







Whose PhD is it? A Case of Supervision in Higher Education in South Africa



Maserole C. Kgari-Masondo ¹ , Bernard Chingwanangwana ¹ ,
Pfuurai Chimbunde ² , Lungile P. Zondi ³ , Aboshioke L. Umejei ³  &
Dineo F. Mosina ³ 

¹ University of Venda, Limpopo, South Africa.

² University of the Free State: Bloemfontein, South Africa.

³ University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

“Whose PhD is it?” This question arises from more than two fronts: the contribution each makes, the intellectual property rights, and the moral ownership of the product. There is a dearth of such literature, the available one concentrates mainly on the administration and intellectual property rights, disregarding the gruesome activities that take place from the start to the completion of the degree itself. The purpose of this study is to answer that question using research. The study uses the qualitative self-study approach, and a case study was conducted from two purposively selected universities in South Africa, drawing data from five academics who lecture in these institutions. This study sought to unpack this question through a self-study methodology. Data generated from the discussions were communicated through WhatsApp, emails, and telephones and then thematically analyzed. The evidence indicates that the supervision style determines whose PhD it is. The authoritative, Eurocentric style of supervision disengages the student from ownership of the PhD, through a shared partnership between the supervisor and the student, the PhD journey becomes a ‘collective project’ and a student’s work. The study contributes to the administration, management, and retention of PhD candidates in universities by advocating for using the Ubuntu Style of Supervision that safeguards and promotes respect, love, care, freedom, social justice, and participation. Over and above this, the research contributes to the literature on PhD student supervision in terms of ethics, accountability, policy adherence, and planning purposes.

Correspondence

Bernard Chingwanangwana

Email:

Bernard.Chingwanangwana@univen.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

The doctoral journey, while challenging and tedious, is taken by both the supervisor and the PhD candidate. Upon completing their doctoral studies, the candidates are conferred a doctorate in their field of specialization, while the supervisors who would have worked behind the scenes remain in the periphery. What is evident from many studies is that the accomplishment of a doctoral thesis hinges on the nature of the partnership between the candidate and the supervisor. Taking this into cognizance, the question that arises is – whose PhD is it? The rationale of the current study was to analyze the ownership of the PhD and establish how the two could work harmoniously and better in higher education institutions, thereby

breaking new ground in knowledge production. This article augments the corpus of scholarship on doctoral supervisors' and candidates' experiences and perspectives. It provides insights on the management and retention of PhD students in universities based on self-introspection, by five academics who did their PhDs in two universities in South Africa. One of the five candidates is working towards the completion of her PhD. Evidence from the narratives of the academics highlights diverse journeys and challenges that depict the question of Whose PhD it is, to be a silently contested terrain in academia for both PhD candidates and students. *Ubuntu* is proposed as the viable supervisory style and ownership right for the PhD because it protects the rights of both the supervisor and the supervisee, through values of love, care, participation, respect, freedom, and social justice.¹

Metz opines that *Ubuntu* as a theory safeguards morality and human rights.² In line with this study, we argue that *Ubuntu* as a supervision style ensures that students get ownership rights of their degree through uncompromised support from their supervisors. This is because sometimes some of the students do not want to play the part of owning their studies, thus, they burden their supervisors, begging the question: Whose PhD is it then? Such challenges of disagreement on work schedules and the titles of theses are key issues that affect the entire research output and support to the student. If these issues are not dealt with in time, as highlighted in the narratives of supervisees Mogirl and Chimbu, they will hurt the eminence of the work delivered. Unfortunately, literature on ownership of a PhD is lacking, leaving a grey area. The focus established is mainly on intellectual property rights;³ hence, this paper tries to bridge the gap in the literature by drawing data from supervisees to allow them to reflect on their experiences in supervision and answer the question: Whose PhD is it? The study is divided into sections: the literature review which interrogates related literature and the scholarly gaps that this manuscript intends to fill, thereafter the methodology, and approach that the study employed, and then the findings fall on data presentation, after which the discussion is presented. The study ends with the conclusions and implications aimed at improving policy and practice on the supervision of PhD candidates in institutions of higher learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A corpus of literature is available showing a growing interest in postgraduate supervision.⁴ The studies are diverse. Some studies have focused on the adversities that impede the achievement of postgraduate research students, while others like Van Rooij et al., investigated the correlation of supervision factors, psychosocial factors, project outlines, and agreed timeframes that influence successful doctoral stories.⁵ Studies acknowledge that undertaking a PhD is a demanding enterprise.⁶ As such, the task demands the commitment of both the student and the supervisor. As projected by Trowler, the eminence and the accomplishment of postgraduate research are mainly dependent on systematic supervision yet effective supervision.⁷ This process is a reciprocal one requiring the involvement of both parties, the supervisor and

¹ Maserole Christina Kgari-Masondo, "In Pursuit of a Decolonised History Teacher: Agency and Boldness in Fostering Change," *Yearbook of the International Society of History Didactics/Jahrbuch Der Internationalen Gesellschaft Für Geschichtsdidaktik* 41 (2020); Maserole Christina Kgari-Masondo and Bernard Chingwanangwana, "Examining the Pragmatism of Unhulized Leadership in Schools Amid Socio-Political and Economic Turbulence in Zimbabwe: The Experiences of School Heads and Teachers in Marondera District," *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 2024, 1–13.

