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Enhancing the Practice of PhD Supervisory Relationships Through First- And Second-Person Action Research/Peer Partnership Inquiry

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Abstract: Our experience in the University suggests that individual and collective reflection on the practice of PhD supervision is under-developed amongst the community of academic supervisors and students. Whilst there is growing interest in research *about* higher education practice and supervision in particular, few studies inquire into practice "from the inside". In this two-semester exploration, supervisors and students used some of the disciplines of peer-partnership inquiry, to seek ways to improve our respective PhD supervisory relationship practices. The group comprised supervising staff and PhD candidates, with a network of sociometric links that reflected well a complexity of multiple academic relationships. First- and second-person reflection, and intentional, engaged, focused conversation, gave us insights into these multiple dimensions of supervisory relationships both with candidates, amongst co-supervisors and into our own practices. The richness of the insights generated through these meaningful conversations surprised us all.

Our paper discusses the ways in which we were able to access understandings through peer partnership inquiry methods, the integrity of the materials generated, individual responses to such subjectivities and our attempts to communicate these to wider audiences through the frames of typical academic presentations: conference settings, departmental and university wide seminars and web-page dissemination. There are implications for institutional practice arising from our findings. We suggest that much greater intentionality has to be paid to the multiple and complex relationships that exist amongst students, staff and institution if the PhD endeavour is to be a fulfilling creative enterprise for all. We advocate that staff and students need to develop skills and courage in reflecting on their own capabilities, to develop skills in peer learning and peer engagement, and to strengthen a culture of learning across multiple role relationships. Sustained reflectivity of this nature is radical in the academic context and the nature of the PhD supervisory relationship is called into question at many levels of inquiry.

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1. Introduction

> "... part of what this process is about, what reflexivity does, is force recognition of dimensions of subjectivity that weren't previously being recognised. We/I enter the room with relatively fixed understanding of supervisor-supervisee relationships, that I would cast in a singular way in my reading of that relationship—this is a professional relationship, I am the supervisor therefore I have to behave in these sorts of ways—what the process of reflexivity does is to expose the tenuousness of that fixed reading of supervision." (group member)

The above reflection speaks to the relationship between subjectivity and reflexivity that we, a group of academics bound in various ways by the supervisory relationship, directly wove through conversation, and placed under the analytic gaze. The assertion expresses a reading of the supervisory relationship, from one that is "fixed" and "singular" at the start of the research process, to one characterised by "tenuousness" and complexity at the end of it. Pivotal in this conceptual shift from the static to the dynamic is reflexivity and the way it evokes, "dimensions of subjectivity that weren't previously being recognised". [1]

This article charts what proved to be a transformative collaborative inquiry for the researchers involved. Transformative, firstly, in that each member of the group was able to recognise, articulate and embody the multiple subjectivities that are significant, but often unstated, in ongoing professional relationships and endeavours. The greater transformation was in the group process which provided, within the institution, a new forum where the research topic, *enhancing supervisory relationships*, could be both discussed and enacted. Reflexivity was at the heart of both this discussion and enactment. Individual reflection impacted variously on members' practice. Group reflection came more slowly. We became aware of the power of reflection "within the group", and of reflection "of the group" only as familiarity with peer partnership inquiry grew. [2]

This article provides both a reflection and reading of that journey. The theoretical framework for this project was an action research one, with a very specific purpose—namely to inquire into ways through which the PhD supervisory relationship might be enhanced. This was not an inquiry into how to *do* supervision, nor into what constituted a PhD, though both these topics were canvassed within our conversation. Our purpose, in its own way, was radical: to inquire into the *relational* aspects of institutional behaviour that are not typically foregrounded. The intention to enhance the PhD experience went beyond our individual interests, and specific relationships. Implicitly we claimed from the outset that the subjectivity of our experience could and should be of wider value to the university. The inquiry is not only, then, a record of a particular period of data gathering, it is also a searching of how to reach out to the wider context of our institution, and our academic peers. [3]

The first section of our paper frames the research experience in terms of first and second person research. Subjectivity and reflexivity are then explored primarily

through the lens of embodiment; a way of thinking and being, we suggest, that is particularly difficult to site in the majority of our academic institutions. The bulk of the article focuses on our emerging peer partnership and the strategies we used to construct a space in which members of the group could come to have "real conversations" or conversations that evoked and honoured the embodied, multifaceted and changing subjectivities invariably present in all supervisory and collaborative relationships. We conclude by arguing that it is precisely the "real" and "embodied" that are often excluded in our institutional policies and practice. It is only by seeing supervision and research collaboration as *relationship* as well as a *project*, that intellectual intimacy, reflexive practice and creative inquiry can be fostered and enhanced. [4]

1.1 Context

The first phase of our inquiry took place over eight months (March-November) in 2001. A group of eight women gathered with the intention to improve their PhD supervisory relationships through action research: we were supervising staff and PhD candidates, sociometrically linked in a complex of multiple academic relationships. The patterning of these relationships was not foreshadowed, but in practice provided different examples of the intertwined nature of our relationships. These groupings comprised: an interdisciplinary candidate and her supervisors from the Arts and Commerce faculties, another candidate with one of her (three) supervisors; two co-supervisors without their student; two former peer partnership colleagues with a long history of collaborative research; one PhD candidate who was also a staff member (and therefore colleague to other members of the department, including her supervisor). Group members came from three different departments (Management and Employment Relations, Management Science and Information Systems, and Sociology). Since the first year, the four authors of this paper (two PhD candidates and two supervisors) have continued the inquiry, working back on materials, extending our understanding through further engagement, writing for publication and giving a series of different presentations. [5]

