

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THESIS SUPERVISION: SUPERVISORS IDIOSYNCRACIES AND ETHICAL MALFUNCTION

By

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance, as a means to ensure that expected results are achieved, is a series of checks and balances put in place to ensure that quality is maintained in the proposed area of interest. In thesis or dissertation research supervision, a lot of checks are to be put in place to ensure that rules are obeyed from both the supervisor and the supervisee. This is a dissertation desk paper to highlight the qualities expected of a supervisor to ensure quality of supervisees' projects emanating from the supervisor's behavior. The supervisee has a lot to do but the emphasis of this paper is on the supervisor. Ethical issues were presented to expose some of the idiosyncrasies supervisors exhibit. Idiosyncrasy has to do with people's temperament or peculiarity of personal constitution; person's characteristics. The paper focused on ethical issues and brought out some offensive abhorred behaviors of supervisors. The effect of supervisors' behavior towards his supervisee was highlighted. Over ten things that a supervisor should be weary of are explained. The integrity of a supervisor is at stake because both the supervisor and the supervisee share the blame for a shabby research product.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SUPERVISION

It is nice to start this section with a wholistic look at supervision starting with its verb form *supervise*. To supervise means to oversee, direct, to exercise charge (superintend). Quoting Unegbu (2016: 112), supervision "is an oversight function. To supervise means, to direct someone towards a certain intended goal achievement". The noun form of it which is *supervision* according to Webster (2000) is "the action, process, or occupation of supervising, esp. a critical watching and directing (as of activities or a cause of action)". Merriam-Webster.com (2016) defined quality assurance as "a program for the systematic monitoring and evaluation of the various aspects of a project, service, or facility to ensure that standards of quality are being met". This activity of watching, directing, overseeing, guiding, monitoring, evaluating, servicing, etc. is guided by someone called a supervisor. Kimani (2014:63) sees a supervisor as a "foreperson,

overseer, coach, facilitator and coordinator”. He went on to situate a supervisor in the context of a postgraduate supervision. As “one in a position of trust, to guide the student in the course of the research work, while being held responsible for the quality of work and performance in line with the research guidelines and expectations of Graduate School”. From the foregoing, one could conclude that a supervisor is one in a position of trust to guide, mentor, direct, watch, oversee, superintend, facilitate and coordinate the research work of a student to ensure quality research report. To this end when the supervisee fails the supervisor shares the blame. A supervisor should be focused and mindful of his duty because supervision is a means of grading his work. He should show concern to his supervisee because the supervisee’s success is the supervisor’s success and vice versa.

Insurance of quality is dualistic, that is, it should come from both the supervisor and the supervisee. The focus of this paper is on the supervisor. How should a supervisor ensure quality of students’ research work?

IDIOSYNCRACIES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Webster’s dictionary (2000) has these as the definitions of idiosyncrasy 1(a) “a peculiarity of constitution or temperament; an individualizing characteristic or quality; (b) individual hypersensitiveness (as to a drug or food) 2. Characteristic peculiarity (as of temperament).” Idiosyncrasy has to do with people’s behavior sometimes unknown to him or unrecognized by him. Things people do unconsciously that affect their relationship with others. Idiosyncrasy can equate with mannerism which is an “exaggerated or affected adherence to a particular style or manner”. Mannerism is a “characteristic and often a conscious mode or peculiarity of action, bearing or treatment” (Webster, 2000). Mannerism could be a formed habit with constant practice. Once formed it is done unconsciously. Idiosyncrasy is someone’s peculiar unfavorable behavior detestable by associates. It is a character in someone that needs to be changed because of its offensiveness. A supervisor having such a feat puts off his supervisee who may not fully understand why his supervisor is displaying certain attitudes towards him. The solution is listening to friends who may point out your deformities to you. The next and best solution is to ask your creator to remold your character.

When a supervisor has mannerism it affects his supervisee and inversely affects the research output. This paper highlights some of the idiosyncrasies exhibited by supervisors and proffer remedies for them as far as possible. All idiosyncrasies or mannerisms may not be mentioned. It is better done by psychologists. As far as supervision is concerned efforts will be made to point as many as are remembered that would affect quality assurance. Another issue that needs to be addressed in supervision is ethics.

Ethics has to do with morality and matters of right and wrong. Every religion has a code of ethics which could be called laws or rules and regulations guiding their behavior. In Christianity, it is called the Ten Commandments which stipulated the acceptable behaviors expected of Christians. The entire Bible is the expansion and explanation of the Ten Commandments. The Moslems have theirs, the traditionalists have theirs, the Budhists and other religions have theirs. Going contrary to these codes of conduct portends doom. According to ALRC (2001) ethics is

an accumulation of values and principles that address questions of what is good or bad in human affairs. Ethics searches for reasons for acting or refraining from acting; for approving or not approving conduct; for believing or denying something about virtuous or vicious conduct or good or evil rules.