² Thaddeus Metz, "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 532–59.

³ Sheikh Tariq Mahmood, "Intellectual Property Right and Patent: Conceptual Awareness of PhD Students about Plagiarism," in *2010 International Conference on Education and Management Technology* (IEEE, 2010), 694–700; Lisa Robins and Peter Kanowski, "PhD by Publication: A Student's Perspective," *Journal of Research Practice* 4, no. 2 (2008): M3.

⁴ David Hodgson, "Helping Doctoral Students Understand PhD Thesis Examination Expectations: A Framework and a Tool for Supervision," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 21, no. 1 (2020): 51–63; Christian Schneiderberg, "Supervision Practices of Doctoral Education and Training," *Studies in Higher Education* 46, no. 7 (2021): 1285–95.

⁵ Madoda Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 33, no. 3 (2019): 8–25; Els van Rooij, Marjon Fokkens-Bruinsma, and E Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics," *Studies in Continuing Education* 43, no. 1 (2021): 48–67.

⁶ Hodgson, "Helping Doctoral Students Understand PhD Thesis Examination Expectations: A Framework and a Tool for Supervision"; van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics."

⁷ Paul Trowler, "Doctoral Supervision: Sharpening the Focus of the Practice Lens," *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 5 (2022): 1743–56.

the research supervisee. However, not a single study from the survey of literature has answered the question Whose PhD is it? Hence the current one.

The Doctoral Student

Substantial studies acknowledge that doctoral candidates need to develop some psychological coping strategies to overcome the various impediments associated with doctoral studies.⁸ The doctoral student navigates through a sequence of transformations, namely emotional, intellectual, and scholarly under the guidance of a critical friend - the supervisor. Given this situation, the doctoral student is expected to be immersed in his/her research journey, and this process includes deciding what is required before carrying it out meticulously. Trowler avers that post-graduate students should independently manage the writing process, without being dependent on the supervisor.⁹ Cekiso et al., explain that each student must be able to identify a research area, construct and rationalize the topic, decide on relevant research techniques, and be able to present findings.¹⁰ The existing literature shows that PhD supervisors expect high levels of commitment and independence from their PhD students.¹¹ Other studies argue that the success of the candidates in completing a PhD hinges on some leveraged guidance provided by the allocated supervisors.¹² Therefore, the role of the supervisor in the finalization of a good quality PhD thesis remains indispensable though students are to be provided with room for their ideas and opinions.¹³ This suggests that students must have autonomy in the creativity of their ideas, fused with personal commitment.¹⁴ Lessing and Schulze argue that PhD candidates should no longer wait for instructions from supervisors instead, they are expected to be active in initiating discussions, and asking for help in specific areas because they are advancing from their master's research journey, it's not like they are new in the process.¹⁵ This explicitly implies that one of the roles of a supervisor is not to construct or write the student thesis, edit the language, or find solutions to problems experienced during the research.¹⁶ What then is the role of the supervisor?

The Supervisor

The existing literature asserts that several authors have outlined many roles and responsibilities of the supervisor. Authors such as Fraser, Mathews, and Hockey have delineated three crucial areas that are incumbent on a supervisor's role.¹⁷ Firstly, it is to offer critical insights and proficiency in the research area, second, to encourage the student, and lastly to balance creativity during the writing process. Mouton sees 'the responsibility of the supervisor being to provide supervision and mentorship, give advice and offer the required psychosocial support to all research students.'¹⁸ It is therefore evidenced that, the responsibility of doctoral supervisors has been established in several studies.¹⁹ Such sources of literature agree that the doctoral supervisor who is experienced in a given field guides a doctoral student through

⁸ Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution"; Trowler, "Doctoral Supervision: Sharpening the Focus of the Practice Lens."

⁹ Trowler, "Doctoral Supervision: Sharpening the Focus of the Practice Lens."

¹⁰ Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution."

¹¹ van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics."

¹² Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution."

¹³ van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics."

¹⁴ Jude O Igumbor et al., "Effective Supervision of Doctoral Students in Public and Population Health in Africa: CARTA Supervisors' Experiences, Challenges and Perceived Opportunities," *Global Public Health* 17, no. 4 (2022): 496–511.

