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NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP WITH PHD STUDENTS; VOICES FROM PAKISTANI ACADEMIA

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ABSTRACT

Abstract— The current study is entitled “Narrative inquiry of supervisory relationship with PhD students; voices from Pakistani academia, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.” The purpose of the study is to explore the supervisory interaction with PhD students, challenges, and how supervisor interaction affects the quality of the study within the specific cultural context of Pakistani society. The prime objectives of the study are to explore the personal narrative of the students regarding their supervisor interaction with male and female students and to examine how students' supervisor interaction affects the quality, motivation, and productivity of academia. For the current study, the researcher used a qualitative study as a research design. A total of eight sample sizes is selected purposively from the Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan. The data was collected through open-ended in-depth interviews from the respondents and was analyzed through narrative analysis. The analyzed data were presented in the form of themes and respondents' narratives, stories, etc. The analyzed data reveal that the personal qualities and abilities of the supervisor lead to the academic growth of the students. It is the personal qualities of the supervisor through which the soft skills, management and discipline skills of the students can be enhanced. Similarly, the expertise of the supervisor in the research area has a positive impact on the academic growth of the students. Further, regarding the gender differences, the views of the respondents reflect differently, as most of the respondents shared that it is not a barrier for the students or the supervisor; however, a few respondents shared that due to the socio-cultural context of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, it is very challenging for the scholar to conclude his/her PhD on time as time management, coordination, discussion of ideas and timely response is mandatory in gender different supervisory role.

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Keywords: Education, Supervisor interaction, PhD students, Personal narrative, Academia.

INTRODUCTION

The journey of the PhD is deeply shaped by the supervisory relationship, especially in Pakistan. Such a supervisory relationship either empowers or hinders academic growth. Throughout the research journey, many Ph.D. academics feel a variety of feelings, such as exhilaration, fear, frustration, and loneliness. Original research, data analysis, and thesis writing can be intimidating tasks, particularly for students who believe they don't have enough time to finish them all (Taylor & Kiley, 2024; Gardner, 2008). From science and engineering to the humanities and social sciences, Ph.D. programs offer a valuable way to create new knowledge and develop competence in a range of subjects (Borrego & Newswander, 2010).

Postgraduate research is characterized by independent investigation and in-depth study of a particular subject, with supervisor involvement usually consisting of one-on-one guidance and counselling. Despite this subtle element, the cooperative relationship between the researcher and supervisor fosters a constructive environment that promotes learning and idea exchange. Although the dynamics of instruction are still not fully understood, effective supervision is essential to the success of postgraduate research projects (Cekiso et al. 2019; Mapasela & Wilkinson, 2005). Like many other academic pursuits, obtaining a PhD is rarely easy. Research scholars frequently encounter periods of inactivity along their journey, which is full of vulnerable moments, but these are recognized as essential elements of their journey of exploration and discovery (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006).

For PhD candidates, choosing a supervisor is a crucial choice that will have a big influence on their academic career. The scholar's experience, the calibre of their research, and eventually their success in the area can all be impacted by the supervisor they choose (Baker & Lattuca, 2010). The process of choosing a supervisor is intricate and multifaceted, involving a number of elements such as the supervisor's availability and accessibility, supervisory style, and alignment with research goals (Igumbor et al., 2022). By recommending their PhD students for jobs and promotions, supervisors can use their power to help their students' careers progress. Women are over-mentored but under-sponsored, according to research that examines these processes and tries to explain the gender gap in academia (de Vries & Binns, 2018; Ibarra et al., 2010; O'Connor et al., 2020).

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the personal narratives of the PhD students, both male and female students, regarding their interaction with their supervisors.

