

Article

## **Breaking Supervisor-Student Trust: Perspectives of Students**

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**Abstract:** Some supervisors do not treat students well and this impacts on trust which can be viewed as a cornerstone for the supervision. The supervisor-student trust is a fragile element of supervision, if not handled with care it can break and thus bringing supervision relationship to an end. Hence supervisors and student should clearly understand their roles in sustaining trust so that they can mould it accordingly. This paper sought to explore issues that can break trust between supervisors and students. It was framed qualitatively and employed semi-structured interviews for data generation. Five themes emerged from analysis of findings. These themes were dehumanising pedagogy/behaviour, treating students as tabula rasa, incompetent supervisor, lack of understanding between the supervisor and co-supervisor and harshness. This paper concludes that some supervisors do not understand that students, as adults, have other responsibilities to take care of on top of the study and some supervisors are not patient with students and that affects trust. Therefore, this paper recommends that supervisors and students discuss terms and conditions of the supervision process so that they clearly define expectations at the early stages of supervision.

**Keywords:** Relationship; student; supervisor; trust; perspectives

### **Introduction**

Trust is one of the cornerstones for a student-supervision process. Moreover, the supervisor and the supervisee referred to as student can be likened to a research team. Meanwhile, a research team needs trust to thrive towards the achievement of the objective(s) of the research. Trust is important in supervisor-supervisee relationships because the supervision process encapsulates number of trust bearing activities that should be accomplished by both the supervisor and student. Trust is a firm belief on the reliability or ability of someone. In other words, trust has to do with believing in the reliability or ability of someone to accomplish a set task. Guccione (2018) argues that the quality of supervision relationship is determined by the influence and or presence of trust. This may suggest that trust is fundamental in the supervision process. The supervisor and student should have the belief that they are both able to contribute towards the completion of the research study. Supervisors and students should do everything in their power to secure and bolster the trust they have so that they may have good working relationship that can result to the completion of their study. They should ensure that nothing comes between them and trust. This implies that the students' behaviour and activities are not expected to aggravate the trust they have and/or should have.

However, some supervisors become reckless and engage in activities that can jeopardise trust of students. In line with this, Hope-Hailey, Searle and Diets (2012) claim that if professional trust has to develop, trust behaviours should be demonstrated by those involved in the process. This suggests that both supervisors and students should behave the way they will contribute to the enhancement of trust. On the same note,

Guccione (2018) proclaims that trust is an essential component of a professional. This resonates with the findings from the works of Le, Pham, Kim and Bui (2021), Almusaed and Almusaed (2020) as well as Masek (2017) which show that there is need for supervisor-student relationship to be well matched for the success of the study under focus or in view to be ensured. Matching the relationship means that supervisors and students should nourish trust which is a component of a good relationship. If trust is broken, there are great chances of the study not to be completed at all because students may not be comfortable with collaborating with someone they do not trust. On the other hand, supervisors may not guide and support students they do not trust relative to competence and capability for completing research studies.

Studies have been conducted to address supervision issues like the one by Denis, Colet and Lison (2019) which looked at perceptions and challenges of supervisor and supervisee. Another one by Bui (2014) looked at supervisor-student expectations, whereas perceptions about trust were investigated by Lundh, Palmgren and Stenfors (2019). Also, Moxham, Dwyer and Reid-Searl (2013) wrote about articulating expectations for PhD candidature upon commencement and Määttä (2015) looked at 'a good supervisor - ten facts of caring supervision'. All these studies used supervisors and students as sources of information. However, the views of postgraduates who have completed their studies have never been fully explored. It is against this backdrop that this study explored the perspectives of students on issues involved in the breaking of supervisor-student trust. This is in an attempt to present issues revolving around leading and managing supervisor-student trust.

## Literature Review

The review of relevant literature for this study are presented in various identified headings. These headings include: behaviours capable of developing or hampering trust in research supervision, elements of a good supervisor-student trust, .

### 1. Behaviours Capable of Developing or Hampering Trust in Research Supervision Relationship

In a study conducted to understand behaviours involved in the building and breaking of professional trust in student supervision, Guccione (2018) discovered that implicit trust can help develop trust. Implicit trust means that students undertake their studies with a willingness to place their trust in the supervisor because of the assumed 'trustworthiness' which is derived from research status or prior experience (Frowe, 2005). In other words, trustworthiness can build a trust in a supervision process. For students, trustworthiness is informed by research status and prior experience. The in-depth in these areas influence them to trust the supervisor. This indicates that before the supervision process begins, supervisors ought to have already won the trust of their students. It is therefore upon supervisors to either sustain or demolish trust which can impact on the working relationship they have.

