

## Thesis supervision as professional work

Orientação de mestrandos e doutorandos como atividade profissional

Orientación de maestría y doctorado como actividad profesional

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doi: 10.1590/0102-311X00135719

This paper aims to establish a dialogue with professors and researchers that supervise undergraduate and graduate students in health-related themes. However, before addressing the specificity of such supervision, it is important to provide an introductory discussion on what it means to supervise and what is expected from a supervisor and a supervisee.

There are three basic premises to this discussion. The first is that supervision is an interrelationship between a more academically experienced person – not a know-it-all – and a student who is beginning or continuing a research career <sup>1</sup>. This relationship can take place in complementary fashion in group sessions <sup>2</sup>, in which professors, supervisors and colleagues meet to discuss a student's theme. At the National School of Public Health, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, for example, these sessions are called “advanced seminars on theses and dissertations”. Although this seminar modality is important, particularly as an opportunity to share the research topics and personal concerns, the format needs to be well-designed in order to avoid becoming a time for guesswork that can disorient students more than collaborating with them. The second premise is that supervision, as a technical and professional act, is also an art ripe with human meaning and that demands care and precautions. The third premise is that when students have reached the stage of elaborating their monographs, theses, and dissertations, they are already at the highest levels of their formative education. Thus, students who turn to a professor or researcher for supervision already have academic background, knowledge, and experience that should be acknowledged and shared, no matter how famous the supervisor may be.

Although it would be fair to expound on the supervisor/supervisee dyad, this introduction emphasizes the supervisor's role and draws on questions raised by students to illustrate issues on this academic task, crucially important for institutions and society. On the one hand, supervision should be addressed as an activity exercised by “professors-researchers” as part of their academic agendas, and for which they receive credits <sup>3,4</sup>. On the other, supervision should be treated by supervisors as a meeting of two intelligent human beings that can complement each other. There may be greater or lesser empathy between them, but never a lack of respect or commitment that might jeopardize their construction of knowledge or their mental health, particularly that of the weaker party, the student.

There is a vast international literature today on supervision as a multifaceted professional job and as one of the most complex and important academic tasks <sup>1,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</sup>. Many authors I consulted in preparing this paper acknowledge supervision as crucial to the academic program's success <sup>7,11,12,13</sup>

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and to the institution's reputation. Supervision has repercussions on the institution's prestige and financial viability. Due to the significance of this noble educational task, the work of a supervisor as a professional of the highest level has become the object of international concern, as observed in documents by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) <sup>5</sup>, the World Bank, as evidenced in the work by Altbach & Salmi <sup>3</sup>, and the European University Association <sup>8</sup>. In all these organizations, supervision of Masters and PhDs (particularly PhDs) is assigned high social and political value. The idea underlying this value is the end product of supervision: persons sufficiently and adequately trained, competent, and emotionally intelligent, capable of spearheading their countries' development.

In Brazil, despite some studies on the topic (e.g. Diniz <sup>14</sup>), thesis supervision still receives amateur treatment as a learning-by-doing process and a matter of private interest between professors and their students. Thus, although monographs, theses, and especially PhD dissertations should receive the greatest possible pedagogical attention as the most decisive acts in the person's peak educational experience, many students fail to receive adequate monitoring or the necessary structural and subjective support <sup>10,15,16,17</sup>.

Proof of the limited attention assigned to supervisory work is the blog *Eu Confesso (I Confess. I Hate My Supervisor)* <sup>18</sup>, an informal chat space that has gone viral on the Internet in Brazil, with countless graduate students venting their rage. Still, their bristling comments contain pearls on what should (or should not) be done by supervisors, who are so crucial to Brazil's progress (along with their home institutions). What do these graduate students say, some embarrassed, others terrified, still others annoyed, and some even depressed? In short, the main complaints relate to (a) arrogance; (b) disrespect; (c) irresponsibility; (d) impatience; (e) "hassling"; and (f) "not giving a damn", that is, lack of commitment. All these situations, widely voiced on the internet, express one of the most painful forms of violence in human relations: moral harassment. If "hassling" causes suffering due to excessive demands and orders, lack of commitment leaves students with no direction for conducting their searches, often leaving them at the end of the process full of insecurity and falling far short of what that they might otherwise have achieved.

One frequent complaint, quite familiar in the Brazilian academic community, involves situations of blatant irresponsibility in which the supervisor corrects his or her student during the review of the monograph, thesis, or dissertation, publicly displaying lack of involvement or consideration of supervision as serious academic work: that is, lack of professionalism. One of the problems behind students' complaints – of course in addition to the temperamental outbursts and impoliteness that can be mutual in this dyad – is the difficulty created by Brazil's academic tradition in structuring this relationship: the supervisor is frequently displayed as someone with total power over the supervisee, even to the point of students being removed from a course at the supervisor's discretion. In the blog, students complain that there are few channels for the student body's expression within the programs, which creates difficulties, for example, in switching supervisors.

