses and suggests that each of us have had

7 Cf Cummins 1995, Ivanič 1988, Thesen 1998, Gee 1996, Hymes 1996, Norton 2000, Miller 2003, De Kadt & Mathonsi 2003, McKenna 2004.

a “unique trajectory through Discourse space” which, along with our story of it, are what constitute his or her (never fully formed or always potentially changing) “core identity”. Gee (2000: 111) points out that:

[w]e can always also ask a crucial ‘micro-level’ question: How, on the grounds of moment-by-moment interaction, does [and has] recognition work[ed] such that some specific combination is recognized (or not) in a certain way, or contested or negotiated over in a certain way? In the end, we are talking about recognition as a social and political process, though, of course, one rooted in the workings of people’s (fully historicized and socialized) minds.

An important aspect of taking on a new identity is feeling safe to experiment with the practices of that identity. This issue came up strongly in our data, with a number of women referring to the need to find a supervisor who would not make them “feel stupid”:

I was so patronized at university (as an undergrad), it was absolutely painful. I was the butt of all the jokes [... and now] I had that déjà vu of being this absolutely, god, this ignorant little [...]
– Catherine

I never felt embarrassed, [my supervisor] was one of the few people who I respected [in] their discipline knowledge and who I didn’t feel embarrassed to ask what I thought was a stupid question [whilst], for instance, in my Master’s I always felt if I had a question I couldn’t e-mail it through to my supervisor [...], because their comments on my course work essays made it clear that they didn’t suffer fools, so I didn’t want to ever look stupid and I think that’s [...] ja, part of my personality as well. – Cheryl

In addition to this need for a safe space came the desire for a supervisor to recognise the present selves of the candidates, both in terms of the individuals’ content expertise and their range of practices and values. In the process of taking on the doctoral identity, we are constantly organising and reorganising a sense of who we are and how we relate to the social world, and we wanted to do this with a supervisor who acknowledged the personas we brought with us:

[...] but for me I found that intimidating, you know, to go and approach a supervisor that hadn’t a clue as to who I am or where I come from or what my interests are, you know, what I’ve done or anything, you know. – Faye

And that’s what I don’t like, because everybody assumes that when you [undertake] a doctorate you’ve got a clean slate and nobody has

got a clean slate, some people's slates are quite full already. And I think [my supervisor] acknowledged that too. – Ingrid

Among other things, we wanted acknowledgement of the discursive practices we brought with us arising from our experience within the higher education environment:

I think it's about; it's really about who I am. So it's things I've done along the way to get there. – Catherine

The whole idea of somebody constantly throwing me into a sense of deficiency without making space for the deficiency to be bridged. It's that kind of deficiency thinking. I'd rather be working with somebody who is interested in new ideas or development or whatever, and who in a sense is prepared to work with me as an equal, as a person of equal ability. – Hazel

Although I'd never contemplated doing a PhD, I've always known that if I ever did, that would be the sort of person that I would want to mentor me, although I know that they don't really construct themselves as mentors, but more there was a person there that I thought would understand me and also sort of about my age, I guess, and then [...] so when it turned out that I did come to do a PhD, she was really the only one I wanted to approach. – Cheryl

When individuals invest in the identity constructed by, for example a doctoral discourse, it is not an abrupt occurrence. The acquisition of that identity consists of changes over time and place, dependent on conditions of power and similarities between the target practices and the individual's current identities. It was thus deeply important to the PaperHeads group to maintain the autonomy necessary to invest in the PhD identity on their own terms:

I think I'd rather be able to define what it is that I want to research and be totally in control of it before I start looking for somebody to supervise me. – Hazel

One of the things I like about [my Supervisor] is he lets me do my thing, you know, he's very supportive and he gets me a lot of information and a lot of suggestions, but at the end of the day, it's definitely my project [...]. – Catherine

At Master's level, I wasn't confident enough to insist that [the Supervisor] walks with me and it was just two worlds too far apart, so [...] I was the one who was crying behind the scenes and [the Supervisor] wasn't really aware of it, so I think it's [...] when you get to PhD level, you [...] the moulding goes both ways as the growth process for the supervisor and the student. – Barbara

On the other hand, there were aspects to this autonomy that proved difficult. One of the women who, like the rest of the group, wanted a large degree of control over her PhD process, also indicated that she had difficulty with being self-motivated, an attribute she nevertheless believes to be an essential aspect of the doctoral identity:

Well, I think, isn't that [...] supposed to be part of who you are when you do a PhD? We're supposed to be so self-motivated that you just kind of set your own deadlines and you meet them and, if you don't, well, that is your problem and nobody else's problem. And that's just so not the way I work. [...] I mean I think my whole life has been [...] I mean I've used external control to control my learning and this is like [...] Even in my M.Ed I did that because it was quite directive and this is like a culture shock for me. I don't know what to do with myself. – Elsie

Elsie appears to be indicating that while she, like the rest of the group, wanted autonomy to forge her own doctoral process, she was concerned about the responsibility such equality in the supervisory process brought with it. The need for autonomy in no way undermined the need for affirmation. This need was also an important aspect of the supervisory relationship for our group, and strongly tied to issues of embodiedness:

My need to be a good girl far surpasses anything else, so it's around pleasing other people; it's around those kinds of things. – Elsie

Ingrid similarly emphasises the point:

The way he presented it was not as daunting. He didn't try and scare me off it. He actually tried to tell me that it was within my reach, that I deserved it, that I needed it and it was something that was achievable, it wasn't something that scared me off like all the other people I [approached]. So that's quite attractive.