Guccione (2018) goes on to explain issues that inform trust building. These issues are informed by knowledge and guidance, disclosure and finding common ground, having the students' best interest at heart, inclusion and giving credit where it's due, socializing and professional integrity. For supervisors to win the trust of their students, they should always display a requisite expertise and guide students accordingly. Both supervisors and students should share a common understanding of what is happening in the study. In other words, students should not be left wondering because of a misunderstanding and perplexity. In support for the strategies for building trust, Van Malele and Van Houtte (2012, p.3) argue that 'being trusted raises self-esteem and personal worthiness'. If students acknowledge that supervisors trust them, their self-esteem may be affected for the good course. Meanwhile, self-esteem is described by Cherry (2022) as an individual's sense of personal worth. or value. Moreover, according to Zhao, Zheng, Pan and Zhou (2021), there are close ties between self-esteem and academic engagement. Nguyen et al (2019) from the findings of their research had previously highlighted that there is a close relationship between low self-esteem and its relation to depression, and anxiety which affect the well-being and consequently academic performances of students. Suffice to state that the self-esteem of supervisees if tampered with due to poor supervisory roles of supervisors can hamper the successful completion of the research study by the student.

Conversely, various issues can erode trust in supervisor-supervisee relationship. Amongst such issues may be factors rooted in the unavailability of the supervisor, lack of specialist expertise, insecurity about

progress, standards and achievements, benevolence and integrity, and trust may be reduced when students feel blamed and experience unfairness compared to peers (Guccione, 2018). If supervisors are to sustain professional relationship with their students, they should always be available when students need them, they should uphold standards and be careful not to blame or lambaste students recklessly but rather make them understand amicably where they got it wrongly. Supervisors should not compare students with their peers since it's unfair to them and this can break trust between the supervisor and students.

Dube (2021) conducted a study investigating '*Eight ways to erode a supervisor-student relationship*'. The findings unveiled that harsh manner of approach, long turnaround time, communication barrier, failure to understand students' circumstances, impatience and intolerance, unfair treatment of students, disrespect and a temperamental supervisor can erode supervisor-student trust. His argument is that if supervisors do not take the above-mentioned issues into cognisance, the trust between them and students can be eroded. Therefore, it is incumbent upon supervisors to be very cautious of the manner they relate to their students so that they can work harmoniously throughout the research journey.

## 2. Elements of a Good Supervisor-Student Trust

There are important elements that can shape a supervisor-student trust. One of these elements is a shared interest (Denis, Colet & Lison, 2019). It's incumbent upon the supervisor and student to share the same interest of the study if they are to build and sustain trust. A shared interest means that both parties have a similar understanding and know their tasks and responsibilities vividly. Guccione (2018) argues that supervisors should support stressed students because it emanates from study pressure. Supporting stressed students may imply that the supervisor is concerned about what they both should achieve in the end. Therefore, if something comes up that can interrupt the achievement of study completion, the shared interest may be a fiasco. Supervisors know most if not all the dynamics of a study therefore they are the most appropriate ones to support students. If they support their students accordingly, they may sustain and develop trust. If stressed students are not supported, they may lose trust. Therefore, supervisors, through support, should help students regain the feeling of control over their work (Guccione, 2018).

Some elements of a good supervisor-student trust are supervisors ensuring that students receive appropriate research training, supervisors being creative and enthusiastic, committed, knowledgeable, approachable, and being able to help supervisee(s) with their research where and when necessary (Almusaed & Almusaed, 2020). During the research journey, students need all sort of assistance that can enable them to accomplish their study and research training can be one of them. If supervisors expose or inform their students in any research training, they build trust for themselves. If students see that their supervisor is enthusiastic, knowledgeable and approachable, they may trust that supervisor because they may anticipate the good completion of their study. It is therefore essential that supervisors be approachable and show that they have expertise. If students encounter problems that can interfere with the completion of the study, supervisors should step-up and help the student do away with the problem so that the study can be completed.

