

## Case Report

# Supervisory Relationships, Constructing Academic Identity, and Transition to the Researcher: An Interpretative Single-Case Study

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The present interpretative case study aimed to explore the construction of researcher identity through successful dyadic supervisory relationships. The only participant in the current single case study was Ako, a recently graduated doctoral student who published some papers with his supervisor and maintained that intimate and fruitful relationship after graduation. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, journals, and narration. Thematic analyses<sup>[1]</sup> were conducted to analyze the collected data. In line with Wisker's (2012) framework, the findings generated four themes, including *supervisor's qualities*, *supervisor's affective expectations*, *supervisee's journey*, and *relationship enhancement*. The results revealed that a full-fledged and intimate supervisory relationship, in both formal and informal settings, contributed to the development of researcher identity. The results have some implications for teacher educators, university managers, supervisors, and doctoral students.

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## Introduction

Doctoral courses are becoming popular (Wellington 2013), and the number of students enrolling in these programs is increasing every year<sup>[2]</sup>. Doctoral education is considered not only as a curriculum but also as much identity construction as a knowledge movement<sup>[3][4]</sup>. The formation of academic identity is realized through academic writing and publications<sup>[5]</sup>. Collaboration and publication with a supervisor, as an experienced researcher, are beneficial to developing the researcher's identity<sup>[6][7]</sup>. Moreover, establishing a tightened relationship with supervisors to fulfill the students' competencies is a means to

transform the knowledge into a new researcher identity<sup>[8][9]</sup>. A growing number of research studies have verified the supervisory relationship as a predominant factor in doctoral students' graduation (e.g.<sup>[10][11]</sup>). However, the authors could not find how establishing intimate and close supervisor-supervisee relationships would contribute to constructing researcher identity. Hence, the results of an interpretative single-case qualitative study were examined to shed light on a recently graduated Ph.D. student's perspective regarding how an ideal supervisory relationship could play a supportive role in the transition of the Ph.D. candidate to an independent researcher position and how and why the case built an academic and independent researcher identity as a result of an ideal and intimate relationship with his supervisor.

## Literature Review

The transition from teacher to researcher to gain academic identity is aligned with the feeling of vulnerability<sup>[12]</sup>, resulting from a lack of competency and academic experience<sup>[13]</sup>. Academic writing, including dissertations, is developed through collaborative work<sup>[14]</sup> and co-authorship with a more experienced researcher, a supervisor<sup>[6]</sup>. Although supervisors facilitate - not to act as proofreaders - the students' ability to write academically<sup>[15]</sup>, their role ought to 'support the student to be emancipated' by critical thinking, give feedback, grow rhetorical competence, and assess<sup>[16]</sup> the process of dissertation writing. Supervisors, in the Iranian context, receive no training as to how to supervise students' dissertations nor are they obliged to reflect on the process of their supervision. This results in a threat that the amount of expertise needed for the assessment and representation of identity fades away<sup>[17]</sup>.

Willingness to write is built on trust, emotional support, and a formal relationship with the supervisor<sup>[18]</sup><sup>[5]</sup>. While<sup>[19][20]</sup> reported better supervisory relationships through informal events and outside the classroom environment, the contrary point has been signified in what Leask<sup>[21]</sup> reported as an extracurricular or informal curricula activity to foster the supervisory relationship. The supervisory relationship, in the Iranian educational context, shapes out of the classroom environment where students mainly interact with their supervisors through social media and email, reducing the number of regular meetings and the considerable communication required to improve the supervisory quality<sup>[22]</sup>.

Supervisors are not required only to meet the doctoral students' academic and educational needs but also to support the supervisees emotionally to increase the chance of survival<sup>[23]</sup>. Kerdeman (2015) considers emotions pivotal for nurturing students' understanding and developing identity<sup>[24]</sup>. Catatonic supervisors who 'leave students with emotions akin to orphans' are considered unemotional and hinder

the students' progress<sup>[8]</sup>. Given these considerations and the significance of the supervisory relationship in the reconstruction of students' identity<sup>[3]</sup>, this research investigates how a full-fledged supervisory relationship would reconstruct a new researcher and academic identity in the case by seeking the following research questions:

1. How does the supervisory relationship turn into a full-fledged one?
2. How do supervisor qualities contribute to constructing the academic identity of a Ph.D. student?
3. How does the supervisee react during the doctoral course journey?