Various studies cited here <sup>4,6,9,11,19</sup> depict thesis supervisors as educational professionals of the highest professional caliber, citing five basic requirements: (1) that they be capable of developing a learning alliance to work with the students towards common objectives; (2) that they be interested in the object of the monograph, thesis, or dissertation, learning together, sharing knowledge, and acting with wisdom; (3) that they have theoretical and reflexive capacity proven by research, publications, article reviews, courses, and academic programs; (4) that they clearly state the skills the student needs to develop, particularly the capacity to write, speak, and communicate on the research object and on issues studied in their course. In the case of monographs, theses, and dissertations in the field of health, this also means the capacity to transform the research into practical knowledge or knowledge for practice; and (5) of the utmost importance, that they have a comprehensive vision of the reality, putting in perspective the importance of the research work and the person they are supervising.

Concerning the interrelationship in supervision, based on the above-mentioned studies and the author's experience with supervisory work, the following points are suggested for young supervisors: (1) do not subordinate your supervisee and do not treat him or her as a "blank slate"; (2) help the student outline the question that will orient his or her research project; (3) once the initial and underlying question has been chosen, encourage the student to conduct a thorough literature review on the subject, and if possible, give the student tips on seminal, inspiring, and suggestive reading; (4)

schedule regular meetings with the student, always through written texts determined in advance: merely chatting about a subject does not help with their development or with academic difficulties; (5) honor your commitment to the scheduled meetings: be punctual, never underestimate the student's time and agenda, although some need for flexibility is understandable; (6) be frank and clear as to the quality of the research work or stages the student submits to you, and if necessary, help him or her to improve them; (7) set schedules and deadlines for each stage of the monograph, thesis, or dissertation's development, and when necessary, be demanding on the commonly agreed points; (8) try to keep ahead of problems, calling attention to the risks of academic incompetence you may glimpse based on your experience; (9) acknowledge the student's capacity, but also his or her weaknesses, and if necessary, request help from another colleague as a collaborative supervisor to complete the work appropriately; and finally, (10) this interaction will hopefully result in mutual growth, and even further, in an on-going professional relationship in research lines, technical support, publications, and other academic commitments.

It should also be clear what students should not expect from supervisors: (1) you cannot be a therapist for the student's emotional crises; (2) you cannot answer all the questions; (3) you cannot solve problems with the work or assume commitments in the student's place; (4) you cannot remain passive when you receive rough drafts or notes instead of coherent texts; (5) you cannot accept delays and omissions in relation to the scheduled meetings without reacting; and (6) you cannot be a proofreader of the texts you receive (although this always ends up happening).

In short, this introductory text opens the way for reflection on necessary improvements in the specific objects of supervision. We can conclude provisionally that supervision is a professional and relational activity in which the student, pedagogically, should be acknowledged as a producer of (and active participant in) the knowledge. Otherwise, the supervisor's task becomes an act of intersubjective violence. At the current historical junction, supervisory work entails an incontestable responsibility, since it impacts not only the student's intellectual, cultural, social, and economic development, but also that of the country.

Although this small article can be helpful for supervisors in any field of knowledge, it is particularly relevant for those who teach in public health. They face at least two specific challenges. The first pertains to the multidisciplinary nature of the students in these graduate courses. Many come originally from the fields of the social sciences, economics, statistics, medicine, nursing, psychology, even public security, among others. These students enrich the courses with their diverse knowledge but may lack a basic background in public health. It is thus imperious that they acquire a body of knowledge and practices historically built in public health. Although it is up to the course curriculum to provide initiation and in-depth training in the core disciplines, it is up to supervisors to assess and require of their students a proficiency in the field in which they will soon receive their advanced degrees. Unfortunately, there have been many undocumented complaints of graduate students who receive their degrees without a command of the theoretical and methodological pillars of collective health.

The second challenge for Master's and PhD supervisors in Public Health/Collective Health is the link between theory and practice. The field has an undeniable calling for the production of theoretical-conceptual, methodological, and technical reflections that engage in dialogue with health services and policies: through epidemiological diagnoses, qualitative studies with the various actors in the health system, or planning and programming health services management. This calling for graduate studies in Collective Health makes it strategic for the development of the Brazilian population, technologies and inputs for health services, and performance assessment of the system's various components.

Masters and PhDs who finish their theses and dissertations are certainly the best evidence of the quality of any graduate studies program. In the case of collective health, the weight and the joy of this success are all the greater when former students become health ministers, health secretaries, and competent administrators and professionals committed to themes of the highest relevance for the Brazilian population's wellbeing and quality of life.

## Additional information

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Submitted on 17/Jul/2019

Final version resubmitted on 25/Jul/2019

Approved on 30/Jul/2019