Cross-Cultural Supervision Amidst A Generational Shift

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Abstract

Aim. This paper sets out to draw on my experience as a Sweden-based academic supervisor who is also active in Poland to reflect on the issue of cross-cultural supervision amidst a presumed generational shift that goes on in Poland. Split between stories of a destructive hierarchy and non-transparency in Polish academia on the one hand, and of an emergent "West-minded" reorientation on the other, this paper looks into the cultural idiosyncrasies that have made supervision in Poland tricky for me, if not outright difficult.

Methods. This paper focuses on the perspectives of ten active PhD supervisors based in Poland. Using questionnaires and interviews the respondents were asked to reflect upon whether a generational shift is underway. This was done by comparing the ideals, attitudes, and behaviours of their past supervisors to those of their own. The results were then analysed through a set of challenges common in cross--cultural supervision and compared to the Swedish context.

Results. The findings point to a possible gap between self-assessment of the respondents as progressive and the regressive practices that seem to linger and impact the students.

Conclusion. A tentative conclusion is that the long-awaited generational shift in Poland has not yet fully taken root. This is further reflected in how markedly different the culture of supervision in Poland still is from the culture practised in Sweden.

Cognitive value. The paper points to the difficulty of breaking free from the routines inherited from one's past-generation supervisors. It also emphasises the benefits of cross-cultural supervision, given that shifts within cultural practices are difficult to perceive and implement while operating within a single cultural ecosystem.

Key words: culture of supervision, generational shift, cross-cultural supervision, Poland, Sweden

Introduction

Supervision of students is a challenging exercise for most university professors. The breadth of inter-personal aspects and expectations it brings

with it is enormous, meaning that supervision, for both the student and the supervisor, can be a stressful task as it is (Nilsson & Andersson, 2004), notwithstanding the added variable of cross-cultural supervision (Finkelstein et al., 1998; Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999). Today, globalisation and the rise of digital teaching technologies have made cross-cultural interactions between academic teachers and students a staple of everyday work (Barron et al., 2021), and teachers – at least at some point in their careers – will experience cross-cultural supervision (Huang et al., 2014; Wisker, 2015).

Being a Sweden-based supervisor who is also active in Poland, I find it unavoidable to think about supervision from a cross-cultural perspective. Having fulfilled my whole education in Sweden, I am used to and fairly acquainted with how Swedish academia works. This also includes the basic "do's and don'ts" of supervision: how it should be run, what is expected from it, and what should be avoided. Thus, being thrust into a new culture of supervision brings with it a host of question marks, unwritten rules, and unexpected ordeals that make the main task – supervision – so much harder to navigate and make sense of.

Moreover, the Polish academic culture of supervision is experiencing a transition as a new generational shift is underway (Kwiek, 2014). "Old-school" professors who have ruled the Polish academia for decades are now seeing a decline in power as their younger colleagues advance in ranks. The new generation seems more aware of (their) rights and responsibilities, have more personal integrity, better English language knowledge and access to international literature (which was not the case before), greater access to research money, but also more tools at their disposal to avert discrimination, nepotism, and other despicable behaviours (Kwiek, 2012). The latter is expressly visible in the growing number of self-organised seminars and workshops that enjoy a great national following.

But could this be merely a nascent movement making its baby steps in the direction suggested by "Western" standards? Could it be that the destructive culture of the past lives on, still casting its shadow on how future scholars are being educated? Several Polish researchers observe that even though certain mechanisms and resources have been put in place, the ghost of the past still imbues the inner working of Polish academia. Aleksander Kobylarek (2016), for instance, has described it as "feudal science which leads to the cultivation of pseudo-science, the creation of inadequate criteria and inappropriate mechanisms in assisting the development of science" (p. 5). Dreadful practices such as prolonging supervision on behalf of the supervisors in fear of emerging competition from their protégé(e)s, assigning chores unrelated to the PhD, getting the PhD students to write articles for them, verbal shaming, ostracism, stigmatisation, rejection, career blocking and so on, have been continuously reported upon by the Polish media, on the websites of private foundations or by fearless academics who have devoted their lives to disclose irregularities at Polish universities. Are these isolated, overly dramatised cases or is there systematicity to it?

