Supervision response:

Before I get into my own reaction I would like to comment on the process that has unfolded and finally resulted in this compilation of articles on supervision and assorted responses. When writing ‘networks’ back in 2008 I was concerned that our own community of education academics were not taking each others’ work seriously enough. We were not referencing each other or engaging in debate with each other in a sustained way, and I saw my paper on supervision as stimulating a nascent debate that existed between Waghid and Fataar’s work. I set up my piece as a spicy addition that would stimulate discussion, but did not really expect it to bite. That it did so is largely due to Fataar taking the process seriously and driving it to this point we are now, and I would like to convey my appreciation for his sterling efforts in this regard.

My reaction is not protective, I do not want to defend my paper or attack the other respondents (although there will be elements of this in what follows). Nor do I want to take the middle line where some golden mean of supervision is looked for by synthesizing the papers (although I will do some of this as well). I want to use Ockham’s razor, as Bak does, to get at a minimal conceptual set that has manifested itself in the collection. That said, I do not want to step away from the spice of academic life offered in the chance to respond, so there will be some sharpness.

Here is the question that interests me as I read the collection: what basic conceptual tool set can we use to illuminate the contributions by Waghid, Fataar, Hugo, Bak, and Bitzer; and what blindspots are still being shown that can take us forward in our attempt to understand the complexities of academic supervision in South Africa.

The supervision relationship works with two basic dimensions that are deeply intertwined but can be analytically separated – the normative ‘ought’ and the epistemic and the empirical ‘is’. They are intertwined because it is in the daily routine relationship between supervisor and student that reasons are given and taken, empirical reality is interrogated, validity claims survive or fall. The deliberative relationship produces an epistemic effect. It strikes me, as I read through the responses, that the debate seems to have focused powerfully on the normative at the cost of the empirical and the epistemic, and I find this strange, given that the relationship between the supervisor and student centers around knowledge. In the space of the normative, I feel that Bak has got far closer to what the regulative relationship is between supervisor and student than Waghid, in her pithy statement that the object of love is not the student but love of intellectual work itself. By focussing on Aristotle’s intellectual and practical virtues, she gets the regulative focus correct – its virtues alright, but *intellectual* virtues. Its not that Waghid is wrong about the beauties of friendship in supervision, only that his focus is wide-angled rather than sharply defined. This allows him to point out that friendship is able to include an authority relation, accountability, professional mutual caring, and skepticism. He can partly do this because friendship is a wide and inclusive relationship, whereas I prefer a tighter focus for supervision relationships. Friendship does not give the analytical focus needed to get hold of the particular nature of the supervision relationship. Friendship appears to me as a larger and somewhat tangential set in which the supervision relation resides as a problematic subset. Bak shows this up quite clearly, I think, through her placing of supervision relationships within the broader frame of intellectual virtue. I immediately felt this was a helpful larger frame because it got at what the *supervision relationship* is about by emphasising the *supervision* part rather than the *relationship* part of supervision relationship. But if you look carefully, her focus is on the *virtue* of theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom, not what theoretical and practical wisdom actually are in their epistemic purity. Sure, the supervisor and the student must care deeply about the truth, but just as importantly, they should get at the truth. I can care about the truth and not get it. She does the same thing when she focuses on the ethically appropriate supervisory relationship resting on four *ethical* principles. I like these principles, they get to the normative heart of the supervisory relationship far more accurately than friendship and forgiveness does, but the epistemic silence is deafening. When I read through the various responses, I see strong debate on the normative dimension of the supervision relationship, but I see little on the epistemic/empirical practices themselves. This absence surprises me, because it is precisely what I tried to point to in my article, and when my article gets picked up on, its in terms of its normative dimensions (authority and lineage of supervisor, etc) not its attempt to delineate what it actually means for a student and supervisor to chase an empirical detail all the way from its natural home into the epistemic confines of a research thesis.