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<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

2. To identify the challenges faced by PhD students in their supervisory interactions in the study area.

Literature Review

Globally, postgraduate supervision has drawn a lot of attention due to demands for rigor, equity, and transparency (Sidhu et al., 2013). Different definitions of the supervisory process have been provided by different authors. Academic supervision, for instance, is described by Pearson and Brew (2002) as a system that attempts to develop students into professional scholars and researchers who are independent in their fields and adept at navigating a variety of research environments, whether in academia or industry. Cryer and Mertens (2003), on the other hand, view postgraduate supervision as a complex process that requires a sophisticated blend of interpersonal and academic skills.

Students receive inadequate help when supervisors are viewed as remote-privileged masters with specialized knowledge and exclusive accountability for research outputs (Bastalich 2017; Corcelles-Seuba et al. 2023; González-Ocampo and Castelló, 2019). Furthermore, prior research has recognized a number of ethical challenges with supervision, such as insufficient supervision, supervisor desertion, exploitative and abusive supervision, bullying, fraud encouragement, and authorship concerns (Cohen and Baruch 2022; Löfström and Pyhältö 2020). Additionally, doctoral students have encountered hostile behaviors from their supervisors, such as poor communication styles, hostile remarks, sudden encounters, yelling, and, in the worst cases, psychological or sexual harassment (Devos et al. 2015).

Early career researchers have demonstrated a very socially embedded level of participation (Mason, 2012; Scaffidi and Berman, 2011; Vekkaila et al., 2018). This indicates that it is controlled by the number and caliber of contacts with the supervisor or supervisors and the research community. Support from the academic community has been shown to boost involvement (Posselt, 2018; Pyhältö et al., 2022). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that post-doctoral researchers' involvement is mediated by obtaining socio-emotional, informational, and instrumental support (Vekkaila et al., 2018).

The function of the PhD supervisor is frequently emphasized in the literature (e.g., Gaule and Piacentini, 2018; Paglis et al., 2006), as the supervisor may "socialize" the applicant toward particular research methodologies and hence influence work results following the doctorate. Furthermore, due to family obligations and current gender conventions, women may find it more difficult than men to pursue careers in some scientific fields or may choose not to pursue a career in science altogether.

The unique role of a PhD supervisor has been examined in both recent and classic sociological literature. According to socialization theory (Gopaul, 2011) and particularly from the standpoint of social capital (Andersson et al., 2017; Gopaul, 2015;

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<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Maritz & Prinsloo, 2015; Rowlands, 2013), the supervisor is a crucial component in explaining academic career success. In addition to, or after, the primary levels of family and private relationships, the supervisor also acts at the level of social capital and socialization. Supervisors are unquestionably important for reasons other than their "professional work" (Halse & Malfroy, 2010, p.83) with the candidate, which includes helping with research (e.g., Pearson and Brew, 2002) and acclimating the PhD student to the academic setting.

Research methodology

The current study is purely qualitative in nature and the researcher employed a narrative enquiry approach to explore the perceptions and experiences of male and female PhD scholars regarding their supervisory relationship. The narrative study approach is a qualitative method that is dependent upon the personal experiences and stories in understanding a particular phenomenon. The narrative study approach seeks to disclose the meanings that participants attach to their experiences and how these meanings are shaped by their social and cultural contexts. Seven participants for the current study were selected through a purposive sampling method. Inclusion criteria for the study were male and female PhD scholars who had recently worked with a supervisor.

Data was collected through an interview guide in which the participants were allowed to share their personal experiences and perceptions related to the supervisory relationship. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved identifying patterns and themes in the data and interpreting these patterns in relation to the objective. The analysis was conducted iteratively, with the research team revisiting the data multiple times to refine and confirm the identified themes. The narrative inquiry approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' personal experiences and perceptions related to PhD students and supervisor relationship.

Thematic Analysis

Knowledge and intellectual abilities

The expertise and intelligence of a research supervisor are essential for successfully mentoring trainees. These skills include a solid understanding of the study topic, expertise in research techniques, and the ability to think critically, analyze, and solve problems. They should also be able to help students generate compelling arguments, encourage creativity and innovation, and efficiently oversee the research process. Regarding the question, "How do supervisors' knowledge and interactive abilities impact the quality of research in Pakistan?" the respondents expressed their opinions.