This article reflects on our work-in-progress and raises up for further consideration how we work with subjectivity and reflexivity in deepening our understanding of conversational inquiry. Reflections, we have found, shimmer and change according to the light being cast. Here we capture something of our several different perceptions and understandings, our collected and collective voices, the subjectivities of our experiences and our deepening awareness of what opens up when we are able to acknowledge dimensions of our individual selves to engage with others in a collective endeavour. [6]

1.2 Initial framing

Our study needs to be seen in the context of institutional change. Over the last few years the University of Auckland has spent considerable time and effort on improving the doctoral experience. This has involved greater accountability for both staff and students. New initiatives have included a Vice Chancellor's symposium on doctoral study, introduction of form progress report, formal

orientations, departmental presentations etc.), though the paradigm is still predominately that of "text" or "product" rather than "process". One of the changes introduced was formalisation of co-supervision. This was seen to provide safeguards to students against insufficient engagement by staff, and to broaden the opportunity for academic input. Co-supervision has been written into the University PhD guidelines, but little recognition has been given to what this might mean in practice. For example, what might this mean in terms of staff time (does co-supervision require half or twice as much time or energy as sole charge supervision?), and what of PhD candidates' responsibilities, are they now expected to manage a complexity of relationships as well as their thesis? Whilst some of these changes impinged on us individually, we were not consciously paying attention to them. Rather, the impetus for this particular inquiry came from a desire to conduct a particular type of research, from individual disquiet that things could indeed be improved, and an appreciation of the potential to be realised from supervision done well. [7]

We framed our study as a peer-partnership inquiry, employing intentional dialogical tools to enable us, individually and collectively, to surface greater understanding of the supervisory process. In doing so, we built on earlier peer partnership (PP) experience (BYRNE & McMORLAND 1998, 2000; McMORLAND & BYRNE 1998, 1999). Conducted over four years, this earlier collaborative learning experience identified practices that facilitated group engagement and generative conversational inquiry. Its participants also learnt to appreciate the depth of inquiry that could be generated through intentional group reflection and meaningful conversation around a central, focusing question. [8]

In framing the PhD study as another peer partnership, we wanted to see if previously generated principles could be transferred across contexts—from an informal study where there were no institutionally derived links between participants, to one seeking to transcend institutional differences in status and experience, around another topic of inquiry. Unlike the previous PP (where the focusing question was arrived at within the group), the invitation to participate in the university study called potential qualitative research participants to a pre-ordained focusing question. This was "How can we improve our practice of the PhD supervisory relationship?" The focusing question is a gathering point for the PP group, its focus of intention, its *raison d'être*. It establishes the criterion of association on which "peerness" is predicated (BYRNE & McMORLAND 2000). Peer partnership as "purposeful inquiry" provides a conversational forum in which individuals can come together to "learn about the processes and practices of collective learning, and to practice the disciplines and skills of critical reflexivity" (McMORLAND & BYRNE 1998). [9]

Our experience in the University suggests that individual and collective reflection on the practice of PhD supervision is under-developed amongst the community of academic supervisors and students. Whilst there is a growing body of research *about* higher education practice, and supervision in particular, more recent innovative works (CUNLIFFE 2002) inquire into practice "from the inside" out into

the lived experience of supervisors and supervisees. Such inquiry connects tacit knowing with explicit knowledge through "reflexive talk" (p.36). [10]

Premised on the notions of "peerness" (BYRNE & McMORLAND 2000), the validity of subjective "lived inquiry" (MARSHALL, 1999), "intellectual intimacy" (McMORLAND & BYRNE 1998) and the practice of skilful and meaningful conversation (SENGE 1994) we set out to inquire, how we might improve our practice and experience of supervision through first and second person action research. [11]

According to REASON and BRADBURY (2001)

> "First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act with awareness and to choose carefully and to assess effects in the outside world while acting." (p.xxvi) [12]

Though we each brought our subjective experience of doctoral study and supervision to the group, our capacity to inquire into that experience within the group developed only as trust was built and as the conversation brought specific themes into view. It occurred at different paces for each of us. Importantly this helped develop our "community of inquiry", our collective dialogue, which enabled us to shift focus from personal to interpersonal practice. Second person action research/practice

> "addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern, for example in the service of improving our personal and professional practice both individually and separately. Second-person inquiry starts with interpersonal dialogue and includes the development of communities of inquiry and learning organizations." (REASON & BRADBURY 2001, p.xxvi). [13]

We built our community of practice by contracting to meet on a regular, monthly basis, for the academic year. Conversation was contained in protected time and space set aside from interruption, but the genre of first and second person conversational research was not, as the group later acknowledged, one with which everyone was familiar or comfortable:

> "... in all of our lives there's a huge amount going on. I have really enjoyed the conversations we have had in this group, really enjoyed. Think they have benefitted me significantly which is a reason to keep having the conversations, I think, and I'm keen to support the continuation of the group from that perspective alone—but I have lost sight of, any sense of the direction of the research issue which drew us together in the first place. In fact, one of the things I hoped you'd talk about today, is to remind us what the nature of first person research is. Because that's something that I am not really familiar with. I am having an experience here, but its still largely tacit—whatever it is I am experiencing in a research context needs to be made explicit for me so that I can see some structure that's giving us some cohesion, that brings us together in some way ... I DO want to say that I have REALLY enjoyed the conversations!"

