

Supervision at the kitchen table: Supervisory alliance and implications for scholar development



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Introduction

I met Professor Leslie Swartz during my interview at Stellenbosch for the clinical and community counselling programme in 2011. I was calm going into selection week because I believed that my chances of getting into a master's programme at 21 years of age and interviewing while still busy with my honours degree were very slim. This belief was compounded by thinking Stellenbosch would likely not take black applicants. At the time, I was ambivalent about going straight into my master's, but I had strong suggestions from my family to try. I sat nervously across from Prof. Swartz as he reviewed my transcript, and he said something to the effect of 'Your marks are really good – I see a few distinctions over the years, but I see you failed research in first year; what happened?'. This forever-stamped 'fail' would, in my mind, follow me and threaten my chances beyond that selection week. I remember looking away in embarrassment and thought, 'Oh well, might as well tell the truth', and I said something like, 'I was at a photoshoot and did not know it would take all day, so I spotted, and the paper was pure stats, and I didn't cover that in my spotting'. We laughed and moved on. Later that year, he agreed to supervise my master's minor dissertation, and three years after that, we chose each other for my doctoral journey. When his name comes up, I often say I would not be where I am without his ability to see beyond scores and political tasks of 'who is going to supervise the black kid?'. I say that last part in a crass way. However, I do wonder how much of a conversation it was that someone would have to take me on after they all deliberated about my readiness for the clinical and community counselling programme. It seemed that the perception of how much additional support I might require was influenced by the fact that I was the only black student and possibly not the strongest in research. I also comment on the deliberation over supervision because I now sit in the position of deliberating over students' readiness, where some of us often have to fight for some candidates and make commitments to supervise them the following year. I do not know what the panel's concerns were about me almost thirteen years ago, but as a panel member now, I often wonder if they debated my marks, my age or that I was the only black person coming into the programme. What I know is that I had Prof. Swartz as my research supervisor, who later became the sponsor who would mention my name in rooms without me being there – a supervisor turned sponsor who would later play a significant role in my career.

Using an autoethnographic approach, I attempt to make meaning of my supervisory experience during my master's and doctoral studies and the implications for my journey as a supervisor. I also discuss *Ubuntu* as a guiding force and argue that Prof. Swartz's *Ubuntu* and his willingness to share created the supervisory alliance that made for a successful research journey as a student. I refer to Prof. Swartz as Leslie for the rest of the community paper.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography brings to the fore the complicated and dialectical nature of lived experiences (eds. Boylorn & Orbe 2014; Parker 2014). I have written elsewhere (Shabalala 2022) about how offering my life in this way exposes me and my experience to be scrutinised and criticised. Leslie introduced me to autoethnography during my master's minor dissertation. One of the things he told me when I was writing my first article for publication was that I write best from the heart. I have had to hold on to that sentiment and not the reviewers who stated that my work was not scholarly enough. The comment from Leslie was helpful because writing my story as I continue to navigate the work world and academia has been liberating and has given me room to speak about work and its emotional impact on me. In this way, autoethnography has been an emancipating form of inquiry for me, where one is free to voice what may have been deemed unsayable (Shabalala 2022). It also allows for an interpretation of experience that could be applied

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to a particular group of people (eds. Boylorn & Orb 2014; Shabalala 2022).

Autoethnography, for me, much like Carolyn Ellis' account (Jones et al. 2016), feels like a pumping of humanness (Ramose 2015) to doing qualitative research, where the use of emotion, an evocative voice and experience are seen as resources (Jones et al. 2016). Autoethnographic work recognises that knowledge is embodied. Stacy Holman Jones notes, 'Much of the work focuses on telling stories that clearly locate the personal in the field, in the writing, and in the political contexts of research' (Jones et al. 2016:20). Stacy Holman Jones (Jones et al. 2016) further describes this methodology as a way to research and highlight how text operates to write us in and out of being.