Without knowing the answer to these questions, supervising a Polish student is, from my personal experience, indeed significantly different from supervising a Swedish one, in a number of dimensions. For my own personal development and cross-cultural adaptability, it is important to make sense of what is going on at Polish universities, and why the cultural difference in supervision is felt so markedly. In order to do so, in this paper I approach the subject of doctoral supervision from the perspective of supervisors experiencing a generational shift in a country known for its hitherto strong hierarchical structure. The aim is to unpack the hidden layers of the black box of supervision using a mix of personal reflection (after Fook, 2011), questionnaires (10), and interviews (3).

Methodology

When investigating generational divides in the academic profession in Poland, Marek Kwiek (2017) stresses that "the power of research at a micro-level of individuals [complements] the traditional research at aggregated institutional and national levels" (p. 645). In that vein, this study is built upon a questionnaire study with ten active PhD supervisors at six Polish universities, in the subject of human geography. For more depth and greater contextualisation, the results are followed up by interviews with three of the supervisors.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain a first, broader overview of how the respondents view the situation surrounding supervision in Poland, and whether/how the behaviours and ideals of past supervisors are likely to be acquired and passed on to next PhD students in pace with personal development and the cultural/generational transition that currently goes on in Poland. All respondents were between 35 and 50 years old, an age span considered to be within the brackets of "new thinking" with regard to how academia is to be run (and where the age span of c. 50-60 would probably be considered a transition zone).

All questionnaires were delivered anonymously and collected through a third person. There is still a risk that the respondents might have sugar-coated the quality of their supervisors' work out of fear that their anonymity might be disclosed. Another risk involved is that self-assessment is not a reliable method for obtaining a true picture of the situation, be it for reasons of excessive self-exaggeration or self-criticism (imposter syndrome) (Northrup, 1997). Still, it does offer a glimpse into how the *respondents want to present themselves*.

As the analytical framework for the interviews, I use Nanda Dimitrov's (2008; 2009) five themes, which according to her represent the most frequently occurring cross-cultural challenges met within supervision. These are: a) assumptions about the nature of research and knowledge production; b) cultural differences in power and status; c) differing needs for saving face;

d) cultural differences in communication styles; and e) expectations about rule following. I insulate each aspect theoretically and contextualise it through the prism of Kobylarek's (2016; 2017) dystopian analysis of Polish academia. I then relate each aspect to what came out during the interviews, as these were purposefully pre-structured around Dimitrov's five themes, with the goal to empirically shed light on how reporting of supervision differs between that of self and one's past supervisor. In the final reflection section, I will compare the results of this study to my own experience of supervising in Poland.

Questionnaire Study

The respondents graded ten aspects of supervision on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 5 (excellent). The aggregated results are to be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Results from the questionnaire study

Aspect of supervision	My old supervisor	Myself as supervisor	Difference
Pedagogical training how to supervise	2.9	3.4	+ 0.5
General subject knowledge (geography)	4.0	4.0	0.0
Specific topic knowledge of the PhD thesis	3.4	4.2	+ 0.8
Extent of the research contact network	3.7	3.8	+ 0.1
English language knowledge	2.2	3.6	+ 1.4
Ability to secure funding (for PhD student)	2.7	3.7	+ 1.0
Ethical behaviour	3.4	4.8	+ 1.4
Personal culture	3.6	4.8	+ 1.2
Time spent on supervision in relation to formal expectations	3.5	4.2	+ 0.7
Interest in the PhD thesis	3.6	4.2	+ 0.6
Average, all aspects	*3.3*	*4.1*	*+ 0.8*

Note: Average aggregated scores (0 [very bad] to 5 [excellent]) with regard to ten aspects of supervision as per questionnaires from 10 Polish PhD supervisors, broken into assessments of (a) their past supervisors and (b) themselves as supervisors. The last column shows the calculated difference between (a) and (b), while the bottom row shows averages for all aspects together.

Source: Own research

Beginning with a general overview of how the ten respondents graded the performance of their past supervisors, the lowest average scores received aspects which could be described as special skills unrelated to scientific work, such as English language knowledge (2.2), ability to secure funding

(2.7) and pedagogical training (2.9). Somewhat higher, although still relatively low, scored aspects related to personality: ethical behaviour (3.4), time devotion (3.5), personal culture (3.6) and interest in the thesis (3,6). Subject knowledge (4.0) and contact network (3.7) represented the highest scores of the respondents' supervisors, whose general average for all aspects was 3.3, whereas the same for the respondents themselves was 4.1 (+ 0.8 difference).