> "I should have flagged it months ago that I am not actually sure what action research is—I do read about it but it feels amorphous. I feel I don't have a grasp of how it all fits in. I'm really interested and it's made a big impact on me just about to finish a chapter and I am hoping to improve my supervisory practice. I've got lots of goals—its clarified for me where my next learning is and what I would like to work on that I haven't worked on ... I'd like to do something that is more like research, doing some reading, doing something, meeting more often, something to get more momentum—I don't feel any momentum. It feels like a nice chat with friends without the wine ... I'd like to get more drive going for it. I've never said that but seems like there is a lack of action. Not ACTION research." [14]

Mid-way through the year, several members of the group expressed frustration at the lack of action and a loss of a sense of purpose. In the course of this conversation there emerged quite different expectations of outcomes, along with differences in understanding of the action component. Those of us familiar with PP and action research were comfortable that "action" took place outside the group, in the actual doing of specific PhD relationships. This was a turning point in our cohesion as a group, as we realised we had indeed been talking *about supervision*, rather than reflecting on our own practices, and bringing them to the group for wider consideration. [15]

There was some scepticism that what we were doing was worthwhile. It was not until the group read transcripts that we began to appreciate the full richness and power of the research, and the validity of the method to generate new knowledge. At this point reflection and the naming of experience, the evolving exploration of feelings, and recognition of the multi-layered nature of our relationships became apparent. To assist greater understanding at this juncture, we developed "maps" of our conversations and experiences in an attempt to translate experiential knowing into presentational knowledge (REASON 1989). In the sections that follow, different voices, individual and collective, express some of the multiple dimensions of this experience. In the spirit of peer partnership, we have chosen not to identify individual authors. [16]

2. Theory and Story: Building Reflexive Relationships in Conversational Research

In this peer partnership we created a space for appreciating the value and use of our personal stories and experiences around PhD supervision. Arthur BOCHNER (1997) maintains there is nothing as theoretical as a good story, a point we proved over many months in collaborative dialogue, crafting stories and theories both individually and collectively about our supervisory experiences. As BOCHNER asserts

> "[T]here is no split between theory and story when theorizing is conceived as a social and communicative activity. That is what I mean when I use the term social theory. In the world of social theory, we are less concerned about representation and more concerned about communication. We give up the illusions of transcendental

> observation in favour of the possibilities of dialogue and collaboration." (BOCHNER 1997, p.435) [17]

From this research, we add the possibilities of reflexive action. (Note: I deliberately use the present tense in this section. Not only is our research on-going and our learning continuing, but as Deborah CEGLOWSKI (2002) points out most research texts are written in the past tense subtly indicating studies completed, and lessons learned. The inquiring approach to life fostered through our first, second and third person action research practice eschews any such notions of completion). [18]

Each time we meet we tell each other stories of what we are doing, and how we are thinking and feeling (about academia, doctoral supervision, and any other aspects of our lives we choose to bring to the conversations). We listen to and reflect on the experiences shared, we disagree, we argue, we laugh, and we take the learnings away to ponder again and to put some of them into practice. In this process we are building robust friendships within a relational learning community that honours and works with a more holistic sense of our embodied, multifaceted "selves". It is arguably rare for students and supervisors attempting to work as colleagues and peers to gather quite like this, and sometimes it is not easy. However in doing so, we are living John SHOTTER's (1999) premise that "to talk in new ways, is to 'construct' new forms of social relation, and to construct new forms of social relation (of self-other relationships) is to construct new ways of being (of person-world relationships) for ourselves" (p.9). [19]

In an early conversation at the beginning of the project it was suggested that PhD supervision involved a form of "bounded intellectual intimacy". A concept that can be likened to MUMBY and PUTNAM's (1992) powerful critique of "bounded rationality", which had reified the cognitive, disembodied mind as a controller of organisational action, ignoring the very human embodiment of that rationality. In this section I will look at what bounded intellectual intimacy means, using it as a lens to discuss some of the ways in which it is fostered in our group, as well as some of the opportunities we missed to cultivate it further. My aim is to show it as an important and yet underdeveloped notion in academic practice that has particular relevance and potential for supervision (and beyond). [20]

Bounded intellectual intimacy names both a process and a state. The "boundedness" speaks of the task at hand (in this case our focusing question, in supervision the doctoral project). Intellectual intimacy refers to the multidimensional relational aspects of a research process. It is richly three-dimensional. The task (and outcomes), the process of undertaking and achieving these, and the relationship(s) which encircle are all considered equally (although emphases will be dynamic across the course of a project). Creating and maintaining an awareness of all three dimensions is crucial to this way of working. It is optimally developed within a holistic reflexive environment, where honest communication can build a trust that allows vulnerability and opportunities for risk taking. An ongoing awareness of people and context is also very important. This means recognising and working with personal dynamics—the

multiple selves we bring to our work—at the same time as making power relations and institutional and disciplinary variables explicit. An active reflexive awareness is key to going about this complex task. This is an orientation that invokes both knowing and doing.

> "[I]f we are to come to an awareness of what we are doing in our doing of it, and to open up opportunities for alternatives, we must ourselves become reflexively aware of the character of our own practices." (HAWES 1998, p.99) [21]

In this project we are using reflexive conversations to focus awareness on practice. A root meaning of reflexivity is to "turn back" (SIEGLE 1986), and a central part of our work together involves critically reflecting back on our own practices (of supervision and of being supervised). Collectively we discuss and unsettle our experiences and assumptions in order to develop a keener understanding of the complexities of PhD supervision. As GADAMER (1997) outlined in his critically informed, socially situated framework we also extend this "reflexive dialogical practice" (CUNLIFFE 2002) beyond self/selves to locate our practices and experiences in the layered complexity of professional, institutional, historical and other socio-cultural contexts.