Ubuntu as a guiding force – Fertile ground for growth

Ubuntu philosophy in higher education is something that I have been interested in recently and have tried to engage with in some of my work. In my attempt to write about it and explain my interaction with it, I found it necessary to establish a definition. While reading some definitions, I have struggled with how *Ubuntu* can be meaningfully captured or translated into English. In my language, isiZulu, it is put simply, and we all (indigenous African people) seem to understand it inherently and in a deep sense, almost as though we were all breastfed by the same mother. Here are two definitions that have resonated. Firstly, Ramose (2015) defines *Ubuntu* as a process of humanness where one has to affirm one's humanity by recognising others' humanity. He argues that humanness encompasses being, becoming, openness and ceaseless unfolding (Ramose 2015). Ramose (2015) further argues that through this process, we have no option but to be humane, respectful and polite towards one another. This is where our ethical compass is established: by doing and being in relation to others (Ramose 2015). Secondly, Desmond Tutu offers a related definition in 1999, as cited by Waghid (2020):

Ubuntu speaks to the very essence of being human. When you want to praise someone, we say, 'Yu, unobuntu;' [they have] *Ubuntu*. This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means that my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs... *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share. A person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for [they have] self-assurance that comes with knowing that [they] belong in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (pp. 300–301)

Sharing, participation and belonging are the words that constitute Ubuntu according to Desmond Tutu's definition above (Waghid 2020), which is also central to the concept of humanness, as highlighted by Ramose (2015). *Ubuntu*, a concept that ought to be as simple as being, is seemingly one that often alludes us in society in general, given the state of the world at the moment, and in higher education in

particular. Higher education has a cold culture of surveillance and competition, with 'tenacious, unforgiving gatekeepers' (Maistry 2017:128). Therefore, Leslie's openness to sharing is quite notable and worth paying attention to.

I want to discuss the idea of sharing and availability as fundamentals of *Ubuntu* by introducing the kitchen table. I found it very odd the first time Leslie suggested we meet at his house for my PhD supervision session. I asked no questions and drove to his house, which was quite close to where I stayed in Cape Town. When we got there, someone was leaving. They, too, had a meeting there. I went inside. Leslie mindfully asked if I was fine with dogs and invited me into the kitchen, where we would have our supervision meeting. One winter's day, as I walked into the kitchen, the coffee plunger was being filled, some eats were on the table, and Leslie was with several people who were all looking serious with their faces focused on their laptop screens. It looked like an *imbizo* (a gathering to share knowledge) was underway. It was a group of black doctors who had been discussing some research. Leslie introduced me and quickly told me I had two projects to choose from for my PhD, but he had a feeling about which one I would choose. I listened as they spoke about the Harambee organisation – a group of black medical specialists investigating the racialised experiences of medical trainees in the Western Cape – and their research.

I was invited to sit at this table as knowledge and coffee were shared. They spoke of their experiences, and I shared mine about clinical training. I watched in awe as they spoke about their contributions to the project – from the complicated statistics I will not pretend to remember to the data they had gathered. I was convinced on the spot that that was where I belonged, and suddenly, an opportunity and a space for me to become were offered. Within that space, my professional identity was born, co-belonging with people who shared a common goal of resolving social malaise (Waghid 2020), one that continues to contribute to my career as an academic and clinician to date. Before my research project started, an invitation to the table finally made me feel a little more at home in higher education, unlike my previous experiences (Shabalala 2018).

Growing up, some of my fondest memories involved the kitchen – where the grannies would sit for hours gossiping and speaking in code, thinking we, as the children, would not notice the conversations. It is where recipes were passed down, and I was taught how to cook. We would disappear into it when the adults were having a 'serious talk.' The kitchen holds so much meaning for me. I have never asked why he held meetings at his house and at the kitchen table. I have also wondered how his wife felt as we all walked in and out of her house, but the kitchen – him sharing his kitchen, sharing what I understand to be an intimate space – humanised him. He became my Jewish mother, who was interested in my process and ensured that I actively participated instead of being a passive higher education consumer (Shabalala & Mapaling 2024). I was fed, literally and figuratively, and this fostered a sense of citizenship in higher education.

The concept of mothering is an important notion in psychodynamic theory, object relations in particular. There is much emphasis on the early relationship between an infant and its mother and how this early relationship creates a foundation for who an individual becomes. I do not bring this conversation on object relations to liken Leslie's interactions with his students and collaborators to kin, where some would erroneously assume that one displays *Ubuntu* because of familial kinship (Waghid 2020). Waghid (2020:301) argues that one has to show a willingness to share and be open and available to others. Thus, it is a function of autonomy; after all, 'What is there to share if humans do not have the autonomy to do so?'. I discuss mothering, the intimacy that the kitchen brings, and the imbizo to highlight how research has not just been research and how it feels to me like Leslie was not just doing his job. He was in communion with us because he wanted to be. Moreover, because he has been, we are.