The conceptualization employed here to frame this qualitative study is Wisker's (2012) supervisory framework, representing the interpersonal relationship from the supervisee's perspective through interviews, narration, and journals. The framework is well-suited as the relationship not only goes professionally and personally but also turns out to be friendly, considered by Wisker (2012) as more than necessary. The close supervisory relationship, inspired by mutual respect, shifts the student's identity through the exchange of power and academicity between the supervisor and student during the dissertation writing<sup>[25]</sup>.

Since students enter doctoral courses with different learning styles but without significantly developed skills, supervisors can leave a crucial impact on the transition of the students to researchers<sup>[26]</sup>. The supervisory relationship plays a pivotal role in guiding and empowering the students, as new researchers, to engage them actively in their topic and critically in their work to achieve their aims and successfully gain their Ph.D. degree (Wisker, 2012). She asserts that the type of dialogue between the supervisor and the student is beneficial to empower the student as a researcher, increase the quality of the research, and set the setting progressively. Wisker (2012) regards feedback as an evolving dialogue, encouraging supervisors and supervisees to interact about the work effectively. "Email and online communication can also build developing interactions and critical thinking through sensitive feedback, which feeds forward to enable learning in a dialogue" (p.306).

Mutual expectations are inevitable in the supervisory relationship. The relationship is well-organized when the parties are understanding, and the expectations are clear and realistic (Wisker, 2012). Since the supervisory relationship is a long-lasting phenomenon, there is a probability that mutual expectations vary and develop. On the other side, both supervisors and students are required to keep themselves away from some irrelevant expectations, e.g., students ought not to expect the supervisors to conduct the

research or proofread the dissertation; moreover, supervisors should not force the students to do something that is not related to the project (Wisker, 2012).

## Method

### *Design of the Study*

The current qualitative research adopted an interpretative single-case study to highlight ‘why’ and ‘how’ things occur<sup>[27]</sup> and to look deeper into the causes of the phenomena<sup>[28]</sup>. The case can be an individual, a group, an entity, or a problem<sup>[29]</sup>. According to Merriam<sup>[30]</sup>, researchers tend to use the qualitative case study as they are inevitably becoming a part of the research. The authors took advantage of the single case study in the detailed data description to find how the relationships, from pre-proposal writing to the post-viva situation, shaped the new academic identity.

### *Participants*

The only participant in the research was Ako (pseudonym), 40, who had taught as an instructor for four years at a local college and ten years at a language institute. He got his bachelor’s in translation studies in 2007, after which he started teaching at English institutes for two years. Since he was proficient in both English and computers, he was recruited as a manager of a trading company in China from 2009 to 2011. He worked as both a merchant and a business English teacher in 2012. He claimed there was a big difference between a teacher and a businessman. A teacher must teach what he knows to others to get paid, while a merchant makes money from others’ ignorance, and people should not find out what he knows. This matter, occasionally, forces people to fraud and cheat others, which is what he never liked to do. As a result, he decided to follow his academic dreams and studied M.A. in TEFL from 2014 to 2016. A year later, in 2017, he passed the university entrance exam and was accepted as a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL. He graduated in 2020 and gained both top dissertation and researcher awards from a national festival in Iran after graduation.

The sample was purposefully selected because it was of interest<sup>[31]</sup> to enhance the researchers’ understanding of how well the supervisory relationship affected the case’s academic identity. For ethical considerations, the consent form was completed and signed by the participant, and he was assured of data confidentiality. Since the case was a researcher, he would appreciate the reality of the data and the way the data contributed to the new findings and implications.