This is not to say we should not focus on the *relationship* part, only that we should be careful how we do it. *Human* relationships is a bigger set than *supervisor* relationships, so we have to be careful about losing focus, but it is a more accurate larger set than ‘friendship’, which I see as a still useful but more tangential set. Expanding your focus outwards is not necessarily a bad thing as it brings broader dynamics into focus, but you have to get the expansion right. So what are the basic kinds of human relationships that are possible and does this shed some light on supervision? Well, lets go to the specialists who have spent their academic lives working on this dimension and see what they have to say. Alan Fiske is one such academic, and he argues that people use just four fundamental models of human relational dynamics: communal sharing (cs), authority ranking (ar), equality matching (em) and market pricing (mp). Allow me to put these four into supervisor relationship terms. With communal sharing you open out your resources to others in a shared and intimate way, where you do not ask what the other can do for you, but what you can do for others without keeping score. In many ways this is where Waghid locates the supervision relationship. With authority ranking there is an asymmetric relation with the supervisor takes on a pastoral responsibility and the student defers and respects the superior position of the supervisor in exchange for guidance and induction into how knowledge and the academic community works. Fataar tracks the tension between these two dimensions with characteristic insight. With equality matching (em) there is a sensitivity to how hierarchical relationships unbalance the supervising relationship and a strong attempt is made to establish balance, especially as the relationship comes to term, and the student takes on the mantle of independent researcher doing her own work in her own voice. Finally, with market pricing (mp), there is a recognition that different supervisors bring with them different values that are socially and intellectually meaningful within the academic community. To be supervised by Bernstein or Habermas or Derrida brings with it specific values and networks, and this dimension of the supervision relationship cannot be ignored. Fiske goes on to point out that we tend to work with all four kinds of relationships at the same time, with all sorts of combinations possible. These can be both productive and problematic. When a student emphasises communal sharing over the other three types of relationships, for example, and assumes that his supervisor is a ‘commons’ to be used at any time or place, then difficulties set it; or when a student refuses to let go of the authority ranking and step into a more equal relationship; or when a student chases market pricing at any cost and finds herself with a supervisor who is so famous and busy that he does not care a whit for his minions of phd students.

Notice that the work I had to do to configure this broader ‘relationship’ set to its contained partner ‘supervision relationships’ was minimal. There is a natural fit that I feel helps to illuminate some of the basic relationship patterns of supervision. Because it is a broader set, it’s not going to get you into the specific details of supervision, but it’s an orienting device that helps you walk into the terrain with some analytical purchase. But that’s about as much as these relationship types can do. To take things further you would need to explore the complex social, moral, political world these relationships breathe in. How these relationships actually work are embedded within particular force fields that shape and twist the relationships in particular ways, and it is here that Waghid and Fataar show their characteristic strengths. For all my criticism of Waghid in this response, what rises above it is my respect for his serious engagement with what it means to engage with a supervision relationship in a post apartheid landscape that twists the relationship in all sorts of difficult and complex ways. It is in this ravaged, yet beautiful, landscape that friendship and forgiveness as a part of the supervision relationship make sense, and this is why I continue to engage with his work, even when he continually seems to work obliquely. When you take the twisted landscape we work with into account, then suddenly the work of Waghid shifts right back to centre stage.

If the analytical ‘ought/is’ double and the broader ‘relationship’ set give my first two productive sets behind this collection on supervision, then different types of research focus gives my third. With one particular PhD student of mine I have worked hard on shifting her vision of the world and encouraged her to see the domain of her research in a completely transformed way. I used Deleuze as the transformative device to get her into a process dynamic where flows and connections link together in fruitful ways. I focused on her as a ‘knower’ and her PhD is now structured around how this fundamental shift in perspective has affected her topic. It’s a very personal thing, to work on some-ones vision of the world, as it changes the core of their being. It strikes me, as I read Waghid, Fataar and Bak that this is their preferred mode. But there are many phd supervision relationships that focus strongly on the knowledge component rather than the knower. Often these are in the harder sciences, and there is a reason for this. The links and levels of the sciences are explicit and simple and can be tracked all the way through. The task of the supervisor is to ensure that all the protocols have been rigorously followed, that each fact and connection is properly established, and that all the previous work already done on the topic (which is also explicit and clear) is acknowledged and built on. This is a very different level of focus and it has profound implications for the supervision relationship. The job of the supervisor is less to help the student interrupt a specific way of seeing the world and more to ensure that the correct lines are rigorously chased. To gain a more complete account of supervision relationships this ‘knowledge/knower’ couplet needs more airtime than it gets in this collection.