¹⁵ A C Lessing and S Schulze, "Lecturers' Experience of Postgraduate Supervision in a Distance Education Context: Research in Higher Education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 17, no. 2 (2003): 159–68.

¹⁶ John Hockey, "Establishing Boundaries: Problems and Solutions in Managing the PhD Supervisor's Role," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 24, no. 2 (1994): 296.

¹⁷ Anne Mathews and Rob Fraser, "An Evaluation of the Desirable Characteristics of a Supervisor," *Australian Universities' Review, The* 42, no. 1 (1999): 5; Hockey, "Establishing Boundaries: Problems and Solutions in Managing the PhD Supervisor's Role," 293.

¹⁸ Johann Mouton, *How to Succeed in Your Master's and Doctoral Studies: A South African Guide and Resource Book* (Van Schaik, 2001).

¹⁹ Anne Lee, "How Can We Develop Supervisors for the Modern Doctorate?," *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 5 (2018): 878–90; Igumbor et al., "Effective Supervision of Doctoral Students in Public and Population Health in Africa: CARTA Supervisors' Experiences, Challenges and Perceived Opportunities"; van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics."

sharing useful research pedagogies. Igumbor et al., summarize the roles by explaining that supervisors are trusted with the responsibility to (i) supervise students to be able to rationalize relevant and feasible research topics and questions, (ii) develop well-written protocols/proposals, provide supervision on the research process and (iii) ensure that students finalize their thesis on time and are integrated into academia as emerging scholars.²⁰ The supervisor's role, therefore, starts from inception through to fruition. Given this context, supervisors are expected to invest their own time and scholarly expertise in supervision because students struggle when there is no proper guidance that includes being guided on the structure of the protocol, guided on clear expectations, encouraged, coached to take full accountability of the PhD journey which is multitasking.²¹ Adding to this study, many scholars in the field have argued that the supervisor's role is not only anchored in the production of scientific knowledge but also in acting as a mentor in the journey. In the mentorship, candidates are introduced into the academic research community and supported to take up leadership portfolios.²²

Supervision is often anchored on the pedagogy of a transmissive approach to education, where the student is allowed to be immersed in the intellectual knowledge and expertise of the supervisor. Manathunga asserts that supervision has been historically known and routinely seen as a 'private pedagogical approach.'²³ This approach is often dimmed by many problems that include 'differing conceptual understandings and expectations' between the supervisor and the PhD candidate.²⁴ To avoid this effect, the supervisor can explore other supervisory methods that are not traditionally limited to "physical presence" but should explore WhatsApp, telephonic, virtual, email, and other initiatives when providing timely answers to student questions.²⁵ In follow up to this view, some researchers regard supervision as a process involving multifaceted academic procedures and critical interpersonal skills.²⁶ Given this argument, the responsibilities of supervisors are mainly to guide, advise, ensure the scientific quality of the thesis, and provide the required emotional and psychological support. Thus, excellent supervisors care for their students by acknowledging their achievements and also giving them psychosocial support in their PhD journey.²⁷

As discussed by Gardner and Kamler other alternative approaches to postgraduate supervision allow supervisors to be mediators and mentors.²⁸ These roles obligate them to represent the broader scholarly community and embody its conventions. During the supervision process, the supervisor has a crucial role, which calls for a 'symbiotic orientation towards the maintenance of a cooperative relationship.'²⁹ In the social sciences, postgraduate education is traditionally seen as a "dyadic approach" to supervision.³⁰ This approach is censured for being seen as a private supervision process that is based on individual styles and attitudes without undertaking full accountability. The absence of supervision accountability causes problems that delay the completion of research projects.³¹ The PhD journey is a

²⁰ Igumbor et al., "Effective Supervision of Doctoral Students in Public and Population Health in Africa: CARTA Supervisors' Experiences, Challenges and Perceived Opportunities."

²¹ Hodgson, "Helping Doctoral Students Understand PhD Thesis Examination Expectations: A Framework and a Tool for Supervision"; Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution." Janet MacDonald., *Blended learning and online tutoring: Planning learner support and activity design*. Routledge, 2017.

²² Lenore Manderson et al., "Enhancing Doctoral Supervision Practices in Africa," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement Supérieur En Afrique* 15, no. 2 (2017): 23–40.

²³ Catherine Manathunga, "The Development of Research Supervision: 'Turning the Light on a Private Space,'" *International Journal for Academic Development* 10, no. 1 (2005): 17.

²⁴ Janne Malfroy, "Doctoral Supervision, Workplace Research and Changing Pedagogic Practices," *Higher Education Research & Development* 24, no. 2 (2005): 171.