> "Reflexivity [is] about collective practice, thrashed out in discussion, always trying to be responsible, accountable and ethical with an awareness of our positioning and partialities ... What each researcher represents [is] a position, an investment, a habitus, a history and a politics." (SKEGGS 2002, p.368) [22]

At the same time, another component of reflexivity involves an embodied awareness that pays attention to emotions and feelings. The importance of this subjective dimension in the process of reflexivity and in relationship building needs to be made explicit, because there is a "tendency to think of critical reflection in overly rationalistic terms, at the expense of a recognition of the extent to which critical reflection can be prompted by the imagination and by emotion, desire and bodily feelings" (MACKENZIE 2001, p.124). This point particularly needs to be made in regard to the academy—an institutional framework historically based on and overarchingly dominated by notions of the intellect. In our conversations a noticeable physicality in expression often seems to occur when things that really matter arise—and this occurs regardless of whether the experiences are positive or negative. Some instances of this included phrases like ...

> "I feel I'm bumping up against you."
>
> "Those relationships are all overlaid over ME—whatever the me might be, and the me can't be chopped up in that kind of way ..."
>
> "That just delights my heart to think that what we've been calling a peer partnership has actually become a peer partnership ..."
>
> The point of the co-operative supervision is that it is a much richer experience ... I get much more, student apart, I like that. It feeds me in a way that is really healthy for me." [23]

The depth and richness of feelings expressed in these examples confirms Edward SAMPSON's (1998) crucial point that we are inherently embodied beings. Alongside rationality (and its discontents) our subjectivity/ies are constructed in and expressed through our bodies. Thoughts, feelings, words and gestures are embodied practices and in fostering a critical awareness of "what we are doing in our doing of it" we neglect this aspect of self/selves at our peril. To learn effectively, connecting knowledge and practice requires a multifaceted, multidimensional critical reflexivity. This holistic layered, contextual and embodied process is as much about how we feel as what we think, as where we are located at any particular time.

> "If learning is reframed as an embodied process ... *of learning from* within—then the learning process may be seen as a discursive, contextualized and ongoing practice constructed in the moment. It becomes part of our ways of being, of responsive and embodied discourse rather than disembodied intellect ... This perspective means focusing on dialogical aspects of the learning process [as] it is through dialogue that we talk the imaginary into the imagined." (CUNLIFFE 2002, p.45) [24]

In highlighting the dialogical, moment-to-moment aspects of the learning process, Ann CUNLIFFE throws practice into sharp relief. In many respects acknowledging rich multidimensionality is *de rigueur* in a postmodern world, achieving it in practice is another story altogether. In our peer partnership process, our institutional location and task dominant focus have proved challenging in this regard. For much of our first year together as a group we paid little attention to the emotional dimensions of our practice. (As individuals we were often keenly aware of our emotional responses to situations, but these remained for the most part unspoken—marked by absence and sometimes by awkward silences.) The gaps and "silences" became particularly apparent in hindsight as in year two we began to reflect on some of the unresolved issues and difficulties we had each encountered. [25]

For example, during the first year once our initial conversations had been transcribed the group gathered to discuss analysis with each member putting forward ideas about how to proceed. Difficulties arose as claims and counter claims based on competing (and seemingly exclusive) knowledge paradigms were proffered as "the" way to make sense of the data. Two participants (academics and supervisors), intense and committed to their way of seeing the world, clashed, while another assumed a peacekeeping role in an attempt to take the heat out of the discussion. The doctoral students in the group were silent/silenced. Quite probably, unspoken dynamics of status differential informed this particular absence—another factor not considered at the time. Arguably, in this session we were trying to work with "difference". Unfortunately, conversations stuck in intellectual mode, rationally arguing the benefits of a particular standpoint failed to take account of the emotional investments and historical lineage underlying the passionate exchanges. "Doing difference" is a significant and ongoing challenge for the academy (CROSBY 1992; GROSSMAN & KRUGER 1999; LETHERBY 2002; REGER 2001; WASSERFALL 1997) and our struggles around this issue again point to the importance of developing and working with a

more holistic, embodied awareness. "Subjectivity is situated such that the voices in our heads and the feelings in our bodies are linked to political, cultural and historical contexts" (ELLIS & FLAHERTY 1992, p.4). In subsequent conversations we have begun to recognise the opportunities missed for richer intellectual exploration and relational learning. [26]

In other moments of our work together, reflexive conversations and stories opened awareness to practice and provided exceptionally valuable insights.

> "I've been mulling over something you said early on, ... and it's that thing about rubbing shoulders that you learn somehow by being in association—I don't know about that because I'm not ... I'm not sure of how much of an insight students get in to the supervisors' own research process—like how much is learned through association and how much is learned through explicit verbalisation. That's an open question ... I don't know.
>
> I was just thinking about some discussions I had with students last year where what came out of ... the result of the discussion was emergent—it wasn't that I said ... [blah] ... and he said OK—there was much more—it's in the exchange—emerges—not so much what I know but through my experience I was engaging him in conversation which led to his product." [27]

In developing bounded intellectual intimacy we discover

> "[O]ur relating ourselves to and understanding of other people ... comes about in a non-intellectual, embodied, dialogical, or conversational manner, in which an embodied, temporally unfolding, responsive form of understanding (denied us in our more monological forms of talking and writing) is at work. And what is especially important about this dialogical form of understanding is that it is not an individual achievement. It is an understanding developed and negotiated with others in the circumstances of its use." (SHOTTER 1997, p.22) [28]

This is a powerful insight for supervisory practice. It is evident from many of our conversations that beyond very broad institutional requirements for what the degree must consist of, any form of generalisation about what constitutes a PhD is diffused by numerous factors and variables. Perhaps the only constant is that a PhD is a "learning to learn" (RAWSON 2000) experience that primarily unfolds (or unravels) within a supervisory relationship. Therefore a more holistic, integrated and reflexive approach on the part of supervisors, students and the institution could enhance and enrich many aspects of the PhD process and its outcomes for everyone concerned. To do so means greater levels of communication, trust and accountability (and the concomitant skill sets required to achieve this) will be needed from these three parties. Bounded intellectual intimacy provides an exemplary framework to do this. [29]