Makhamreh and Kutsuruba (2021) argue that interaction can help build a trust. They argue that this can be done through discussing factors that can help to create and maintain trust. This suggests that interaction can help create understanding of how to work together for the common goal. In addition to interaction, Makhamreh and Kutsyuruba (2021) add effective communication, openness and honesty, and minimizing inconsistent and unpredictable behaviour as factors to enhance a good supervisor-student trust.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

The researchers employed a case study design because it aids with the understanding of the phenomenon taking place in real life under natural conditions which relate to what is being investigated (Hyett, Kenny & Dickson-Swift, 2014). Also, case study allows for flexibility in qualitative approach (Thomas, 2011) hence it aligned very well with qualitative approach. Gaya and Smith (2016) define a case as a phenomenon with defined boundaries that the researcher can demarcate or fence in and therefore, determine what will or will not be studied. The case in this study was the postgraduate students' supervision in relation to a relationship

that should exist between them and their supervisors. Case study design was apt for this study since it is a qualitative strategy (Creswell, 2013b).

## 2. Research Approach

This study was approached qualitatively because it does not deal with numbers but provides a deep understanding and experiences of participants from their own points of view (Chinyakata, Raselokoane & Mphahlele, 2019). With qualitative approach, the researchers were able to understand issues of student supervision that can break a relationship between supervisors and students. The sole purpose for undertaking this study was merely to obtain adequate and good knowledge and (Yin, 2012) about supervision using the eyes of postgraduate students who were like social actors. Therefore, this approach allowed postgraduate students to socially and psychologically construct their own reality about their supervision (Gelo, Braakmann & Benetka, 2008).

## 2. Sample

This study was purposively sampled because it allowed the researchers to decide what needs to be known and set out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). In line with that, researchers had to identify participants who are acutely involved with supervisors; hence 10 post-graduate students were sampled purposively. The reason these 10 students were deemed fit was that they had completed their master's degrees or PhDs. That on its own indicated that they certainly knew about the importance of trust with supervisors when undertaking research study. Also, their engagement and experience with supervisors may have either broke or enhanced their trust, so they were the most appropriate subjects for the study to talk about trust issues.

## 3. Data Collection and Analysis

For data generation, semi-structured interviews were adopted. This was based on the submission of the works of George (2023) as well as Magaldi and Berler (2020) whose reviews show that semi-structured interviews (SSIs) allow for flexibility in terms asking questions. SSIs were deemed appropriate for this study because they allow participants to freely respond to open-ended questions as they wish, and the researcher to probe responses from participants. After this data were generated, themes used to analyse them and this enabled researchers to find and examine patterns of meaning and thus categorised themes that were central for describing the phenomenon (Liñán & Fayolle, 2015) which was postgraduate student supervision. This action fitted well with suggestion of Saldana (2016) who posits that data can be coded, categorised, and themes constructed thereafter.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings emanating from this study were reviewed as part of data analysis. When analysing data themes were categorised. Thereafter they were written and assigned specific codes, and to ease the scanning at a later stage. The interpretation, presentation and discussion of findings were done after the classification of data guided by the identified categories of themes. The analysis of data using themes revealed five issues that can break supervisor-student trust. These issues were dehumanising pedagogy/behaviour, treating students as tabula rasa, incompetent supervisor, lack of understanding between the supervisor and co-supervisor and harshness. Hope-Hailey, Searle and Diets (2012) claim that if professional trust has to develop, trust behaviours should be demonstrated by those involved in the process. The next section possesses an intensive discussion of the above-mentioned findings. The findings of the study are discussed using different themes.

### 1. Dehumanizing Pedagogy/Behaviour

Findings from the study show that dehumanizing behaviour can break the supervisor-student trust. Dehumanizing behaviour is about treating other people aggressively and thus offending them. If supervisors are aggressive to their students, this may offend students hence they may never trust their supervisor and thus bringing relationship to an end.

*“I wrote and submitted a piece of my work about research objectives and questions, mind you I had never heard about them before. His response was ‘this is master’s degree not undergraduate, you must be serious with your work, mina I have many students to supervise, please don’t waste my time’” (Participant F)*

*“I don’t even think my supervisor read my work but I only received a comment saying I must redo my work since it made no sense. This was after I had spent weeks reading and writing” (Participant C)*

Sequel to the findings, it may be stated that it was disrespectful and aggressive for the supervisor to demand and expect correct work from the student knowing very well that the student had not done research before. It can be deduced that the supervisor was aggressive to the student who expected to be taught about research. These comments meant that the student was not fairly treated and this aggravated the relationship and broke the trust. Reviews of the works of Le, Pham, Kim and Bui (2021), Almusaed and Almusaed (2020) as well as Masek (2017), show that the relationship between the supervisor and student should be well matched for study to be a success. So, if the trust is broken there may be no good relationship between the supervisor and student which can make the completion of the study successful. Even though Guccione (2018) argues that implicit trust enhances trust in the supervision process, when supervisors offend students, this implicit trust can be destroyed completely. Hope-Hailey, Searle and Diets (2012) advocate for a professional trust to be developed by those involved in the supervision process. However, aggression and offending students is far from behaving professionally.