²⁵ Parveen Ali, P Watson, and Katie Dhingra, "Postgraduate Research Students' and Their Supervisors' Attitudes towards Supervision," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 227–41.

²⁶ Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution."

²⁷ Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution."

²⁸ Susan K Gardner, "'What's Too Much and What's Too Little?': The Process of Becoming an Independent Researcher in Doctoral Education," *The Journal of Higher Education* 79, no. 3 (2008): 326–50; Barbara Kamler, "Rethinking Doctoral Publication Practices: Writing from and beyond the Thesis," *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no. 3 (2008): 283–94.

²⁹ Sarah Li, and Clive Seale. "Managing criticism in Ph. D. supervision: A qualitative case study." *Studies in Higher Education* 32, no. 4 (2007): 522.

³⁰ Malfroy, "Doctoral Supervision, Workplace Research and Changing Pedagogic Practices," 165.

³¹ Gina Wisker, Gillian Robinson, and Miri Shacham, "Postgraduate Research Success: Communities of Practice Involving Cohorts, Guardian Supervisors and Online Communities," *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 44, no. 3 (2007): 301–20.

partnership between the student and the supervisor.³² This notion contradicts what has been reported by some researchers, who argue that the duties of a supervisor are to monitor the student's performance in line with the university regulations and hence only provide advice about the work and not the supervision of the student.³³

In this regard, supervision should inspire self-directed/autonomous behaviour and equally recognize PhD student's views and ideas with reverence.³⁴ The end of the PhD journey comes with jubilation for the two partners. Considering the two individuals' contributions to the success of the PhD journey, Whose PhD is it? This article discusses the question based on the self-study of 5 academics who walked the journey of studying and one who has almost completed his/her thesis which highlights gaps in the literature in terms of types of supervision that produce ownership of work produced by a PhD student. This study proposes the *Ubuntu* style of supervision because of the values it entails which humanizes students and safeguards social justice.³⁵

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by merging two theoretical lenses (*Ubuntu* Theory and Pastoral Care Theory). The study examines the role of a supervisor in developing a student's intellectual capabilities and eliciting the best from a student. As discussed by Mayaka and Truell *Ubuntu* Theory is also known as the African philosophy that is embedded in generic life values of justice, responsibility, equality, collectiveness, relatedness, reciprocity, love, respect, helpfulness, community, caring, dependability, sharing, trust, integrity, unselfishness, and social change.³⁶ The theory/philosophy emphasizes that people's identities are continuously developing in the context of their reciprocal relationships with others, and thereby, through supporting and nurturing others, one's own identity and life holistically. *Ubuntu* focuses on the inclusivity of everyone within a community, and their responsibility to others. This African Theory/philosophy is timeless in the sense that knowledge and practice are passed from one generation and everything is connected. *Ubuntu* theory/philosophy correlates with Pastoral Care Theory, which is also known as a Research Supervision Style. This supervision style recognizes that the interconnectedness of intellectual capacity and social development cannot be separated from each other, as they both respond to internal factors, such as personality, character, and emotion as well as external factors that look at the society and environment.³⁷ The practical competencies of the pastoral role include care, protection, and the holistic development of supervised students.³⁸ In the research process, the role of the supervisor is fundamental in understanding the holistic context from which students come. Schierhout et al., further state that the social and educational backgrounds cannot be divorced from each other but are used in a manner that promotes a holistic understanding.³⁹

METHODOLOGY

This study is an evocative autoethnographic account of supervisees' experiences in two universities in South Africa. It explored the question 'Whose PhD is it?' based on supervisees' reflection and retrospective analysis of their input and activities as participants in the PhD journey. Autoethnography as a concept is based on the foundations of autobiography and ethnographic research.⁴⁰ It enables the use of

³² Kevin Grant, Ray Hackney, and David Edgar, "Postgraduate Research Supervision: An 'agreed' conceptual View of Good Practice through Derived Metaphors," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 9 (2014): 43–60.

³³ Schneijderberg, "Supervision Practices of Doctoral Education and Training."

³⁴ van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics."

³⁵ Kgari-Masondo, "In Pursuit of a Decolonised History Teacher: Agency and Boldness in Fostering Change."

³⁶ Bernard Mayaka and Rory Truell. "Ubuntu and its potential impact on the international social work profession." *International Social Work* 64, no. 5 (2021): 649-662.

³⁷ Ron Best, "The Whole Child Matters: The Challenge of Every Child Matters for Pastoral Care," *Education 3–13* 35, no. 3 (2007): 249–59.

³⁸ G Schierhout et al., "Quantifying Effects of Illness and Death on Education at School Level: Implications for HIV/AIDS Responses," *Johannesburg: Health and Development Africa*, 2004.