## *Data Collection and Analysis Procedures*

The authors applied multiple sources of semi-structured interviews, narrations, and journals to capture Ako's experiences as a doctoral graduate student. Initially, the researchers asked about the pace and influential factors that drove the doctoral journey smoothly. Then, follow-up questions were posed to provide a rich understanding of how the academic identity was reconstructed and to what extent the supervisory relationship played a role in boosting the case's identity. The journals were in digital form and included emails and messages exchanged, as well as memories, photos, and videos kept on the participant's laptop. The narration was adopted for data collection while exploring journals to triangulate the data and maximize trustworthiness. Narrative analysis has been frequently used in applied linguistics to examine identity construction (e.g., Edwards & Burns<sup>[32]</sup>; Stranger-Johannessen & Norton<sup>[33]</sup>). The narratives depicted the participant's experience and salient moments during the Ph.D. journey. The digital data were discussed during the narrations to gain a deep understanding of the final achievement path. The interview took 45 minutes, and storytelling took about 60 minutes in a friendly environment. The meetings were held at different times. The whole data were digitally transcribed and presented to the case to give his view and more comments. After some minor corrections, the data were prepared to be coded.

In line with the objective of qualitative research, thematic analysis<sup>[1]</sup> was adopted, which is a favorite for researchers to explore more precisely through recording and systemizing the detailed findings in a way that provides readers with the validity and credibility of the method<sup>[34]</sup>. In the current research, thematic analyses helped the authors to capture the real meaning from the data following the research questions<sup>[35]</sup>.

Having immersed themselves in the data bank, the authors employed Microsoft Excel 2016 to code and identify the related themes (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). The researchers utilized axial coding and code description at the semantic level, as there was no pre-coding in their minds. To reach inter-coder reliability<sup>[36]</sup>, each author coded the data individually and then consented to cluster and collate the codes into themes. To enrich trustworthiness and to owe the participant's involvement in academic science, the authors discussed the emerged codes and themes with him. Moreover, the whole data were member-checked to verify accuracy<sup>[37]</sup> and validate the data. According to Sandelowski<sup>[38]</sup>, sharing the transcript, codes, and emerging themes increased the participant's willingness to give feedback in interpreting the data.

## Results

The data analysis revealed the following themes from Ako's point of view: *Supervisor's Qualities*, *Supervisor's affective expectations*, *Supervisee's journey*, and *Relationship enhancement*. The themes represent the factors that contributed to constructing the researcher's identity during the dyadic supervisory relationship through the lens of Wisker's (Wisker, 2012) good supervisor framework.

### *Theme 1, Supervisor's Qualities*

This theme mainly represents the behavioral characteristics of the supervisor. Being humble and communicative were among the qualities that aided in initiating the relationship, finally leading to a full-fledged supervisory relationship. Ako expressed that the supervisor started dialogues with his students and asked about the M.A. course, work, and the frequent way to the university on the first day of the doctoral course. Ako asserted that he jointly went to the university with his supervisor, since the supervisor lived in a city on his way to the university.

It was a starting point to feel comfortable communicating in a more informal and friendly way rather than a formal one. Ako had classes once a week and drove three hours to the university from his home. He narrated a story about an interaction with his supervisor on the way to campus:

*I went to the university via the city where the supervisor was living. He asked me to pick him up on the way to the university and come back together as well. My native language and religion are different from his. A piece of music was being played in my native language; surprisingly, he knew the singer and his biography. Later, I noticed he knew many poets and poems from my own culture and literature that I did not know at all. During our two-year trips, he talked about his personal and academic experiences throughout his doctoral course. Those interactions and experiences shed light on my way and forced me to avoid taking the same path.*

Ako found that humanity was worth much more than nationality to the supervisor. He traced the thought back to the major that they were studying and believed English major students were more open-minded. Ako found him a helpful gentleman with whom he could easily share his experiences. He proclaimed his supervisor was like him. They both enjoyed assisting others, especially on issues that needed error and trial to reach the target.