Smith and Quelch (1992) in a tabular form listed eight ethical problems confronting researchers to include preserving participants' anonymity, exposing participants to mental stress, use of special equipment and techniques, involving participants in research without their knowledge, use of deception, use of coercion, selling under the guise of research, and causing embarrassment, hindrance, or offense. Though Smith and Quelch's write up was addressing participants in research and marketing of research outcome but there are aspects of the listed problems that affect supervisors. There are certain behaviors and principles that are inimical to the teaching profession. Supervision, which is a higher level of teaching assignment, demands higher level of morality because it is an assignment of trust. This paper addresses issues to be avoided as a supervisor.

1. MONEY MANIC

Be aware of financial considerations/implications in supervision. There are supervisors whose mental orientation and craving is money. Monetary reward is expected for any little thing done.

This somehow compromises quality since the amount offered equals the attention given to the work. Poor students suffer by poor supervision and delay in graduation. Institutions reward supervision with a stipend. No matter how little it is it should be accepted with happiness. Money is not everything. Prestige and integrity are essential virtues for supervisors. When one pays for supervision respect for the supervisor has been sold. The supervision becomes a contract which the supervisee has paid for and therefore has no regard for his mentor. Remember that as you are supervising a postgraduate work the supervisee is emulating some of your behaviors. He would like to do as you did.

2. NON-MONETARY GRATIS

In order not to be accused for demanding for money, some supervisors request for other gratis such as recharge cards, bags of rice, fueling their vehicles, invitation to a restaurant, refrigerator, printer, computer, expensive phones, etc. The supervisees do all these because they want to graduate. The after effect of this behavior to the supervisor is a soured relationship. Some supervisors do not accept anything from their supervisee even if they are given voluntarily not by request or compulsion. This type of behavior puts fear in the mind of the supervisee. There should be a mid way between these two extremes. Whatever will tarnish the image of the supervisor should be avoided. There must be a cordial relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee even after convocation.

3. SEXUAL HARRASMENT

Both men and women could harass each other. Sexual harassment is one of the most appalling behaviors of a supervisor. By sexual harassment it means demanding for sexual intercourse in order to do what is required of you; in this case, requesting for sexual intercourse in order to supervise the candidate well. Problem may ensue if the student refuses. It is so bad that some students especially the female students, never graduated from the university. They either change school or abandon the course. Some supervisors may form a clique that the student who refuses to yield may never graduate in the school because the one demanding for sex must have told his colleagues what transpired. The student is always the victim. Quality is compromised when the supervisee yields because the supervisor may do the whole work for the student. This could be noticed on how the supervisor will be vigorously defending the candidate and may not even

allow the candidate to talk during presentations. Sexual harassment or embarrassment is an immoral behavior that has eternal consequences. It is condemned by almost all religions and it has its health implications.

4. SIMPLE HYGIENE

Cleanliness is next to godliness is a popular axiom. Some people find it difficult to bath, brush their teeth, wash their clothes, and make their hair. Some supervisors' offices are their kitchen and the plates used to eat porridge beans (Moi Moi) since one week will be there unwashed and smelling. The supervisee will not say anything but will feel uncomfortable. Whatever is being said will not be assimilated because in his mind he will be saying 'do quick let me get out of here'. When a supervisee's mind is not in what is going on, how will he assimilate? Concentration is needed for comprehension, understanding and assimilation. Where these are lacking, quality is compromised. Some people lack sense of smell as a health challenge but others do not care, they are used to it. So it is idiosyncrasy which affects supervision. Even those who lack sense of smell they can see dirt and mould growing on decaying materials.

5. IMPATIENCE

The intelligent quotient of all students is not the same. Some students are fast learners and understand their supervisors easily and quickly while it takes time for the slow learners to understand the explanations of the supervisors. Understanding the learning ability and capability of the supervisee is crucial in knowing the amount of patience to exercise with the student. Study your candidate and bear with him. Patience is the watchword. Be patient with each of your students. Sometimes the intelligent ones may have family problems that may hamper their ability to comprehend. Enquiring for the welfare of their families is part of the requirements of a supervisor. Supervisors should care for their supervisees.