## 2. Treating Students as Tabula Rasa

Some supervisors treat students as just empty minded but waiting for external forces to impart knowledge. This undermines students’ abilities and capabilities and makes students feel useless and undermined. This suggests that when supervisors deal with students they need to always bear in mind that the manner they address and treat their students should not be as if students are empty minded. The role of supervisors is to add to what students already have in their minds.

*“my supervisor commented on my work “It doesn’t look like you know what you are doing”, I just greeted him and left because he treated me like a tabula rasa” (Participant C)*

*“after submitting my work to the supervisor, he wrote a comment, ‘do you understand what it means to be a PhD student’, yho I felt like I knew nothing” (Participant A)*

*“I had a meeting with my supervisor and he made a comment that made me feel like I was like a blank slate. He said ‘this is PhD my dear, you need to understand clearly, it’s not undergraduate study. If you want to complete your study, this must sink in your mind’, yho I felt like my competence and capabilities were being undermined” (Participant G)*

Saying a student doesn’t know what he is doing and reminding the student the study level he/she is doing can make the student feel like an empty vessel. In a supervision process, students expect supervisors to trust them in order to raise their self-esteem and personal worthiness. However, comments like these cannot only demoralize students but can also make students feel like tabula rasa. Dube (2021) also elaborates on harsh manner of approach as eroding trust. The harsh manner of treating students may not only erode trust but can also instigate a tabula rasa feeling. Supervisors should always note that the students’ minds are not cognitively formless but are in a state that requires correct instruction in order to form representations (Duschinsky, 2012) of research principles. Therefore, students should not be treated as tabula rasas. \

## 3. Incompetent Supervisor

The supervisor who is incompetent can break the trust of the student. Incompetent supervisor is the one who does not have or do not show the necessary skills to do supervision. Students, as adults and postgraduates, can identify a supervisor who does not show necessary and expected skills for supervision. The works of Hendricks, Cartwright and Cowden (2021) as well as Brown and Atkins (1988) suggest that one can

effectively supervise only if one is a competent researcher. This manifested itself from the following comments from participants.

*“I did not understand a paradigm and went to my supervisor to get clarity. Guess what, he tried to explain what it is but could not finish because he did not know what to say to me but simply referred me to books to read; it was clear that he did not understand it at all”* (Participant I)

*“After submitting my work to my supervisor, it came with comments which were in contrast to what I had read about theoretical framework. When I explained where I got that information and what it meant, he then accepted it; it became clear that my supervisor did not know what he was talking about”* (Participant F)

*“When I phoned my supervisor seeking clarity on issues pertaining to my study he kept referring me to the co-supervisor. I ended up communicating with my co-supervisor when in need of clarity because I realised he did not know about research but yet he was the main supervisor”* (Participant C)

Demonstrating competency as a supervisor, is very critical in the supervision process, trust lies in the competency of the supervisor. Students want to collaborate with someone they trust that he/she will not lead them astray. If they note that the supervisor is unsure about what he/she says, they may break the trust required in the supervision process. Review of the work of Khan and Qayyum (2019) shows characterises supervision as psychology’s “critical teaching method”, whereas Falender, Cornish, Goodyear, Hatcher, Kaslow and Leventhal (n.y.) elaborates that supervision is psychology’s “signature pedagogy”. This implies that in the advent that the supervisor is incompetent, demonstrating both critical teaching method and signature pedagogy that are expected tends to be impossible. Thus, Almusaed and Almssad (2020) advocate that research supervisors are required to be knowledgeable in the field. On the same note, Guccione (2018) suggests that supervisors through support should help students regain the feeling of control over their work. The supervisor can only support students if the student is well established in the field. Without proper and expected competences, supervisors cannot supervise students successfully. Therefore, demonstration of necessary skills and expertise can develop trust for the supervisor by students.

#### 4. Lack of Understanding between The Supervisor and Co-Supervisor

Some supervisors and co-supervisors lack understanding amongst themselves about how to work together and assist the student. This can retard the progress of the study because students may get confused by the instructions they get from supervisors. It is therefore incumbent upon supervisors to draw understanding amongst themselves of how to work in tandem for the benefit of students. Makhamreh and Kutsyuruba (2021) argue that effective communication and openness can build trust. The good understanding between supervisors and co-supervisors can stimulate effective communication and openness because all parties may be knowing their roles in the research journey. The lack of understanding between supervisors and co-supervisors manifested itself from assertions by participants of the study.