The supervisee viewed the supervisor as road signs on the route to successful graduation. He mentioned:

*My supervisor was akin to road signs. He warned me where I had to be more careful and how to change into a new gear. He assured me that the view from the top was alluring even though I had to step on a steep hill. His encouragements were heart-warming.*

Ako claimed that the supervisor was a good manager in managing the relationship, making him look forward to going to the university. The supervisor's bits of advice worked, and Ako could present his doctoral proposal successfully based on the strategies the supervisor had taught him.

### *Theme 2, Supervisor's affective expectations*

This theme goes more around the academic and professional traits of the supervisor rather than the personal ones. The theme includes factors that the supervisor expected the supervisee to do or to avoid. As Ako expressed, *the supervisor had made some mistakes regarding choosing the topic and starting the project of dissertation writing; therefore, he asked Ako to prevent the repetition of the same mistakes to do his project sooner and smoother.* These pieces of advice demonstrated the supervisor's feeling of responsibility and sympathy toward the supervisee. Ako opened his mailbox, as a journal in data collection, and more than 500 emails had been exchanged with the supervisor. Concerning this uncanny phenomenon, Ako narrated:

*My supervisor was not only person-focused but also task-focused. He wanted me to engage in doing the task steadily, even slowly. He knew if I left the project for any reason, e.g., holidays, instability was possible, taking time to get back on track. Thus, he asked me to give him a daily report from the articles I had downloaded and read to show what I had learned from them. He taught me to have a bird's-eye, top-down view of the articles and to analyze the papers to learn from them, especially the methodology part of each paper, which is why so many emails were exchanged between us.*

Since every doctoral student needs to publish two papers related to the dissertation project in the Iranian context, the supervisor warned the supervisee to think about publishing a research paper promptly. Otherwise, holding a viva session and graduation could be postponed. This is a hallmark that Ako considered well and played a significant role in his timely graduation. He maintained:

*If I did not involve myself in submitting a research paper before completing the project, I would have to spend a lot of time, six months to one year or more, waiting to publish the paper. Then, I*

*could not graduate sooner, and I would have to pay more fees and spend much more time to have my viva session.*

These experiences and putting them forward to Ako made the relationship more tightened as it included two aspects of personal and academic issues. The supervisor recalled to Ako that paper rejection happened in doctoral courses, and it was better to look at rejections as sources of learning rather than exhaustion and demotivation.

### *Theme 3, Supervisee's journey*

This theme includes the supervisee's exercises toward the supervisor's demands, his reactions to the supervisor's favors, and the effect Ako had on his supervisor. Prolonged and permanent interactions developed a taste of a strong academic relationship with the supervisor, which needed keeping and going tighter. For this, Ako narrated the story of a trip:

*The classes had finished, and face-to-face meetings were decreased. The New Year was coming. I suggested to my supervisor to visit one of the lovely historical places where one of my closest friends lived. He desired to refresh his life and thus accepted. We went there, along with one of my supervisor's best friends and my friend who lived at the destination. As intimacy was growing, I could develop my self-confidence, dare to criticize some research papers, and share my views with my supervisor. In fact, beyond the pleasant time of being together, the trip developed our relationships both personally and academically. It seemed to me that our personal and professional relationships went hand in hand and developed simultaneously.*

Ako was concerned that the relationship was kept professional and lost its personal effect. The strategy of traveling was one type of managing to keep the relationship tied. He declared that he had such affection for the relationship that he had a research book in his hand to study during the tough days when he was hospitalized. He added *the effectiveness of the relationship was more transparent when he was comparing himself with other classmates. His classmates' relationships were formal, and they complained about the rate and pace of interactions with their supervisors, reflecting how successful he was in his supervisory relationship.* However, the supervisee rejected being lucky to have such a supervisor but primarily related it to being responsive to the supervisor's demands and attempting to remain in close interaction with the supervisor.