The kitchen table

The Jewish mother: Supervisory alliance

There is pressure in higher education to move enrolled students along and to enrol as many new master's and doctoral students as possible (Maistry 2017; Van Rensburg, Mayers & Roets 2016; Wood & Louw 2018). Supervision in research then encompasses doing enough to ensure that the student completes their research within the minimum required time (Wood & Louw 2018). This often means that the focus, especially at the master's level, is less on ensuring that students master research conceptually, preparing them for their doctoral studies and more on throughput targets (Maistry 2017; Wood & Louw 2018). This issue is especially pronounced in professional programmes, where there is room for a minor dissertation, and most of the time is spent on coursework material and work-integrated learning (Maistry 2017). Wood and Louw (2018) argue that the point of research supervision should be to develop students to be confident in their ideas and opinions, to be critical and to be open to others' opinions and critiques. Wood and Louw (2018) argue for a supervision process that encourages the value of collaborative and reflective work. The reality, however, is that within the performative era of higher education, supervisors tend to only function as technicians, divorcing themselves from embodying agendas that empower students and those that are for the greater good of society. This was not the case at this kitchen table.

There was a unique balance between Leslie being available and responsive to my needs as a student (sometimes on a practical level, like paying my registration fees out of his research funds, feeding me soup and feeding my emotions) and allowing healthy independence by taking a step back and affirming me as knowing. The concept of mothering also allows me to speak to power and how that functioned in our relationship. I have given an example above about how opportunities were offered to me before embarking on my doctoral studies, but I want to take us back to my master's. For my master's, there were times when Leslie had to be

more managerial and didactic, as more teaching and oversight were necessary. Oparinde (2021) highlights that the general concept of supervision encompasses management, oversight and direction. My master's research was about my sister's training to become a traditional healer contrasted with my training to become a psychologist. While Leslie held research and writing expertise, he made room for what he did not know and positioned me as knowing. He always tried to instil the politics of voice in me – to find my voice and bring it forward in a way that felt authentic to me and recognised it as valid and scholarly. This is particularly important because African ways of knowing and being have long been believed to exist only in narrative form and consequently contested as knowledge (Waghid 2020). Therefore, discussing my experiences as a black woman and discussing them in scholarship has been a liberating and propelling force in my career.

So, this table, the supervision space, was not contentious. Some may imagine a table and a white older man in a position of power and immediately think of Biko's (Woods 1991) words:

We are aware that a white man is sitting at our table. We know he has no right to be there; we want to remove him from our table, strip the table of all the trappings put on it by him, decorate it in true African style, settle down and then ask him to join us on our terms if he wishes. (p. 49)

Leslie embodied *Ubuntu*, and because he did, I could participate meaningfully in research and scholarship. I also want to argue that there was a humanness in him that knew when I (as I can only speak from my experience) entered that space, the table was not his, but he would join me. My research was deeply personal and was concerned with blackness. As such, it warranted a recognition that the table would have to be arranged through my imagination and experience.

For my doctoral journey, supervision was taking place against the backdrop of the fallist movement (the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements) happening at the time. It was a chilling realisation that, while I was more freely accessing my education, some were fighting for theirs. Dladla (2020), in the preface of his book *Here is a Table*, discusses that while some of us are invited to sit at the table – referring to white structures – some people are left outside the house and nowhere near the kitchen table. He further argues that the fallist movements awakened African people, wising them up to the table not being arranged in their style (Dladla 2020). I have a different story, but it is not lost on me that some supervisors may not use their power to emancipate their students.

The craft of research supervision

My supervision with Leslie also involved constant negotiation for my master's and PhD. For my master's, we had just sent my proposal in for internal review, and I remember three distinct comments. The first was

questioning the use of autoethnography, the second was whether the topic was not too big for a minor dissertation, and the third was whether we should shift the focus to 'sisters'. Leslie guided me through responding to the two former comments as they spoke more about the technical aspects of the work. For the latter, he asked me to decide what my focus was, speaking to the conceptual component of the work. I cannot remember if I immediately felt empowered when I was given a choice – a clinical master's programme is overwhelming; knowing myself, I probably just wanted to be told what to do. Memory sorting aside, I decided that the focus was more on indigenous knowledge systems and when they come into contact with Western ways of knowing and what is privileged. While there are many painful things about my master's (see Shabalala 2018), this was not one of them. I am grateful that my supervisory relationship with Leslie was not one of a once-off experience found to be painful for both student and supervisor, as Wood and Louw (2018:285) put it.