In this regard, the responses of R1 and R3 are as under;

"The supervisor must have the knowledge about the research topic, research methodology and mentoring. Similarly, the supervisor must have an

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awareness about the theoretical framework and tools development. The supervisor must have clear understanding of the research area and there must be clarity between the scholar and the supervisor about the plan of work and research methodology.

The analyzed data is supported by the studies that states that the characteristics of a successful supervisor include having technical know-how in the subject, actively researching, setting realistic expectations and results, providing timely quality feedback, inspiring and motivating students in the development process to become independent researchers, and having a high level of availability (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002).

Personal effectiveness

Strong communication skills, academic knowledge, and the capacity to offer both emotional and intellectual support are all necessary for a successful PhD supervisor. They should be actively interested in their field of study, possess a solid research record, and be well-versed in their discipline. Additionally important are the capacity to assist students through the difficulties of a PhD, provide constructive criticism, and be a positive and encouraging presence. "How does the supervisor's personal effectiveness touch the PhD students in professional and career development and self-management?" was the question posed to responders in this respect.

In this regard, R2 and R5 recorded their responses;

"The knowledge about the research topic and the effective utilization of that knowledge makes a supervisor successful in the professional growth of their team. Similarly, capacity building, clear communication and clear direction of the supervisor enhance the efficiency and professional growth. Moreover futuristic mind, effective time management and self-awareness create proficiency among the team. However, training and workshops should be provided on necessary basis for the professional growth and development of the supervisor".

The analyzed data is supported by the study, which states that Holistic supervision takes a more comprehensive approach, addressing the academic, emotional, and psychological needs of doctoral students. This method recognizes the interconnectedness of personal well-being and academic performance and encourages supervisors to provide mentorship that extends beyond research guidance. Recent findings (Campbell & Lassiter, 2020) underscore the value of this approach, demonstrating that holistic supervision leads to higher student satisfaction, reduced attrition rates, and stronger student-supervisor relationships.

Research governance and organization of the supervisor

The duties of a PhD supervisor include assisting a doctoral student with their research,

Online ISSN

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<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

making sure that university and funding body (such as HEC) regulations are followed, and fostering their academic and professional growth. This includes helping to choose the research topic, the coursework, and the general path of the dissertation. Supervisors are also in charge of keeping an eye on students' progress, making sure they finish assignments on time, and reporting any problems to the appropriate authorities, like the HEC. In addition to offering academic advice, supervisors assist students in honing their research questions and techniques and make sure the work complies with ethical and disciplinary requirements. They evaluate the student's progress on a regular basis, offer helpful criticism, and quickly resolve any issues or hold-ups.

In this regard, the responses of R1 and R7 are as under;

“The supervisor provides guidance about the research plan and gives me a proper schedule for time management which helps me in the timely completion of my task. Moreover the supervisor has expertise in research and adopting various techniques and methodologies that helps us in addressing any challenges to our research promptly. Similarly I felt that we need more institutional support, international exposure which we are lacking, lacking budgetary constitution, lacking philosophical debates and international capacity building training of supervisors”.

The analysed data is corroborated by studies that found that students receive insufficient support when supervisors are viewed as distant-privileged masters with expert knowledge and sole responsibility for research outcomes (Bastalich 2017; Corcelles-Seuba et al. 2023; González-Ocampo and Castelló 2019). Furthermore, prior research has recognized a number of ethical challenges with supervision, such as insufficient supervision, supervisor desertion, exploitative and abusive supervision, bullying, fraud encouragement, and authorship concerns (Cohen and Baruch 2022; Löfström and Pyhältö 2020). Additionally, doctoral students have encountered hostile behaviors from their supervisors, such as poor communication styles, hostile remarks, sudden encounters, yelling, and, in the worst cases, psychological or sexual harassment (Devos et al. 2015).