The supervisee believed that he had influenced the supervisor as well since the supervisor was interested in the type of relationship after he found Ako was hardworking and severe. This interest was observed through the congratulatory messages on various events, e.g., national festivals. He maintained:

*The supervisor was proud of me, especially when my dissertation was awarded the top rate at a national festival. He sent the news of the reward to many social channels and newsagents. He also recommended staying as a co-author for further research after graduation. I was very delighted with his suggestion, and I accepted it warmly.*

Doing research with the supervisor, even after graduation, was a great achievement for Ako. He could improve his researcher identity by being a co-author with an experienced academic individual. He called it an impact that he had on the supervisor to accept him as visionary and as a good researcher.

#### *Theme 4, Relationship enhancement*

This theme is more related to the way the relationship evolved from formal to informal or achieved much intimacy. Every teacher-student relationship is shaped in an educational environment, which makes it a formal relationship. For Ako, the relationship shifted to an informal one, mostly after their trips that resulted in more intimacy. Ako claimed that they were like friends, but the supervisor-supervisee relationship was kept respectful. The supervisee remarked:

*For me, the supervisory relationship was similar to a movie. Everything was vague at the beginning, but the passion for progressing and developing my identity, as well as the specific behavioral features of my supervisor, shaped the teacher-student relationship. Moreover, it was soon agreed to be reorganized as a supervisor-supervisee relationship. The relationship that was always formal changed to informality for me and was soon renamed as an academic relationship. A year after graduation, we still cooperate as co-authors, meet each other, and have academic and research-related communication every week.*

Ako perceived the successful relationship as leading to a significant achievement, the researcher's identity. He knew the doctoral course as a journey made outstanding by the person whom he met, the supervisor. The supervisee considered the supervisory relationship dyadic, which is easy to shape but difficult to keep.

## Discussion

The results of the present study are in line with Wisker's (2012) supervisory relationship framework. The findings illustrated how a doctoral student turned into a researcher through a full-fledged and intimate supervisory relationship. The supervisory relationship starts much the same as a journey and ends with outstanding achievements. In line with Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw's<sup>[39]</sup> findings, the personality characteristics of the supervisor and his communicative style were among the preliminary factors inspiring the supervisee to select him as the dissertation project supervisor. Meanwhile, the supervisor demonstrated some issues regarding the supervisee's culture that were remarkable factors for intercultural supervision and indicated the supervisor's cultural awareness<sup>[40][41]</sup>.

Our study proves the findings of Ismail, Majid, and Ismail<sup>[42]</sup>, in which the supervisee considered a good supervisor as one who was in constant communication with the students, encouraging, and supporting them regularly. Sharing academic experience was among the impressive characteristics of the supervisor, regarded by the supervisee as an accelerator throughout the doctoral journey. Although personality clashes and other barriers, e.g., race, are inevitable in a supervisory relationship, the supervisee did not report any problems during the supervision. The supervisee recognized both the supervisor and himself as good managers in managing the dyadic supervisory relationship.

The case revealed no conflicting expectations at the time of the supervisory relationship. In line with Wisker's (2012) framework, both halves of the relationship had a deep, clear, and balanced understanding of the expectations. The supervisor's expectations developed gradually and ended in certain personal and professional progression. The expectations were mainly task-focused to provide the supervisee with the required academicity. The expectations were along with support to reduce emotional exhaustion<sup>[43]</sup> and engagement to exercise agency to establish a favorable professional identity (Author1 and Author 2, 2020). Rejection of the paper is the source of insecurity and lethargy to the extent that it leads to attrition<sup>[43]</sup>. To deal with such emotional feelings, the supervisor asked the case to write down the comments of the reviewers and editors and apply them for the next submission while assuring the supervisee that this problem had happened to him and was manageable.

The supervisor's style mainly revolved around giving plans on how to act rather than waiting for assignments and giving feedback. Some mistakes made by the supervisor during his doctoral course were warned not to be repeated by the supervisee. Ako called the strategy of sharing academic experiences 'management of the supervision,' in which the relationship was shaped personally and

professionally. Major or minor revisions were considered beneficial to maximize awareness for paper publishing. The supervisor assured the supervisee that revisions and rejections would happen, from which they were learning. Regularly, the supervisor asked the supervisee to correct the errors according to the reviewers' comments, after which he gave feedback on Ako's corrections, and then they resubmitted it. This procedure of dealing with revisions and rejections did not demotivate Ako but rather pleased him due to learning new points.