Mobilising a way of learning premised on bounded intellectual intimacy in the academy presents significant challenges. It requires both institutional acknowledgement of the importance of the practice/process, and the creation of

formal mechanisms (and spaces) for its nurturance and development. The process of relationship building inherent and explicit in our peer partnership group, the continuing richness of our research experiences and skill refinements provides a useful template for further exposition. Similarly, a number of the process "tools" we are working with also have broad applicability and potential in this regard. [30]

3. Tools to Highlight Subjectivity and Achieve Reflexivity

"Tools" would not be our choice of terminology because of its inherent functionality—we prefer to use terms such as "approaches, processes, strategies"—but we also recognise the value of sharing something of the processes that we found useful in enhancing our research activities. These "tools" are explored and discussed in the following sections: peer partnership, check-in and mapping. [31]

3.1 Peer partnerships

The main "tool" we used was the peer partnership format itself. Framing our purposeful inquiry as a peer partnership held the potential to disrupt, challenge and stretch institutional frames and structures by crossing boundaries of age, status, experience, qualifications, disciplines, departments, faculties, paradigms and role (indeed it seems the only boundary our group didn't cross was that of gender and that was not intentional). The peer partnership concept provides a way of creating dialogue and connection between institutional members intimately involved in joint processes (such as the PhD process), but separated by a multitude of differences such as in the list above. [32]

Ann CUNLIFFE (2002) calls the learning involved in such a dialogue, "an area of 'muddy water' that creates a space in which possibilities for learning and constructing new understandings from within our experience open up" (p.42). It is a "muddy" space because the potential for both increasing clarity and ambiguity co-exist. It is in this "potentially messier process of making connections" that one can be "struck" (or stuck?) by moments that propel one to make sense of experience in new and enquiring ways. It is our contention then that peer partnerships set in motion a series of "striking moments" that unsettle established subjective positions, construct embodied, reflexive responses and enhance both individual and collective learning. [33]

Recognition of some of these striking moments is very apparent from the transcripts of our meetings

> "In a way, the conversations are part of the reflection but the action is whatever you do in your life in relation to the students you are supervising. So, when you say 'I've got all of these questions and I am going to improve my relationship with my supervisor, that is the action. That's the research. That's the critical domain because you are starting to notice things that you didn't notice before, or you didn't pay

> attention to, in the same way, and in the moment, didn't have the capacity to change the direction of that, so you are shaping it."
>
> "I think we actually we are altering the world we invest with, that we are part of, with our students by the fact that we have conversations that do make a difference."
>
> "I simply ... I don't think we have those sorts of conversations in institutions. We don't make institution out of relationship, we make it out of positions and performance appraisals and all that structure stuff." [34]

While there were critical moments a-plenty, the "muddy space" never completely cleared. While we did attempt to subvert and disrupt organisational boundaries, we also, inevitably, enacted organisational attitudes and practice. One element of organisational life that remained largely unacknowledged and out of our reflexive range, was that of power. [35]

Our peer partnership involved two current (and ongoing) PhD supervisor/supervisee groupings amidst the generalised group of tenured, non-tenured, staff and student members. It was a supervisor who noted that the PhD students started to contribute far more freely late in the process, and it would be months after that before the PhD students would admit that they were sometimes careful and restrained in supervisor company. Our peer partnership also showed us that it takes time to rescript relationships that are firmly embedded in structures of power, and to foster the ability, willingness or voice to bring them into meaningful conversation. [36]

The peer partnership process, again somewhat uncannily, reflects the boundaries, gaps, hesitancies, and silences of the supervisory relationship. There is something impossible about the whole PhD relationship between supervisor and student. It is presumed to be a relationship of trust from the beginning, yet the trust takes considerable time and effort to build. Just as we were unable to be fully open in the check-in, needing time to build trust amongst us, so PhD candidates and supervisors cannot be expected to reach a level of open trust at the beginning of the relationship. Supervision is meant to be a relationship of intellectual intimacy and growth, yet the power differential often prevents open and honest engagement. By "doing" trust and non-trust, intimacy and separation, through participating in a peer partnership inquiry, as well as specifically researching into supervisory practice, we developed greater skills and abilities to reflect and act on the unsaid, unstated, dimensions of supervisory relationships. [37]

Part of the intention for the research was to see whether or not the format of peer partnership was transferable into an institutional context. Given this earlier experience (as discussed above) we were able to use some of the disciplines of peer partnership that had already proved valuable. The most significant of these was the practice of check-in. [38]

3.2 Check-in

Each session began with a check-in and this became a framing ritual. One of our group with wide experience of the check-in process introduced the practice as something that

> "operates at several different levels, in part brings me fully here. It's based on the principle that if I have stuff that is concerning me, or bothering me, that will be taking part of my attention, and so naming it separates me from it, also the check-in process does deeper things than that, revealing myself. In as much as I can do that, revelation to each other gives space to connect. If we're going to do collaborative stuff we surmise you need to have that to be able to do that." [39]