³⁹ Schierhout et al., "Quantifying Effects of Illness and Death on Education at School Level: Implications for HIV/AIDS Responses."

⁴⁰ Andrés Lucero, "Living without a Mobile Phone: An Autoethnography," in *Proceedings of the 2018 Designing Interactive Systems Conference*, 2018, 765–76.

retrospection/reflections to write about past experiences (autobiography) in a specific context.⁴¹ Autoethnography is a method within qualitative research. Researchers can report thick descriptions of lived experiences to create a clear social understanding of a specific context.⁴²

This paper offers a reflection on supervisees' experiences during the PhD journey. The content of the paper provides a social understanding of the nature of the work they were involved in which supports supervisees to claim the ownership of their PhDs. The autoethnography approach sits comfortably within the qualitative case study research allowing researchers to reflect on their supervision experience. Autoethnography was useful in this study as it promoted five supervisees' self-reflection on their lived experiences and activities located in their past and understanding of the PhD ownership. Self-introspection contributed to offering valuable lessons for other scholars in a similar context. These supervisees were selected on the basis that they were all in the same university as students and colleagues, although one of the five, studied her PhD in a different university. Each colleague presented their narratives using WhatsApp, emails, or phones. The use of different instruments and the participants triangulated the data to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.⁴³ Each of the participants was asked to verify the accuracy of the data and make corrections and additions that were necessary before they were reported. The authors also employed thematic analysis as a means of data presentation.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The data in this section are from five academics who studied for a PhD in South Africa from two different universities. Their age differences and the years they completed their PhDs differ widely. Mogirl is 53 years old and completed her PhD in 2008, Lungile is 42 and completed her PhD in 2018, Chimbunde is 47 years old and completed in 2019, Umejei is also 47 years old, and completed her PhD in 2021 and Dineo is 39 years old and is currently rounding up her PhD studies. These five academics have different experiences with their supervisors, which makes the question 'Whose PhD is it?' very complex and topical.

The first narrative was from Chimbunde, he re-counts thus:

Doing a PhD is indeed a journey with twists and turns of challenges. When the university assigned me to my supervisor I felt happy that my topic for PhD had been approved. Little did I know that it was just a working topic that had to be reframed and tweaked to make it researchable. My attachment to her was improved by her motherly love. Other than providing me with academic support she also took care of my emotional and psychological problems which I encountered. From then on she referred to me as her son and I called her my mother. With her critical guidance, personal relations aside, I tweaked my topic to suit both her expectations and those of the university. On noticing that she was always available not only in the physical presence but by providing feedback through WhatsApp calls, phone calls, or emails, I then pulled up my socks to meet her demands and expectations. I need to confess how I did it. When I completed writing the proposal and while I was still waiting for its defense, is when I began to write chapters one to three. I was confident that the proposal would go through because her critical guidance had taught me to perfect that proposal before its submission. Surely, the proposal was a hurdle but with her supervision, it was an easy passage. Later on, I wrote to her, and I quote "Thank you for your patience, commitment, and accessibility to make this research successful. I am eternally grateful for the rescue operations you performed on so many occasions when I found myself entangled in inescapable academic challenges." My supervisor was, as she has always been, a bulwark of inspiration and support throughout my studies. Each time I presented a theme to her, I did not wait for feedback. Rather, I used to work a chapter ahead of her actual supervision.

⁴¹ Lyall Crawford, "Personal Ethnography," *Communications Monographs* 63, no. 2 (1996): 158–70.

⁴² Carolyn Ellis, Tony E Adams, and Arthur P Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 2011, 273–90.

⁴³ J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (London: Sage, 2018).

The second narrative was from Dineo, she relates thus:

The journey of my PhD has been met with challenges. Developing a respectful and professional supervisory relationship in a way that both individuals learn about each other is crucial. But more so, how each person works in terms of how your supervisor teaches and how you as a student learn. Having seen how my supervisor works as an academic and supervisor prompted me to request her to be my supervisor. My supervisor's teaching philosophies through discussion were grounded on Ubuntu philosophy and pastoral teaching meaning that when she looked at or identified her students she viewed them from a holistic perspective. The role my supervisor played in my developing research was pertinent in bringing my perspective and more so, my voice to the front. Having a supervisor whose comments were pastoral in terms of helping and guiding me to receive the best output possible as a student was uplifting. The role she plays as a supervisor is not confined to the set working hours but is extended using WhatsApp groups or telephonic conversations. Therefore, the duties of a supervisor extend beyond the scope of intellectual expertise and also develop your perspective as a novice researcher. The role I play within my research extends to having a sense of involvement in shaping my study. As much as my supervisor is knowledgeable in that area of focus, she also engages with me as a student in asking key questions such as "How do you feel about the shape or direction in which your study is taking?" Such questions as a student are comforting as this assures the student that my voice within the research still matters.