Contrary to Kirk and Lipscombe<sup>[18]</sup>, who estimated that the case's reluctance to be involved in writing was due to the informal relationship with the supervisor, Ako reflected that an informal but mutually respected relationship would bring a comfortable and tightened supervisory relationship. In line with Wisker's (2012) framework, which sees informality as a helpful means to focus on present and long-term issues, the supervisee suggested a trip with the supervisor to prevent a possible gap in the relationship. The trip went based on mutual respect and developed both aspects of personal and professional relationships. Feeling more comfortable with the supervisor invoked Ako to raise a critical view of the papers and improved his confidence in the acquired knowledge in a bird-view manner.

The relationship was more affected after Ako compared his relationship and progress with his classmates, who complained about the lack of responsiveness of their supervisors and the long time waiting for feedback. The supervisee's academic identity was shaping and progressing. The identity development was favored by the supervisor, and both were eager and motivated to keep the relationship. Occasionally, informal meetings, informal and gratitude SMSs, and negotiating the project online demonstrated the ongoing relationship both personally and professionally. Ako's progress was approved by the supervisor, leading to their cooperation on a project.

Ako wrote the dissertation, the viva was held successfully, and his dissertation received the top national reward. Although the relationship was initiated officially, it ended both formally and informally. The relationship continued after graduation, and both the supervisor and the supervisee were developing their academicity through the exchange of power and knowledge. Ako's identity was transformed into the researcher's identity, and he submitted some papers to the supervisor after graduation. Being a co-author with an experienced researcher and interacting with the supervisor through mentoring strategies were beneficial in developing the researcher's identity<sup>[7][18]</sup>.

## Conclusion

The concluding part of the current qualitative study concerns the perceptions of Ako, a newly graduated doctoral student, regarding the successful dyadic relationship. The fulfillment of the requirements for a successful relationship within the framework proposed by Wisker (2012) was based on mutual respect, deep understanding, clear expectations, and two-way responsiveness. A continuation of the relationship after graduation as a co-researcher was a significant outcome of the good supervisory relationship. From a theoretical perspective, this research enriches our understanding of the good supervisory relationship. From a practical perspective, it broadens our understanding of what qualities should be found in a supervisor-supervisee relationship and what exercises are required to achieve academic identity through such a relationship.

Trust in the supervisory relationship, exchange of power, and establishment of an environment of comfort refined the research agency, prompted the supervisee's self-confidence, and developed the research identity<sup>[14][44]</sup>. The model of supervisory availability, both online and face-to-face, being a good communicator, supportive, and respectful were among the unique traits of the supervisor, facilitating the doctoral journey and developing Ako's desire to gain a positive research identity. An appetite for doing many types of research after graduation is evidence of developing good supervisory relationships and constructing an independent researcher identity.

The implications of this research reflect a full-fledged supervisory dyadic relationship in developing the researcher's identity. Since there are no training courses for supervisors in the Iranian context, this study has implications for universities to provide a platform where supervisors are trained, become familiar with different supervising models, and reflect on their experiences. Such an environment can be provided for doctoral students to reflect on their views and raise their awareness of the possibilities that occur during supervision. Due to the increasing number of doctoral students, the pressure on supervisors increases as well. Thus, the doctoral students' reflections remind them of the necessity for the quality of supervision through regular interactions.

This study has some limitations that are worth considering. First, it explored the standpoint of a case that had a successful supervisory relationship. Future studies can focus on multiple case designs to give generalizability to the findings. Second, the research was based on the supervisee's narration. However, both the supervisor's and supervisee's voices regarding a good successful relationship can be elaborated through further research. In addition, the researchers can apply other sources of data collection such as

observation, focus groups, and questionnaires. We hope that sharing this paper sheds light on the way doctoral students develop their research identity and the way supervisors support supervisees during their projects.

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