In terms of self-assessment, the respondents gave the lowest average scores to aspects unrelated to scientific work (just like their supervisors): pedagogical training (3.4), English language knowledge (3.6) and funding abilities (3.7). The highest self-assessed aspects were instead the personal ones: personal culture and ethical behaviour (4.8 each), as well as aspects related to the PhD thesis – interest, topic knowledge and time devotion (at 4.2 each). Interestingly, 9 out of 10 aspects were assessed higher for oneself than for one's past supervisor (just subject knowledge was assessed equally). Some differences obviously related to changes within the educational system of Poland (the introduction of English as an obligatory language after the fall of Communism) and an increased pressure on universities to secure external funding (Kwiek, 2017). Most conspicuously, however, the biggest differences between the respondents and their past supervisors were to be found in personal culture (+1.2) and ethical behaviour (+1.4). This would suggest that a change in attitude is underway.

Interview Study

Assumptions About The Nature Of Research And Knowledge Production

Being a good specialist entails great command of *one* research paradigm; being a good generalist requires knowing them all. Geography, as one of the broadest scientific disciplines moves across physical sciences, technology, social sciences, and the humanities. It is also considered a synthesising science, where broad analyses between the natural environment and human activities in space are key. In order to provide a probing geographical analysis, the student must be able to translate the theoretical knowledge they operate within to the epistemological basis that underpins it and this requires training in philosophy of science. In Poland, the philosophy of science is not present in the curriculum of geography programmes, and the students lack even the slightest knowledge of epistemology. The framing of the thesis is then usually empirical and rather shallow (than what would be the norm in Sweden).

Personally, I find it generally difficult to discuss the flaws in the presuppositions of the student or how they connect incommensurable pools of knowledge (which is often the case in geographical studies). For me as a supervisor "from the outside," this is frustrating, especially if the ambition is to provide the highest quality of supervision. But what is it like "from the inside"? The answers were faint:

I see no problems. The PhD student can find everything on the Internet now. For me, there were problems, because the scope of the doctorate was new.

My supervisor was a specialist in his scientific discipline. So, others should be the judge of this. […] I work in multidisciplinary teams where the PhD students discuss their theses in an open forum.

With regard to knowledge production, the respondents see a difference:

[My supervisor had] acceptance for inappropriate behaviours such as auto--plagiarism. […] There was less focus on publication in high-scored journals.

The knowledge of my supervisor was great…some 50 years ago. That's what happens when you don't update yourself all the time. For me, knowledge must have a practical dimension. If it is not useful, if it does not solve some practical problems, it does not have any sense.

To conclude, with regard to the practice of knowledge production (sociology of science) there seems to be quite an improvement, yet less so (if any) with regard to supervision on the nature of research (philosophy of science)

Power And Status

The supervision situation is inherently asymmetric (Näslund, 2007), with the supervisor placed higher up in the situational hierarchy than the student. As always, with power comes great responsibility, as power can be readily abused. Eva Brodin et al. (2016) differentiate between the power of position and personal power. Power of position relates to the role played within the supervision situation, while personal power is associated with the supervisor's (individual) level of knowledge, or expertise. Since power is a sword that cuts both ways (Näslund, 2007, p. 170), the student may choose to accept the power imbalance on offer or denounce it. The supervisor may also choose to adapt their role within the asymmetry spectrum, or to unconditionally enforce their power. These intricacies are undoubtedly culturally contingent. As Dimitrov (2009) shows, the difference between the social status of the student and the professor in, for instance, Canada is much greater than in Africa, South America, or East Asia, where "deference to authority prevents students from openly disagreeing with the professor" (p. 10; see also Thomas, 2013).

If Canada is to be considered representative for the more widely understood "Western World", then Europe should fare quite similarly. This, however, is not the case in the interviews.

My supervisor over-used his own power to show how important he is. He tried to maintain his status in every possible way…but in fact, it did not refer to his knowledge and expertise. For me, power and status are very relative. We have power when we work together and have fun while doing it. Status, in the proper sense of the word, comes the day when one's research results will be recognised worldwide.

[There was] a strong hierarchy between us, with no possibilities of expressing own opinions. My current supervision is based on a partnership relation.

Kobylarek (2016) describes this as a symptom of "a power structure based on the pyramid" (p. 6). Indeed, the respondents were generally critical of the exertion of power by their supervisors, doing their best to overturn power and status from being restrictive forces to becoming enabling ones. However, while some transit to more informal relations, they still wish to retain the (personal) power that comes with the supervisor role. Yet still, all respondents acknowledged that the status held by their supervisors did open many doors for their personal careers.