*“I got confused when I received my work from both supervisors because there were two documents with contradicting comments, I did not know how to address these contradicting comments”* (Participant A)

*“It’s difficult to have two supervisors because you don’t know who to consult first if you need help”* (Participant G)

Supervisors should be clear on how to attend to the work of students when they submit so that students do not get confused and this can be possible if they sit down and have common understanding as supervisors. They also need to direct the student about how to submit their work so that students are not left wondering. If both supervisors have a common understanding the supervision of the student can be smooth sailing and even the student may not get confused along the way. Guccione (2018) suggests that issues of disclosure and finding common ground, and having the students’ best interest at heart should shape the working relationship between the supervisor and students.

## 5. Harshness

Supervisors should always take into cognizance that their postgraduate students are adults and some of them are fathers and mothers furthering their studies. This means that they have other responsibilities beside studying. For this reason, supervisors should not treat them harshly but with respect. Supervisors should mind their conduct relative to students and not be unpleasantly rough on them since harshness can break the supervisor-student trust. Participants erred their views on the harshness of their supervisors towards them.

*“Tho my supervisors were too harsh on me. She would mark the work, return it and demand that I submit back to her after two days, yet she knew I was the school principal never had enough time for study. If I submit later than two days, she would write me long email complaining about me not prioritizing my work and her having to interfere with her schedule, it was difficult” (Participant C).*

Supervisors should never forget that their students have other serious commitments beside completing their studies. They should expect some delays of submissions from students and supervisors should understand that. Sequel to the review of the works of Japheth, Ssentamu, Wambua and Kurgat (2023) and Polkinghorne, Taylor, Knight and Stewart (2023), it can be stated that poor supervision can impact significantly on students, the quality of their work and student motivation. Similar to this view, Pizzolato and Dierickx (2022) and Yang, Bao, and Xu (2022) add that supervision style influences how processes are managed. If the style is poor, like being harsh on student, the study progress can be influenced negatively. Subsequently, the works of Japheth, et al (2023) as well as Polkinghorne (2023) argue that it is incumbent upon supervisors to continuously support students and also assure them that they will succeed with their studies, and keep the morale of students high at all times. Studies conducted in Australia and USA to explore the student perspective of the supervision process found that academic advising and personal touch are among the most important variables influencing student satisfaction (Arambewela and Hall, 2008) in the study. Being harsh on students can also interfere with the quality of work students expected to provide as well as their motivation. Therefore, supervision should aid students to progress towards completion (Japheth et al 2023; Polkinghorne et al 2023) of the study with the help of the supervisor. If supervisors fail to discuss their supervision style openly with their students, students may feel treated harshly because they are likely not to know the expectations of their supervisors (Yang, Bao & Xu, 2022).

## Conclusion

This study sought to explore perspectives of students on issues that can break trust with their supervisors. Consequently, this study concludes that some supervisors recklessly behave themselves towards students and they treat students with no respect. This negatively affects the trust and working relationship between supervisors and students. Some supervisors are not patient with students, and they expect students to know some research issues before they have been guided by them. They downplay that students are still learning dynamics and fundamentals of research. If students are treated badly, they may lose confidence and feel undermined thus affecting their morale. This study also concludes that some trust issues can be attributed to the lack of understanding between supervisors and students. If both parties do not have good understanding of how they should work, there may be a problem of nourishing trust amongst them. Lastly, this study concludes that some supervisors are not doing their work well because they are not competent. Unfortunately, students rely on the same supervisors for the completion of their studies. If supervisors are incompetent, students may not be guided accordingly and if students are not guided well, trust may be affected due to incompetence.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, this study recommends that firstly, supervisors and student should be encouraged to work in tandem in order to nourish and sustain the supervision trust which is the backbone of a supervision process. This can be done through the organization of relevant supervisor-student relationship workshops. In this regard, supervisors and their students can be engaged in a workshop where they can explore activities capable of fostering healthy relationship between them. Secondly, supervisors and students should be guided to draw their own memorandum of understanding before the supervision process commences. This

would help both parties to agree on terms and conditions of the supervision process. In this regard, both supervisors and students would know when they default and the consequences thereof. Thirdly, supervisors should always recognize the knowledge that students have and treat them as people who need to develop the knowledge they already have. This can help students to freely express themselves if they know that they are treated with respect. Fourthly, supervisors should be patient with students since they are still in the learning process. The supervisors should treat their students with respect and not treat them badly and harshly because that harsh treatment can impact on the research project which brings them together.

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