Haimbodi (2024) argues that the supervisory relationship is fundamental to the success of the learning encounter. This learning encounter is intense and requires a commitment from the supervisor (Van Rensburg et al. 2016). Quality supervision is characterised by supervisor expertise and openness to invest time in their students and guide them through the planning and execution of their projects (Heyns et al. 2019). Furthermore, supervisors must achieve several outcomes during the supervisory process to facilitate a conceptual understanding of research. These include, but are not limited to, promoting a sense of agency, maintaining the supervisory relationship, fostering student learning and adjusting their pedagogical approaches to meet student competencies (Vereijken et al. 2018).

In retrospect, I believe I was not as prepared for my PhD when I was starting, which may have been attributed to having done a predominantly coursework master's. My saving grace was that there was continuity from my master's to my doctorate, with having the same supervisor who would have had insight into my relative strengths and weaknesses. Had I not continued with Leslie, the assumption would have been that as a student with a master's degree, I ought to be coming in with the necessary competency to conduct (particularly conceptually) a research project (Maistry 2017). Thankfully for me, this was not the case. The other benefit was that when we verbally contracted to do a PhD together, Leslie encouraged me to apply for the Graduate School of Arts PhD programme. This was a structured scholarship programme, where students were funded by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). Our cohort comprised students from different departments and countries embarking on different kinds of work. I am still in touch with a few people from my cohort, and I am grateful for those connections from which I learned so much. Having a cohort also made the doctoral process less isolating. We had compulsory seminars that we had to attend regardless of what our topics were and what

methods we were using. For example, we had to learn how to use data analysis software by doing a graded assignment. This ensured that we were exposed to various theoretical and methodological resources. I assume that part of why this was done was to ensure that the responsibility to gain mastery over data analysis, theory and writing was not solely placed on the student to do in their own time to catch up to what was expected in supervision (Maistry 2017).

For me, finishing both higher degrees in record time was not the measure of successful supervisory processes. The measure has been my willingness to engage in critical reflection, openness to collaboration across institutions and thinking about my research as necessary for practice, teaching, learning and being. It is also evident in how I have adopted a constant learning attitude and humbled myself to what I know and do not know; after all, 'we do not do PhDs to show how smart we are', as Leslie would say.

Lessons learned and 'Becoming' a research supervisor

In 2019, I was finalising my PhD and started working full-time in an academic position. I have written a reflective piece elsewhere on my entry into the South African academy (Shabalala 2022), so I will not rehash the story here. What I want to pick up here, however, is the experience of trying to finish my PhD for examination and being given students to supervise simultaneously. Maistry (2017) discusses how complex the South African research supervisory process is. Given the pressure of enrolment targets and the subsequent pressure to meet the university's post-graduate throughput target, there is also an issue of inadequate research supervision capacity (Wood & Louw 2018). There are not enough supervisors to meet the demand (Waghid 2015), and there is also the issue of supervisors, much like me, who fell into supervising master's and PhD students while finishing or having recently finished their doctoral studies (Maistry 2017). Maistry (2017) further discusses the concept of liminality in higher education – an uncertain period of transition, where emerging academics who are often inexperienced as supervisors are conducting supervision, sometimes while finishing their degrees. As Maistry (2017) has argued, the challenge for me is that I hardly had time to metabolise what I had learned to help students get to where they needed to be. I have called my grappling with uncertainty and anxiety in the supervision process as having to learn supervision by osmosis (Shabalala 2022). The other problem is that in higher education, globally, clarity on what constitutes research supervision is lacking (Almlöv & Grubbström 2024). Almlöv and Grubbström (2024) also highlight that novice supervisors (largely early career academics) often become co-supervisors. In their study, Almlöv and Grubbström (2024) found that novice co-supervisors carried the emotional load of students while they experienced the supervision culture as closed. This leads to ambivalence while figuring out where their responsibilities start and end (Almlöv & Grubbström 2024).