From the beginning of the group we were challenged by this group member to take risks with check-in, and be increasingly vulnerable and open. We valued the process of check-in and have sustained this practice throughout our engagement. Within the limited timeframe of the first phase of the inquiry, we did not realise the full potential of this practice, nor did we meet the challenge to reveal ourselves more deeply. Our check-ins tended to be confined to a limited number of levels. We were able to identify and articulate "stuff that is concerning me, or bothering me", but "deeper things than that" were not shared. Previous experience of check-in from the earlier study suggests, however, that this was perhaps an unrealistic expectation for the group in its early stages. In the first study, deep levels of sharing through check-in did not occur until the second or third year, when the size of the group reduced to four regular participants. Intimacy may be an outcome of time as well as number. Frequency of contact is also an issue. Some members, for various and very good reasons, were unable to participate in all the sessions in 2001. This inevitably meant that people engaged at different levels of familiarity and trust within the group, and stepped back into the process of group life often at some distance from the point of their departure. Check-in was able to bring individuals into the group space each time, but perhaps not fully into the flux of collective experience and the relational dynamics that occurred as one session led to the next. [40]

The strength of the practice lay in the complexity of self/ves individuals brought to each meeting. Instead of just bringing the supervisor/student relationships suggested by the topic, group members could site themselves as colleagues, co-authors, friends, employers, employees and parents amongst other things. We met each other in and through the context of a lived experience that transcended university defined relationships. Check-ins deepened our awareness of ourselves, as individuals and as a group, and brought to consciousness the subjective nature of our inquiry, our own intention to enhance personal, as well as collective/ collected, practice. [41]

By establishing check-in as a routine that begins each meeting, each group member is given the chance to present themselves in multiple, diverse, complex and contextual ways. Given the personal nature of these check-ins, the claiming of "place or space", it is inappropriate for others to comment on or interrupt

another's check-in. In practical terms, each member of the group takes the time that they need, at the time they select, to bring themselves consciously into the group in any way they chose. This typically took the form of a reflection on significant events or feelings between one meeting time and the next, a statement on current mood, attitude and perspective, a "turning back" to something from a previous meeting that had significance or resonance, a focus on the institutional/research/work practice that happened to constitute the topic of inquiry, a narrative from personal or other professional spheres, or a chance to simply rave, rant, empathise, speculate and think aloud. [42]

Check-in enables the process of embodiment. Contributions are physical, emotive and strongly embedded in the present. Significant in our discourse, for example, were images that constructed subjectivity spatially.

> "I'm incredibly scattered."
>
> "I realised we were actually on different planets."
>
> "I feel immersed in what this is all about."
>
> "Submerged in research." [43]

For us check-in is a space, site or process where subjectivity could be explored, articulated and questioned. While group members use this process to develop, layer and deepen a self or selves, they also use it to introduce entirely new selves or contradict and juxtapose "previous" ones. We suggest that there is a close relationship between the presentation and construction of these selves in the check-in, and the growth of bounded intellectual intimacy in the group.

> "I am managing elements of my PhD research practice in light of experiences gained in this group. I use the honesty of the 'check-in' technique practised by this group to ground myself at the beginning of meetings/interactions/observations at my case site. I find this conscious placing of my whole self in a particular context allows me to be more fully present to what is occurring around me (by acknowledging intrusive or irritating 'life stuff' I can let it go for a while), this enriches my research experience. I would like to 'check-in' at the beginning of each PhD supervision meeting too—adding value via risk and reciprocity?" [44]

What check-in allows is the active representation of a "position, an investment, a habitus, a history and a politics" (SKEGGS 2002, p.368). We can frame this relationship as a tension between "positioning" and "belonging" and explore the check-in in terms of the "oscillations and ambivalences that exist between belonging and positioning" (MAY 2000, p.158). For MAY, in the spaces "between belonging, practice and positioning lies the key to referential reflexivity in terms of opening up the spaces for transformation" (ibid). Subjectivity or identity is formed within "dialogic conditions" where acceptance is crucial to the ongoing representation of selves. The rules around check-in construct the possibility for this acceptance and provide a regular space and time for its practice. Check-in then is a tool to potentially contribute to both individual and collective transformation. [45]

These subjectivities proved as pertinent to the research group, as they do to the PhD supervisory process, and confirmed the multiplicities present in even the most focused professional or research endeavour. Those complexities revolve around bringing multiple subjectivities to group research processes, and the challenges of deepening both individual and group reflexivity. These complexities and challenges mirror, perhaps a little ironically, the complexities of supervisors and PhD students bringing themselves fully into the supervisory relationship and being able to engage in ongoing, extensive reflexive practice. This is actually highlighted by our peer partnership process, which after all sought to highlight and turn reflexive practice into research data. Supervisory relationships tend to have a far less direct and focused relationship to reflexivity, and if a collaborative research group revolving around reflexivity struggles, then normative PhD supervisory relationships must find the whole practice exceedingly demanding. It is the collective nature of check-in and co-supervision that holds both distinctive promise and difficulty for practices that evoke subjectivity and reflexivity. [46]

3.3 Mapping

Dimensions of promise and difficulty characterised another of the "tools" used in our group process. We used "maps" in different ways to share information across our individual sense-making. In the discussion below, one supervisor shows how she used personal mapping to deepen her own understanding of complexity, to good effect. First, we briefly identify other occasions when individual maps did not fully communicate what their designers intended. [47]

The dialogic/conversational mode of inquiry can feel very ephemeral at times:

> "...it feels odd and incredibly lightweight to be doing research in such a casual, floaty kind of way." [48]

Once we had transcripts of our sessions, the challenge was to make sense of what we had accomplished together, other than an intrinsic sense of the worthiness of the project that we each had. Two of us, both supervisors, discussed at length the themes of the transcripts and produced a "map" of what we saw as key ideas. For the mapmakers, it captured in shorthand form, themes that had emerged over several months. We were surprised that the PhD candidates did not share our enthusiasm for it, when we presented the map in the group! It simply did not resonate with their subjective experience of being deeply engaged in their own PhD research. Only now, in writing about the process of mapping have we, as mapmakers, become aware of the supervisory perspective entrenched in the way we represented those ideas. For the supervisors, however, this charting of ideas threw complexity into sharp relief. We noted the intensity of engagement required for each student: relating to the topic, the student's research site as well as other co-supervisors and advisors. When this relational matrix was multiplied by three or four students, appreciation of the work required in supervising postgraduate students takes on new dimensions, especially when these have to be balanced with personal research and teaching commitments.