The third narrative is from Lungile, she re-counts thus:

My reflection is on the situation of having supervised unproductive PhD students. Supervision is a critical key performance area that is measured by a research-driven institution. Lecturers in academia are often presented with unproductive students who do not have the drive to lead the supervision process but grossly depend on the supervisor to initiate all processes hence the supervisor will subconsciously ask "Whose PhD is it anyway". This type of student is heavily dependent on the supervisor and the supervisor becomes the one that ends up writing the PhD. The supervisor becomes the initiator or rather a wagon of all supervision processes and this includes suggesting the topic, suggesting the research design, and theoretical frameworks, setting up delivery time frames, the proofreading of the work. What has been discussed presents a student who only got registered for the PhD just to be part of the massification agenda and required statistics, but remains clueless on the active role and the responsibility that comes with being a PhD candidate. Unproductive students are those who have identified universities as hiding spaces from rife unemployment and poverty because of grants that are mostly disposed to all post-grad students. They become too dependent on their supervisors on their PhD journey. The supervisor does this as part of the pastoral care support which is a common supervision style. Secondly, the supervisor does this to meet performance review expectations. Supervising these types of students becomes a structural issue for most emerging supervisors in the academic space. Their pastoral supervision care thus embraces the spirit of parenting, Ubuntu as well as umuntu akalahlalwa.

The fourth narrative was from Aboshioke, she reminisces thus:

My PhD journey was motivated by a desire to get more intellectually grounded in my newly discovered passion for Tourism. I had an amazing set of supervisors; my first supervisor was an amazing professional. Although she was not committed to high levels of personal interaction, she was extremely task-driven and provided the needed direction and professional support. A few months into my final dissertation submission, my supervisor passed on after a long battle with cancer. I still struggle to eloquently describe the pain, disappointment, and discouragement that I felt at that time. I was introduced to a new supervisor who I was very apprehensive about working with but it turned out to be a needless worry. She was very hardworking, determined, and dedicated to seeing that the death of my first supervisor did not hinder my scheduled timeline. Her dedication

rubbed off on me and made me become more passionate about my work and determined to see the end of the PhD journey. On so many nights, I would be awake but too distracted by issues of life to give my PhD the focus it deserved. However, the key is to always remember why you embarked on the journey in the first place. Your motivation should come from knowing that the PhD is yours and its completion allows you to showcase the insight you have gained in your contribution to the body of knowledge in your chosen field. My PhD journey was intellectually taxing but it led me to discover my inner potential and strength.

Mogirl is the last supervisee and her reflections are as follows:

My PhD journey was not smooth sailing at the beginning because I am a political activist and an Africanist, and I wanted to research issues along with human rights. My supervisor then was more interested in animal-related issues. I constructed about five topics that deviated from issues of environmentalism. Eventually, I sat back and coined forced removals and socio-environmental justice-related arguments, and my supervisor accepted my proposal and then we started with the PhD project. This indicates that many a time PhD students are delayed in completing their studies for many reasons including the fact that they are forced to study phenomena that are not of interest to them but to their supervisors. This truly bothers the acceptance of the PhD as solely 'yours' because one was not truly interested in the topic but had to do it for convenience's sake. But I want to say, that I am glad that my supervisor strategically drove me to her area of expertise because it links very well with African Indigenous Knowledge and I was clever enough to be able to coin the area that was close to my heart but use socio-environmental theory as a lens. My supervisor supported me because she allowed me to develop thoughts on my own and she was always available to help me polish my work. She never spoon-fed me. What I learned from her is that the PhD is mine and I have to own it. Therefore, I will say that ownership of a PhD depends on the students – they have to drive it to make sure they do not lose ownership.

DISCUSSION

The most remarkable finding to emerge from the narratives of the five supervisees is that, the PhD supervision style determines whose PhD it is. All the participants indicated that the authoritative, Eurocentric style of supervision disengages the student from ownership of the PhD. Nonetheless, their shared experiences showed that great supervisors who allow students to own their PhDs employ teaching philosophies grounded on pastoral supervision and *Ubuntu* values. This notion was evident in the narrative given by Lungile, Aboshioke, and Dineo. Chimbunde, however, went further to include the effectiveness of the motherly approach. Through the reflections of these academics, their various supervisors offered guidance from inception to the completion of their PhD studies.