The fourth (and final) emergent dimension that helps me make sense of the various contributions is the boundary strength of the relationship between supervisor and student. As I read Eli Bitzer’s postscript, I was struck both by how correct and misplaced his essential point is. It is true that the supervisor is not necessarily the most important factor in a student’s success. Internal motivation, peer groups, other academics, committees, cohorts, professional organizations all play a crucial and often more important role in a student’s success. It is important that this gets said to overly important professors like me, so I am pleased that the point gets well made. But it is unclear to me that the various contributions over-estimate the role of supervisors in postgraduate student success, its more like this is not their focus – they have delimited their focus to get at a particular logic that is not about postgraduate student success but about the relationship between student and supervisor. I would have framed the debate differently by pointing to the boundary lines of the debate and showing how to open or solidify them. There are internal lines, where you can strongly draw a circle around the student or the supervisor in their own terms. Then there is the boundary between the student and the supervisor and how this relationship opens and solidifies depending on all sorts of variables that range around type of relationship, type of research focus, type of personalities involved, etc. This boundary opens out to a larger set of networks that work with peer group cohorts, other academics etc., and these boundaries can be open or solid, informal or formal, implicit or explicit.

The four areas explored above do two things for me. They help me to make sense of the emergent debate on supervision relationships and they point to where the emphases have fallen too strongly on one side at the cost of other dimensions. We need to attend to the empirical and epistemological constraints of the supervision relationship as well as its normative dimension; the multiple set of supervision relationship types that are twisted by the complex force field they exist within; the different types of research foci and how they impact on supervision; and the shifting boundaries of supervision that widen and contract, open and solidify, depending on the level of focus and nature of the boundary.

The person who I experience as my double in this endeavor is Aslam Fataar. When reading his work on supervision (and his other writing) I experience someone coming from a very different starting position but working towards the same attempt at a complex and nuanced description of a complex and nuanced field. Fataar works from the deep well of turning and training subjectivity towards specialization, whereas I tend to start from the conditions of knowledge and work towards its impact on subjectivity. Even when dealing with relationships I tend to look for a theoretical simplification that gives me analytical purchase, as can be seen with my use of Fiske in this piece. Fataar starts with the phenomenological and hermeneutic experience of engaging with the depths of another human being and the art of turning subjectivity ‘towards the light’ as it were. I would like to briefly sketch where I see productive twinning of these two positions, captured in the well known tensions in the concept of ‘subjectivity’: where you are both *subjected to* forms of supervisory authority and knowledge protocols and an active *subject* who has the capacity to critically act; where the *institutional* and the *intimate* levels of supervision meet; where the *external* demand of knowledge and the *internal* subjectivity of a knower find a productive boundary; where the *macro* and the *micro* tangle. We both want to get to a critical space where we open out the internal critical capacities of our students and develop a societal critique of the current state of educational affairs, and we both want to do this in a way that takes the rigours of description seriously, only I tend to start at the knowledge pole and Fataar at the knower. I find this kind of pulsating star productive.

So I would like to again thank Aslam Fataar for taking this process to where it currently is. The kind of academic leadership he is showing in this process needs to be celebrated, for it is not only about taking research and debate on supervision relationships to another level that is at stake, but how we engage with each other as an academic community and build our own capacities and relationships.

References

Fiske, A.P. (1991). *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations*. The Free Press, New York.