Differing Needs For Saving Face

The negative implications of coming across as incompetent in a social situation is a trait of human nature, especially in modern societies based on a knowledge economy, where competence is valued as a commodity. This inclination, however, manifests differently between different cultures. As Dimitrov (2009) observes, the needs of the Japanese or Koreans to save face are greater than, for instance, among Canadians. In translation to Polish academia, Kobylarek (2016) describes this as "the sin of emotionalism," i.e. when "science is not guided by rational arguments but by emotion" (p. 8). This insistence seems to apply to the Polish respondents' assessment of the needs of their supervisors; however, they adopt a lighter approach towards self:

The need to save face was the main motto of my supervisor. When you don't have a proper [subject] knowledge [yet] a strong position in your field, you must save face at all times. Personal pride is always very strong in the older generation of supervisors! For me… personal pride: what does it even mean? It is not a word I care about. If it turns out I was wrong, I simply apologise.

During my PhD, I was pretending I had not seen compromising things to save my supervisor's face. Myself, I'm more preoccupied with the comfort of workplace for PhD students.

One respondent, however, acknowledged that caring about saving face is likely to instil dignity in both the supervisor and the PhD student, which in turn is likely to "help build scientific recognition," as long as it is done "within the limits of human maturity." The respondent also notes that while saving face is important, "it is also important to show a human face". In conclusion, some traces of the need to save face are passed on, while others are bravely thwarted.

Communication Style

According to Lev Vygotsky (in Norberg Brorsson & Ekberg, 2012), language is not merely a bearer of ideas, but also the creator of ideas. Put differently, ideas are created while we speak. As such, Vygotsky continues, it is indispensable to learn different linguistic categories, as those function as

an interactive bridge between culture and individual learning. In this sense, one major issue in cross-cultural communication is the issue of responsibility for making oneself understood. According to Dimitrov (2009), in much of Asia and Eastern Europe, the responsibility to understand the intended meaning of a verbal message rests on the listener as opposed to the speaker, whereas the opposite is more common in Northern Europe and North America. My respondents' answers confirm this insistence:

Communication was by demands. I use dialogue.

[Communication was] like [between] a lord at a court and a servant. I communicate [with my PhD student] like friends. We work together and have similar goals.

[Communication was] sometimes chaotic. I try to make it clear and professional.

Kobylarek (2016, p. 7) extends this meaning also to the flow of communication, where "disrupted communication" ("a reluctance for academics to communicate with each other") is yet another sin of Polish academia. Some of the respondents note that the supervisor did not have time for them, whereas they always try to make themselves available, for instance:

I had to demonstrate high independence. Little time [was] spent on consultations. For this reason, I used the help of other scientists.

Contact with my supervisor was restricted to scheduled meetings. Mine is more spontaneous owing to MS Teams.

For communication to occur, availability must be assured. Current technology and departure from face-to-face meetings might have helped, although the formality of communication is retained, at least to certain levels.

Expectations About Rule Following

According to Dimitrov (2009), in Western cultures, there is this rampant assumption that rules should be followed. Contrarily, for students from countries with totalitarian regimes, including post-communist societies, taking programme regulations at face value happens rarely. If we consider Poland a post-communist country, the interviews show that such rule--averse attitudes are not visible, probably because of the demographic turnaround that has happened since the fall of Communism, where this was practised more widely:

The rules were there for me, but not for my supervisor. Today, the unofficial rules are the same for everyone.

Student had to strictly follow the rules even though those could have changed in a short time – the "stronger" part dictated the rules. I follow the rules only if [they are] not limiting the freedom of thinking and researching.

When I was a PhD student there were no strict rules and regulations, therefore, there was more room for manoeuvre. I [follow the rules] at a high level.

Kobylarek (2016) describes this as the "dogma of the infallibility of the professor". Indeed, the concept of "following rules" is a complex compound where "rules" can have both a positive and a negative connotation, and this is highly culturally conditioned. In some cultures, rules are merely a symbolic framework that is meant to be stretched. For instance, within Middle Eastern cultures rules are not strict but negotiable, meaning that exceptions to rules are made frequently depending on the situation (Dimitrov, 2009). This gradient is noticeable, with an added stress on responsibility:

> From a legal point of view, everything [my supervisor did] was done correctly. However, in my opinion, the whole thing did not meet my expectations. I felt underappreciated and lacked sufficient scientific supervision. I try not to make my [style of] cooperation look like my PhD. I follow the rules but try to give more than is required. I am aware that this is our common concern, and not only a task for a PhD student. The effect will testify both to the doctoral student and the supervisor. I feel that the supervisor's responsibility is greater because it affects the scientific future of the other person.