These reflections correspond to many studies.⁴⁴ Hence Cekiso et al., in their study, opined that supervisors are expected to multi-task.⁴⁵ Their role includes but is not limited to, guiding the supervisee towards sound proposal preparation, ensuring both supportive and professional relationships, and this includes reflecting on the research process. Inherently implied, is one key issue of partnership in the PhD study as correctly pointed out by Grant et al.⁴⁶ While the supervisor may have experience with sound research skills and be highly respected in his/her field of study, it is believed that the supervisee has new eyes, and is bringing in a new perspective to the phenomenon. It is expected that together, they can co-learn and challenge old scholarships. In the end, however, the student owns the PhD as evidenced by the supervisees in this study. Taken together, this type of supervision tallies with the *Ubuntu* philosophy.

⁴⁴ Lee, "How Can We Develop Supervisors for the Modern Doctorate?"; Igumbor et al., "Effective Supervision of Doctoral Students in Public and Population Health in Africa: CARTA Supervisors' Experiences, Challenges and Perceived Opportunities"; Manderson et al., "Enhancing Doctoral Supervision Practices in Africa"; Trowler, "Doctoral Supervision: Sharpening the Focus of the Practice Lens"; van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics."

⁴⁵ Cekiso et al., "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution."

⁴⁶ Grant, Hackney, and Edgar, "Postgraduate Research Supervision: An 'agreed' conceptual View of Good Practice through Derived Metaphors."

According to Masondo, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is focused on the well-being and concern for humanity, especially for those who are struggling with conformity and weighed down with life challenges.⁴⁷

From the research conducted, it is evident that the role of the supervisor is important in ensuring that the researcher is transformed or progresses to become an independent researcher. According to the recollections of Chimbunde, “*On noticing that she was always available not only for the physical presence but also in providing feedback through WhatsApp calls, phone calls or emails, I then pulled up my socks to meet her demands and expectations*”. The findings of this study also revealed that, although the PhD project involves shared responsibilities, between the supervisor and the supervisee, the project, however, remains the student’s work. All supervisees attest to the fact that undertaking a PhD, was intellectually taxing and they had to work hard to complete their studies. Bearing that burden alone is enough to justify their ownership of the PhD. This finding lends support to the work of Van Rooij et al., who argue that supervision involves inspiring and shaping autonomous behaviour and treating the PhD student’s point of view and ideas with respect.⁴⁸

Many candidates struggle to have a good working relationship with supervisors who do not respect or value their input (see Reflection: Dineo). Sidhu et al., in their study, elaborated on the importance of supervisors depicting their intellectual knowledge that will help to boost the supervisee’s self-confidence and self-esteem.⁴⁹ Dineo’s narrative attests to that fact “*By having a supervisor whose comments were pastoral in terms of helping and guiding you to receive the best output as possible as a student was uplifting... The role she plays as a supervisor is not confined to the set working hours but extended using WhatsApp groups or telephonic conversations*”. Lungile’s reflection contradicts the commonly agreed finding that students must work on their own to claim ownership of the PhD. Instead, the findings show that some students overburden their supervisors to the extent of the supervisor becoming the owner of the PhD project and thus describe such students as unproductive. This finding suggests that some students continue to depend on their supervisor’s expertise despite being given adequate guidance. While other students have found mothers and fathers in their supervisors, it should be categorically stated that being a *parent* is not a style of supervision, but it comes from the space of care and *Ubuntu* and forbids the supervisor to do the work that is supposed to be done by the student (Reflection: Lungile). Many supervisors embrace *Ubuntu* and are *driven by umuntu akalahlwa* which is an African style of supervision proposed in this study, however, institutions should note that supervisors are heavily burdened (Reflections: Dineo and Lungile). In such a scenario, the PhD then is jointly owned by the supervisor and less by the supervisee, hence the *Whose PhD is it* question has remained a pertinent question to be asked in this paper.

While it is generally accepted that there is no gold-standard model of supervision which can be applied in all situations, and interdisciplinary as stated by Beddoe and Egan, it is important to note that the role, played by the supervisor is crucial.⁵⁰ All the narratives shared by the supervisees in this study showed that they were motivated to excel because of the encouragement they received from their supervisor. Shioke’s narrative opines this better “*My supervisor’s dedication rubbed off on me and made me become more passionate about my work and determined to see the end of my PhD journey*”. Deist and Hockey agree that the supervisor’s role is not to construct or write the student’s thesis, edit the language, or create solutions to problems encountered during the research.⁵¹ They are, however, expected to guide the researcher when the need arises. In the narrative given by Mogirl, her supervisor “*allowed me to develop thoughts on my own and she was always available to help me polish my work. She never spoon-fed me.*” Benefiting from the *Ubuntu* supervision style means there is an opportunity for interpersonal development, joint rootedness, and interdependence.

⁴⁷ S Masondo, “Umuntu Akalahlwa: An Exploration of an African Ethics,” *Who Is an African*, 2018.