Discussion of this complexity made the PhD students more aware of institutional expectations placed on their supervisors. [49]

Further forms of "mapping" occurred around the transcripts. Each of us was asked to make sense of our data, which we did from a diversity of epistemologies. The result was six different "maps" featuring quite different topographies which were not collectively explored in the peer partnership. The impact of these separate interpretations was to highlight different subjective experiences of the group journey and to evoke a range of emotional experiences which did not get talked about. Under pressure to get a conference paper written, we failed to surface why such difference mattered so much. In hindsight, we lacked skills to talk through our differences. Had we "sat in the fire" (MINDELL 1995) with our differences a little longer we might have been less fearful of confronting one another's world views, and learned from the multiplicity of each other's sense making processes. [50]

Even though these attempts were less than successful, mapping has proved a useful process for deepening understanding of subjectivity and reflexivity, as the following example demonstrates. This figure maps one supervisor's perception of the complex nuances of her supervisory relationships with four different doctoral candidates. The overlapping membership of supervision with members of this inquiry is also traced. She describes her interpretation of the relationship for each student.

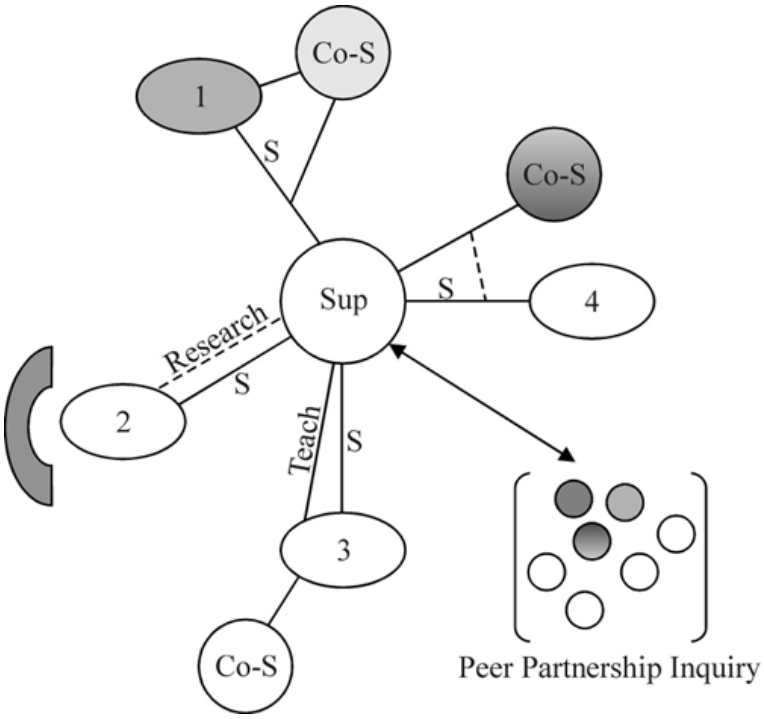

Figure 1: Mapping one supervisor's relationships[1] [51]

1 The dotted or solids line represents the strength of the relationship, however, the straight line between supervisor and candidate is never straight nor a continuous flow. Rather it represents intermittent and dynamic connections. "Co-S" is a co-supervisor, the grey coloured circles represent the overlap in membership by individuals, the numbers match the supervisory

Relationship 1: This candidate came with knowledge of my teaching and research interests. It is collaborative in content and process; there is no other way. And there's action. It is the candidate moving the process along, guiding the three of us. Our co-supervisory relationship is growing spotlighted by this participative inquiry. [52]

Relationship 2: We were first involved as co-researchers. The fieldwork was followed by writing together ... but then in the midst of our writing flew in a PhD supervisory contract. She was in the midst of data gathering. Where were the other advisors? There seemed to be other people advising her. She would surprise me in the middle of writing sessions by telling me how the PhD was progressing. Months later ... as a result of this inquiry, I ask her about these "reports". It seems I have become synonymous with a sign that raises the "PhD progress spectre" calling forth a report from her, whatever the occasion. [53]

Relationship 3: We have strong links together to which a supervisory role is now added. As with Candidate 2, the thesis pops up all over the place. The addition of another supervisor provides a welcome outrigger to stabilise the process. [54]

Relationship 4: The topic engages me. It is early days and the student seems able, although there are twists and turns, all interlaced with passion or is that angst? The University has a new process. Almost at once there are two supervisors. It seems that the student is sometimes a ghost in the process, as the co-supervision takes centre stage. Pushes and pulls as the candidate looks bewildered from one to another. Our co-supervision needs to be clearer. We need to sort out our process and where we each engage with the material. [55]

One year on I draw another map of the same supervisory relationships. In it I notice two obvious changes in the patterns of relating. The multifaceted nature of the supervisory relationship with Candidates 2 and 3 has become more clearly focused on supervision rather than multiple roles. These shifts have been both deliberate and incidental. I have become more aware of the nature of the relationships through reflections with this "inquiry". I also acknowledge environmental factors, such as departmental dictated changes in their roles. The map reveals a surprising second factor. There has been a strengthening of co-supervisory relationships. I have learned that the co-supervisory relationship is central to the developmental process, rather than a shadow play that has to managed by the student. This co-supervisory relationship appears crucial for the developmental process of the candidate as well as the supervisors. [56]