6. CONTROL OF TEMPER

Supervision is not fighting. Human beings are born with different temperaments and therefore behave differently. Some are hot tempered while others are cool or mild tempered. An intelligent supervisor should know what his temperament is. If he is aware that he is a hot tempered person he should be able to control his temperament. A hot tempered person is a bully, talks carelessly,

hurts supervisees' feelings, acts irrationally, does not control his emotions, abuses his supervisee, criticizes destructively and may in annoyance refuse to supervise the candidate. The resultant effect to the supervisee is downcast and regret. When the morale of a supervisee is down, the quality of the work is affected. To ensure that quality is maintained the supervisor should control his temper. An easy going supervisor, a melancholy, is as bad as a hot tempered supervisor because everything and anything goes. Most of the time, the temper of a melancholy fluctuates. Such personalities are drunkards. Extremity of any temperament is bad, find a midway.

7. RETALIATION: IT TOOK ME TEN YEARS THEREFORE ...

Quality assurance involves not only quality of output but also duration of production. A master degree course takes between one and two years and that of PhD takes between two and four years under normal circumstances. Vindictive professors or supervisors whose PhD degrees took eight to ten years or more may want their candidates to stay as long when they come for theirs. The supervisors usually say, "Do you think that to get a PhD is so easy, it took me 10 years to get it, why are you in a hurry?" As it happened to them they want the same to happen to their supervisees. Remember that you are not working in the same study environment. When you did your degree there might not be computers or the internet to make things easy for you. You used typewriters to type your thesis and all corrections were manually done. Some supervisors have this attitude in them which is counterproductive. Vengeance belongs to God, forgive. Allow your supervisees to finish on time! Let a delay not come from you.

8. ASSURANCE OF VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY TESTS

Validity is the ability of a study to measure what the researcher intends to measure. This, most of the times, is tested using the instrument for data collection. "Validity is best tested by comparing the findings with a suitable "gold standard". If no test can be used as a criterion, associations with expected outcomes (predictive validity) or other expected correlates (construct validity might be explored" (Araoye, 2004: 150). There are at least seven ways to validate a research instrument: internal validity, external validity, face validity, consensual validity, criterion validity, predictive validity. Two or more could be used for an instrument. A supervisor must be sure that this test is carried out before the supervisee administers the instrument for data collection. Pre-test is normally done to test the instrument. A specialist in the area of the

student's research must be drafted to assure validity of the instrument especially if the questionnaire is self-constructed. A faulty questionnaire gathers an unreliable data and a fake conclusion results. An adopted questionnaire should also be validated because environment and time lag must have imparted on it.

Reliability test is a technical analytical manipulation. A special analytical instrument is used to test the worthiness of the data collection instrument. A statistician or a knowledgeable researcher cum supervisor should know the technique to test for reliability. "Reliability also termed reproducibility or repeatability is the stability or the consistency of information. That is, the extent to which similar information is supplied or obtained when a measurement is performed more than once (test-retest)" (Araoye, 2004:154). Research is universal and not local though every research has its local environment, each data gathering instrument when adopted should be able to reproduce the same result it purports to produce elsewhere. A supervisor must be sure that any self-constructed questionnaire even when adapted or adopted must be tested for consistency. Cronbach's alpha is usually used to test for reliability of instrument especially in the social sciences.

9. MENTAL STRESS TO SUPERVISEE

Though thesis writing is not for premature students, caution should be exercised not to stress the student so much as to cause harm to his mental health. Every student has his breaking point. Every student has his absorption capacity. It is a duty of a good supervisor to know the intellectual capacity of his supervisee. Supervisors should not overload their supervisees to the extent that they become distressed and deranged. The supervisor may be held responsible for any mental stress caused to a supervisee as a result of exertion of too much work from the supervisor. Though you might not be a psychologist, you should know the limit of your candidate's level of mental stretch. By the time you have engaged your supervisee with some probing discussions you should be able to know his learning ability and capacity. Allow your supervisee to talk with you freely. Know his family background, his early years' education, his ailments, if any (be cautious in inquiring for this, be tactful), his reason for doing the research, etc. How eloquent and open the student is will help the supervisor to have an idea of the candidate's intellectual capability. Follow him according to his ability. Do not drag your supervisee but lead him.

Some supervisors' make jest of their supervisees calling them names. This is distasteful and uncalled for. Provoking supervisees may lead to mental stress. Giving the supervisee too much work (beyond his coping capacity) is not encouraged. Some supervisors, from the first interaction with their supervisees, discourage them. Some tell them to go and bring 50 articles from journals and 20 textbooks on the title they want to write on. Some supervisors may tell their students to download 200 relevant articles and send to them before starting to write anything. These could be stressful.

