

The Impact of Culture on the Supervisory Relationship

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

“If the student is to be successful, he or she must gain a genuine appreciation of the need to formulate a personal response to the research problem, a response which is distinctive, forceful, challenging and, above all, original.”

(Knight, 1999, p.96).

Many of the central assumptions of conducting research in North American academic settings are unspoken, and not necessarily shared by scholars from overseas (Cryer and Okorochoa, 1999). For example, the expectation to be original in one’s research and to be able to critique the work of others is contrary to prevailing norms in some cultures in South and East Asia. These cultures emphasize maintaining harmony in the community, which creates expectations for scholars to reiterate widely accepted or dominant perspectives rather than challenge existing knowledge (Knight, 1999).

As a result, graduate students from Confucian educational cultures such as China or Korea are likely to arrive at Canadian universities with relatively little experience in designing original research or pointing out the shortcomings of the existing literature. Historically, in their cultures “the role of reading was to (re)discover what the sage was saying, while the role of writing was to reveal the truth held in the text for a larger audience, rather than to argue with it... The aim of education was the simple transfer of knowledge and skills with emphasis on the conservation and reproduction of knowledge, at the expense of its testing, through the avoidance of any explicit evaluations or judgments” (Smith 1999, p. 149). When asked to critique a particular account of history, a Chinese student reportedly asked: “How can I challenge history? History happened” (Smith 1999, p. 151).

“If you give me an acceptance, you should have something I have to work on.”

(PhD student from the Middle East, Science)



Similarly, students from East and South Asia may not realize that they are expected to take initiative in designing their own research paths and research questions, and frequently wait for their supervisor to assign the question they will research. They assume that their research will consist of finding evidence to support the hypotheses the supervisor identifies. Studies on the adaptation of international graduate students find that most students are able to and willing to adapt to the expectation to take initiative in research once this expectation is made explicit for them (Smith, 1999; Knight, 1999; Eland, 2001).

“In the [North] American system...if you don’t know, it’s your responsibility to go and ask questions. But in our system, we look at the teacher as someone who has been on that path before you. So he has all the questions and the answers from his experience. He is preparing you to tap into his experience and go forward.”

(West African student, cited in Eland, 2001, p. 100)



The degree of initiative shown by international students here at Western varies greatly. In a survey of more than 200 incoming Western graduate students in the fall of 2007, international graduate students indicated that they expected somewhat more direction from their supervisors than Canadian students. As part of the survey, we asked new students to list some of the questions they would ask their graduate supervisors during the first meeting at the beginning of their program. Some of the questions that suggested an expectation of greater direction from the supervisor included: *Would you give me a research direction you want me to do?* and *What is my topic?* Questions that indicated an expectation of initiative on the part of the student included: *What is your way and method in supervision? Is my topic realistic/doable? Could we develop a Gantt chart for my research – with readings, assignments built in with my research? Who are the people I can get help from? How can I benefit from the research work?*

Questions that demonstrate initiative on the part of the student focus on clarifying the supervisor’s expectations about the program, research collaboration, and the relationship between student and supervisor. Questions that demonstrate initiative also tend to have a “long-term orientation,” meaning they inquire about how the student may be mentored by the supervisor and gain independence as a scholar. Supervisors may help students take the first step towards demonstrating initiative by asking them to bring three or four good questions to every meeting.

Please see the following page for more mentoring strategies to promote independence and initiative. The suggested mentoring strategies throughout this guide draw on focus group discussions with international graduate students and on the literature on cross-cultural supervision and intercultural communication.

MENTORING STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE INITIATIVE AND INDEPENDENCE

- **Ask students to bring three good questions to every meeting with you.**
- **Explain the meaning and value of original research as soon as students enter the program.**
- **Ask students to set goals for themselves for each term of their program. Review their progress towards goals regularly.**

Goals may focus on research, professional development, teaching or personal development. For example: "I will give three presentations to gain confidence in presenting in English." "I will submit my research for presentation at the Western Research Forum."
- **Discuss who will come up with the research question for the student's projects.**
- **Discuss the division of labour during collaborative research explicitly.**

Clarify which component of the study the student is working on, how it relates to the rest of your research, and how much independence they have in carrying it out. Put the division of labour in writing if necessary. A template letter of understanding is available from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.
- **Encourage students to examine the research critically.**

Ask students to explore alternative approaches to research. Explain repeatedly that constructive criticism of others' work is an important part of scholarship. "Give students permission" to critique the work of well established scholars.
- **Ask students to write a formal review of a journal article as an assignment.**
- **Give students an opportunity to conduct pilot studies on their own.**
- **Recognize and point out when students make original contributions.**

Acknowledge when students make original contributions to the research conducted by the lab group or take initiative in graduate seminars. Public acknowledgement of initiative will encourage international graduate students to take initiative as well.
- **Point to role models from the student's home culture.**

Give students an article in which a scholar from China, India or Egypt critiques the literature particularly well.
- **Encourage innovation and initiative through brainstorming in class.**

Allow students to see the process as you come up with a research question or identify research methods.