Because identity construction was highlighted in the data as the key issue in the doctoral process, it is hardly surprising that the supervision process was discussed in terms of being a relationship rather than a set of procedures, as many textbooks on the issue seem to indicate:

I really want somebody that I can sit down and have a conversation with and feel that it's a human engagement. – Karen

Gender was important to me as well and that [...] I'd felt I would feel comfortable with a woman, both on a personal level, talking to a woman, and in terms of the kind of research I was doing.
– Cheryl

Five of the PaperHeads women indicated that, as a result of negative previous supervisory relationships, being “squeezed” into a frame – forced into a way of thinking that did not work – they prioritised the need for compatibility in their selection of a PhD supervisor. In describing how her previous supervisor informed her that he was moving to a new job and would “pass her on to someone”, Ingrid said:

Somehow it's like, you come home one afternoon and your lover has walked out leaving you a one line response. That's how I felt, I felt like 'Fuck, you know, I'm in a relationship here with this oke⁸ and he just bails on me with a one-line response'

The interaction between the doctoral student's current subjectivities and the academic persona she is taking on raises the issue of power relations in the supervision process. The frequent use of the term “they” in discussing previous negative experiences of being supervised is telling. It speaks directly to an us/them divide that may foreclose the possibility of flexible and mutable power relations (Armstrong 2003: 12).

I wouldn't link up with somebody I didn't [respect] or was just kind of somebody I knew by the wayside, which in a sense is how I got my current one, [...] it was somebody in the department who was given to me – allocated for the Masters [...] they said 'Okay he's going to be your supervisor.' – Karen

4. Power relations: whose PhD is it?

Following Foucault's position (1979) that power and knowledge directly imply each other, PaperHeads always acknowledged that our intent to gain a PhD is an intention to position ourselves as powerful; we are also aware that as such we are elements within the articulation of power relations. Within the PaperHeads group we have reflected, in fairly overt ways, about how power/knowledge subjects people to

8 South African English term meaning man.

normalising truths that shape their lives and realities. In doing so, we have tried to choose supervisory processes that allow us to “play [...] games of power with as little domination as possible” (Gordon 1980: 298).

The notion of entering supervision as a “product” was rejected in the data in the search for a more symmetrical relationship:

[...My supervisor] acknowledged the work I'd done already which also made it attractive whereas in the past supervisors have said 'Right, now kind of like forget everything you've done before, we're going to start now', and I don't want to do that, I've been doing this for a long time, why must I start and try and obliterate everything that was there? I suppose that that was another thing that persuaded me to do it [with him]. – Ingrid

Ingrid indicates that being reduced to a neophyte would prevent the relationship from being mutually beneficial. As Jarvis & Zukas (1998: 3) write:

An expert, a gatekeeper [the supervisor] is not usually someone who takes into account and pays attention to experience. So the relationship is contradictory – on one hand, holistic and legitimating, on the other scrutinizing and evaluative.

I was also concerned when I was sussing⁹ this out and [my supervisor] worked in a very different research paradigm to me, but what I've done was I've shifted him and he's started to think of other things now and he's seeing different things that he didn't see before and he's quite open to it in some ways. At times he sort of just like, cuts it off, and then I just press ahead and do it anyway. – Ingrid

The notion of the “apprentice” having the audacity to question the “master” is a radical departure from received discourses of supervision. “The tone of the Proper Traditional Supervisor is marked by formality and distance [...] a pedagogy of indifference [...] from which only the fittest emerge” (Grant 2001: 4). The women in the group recognised their own expertise as influencing the power balances in the process of learning doctoralness:

I'm looking for [...] an engagement with what I'm doing but [also] pushing further than that, asking the difficult questions and making me answer them. – Karen

9 A South African English term meaning a combination of considering and surveying.

It may be that this group of women, who value their experience gained from years of working in higher education, is indicative of the need for a form of supervision that values symmetrical relationships where possible. Such a pedagogy may, for example, enable negotiations around “the game” of postgraduate study, which makes the implicit to be explicit, and the boundaries to be clarified (Jarvis & Zukas 1998). Ingrid highlights some of the covert games that may pervade supervisory relationships and the need to try and uncover important aspects:

[Professor W] was going to be the PhD to give it the cred¹⁰ and then this woman called [Mrs Y] was going to do the actual supervising but she only had a Master's, so I got this distinct impression all the time that she was gate keeping, 'I haven't got it and you're not going to get it easy'.

Although the PaperHeads viewed the notion of mutuality to be outside the “norm” of power relations in supervision, we all saw it as a desirable status. In fact, Karen mentions that it was the main issue that determined her choice of supervisor.

I was looking for somebody with whom I could have a conversation about whatever I was engaged with. I wanted an intellectual engagement more than anything. Um, less importantly, I want[ed] somebody to actually walk through the process. Um, so once I had sort of chosen my topic and thought about who else had worked in the area, the only suitable person was [my supervisor].

6. Conclusion

Guiding texts on acquiring a doctorate, while encouraging some engagement with the process, do not question it to any great extent. The discourses discussed in this article suggest that the messy affective processes only hinted at in such texts are in fact at the centre of acquiring postgraduate practices. The collaborative support environment of PaperHeads allowed these stories to be told in ways that may challenge the discourses of supervision found in postgraduate guides.

10 Credibility.

The analysis of the stories in this study shows women seeking ways to become empowered by assuming the new identity of doctoralness. The women of PaperHeaDs noted and negotiated boundaries, recognised multiple identities, and made the power relations overt in the process of selecting a supervisor. The supervisory process was constructed as that of a relationship with the supported acquisition of a self-constructed doctoral identity as its target.

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