Final Reflections And Concluding Thoughts

Culture is the primary source of social progress or regression. This basic yet potent proposition highlights that what goes on in people's minds matters for the productivity and quality of any one social endeavour, including teaching and supervision. In this sense, the degree of internalisation culture entreats is likely to prove pernicious, as any form of accultured knowledge spawns a vast pool of automatised behaviour patterns that have become tacit and implicit, something people "just do" (Collins & Evans, 2008; Trowler & Cooper, 2010). Although the internalised nature of such behavioural patterns is what makes them efficient, a lack of awareness of the cultured nature of supervision is likely to prove challenging in cross--cultural settings.

Personal Reflection

As a Sweden-based supervisor to a Poland-based PhD student, but also having taught Master's students, I cannot help but notice an array of cultural idiosyncrasies that play out in the process.

With regard to *knowledge production*, I find it generally difficult to discuss the flaws in the presuppositions of the students or how they connect incommensurable pools of knowledge (which is often the case with geographical studies). In terms of *power and status*, the Polish students seem much more deferent towards the supervisor than is the case in Sweden. The supervisor is always called using an honorific (Mr./Mrs.), followed by the academic title (Dr/Prof.) and then the last name. Moreover, the Polish students I have supervised seem unkeen on saying 'no' to requests from me, and per defini-

tion assume that the supervisor is right even though what is being uttered might be some initial train of thought.

In terms of *saving face*, the students consider the supervision not only a venue for obtaining knowledge and perfecting skills, but also for displaying accomplishment. This, then, is likely to trigger an ambience of "examination" that suffuses supervision (cf. Dymitrow, 2020), even though there is no such agenda, particularly so in the earlier stages of supervision. The Polish students I have supervised also seem keen on saving face for others and avoiding situations that may cause the supervisor to lose face. For example, in those instances where my flow of argumentation did not add up or was self-contradictory (and I saw that the student noticed it), the student did not pick up on it and quickly changed the subject.

In terms of *communication*, the Polish students I have supervised have hardly ever asked for clarification, even if I could notice they were not following the discussion. In Sweden, asking for clarification is standard, and almost never interpreted as a failure on behalf of anyone involved. I could also notice that they preferred a style of communication that was more direct, instructive, and assertive, when there was little room for ambiguity. Lastly, in terms of *rule following*, my impression is that teachers in Sweden are given much more autonomy to adjust the curriculum, lesson plans, and time allocation more often than what is allowed in Poland (cf. Barron et al., 2021). This means that practices based on procedural steering documents, if not updated frequently, are more likely to persist in Poland, to the detriment of the supervision.

Connection To Findings Of The Study

The findings of this study, both from questionnaires and interviews, provide contradictory signals. On the one hand, they confirm what has been critically said about the hierarchical structure and non-transparent nature of Polish academia. On the other hand, the brazen behaviours that accompany this brand of culture are attributed mainly to the "old-timers", in this context the respondents' past supervisors. Instead, the respondent's own ideals, behaviours and goals are self-assessed through a different matrix, one where progress and alignment with "Western" perspectives seem key.

Perhaps more intriguingly, the effects of those reportedly "adjusted" academic practices of the respondents do not show in practice in the attitudes and expectations of the students, at least not in my supervision experience. Could this be because the generational shift is still nascent enough for its effects not to show through in the students? Or is this merely symptomatic of wishful thinking without knowing how to actually break free from the fettering routines inherited from the supervisors? Or maybe is this a methodological flaw of self-reporting and all the issues that come with it, including exaggeration, social desirability bias, fear of embarrassment to reveal private details, etc. (Northrup, 1997)?

Those questions are impossible to answer within the scope of this short study. Writing this paper, though, gave me an opportunity to reflect upon several recurring issues connected to cross-cultural supervision, where – to me – it is obvious that the sought-for generational shift in Poland has not yet taken root. It is also obvious that the political climate of Poland for achieving this goal quickly is far from favourable. On a positive note, being a supervisor in Poland has made me more prepared to supervise in Sweden, where supervision requires much more cultural flexibility. Contrarily, being a supervisor familiar with the Swedish multicultural context has proved helpful to broaden my gamut of social skills to scan the needs and expectations of the Polish students and by that more efficiently adapt to an unfamiliar context.

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