POWER AND STATUS

“For me, as an international student from a Confucian culture, usually we respect our supervisor as an authority. So if a supervisor or a professor doesn’t say something like ‘Oh, please feel free to say anything or share anything academically or something about your life, your concerns...’ Without supervisors or professors saying that, I wouldn’t say anything to them. And especially if there was a meeting between a supervisor and me, I am always time sensitive. I’m so afraid I’m bothering them too much. Or I’m taking too much of their time. After two years in Canada, I’ve found that my former supervisor and my PhD supervisor, they’re very friendly and they like to hear if you have any concerns about your life or your studies. But at the beginning I had no idea.”

(Chinese PhD student, Science)

Graduate student-supervisor relationships always involve an inherent power imbalance. International graduate students often perceive a *greater* power imbalance between themselves and their supervisor than Canadian students do, because Canada is what is termed a *low power distance culture*, in which the difference between the social status of the student and the professor is much less than it is the *high power distance cultures* of Africa, South America or East Asia (Hofstede, 1999). In high power distance cultures, deference to authority prevents students from openly disagreeing with the professor and makes it almost impossible for them to say ‘no’ to any requests from the supervisor even if the request is unrealistic (overtime work, deadlines they will not be able to meet).

“I think the hierarchy is always there, in every part of the world, but the kind of relationship could be different. For example, you cannot joke with your supervisor if you are back home [in the Middle East]. You cannot joke with them, but here you can. Here you might hear slang words from your supervisor. [In my culture] because the level is quite high and he is kind of an intellectual personality and it is not expected that he would say something which is not good.”

(PhD student, Science)

Students from high power distance cultures such as India, Mexico or Malaysia often behave in ways that seem overly deferential to Canadians. When they first arrive in Canada, they wait to sit down until told, or stand up each time they say something in class. They may address their supervisor as “Sir” and always use titles before the names of faculty members. Younger faculty who prefer using first names may find students’ continuing use of “Professor Jones” and “Dr. Weir” frustrating, because they feel that the titles create greater distance between them and the students than the informal, collegial relationship they envisioned with their supervisees.

“Students often come from an environment where they are not allowed to criticize teachers, raise questions that could embarrass the teacher or even to correct them if they make a mistake. It is therefore not surprising that they find it hard to put forward their own ideas. However, in the UK postgraduate students are required to demonstrate that they appreciate that other findings are not to be simply accepted and reproduced, and to show that they understand how knowledge in a certain discipline is constructed.”

(Todd, 1996, p 9).

Students from high power distance cultures will also be sensitive to hierarchy among students within the lab. A faculty member who assigns the writing of a publication to a second year PhD student who writes well may not be aware that a fourth year student from a hierarchical culture will be acutely conscious of the fact that they have been ‘passed over’ for working on the publication. Explaining the division of labor in the lab clearly before a project begins or articulating the rationale for why particular students are assigned to tasks can facilitate negotiating such sensitive issues.

Low Power Distance Cultures

- Austria
- Israel
- Denmark
- Norway
- Switzerland
- New Zealand
- Canada
- United States

Medium Power Distance Cultures

- Japan
- Iran
- Eastern European cultures
- Pakistan
- Italy
- Greece

High Power Distance Cultures

- Phillipines
- Mexico
- Venezuela
- India
- Brazil
- France
- West Africa
- China
- Arab Cultures

*Based on Hofstede (1991): Cultures and Organizations; Software of the Mind. Hague: Mouton.
Power Distance Index data available online at www.geert-hofstede.com

High Power Distance Student

- Expects formal communication with supervisor (use of titles, formal language in emails)
- Reluctant to impose on supervisor's time and ask for help
- Asking questions may imply that the "professor didn't do his job properly" so student may ask for help from peers instead
- Tends to agree with the professor as sign of respect
- Expects research direction to be set by professor
- Goes out of his/her way to save face for the professor
- Not used to professors saying "I don't know"
- Will ask frequent open-ended questions such as "What approach would you recommend?"

Low Power Distance Supervisor

- Expects relatively informal communication with students
- Expects student to ask for help when needed
- Expects initiative from students
- Sees student questions as a sign of interest
- Open to ideas, critique of the research group's project from the student
- Expects contribution of original ideas from the student
- Willing to admit if he/she does not know the answer to a question
- Consults students about direction of the research group

Low Power Distance Student

- Takes initiative in class
- Expects direction from supervisor through discussion
- Expects relative independence in his/her work
- Expects to be consulted about decisions that impact his/her research or progress
- Sees questions as a sign of interest and involvement
- Expects faculty to admit if they do not know the answer
- Expects to contribute to research direction of the lab or research group
- Prefers to work with faculty who downplay their status and power

High Power Distance Supervisor

- Expects deference from students
- Does not expect students to take much initiative in class; students are expected to listen and learn
- Expects to tell students what to do
- Expects students to follow instructions closely
- Expects privileges as supervisor
- Expects students to depend on him/her
- May see student questions as challenge to his authority
- Believes that faculty should not show if they do not know the answer to a question