Engagement, influence and impact of the supervisor

Research engagement refers to an active cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement in doctoral research, which is characterized by experiences of vigor, dedication, and absorption in doctoral studies. The supervisor has a great impact and influence on their students working under their supervision. In the current trends of education in universities, especially the postgraduate degree, is totally relying on the supervisor; therefore, the students and supervisors' relationship has got great attention in current times. Moreover, the quality of research and the timeline of research activity is totally dependent upon the supervisor and the students in this regard are totally exposed to the supervisor.

Online ISSN

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In this regard, the responses of R4 and R6 are as under;

“The supervisor deal with students as per their capacity and his in his engagement influence is worthy for students. However, due to many engagements supervisor didn't give enough time to their students. Similarly, the supervisor treat students with participatory engagement, clear communication and openly deal with them. However, further improvement is required for both the supervisor and student to learn about research practicality”.

Early career researchers have demonstrated a very socially embedded level of participation (Mason, 2012; Scaffidi and Berman, 2011; Vekkaila et al., 2018). This indicates that it is controlled by the number and caliber of contacts with the supervisor or supervisors and the research community. Support from the academic community has been shown to boost involvement (Posselt, 2018; Pyhältö et al., 2022). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that post-doctoral researchers' involvement is mediated by obtaining socio-emotional, informational, and instrumental support (Vekkaila et al., 2018).

Gender differences

According to research, a student's experience and results may be impacted by the gender of their PhD supervisor. Research indicates that female students may be more productive and inclined to continue academic careers if they have female supervisors. On the other hand, other research indicates that female students may view male supervisors as less approachable or encouraging, which could affect their sense of achievement and belonging. Other studies, however, indicate that the supervisor's gender might not necessarily play a big role. Additionally, while a lot of research has been done on the role of gender in the supervision experience from the viewpoint of the PhD student, less attention has been paid to the supervisor's perspective.

In this regard, the responses of R4 and R6 are as under;

“Gender difference matters up to some extent during supervision and sometimes issues created during face to face interaction. Sometime there is hesitation between female students and supervisors. However I felt there is no issue in interaction and communication for any gender with supervisor because the supervisor provide us friendly environment. Moreover closed system of education must be discouraged and the supervisor must ensure same sort of time and quality to both male and female students”.

The literature often emphasizes the role of the PhD supervisor (e.g., Gaule and Piacentini, 2018; Paglis et al., 2006), as the supervisor may “socialize” the candidate towards certain ways of doing research and thus affect work outcomes after the doctorate. Moreover, women may encounter more difficulties than men in entering certain science professions or may opt out of a science career for reasons relating to family responsibilities and prevailing gender norms.

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

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Conclusion

The current narrative study focusing on the relationship experiences of PhD students with their supervisor at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan provides a rich understanding of the supervisory relationship between the students and supervisors. By investigating into the personal narratives of both male and female PhD scholars, this study has illuminated the critical role supervisors play in shaping the academic journey, motivation, and productivity of their students.

The findings of the study concluded that the supervisor's knowledge, ability and intellectual awareness is dominant, which is directly impacting the quality of research through the grasp of methodology, theoretical framework, and their capacity for critical guidance. Furthermore, personal effectiveness of the supervisor including communication skills, emotional support, and a proactive approach to student development emerged as a vital factor influencing students' professional growth and self-management.

The study also highlighted the importance of research governance and organizational support, with participants emphasizing the need for clear guidance on research plans, time management, and institutional backing for international exposure and capacity building. The narratives revealed that insufficient support and, in some cases, aggressive attitudes from supervisors can significantly hinder student progress and well-being, echoing concerns raised in broader literature.

In conclusion, this narrative inquiry offers valuable insights into the complexities of PhD supervision in Pakistan. The stories shared by the participants emphasize the transformative potential of effective supervision, while also pointing to areas where improvements are needed to foster a more supportive, engaging, and productive academic environment for future PhD scholars. Further recommendations, based on these primary data and participant insights, will be crucial for enhancing the quality of postgraduate education in the region.

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