⁴⁸ van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, “Factors That Influence PhD Candidates’ Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics.”

⁴⁹ Gurnam Kaur Sidhu et al., “Postgraduate Supervision: Comparing Student Perspectives from Malaysia and the United Kingdom,” *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 123 (2014): 151–59.

⁵⁰ Kacey Beddoes and Grace Panther, “Engineering Professors’ Perspectives on Gender and Assessment of Teamwork,” *International Journal of Learning and Development* 7, no. 3 (2017).

⁵¹ F E Deist, “The Role of the Promoter,” *Theologia Evangelica* 23, no. 3 (1990): 66–68; Hockey, “Establishing Boundaries: Problems and Solutions in Managing the PhD Supervisor’s Role.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the study findings and discussion above, it is recommended that:

- Supervisors build healthy relationships with their students to make the PhD journey easy to navigate and bearable.
- Regardless of the assistance a supervisor offers to the PhD student, the Degree belongs to the student.
- PhD students should carry their load and avoid overreliance on their supervisors.
- Supervisors should endeavor to use approaches that render dignity, respect, social justice, and freedom to their students. This will allow them to create new knowledge in their areas of study.
- A larger scale study be mounted to come up with strategies and policies that will promote smother navigation between the PhD supervisor and supervisee.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this manuscript offer insights into the doctoral journey of PhD candidates. It explored how the inputs of supervisors influence the actualization and successful completion of the PhD journey. Evident from the data presented in this manuscript is the fact that the various roles played by the supervisor, in terms of the supervision style employed, are crucial to the successful completion of the PhD. While the relationship between the researcher and the supervisor is not the only influencing factor in the successful completion of a thesis, it should be noted however that the joint effort employed by both the supervisor and the supervisee impacts significantly on the success of the process. The limitation of this study is centered on the sample size. Since narratives were taken from five participants, it makes it risky to make a conclusive statement, however, cited narratives remain a valid experience to be given attention. Future researchers can expand the sample size and further accommodate the use of a mixed method. The use of mixed-method research could be explored to test the validity of these findings and the extent to which supervising ineffective students has been a burden to the supervisor. Nevertheless, the findings captured in the manuscript provide insights into how PhD students have succeeded in their supervision. This paper thus contributes to the *Ubuntu* supervision style as a style of supervision that should be received in the existing body of literature. This is because this style of supervision has propelled most candidates to claim ownership of their PhDs as evidenced in this study. The findings of this manuscript support the assertion of the *Ubuntu* Style of Supervision that safeguards values of respect, love, care, freedom, social justice, and participation.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Professor Maserole Christina Kgari-Masondo, Associate Professor of History, University of Venda. South African-born and educated, widely published with an excess of twenty articles. Has experience in teaching Cultural History. Has a cutting-edge approach to Decolonization and Indigenous knowledge insight and campaign, through her various writings and practices. Professor Maserole Christina Kgari-Masondo grew up as an orphan and in a poverty-stricken household. Despite that, she used her family background and personal challenges as motivation to be a high achiever. Studied her degrees through academic awards from – Kellogg's Foundation, Mellon Foundation, and National Research Fund. For PhD, she won a prestigious Academic Award from Carnegie Mellon Scholarship for Black Students in 2004-2007.

Dr. Bernard Chingwanangwana, holder of PhD in Educational Leadership (Witwatersrand), born in Zimbabwe, South Permanent Resident, currently doing a Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship with the University of Venda, South Africa. He is on leave of absence from Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University. He has been in Education for over 35 years from High School to University. Has published over fifteen articles on Educational Leadership and Management. His area of specialty and research interest in ethical leadership in schools.

Dr. Pfuurai Chimbunde, holder of PhD in Educational Sociology from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, is currently doing a Post Doctoral Research Fellowship at the University of Free State in South Africa. He has published over 25 articles in peer-reviewed journals. Dr Chimbunde is a seasoned educator who has taught in various colleges and Universities.

Dr. Lungile P. Zondi holds a PhD and is affiliated with the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Dr Bandile is a seasoned Anthropology Lecturer who has published in peer-reviewed journals and has extensive experience in education at various levels.

Dr.Umejei L. Aboshioke is a PhD holder in Culture, Heritage, and Tourism. She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban. Dr Umejei has vast experience in the

private sector, both in South Africa and Nigeria. She is an avid researcher who has published in renowned peer-reviewed journals.

Dineo F. Mosina, Completed her PhD at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She also has a Master of Education from the same university. *Her teaching passion is in the representation of African Women in Decolonisation and Gender issues, as well as in History.* She is focusing on developing textbooks in Curriculum Transformation in Higher Education.