Each supervisory relationship is dynamic and multi-layered, but is it the somewhat grand "bounded intellectual intimacy" that my colleagues suggest? What of the fluctuation in the relationships over the years, and directional changes? What of the student's life crises? What of my own: the stresses, the fragmented selves. "I cannot concentrate today". "Can you leave in ten minutes I really have to rush". "No it is fine that you are late, (I still have three pages to

relationships briefly described below.

critique)." Supervision is not only sitting thoughtfully for an hour or more in an intense intellectual space. [57]

So how may this reflexive subjectivity improve our supervisory practice? Mapping the supervisions provides the opportunity to see the patterns of simultaneous relationships. The visual representations crudely describe the flux and change of processes within one relationship that are translatable and comparable to other supervisory relationships. Mapping provides a process of sense making. It has both advantages and disadvantages as a tool to facilitate the reflexive process. It gives concrete representation to what may be amorphous feelings and perceptions but it also presents a cross-sectional, time-limited view. There is a danger of becoming "stuck" with the "map" and the dynamic nature of the relationships becomes lost. Nevertheless a map serves as a symbol, and as a useful, if imperfect, representation of supervisory relationships. Maps have the potential to highlight individual perspectives, to open up opportunities for dialogue and debate. They also have the potential to be viewed as an object rather than as symbol, unitary rather than multifaceted. In the wrong hands (or imaginations) a map may indeed be a dangerous thing, but it may also be a spark to that imagination in the search for collective understanding. [58]

4. Action Outcomes from This Inquiry

Our paper has discussed the ways in which we were able to access understandings about the relational dimensions of supervisory practice, through peer partnership inquiry methods. The integrity of the materials generated is grounded in personal experience, validated in discussion with others, set within a specific institutional context. We have grappled with individual responses to such subjectivities and attempted to communicate these to wider audiences through the frames of typical academic presentations: conference settings, departmental and university wide seminars and web-page dissemination. These processes of communicating have made us more aware of the extent to which we take the subjective for granted, and of the difficulty of sustaining relationships and reflexivity when task, rather than process, becomes the focus of interaction. [59]

One example of how we became distracted from our reflective practice occurred towards the end of the first year. Excited by our discoveries, we submitted an abstract to a conference on postgraduate research. In the subsequent process of writing and presenting, we lost our sense of connection to each other, the focusing question, and the integrity of our peer partnership inquiry. The task of writing and interpreting for a wider audience (third person research) threw us, as discussed above, into defensiveness or silence. Perhaps because we failed to grapple with our difference, to use the check-in process to surface deeper issues of disconnection or disappointment (whatever might have been the case), our collective presentation at this international conference (McMORLAND et al. 2001) was not a success: the group fragmented into a collection of individuals each with their piece to say! [60]

In February 2001 we presented again, this time to colleagues across faculties in the University. This workshop attracted a large number of people and generated considerable interest. PhD candidates valued the frankness with which we were able to talk about the differences in perspective between supervised and supervisor, and some staff were intrigued by the notion of having "real conversations"! The new dean of postgraduate research identified the need to clarify expectations between staff and students as a critical issue. He questioned how the relationship dimension could be initiated in faculties which primarily focussed on the PhD as a task. Feedback from a second presentation, this time within one department, was mixed. New doctoral candidates were encouraged that the PhD process might be seen in wider terms: some staff recognised the value of making the process of developing inter-personal and inter-role relationships much more explicit, others were unable to acknowledge this dimension. Despite institutional talk at the highest levels for collaborative endeavours, we found it hard to break through the silence of institutional scepticism in our own quarter, to communicate across the boundaries of different communities of practice. [61]

The next presentation was at the Action Research Practitioner series at the American Academy of Management, Denver (August 2002). In preparation for this, three of the group met regularly to extend and reflect back on the previous year's work. Here, amongst a different "community of practice" we were able to engage with international colleagues. Through the two-day roundtable discussions we held with other action research colleagues, we were both encouraged in our inquiry and challenged to make explicit the learning and outcomes that had impacted on practice. We found our first and second person action research resonated with others' experience. The "supervisor-centred" map became a centrepiece around which others engaged quickly with the content of our study. The forum gave others opportunity to share their own subjective experience of the PhD experience and the ensuing discussion extended to a wider reflection on academic relational practices in a variety of institutional contexts. [62]

There are implications for institutional practice arising from our reflections on our practice. Individually, the supervisors have noted changes in their own practice: for one this has meant a rethinking about the relational process of supervision, for another it has brought deeper awareness of how academic conversational development can strengthen the emergence of candidates' ideas. As an examiner of a number of PhD theses, it is easy to see when a student has floundered along in their own subjective understanding of the topic, rather than entering into robust and critical conversation with supervisors or peers. [63]

The two PhD students in the group both found the peer partnership dialogues influential and transformative, although in utterly different ways. One gained insight into the complexities of her co-supervisory panel and how to understand and better "manage" the relationships between supervisors with hugely differing areas of expertise, methodology and understandings of supervision. The other has built on an existing strong supervisory relationship to initiate future research

inquiry into the significance of power underpinning voice and silence in collaborative groups and conversations. Both relished the opportunity to work towards "peerness" in an institutional context more demarcated by difference than connection. [64]

To conclude: we suggest that much greater intentionality has to be paid to the multiple and complex relationships that exist amongst students, staff and institution if the PhD endeavour is to be a fulfilling creative enterprise for all. We advocate that staff and students need to develop skills and courage in reflecting on their own capabilities, to develop skills in peer learning and peer engagement, and to strengthen a culture of learning across multiple role relationships. [65]

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