I will admit that writing this community paper has forced me to reflect on my research supervision over the years and wonder what has informed that. I have seen several master's students through their research and am currently busy with several doctoral students. However, my statement haunts me as I draw near the end of this reflective piece. The statement relates to the success of the supervisory process, which is not necessarily measured by students graduating in record time. As Waghid (2015) argues, the importance of knowledge production cannot just be about performing a technical exercise that produces a technically compliant manuscript. Research and the academy are to produce work that responds to complex societal needs (Waghid 2015, 2020).

So, as a researcher waiting to emerge, I have to ask myself if I have reached the conceptual threshold to do this work with integrity. I can also not truly reflect on Leslie's supervision style beyond my experience. My fantasy would be for him to write a research supervision for dummies handbook for me to call upon when that anxiety hits, as it often does. In writing this community paper and trying to notice what he was doing and how he did it, I learned a lot about being your student's champion, not in a weird, infantilising way. Ubuntu and its potential for pedagogical encounters could be a force of decoloniality within the teaching and learning space. Ubuntu undermines exclusion and humiliation that can result from encounters with supervision. The unintentional harm and disempowerment of students, which results in feelings of exclusion and humiliation, is often associated with supervisors inadequately attending to issues of power and privilege within the supervisory encounter (Kovič & McMahan 2023). Co-belonging in supervision encourages students to act freely, as co-belonging is connected to the freedom to inquire critically (Waghid 2020). I have learned that sometimes co-creating the space with your student fosters a sense of independence and an attitude of lifelong learning. I suppose Leslie is constantly teaching me beyond the kitchen table.

Mentorship is essential to emerging scholars' success and career advancement (Dhunpath 2018). I am aware of some supportive structures in the form of workshops for supervisors at my current institution. However, these often occur during teaching time. At my institution, we are enrolled in mentorship programmes that provide some supportive structures. A challenge emerging academics face in getting appropriate mentorship opportunities is identifying willing and able mentors (Dhunpath 2018). This is also exacerbated by academics' preoccupation with their own success, given the neoliberal publish or perish imperative. Dhunpath (2018) express how unfortunate this is because of how important mentorship is in fostering a sense of confidence and competence in emerging scholars. Much of my success is because of the mentorship programme I am enrolled in and from my supervisory relationship with Leslie extending beyond the pedagogical encounter to mentorship and sometimes sponsorship.

Appropriate, well-matched mentorship aids emerging scholars' success in higher education (Dhunpath 2018). Therefore, the mentee-mentor dyad ought to be a good fit, with the mentor mindful of cross-race relationality (relating across racial differences), as higher-ranking academics are still predominantly white in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Mentorship as a concept can be elusive and ill-defined (Dhunpath 2018). Mentorship programmes within academic institutions must have well-defined mentorship models. This is especially true because specific academic tasks, like supervision, need training and guidance to create competency in the emerging supervisor (Dhunpath 2018).

In lieu of a conclusion, thank you, Leslie

Leslie knows that wrapping up thoughts and writing conclusions has never been a strength of mine, but he has also told me that the type of work I usually engage in can seldom be wrapped up easily. A colleague recently told me that for the kind of work we do, a conclusion is often never a conclusion but rather the start of a conversation. So, maybe that is what I am doing here: starting a conversation. As a guiding force, Ubuntu offers us a unique opportunity as South African scholars. It feels like a superpower written in our DNA that, if called upon, could help us realise the radical transformation we seek as a country and in the academy. Centring Ubuntu in supervision with our students could lead to transformational learning, which is necessary for them to develop as independent and critical thinkers. Attention must be paid to the experiences of emerging scholars who may be suffering in silence while trying to fulfil the demands of their jobs. More effort has to be put into enabling emerging researchers to do their jobs effectively. It is alarming how many conversations I have daily where young academics struggle to see a career in academia (Shabalala & Mapaling 2024). Leslie's long and gracious career should be a call to all of us to do and be better for ourselves and others. It takes nothing away from us to open up resources and share our time and experience. The gatekeeping culture is threatening, and the loss of academic freedom felt by academics is disheartening.

I feel indebted to Leslie for selflessly supporting me throughout my career, and the only way for me to feel like it was worth the effort he made and the time he invested in me is to embody that grace and humanness myself – *ngibenobuntu* (and embody Ubuntu). Leslie, I do not have enough words to thank you for how much you have invested in me and continue to do so. I am truly grateful to you.

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Disclaimer

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