10. EXCESSIVE MAKE-UP AND UNKEPT

Make-up is an adornment to enhance appearance. Moderation is acceptable in every society. When it is excessively done the person looks like a masquerade. This is a behavior that the adherer may not be aware of hence, idiosyncrasy. When a supervisor is excessively adorned, it may distract the attention of the supervisee. The ladies are mostly affected. The men may be the opposite, instead of dressing smartly and comb their hair well they dress in tattered jeans, leave their hairs and beards scattered. It is appalling to see that supervisors who should be decent in their appearance should dress or keep themselves shabby. Wearing of long hairs by men is unacceptable in some cultures. Men wearing ear rings and nose rings and having tattoos are part of excessive make-up. Instead of the supervisee to be occupied by his work the appearance of his supervisor takes over his attention compromising quality.

Ladies need to look pretty, but not to the extent of disfiguring themselves to become objects in an archives. Make-ups are good enhancement for beautification but when it is done without any consideration to its effect to onlookers, it becomes dangerous. Supervisees, instead of paying attention to instructions on how to improve on their research work may be distracted by their supervisors' outlook. So avoid excessive make-ups and dress corporately.

11. ICT INTOLERANCE

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is controlling the world today. With ICT, a lot of information problems hitherto hindered by distance and obscurity are solved with the possession of appropriate gadgets of connectivity to hook on. This generation is said to be ICT indigenes while those who are 50 years and above are ICT aliens. Many of those born from the 50s up until the early 70s find it difficult to adjust to the use of ICT, and many of them are the

teachers and lecturers and supervisors of the “indigenes”. The supervisees are ICT compliants while the supervisors are ICT “aliens”. What a discrepancy! Should the supervisees be the teachers now since the world is not retrogressing but progressing? The solution is the ability of the supervisors to go and learn in order to be educated. An educated person is someone who knows little about everything while a learned person is someone who knows much about a particular thing and can philosophize about that thing. This is why we have the degree, PhD, which is Doctor of Philosophy. The problem is not lack of the knowledge of ICT per se, but the inability of the supervisor to learn the new technology. An educated person should have the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn. The non-effort to acquire new knowledge is the problem

When a supervisor makes up his mind not to learn what is “trending” as a result of his preconceived idea of the ‘uselessness’ of the equipment because of the rigor he envisages in learning it, then he is not worthy of being a lecturer cum supervisor. Supervisors should be open to new learning technologies as they enhance quality and easy learning processes. A supervisor’s inability to learn should not constitute an impediment to the supervisee’s progress. Take, for instance, the plagiarism detector software, if a supervisor does not know how to use it could you imagine what is lost by this feat.

12. MINOR BUT OBSESSIVE IDIOSYNCRASIES

There are other abhorred behaviors of supervisors which will be highlighted here but not elaborated. Each of them has the tendency to put off the concentration of the supervisee thereby hampering his alertness and concentration. Inadvertently such attitudes lead to poor research output and compromise quality of work.

Laughing hilariously in the presence of your supervisee is not a good attitude. Supervisees may wonder why their supervisor is so ‘noisy’. Many thoughts may come from him about this irregular behavior of yours. Laugh mildly when you are with people other than your regular friends who know your ways. Picking the nose is another idiosyncrasy that those who are used to it are not aware of its abhorrence to others. If you are in a place where people show love and appreciation by hand shake how easy it is to soil their hands with wet and dry mucous from your nose. Apart from this, mere seeing you pick your nose is repugnant.

Equally disgusting are scratching your armpit, private parts, and your hair; removing dirt from your fingernails; removing disturbing hairs from your nose and ear; answering phone when you are seriously discussing issues with your supervisee especially when your voice is high etc. These are behaviors that should be avoided. Sometimes they are part of people; they are used to doing them without paying attention and that is why they are idiosyncrasies. Try as much as you can to limit these behaviors. Anything that takes the attention of your supervisee away from the research lessens the quality of the work and affects the quality of the research. If you have not been aware of them, this is the opportunity!

CONCLUSION

Quality assurance in dissertation research supervision is not a raw egg that should be handled with care but a giant viper that should be pursued with a sledge hammer. The product of a research work is equal to the effort put in producing it. The reputation of a supervisor is at stake because the supervisee is not solely responsible for his research output. A supervisor cannot exonerate himself from the impediments of a bad research output.

From the beginning when a supervisee is assigned to a supervisor a serious business has begun. The earlier the supervisor knows this the better for him and the more careful he becomes. So, the supervisor should do everything possible to ensure that quality is maintained. He has two things to do: (1) Assurance that the student has done all the rudiments of research, and (2) Assurance that he comes out not indenting his image. These two duties this paper addressed.

Avoidable behaviors tagged idiosyncrasies have been succinctly dealt with. The aim is to help the supervisors to be aware of some abhorred behaviors that might lead to poor research outcome which eventually compromise and distort quality research output.

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