Every Supervisor tells me his or her own things: a personal lived experience with working with two PhD Supervisors

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Abstract

Various studies have explored PhD supervision worldwide, but with a paucity of studies on experiences with two supervisors. This paper recounts the personal lived experience with working with two supervisors at the PhD level to inspire fresher PhD candidates locally, regionally and globally. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework, the paper retells both positive and negative experiences, focusing on three ambivalent types of experience with working with two PhD supervisors: (i) balanced attitudes and perseverance with seniority,(ii) matching the supervisors-supervisee working pace, and (iii) handling two supervisors' diverging content orientations, which led to timely completion of PhD studies. The paper argues that experience with two PhD supervisors is both enjoyable and challenging, but candidates have to be equipped with strategic interpersonal skills. It informs fresher PhD candidates about tips on strategies to deal with two supervisors and lessons for timely completion of PhD journey.

Key words: *Personal lived experiences, PhD supervision, two supervisors, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, University of Rwanda*

Introduction and background

Experiences with PhD supervision, with its both positive and negative experiences, on the side of candidates and supervisors have been explored widely (Devos, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Frenay, Azzi, Galand & Klein, 2016; Gazzola et al., 2014; Harman, 2003; Hockey, 1996; Winfield, 1987; Wright & Lodwick, 1989; Hill et al., 1994). However, studies on experiences with two supervisors are still limited while fresher candidates in Rwandan universities, in the region and beyond need to hear and learn from such experiences. This is because PhD programmes in Rwandan universities, including the University of Rwanda – College of Education, are still new since the first cohort started in 2015-2016 academic year. This insinuates that the supervision component at the PhD level is still in its infancy, not only for the PhD candidates but for the supervisors as well. Hence, it can be argued that experiences with supervision are likely to be frightening on the side of both candidates and supervisors. This paper was conceptualized within the framework of reflecting on the lived experiences from lecturers who completed their PhD recently so as to inform the candidates about such lived experience, with the purpose to inform them about the strategies and behaviours to adopt for timely completion and smooth run of the PhD journey, which is a great concern for most of the fresher PhD candidates. It is within this background that this paper reflects on the personal lived experiences with two PhD supervisors, by recounting both the positive and negative experiences, the level of satisfaction but particularly the tactful strategies and the adopted attitudes that led to timely completion. The paper argues that retelling such experiences and the adopted strategies might bring new insights and inspire PhD candidates locally, regionally and globally. Hence, fresher PhD candidates and junior PhD supervisors might draw lessons from experiences recounted in this paper that may shape their PhD journey, alleviate their fear and lead to the ultimate goal of smooth and timely completion of a doctoral programme.

2. Brief literature on experiences with PhD supervision

A number of studies have been conducted on experiences with PhD supervision. The reviewed literature focuses on PhD candidates and their supervisors' level of satisfaction with PhD supervision, particularly when it is done by two supervisors. It also explores positive experiences with PhD supervision, as well as negative experiences with two PhD supervisors.

2.1. Level of satisfaction with PhD supervision

Currently, the supervision of PhD research projects is a common practice in all universities and higher learning institutions worldwide. Harman (2003) observed that the appointment of two or more supervisors had increasingly become a common practice and it is regarded as the best practice in universities. A lot of literature has been written on experiences with PhD supervision, both on the supervisors' and students' side (Devos, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Frenay, Azzi, Galand & Klein, 2016; Gazzola et al., 2014; Harman, 2003; Hockey, 1996; Winfield, 1987; Wright & Lodwick, 1989; Hill et al., 1994).

On the supervisors' side for instance, Hockey (1996) researched on supervisors' motives to choose to supervise PhD students. Three blended motives stood out from the findings: (i) the Supervisors' intellectual motives, which are related to their attainment of intellectual knowledge in particular disciplines; (ii) their functional motives, which are related to their perceptions of tangible benefits, material or otherwise, and their relationships with their PhD students, and (iii) subjective motives based on their self-esteem in fulfilling their academic role as PhD supervisors. Such various motives apply whether the supervision is done by one or two supervisors, and they might be applicable to PhD supervision at the University of Rwanda – College of Education.

On the side of PhD students, Harman (2003) analyzed the students' level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their male and female supervisors in two Australian universities found that females were more dissatisfied with supervision than males. The main reasons for dissatisfaction were the supervisors' inaccessibility caused by heavy workloads, and weaknesses in supervision practice (Harman, 2003). Similarly, Devos, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Frenay, Azzi, Galand and Klein (2016) explored the experiences related to the misfits and incongruence that occur between PhD students and their supervisors. The findings from this study revealed that PhD students either learn to live with such misfit; suffer from it without being able to address the problem with their supervisors, manage to address the issue with their supervisors, or are unable to address the issue because it reached a point of no return. These experiences can also inspire and inform PhD students and their supervisors at the University of Rwanda – College of Education.

Based on the above mentioned description, it is evident that experiences with PhD supervision is ambivalent, bearing both positive and negative experiences. The next section of this paper explores positive versus negative experiences with PhD supervision.

2.2. Positive experiences with PhD supervision

PhD supervision bears a number of good and positive experiences and various studies have explored this component worldwide. An illustrating example is from Gazzola et al. (2014) who examined positive experiences of supervisors who were doing PhD supervision for the first time in Canadian universities. The positive

experiences which were portrayed by those supervisors include (i) the positive value of feedback;(ii) enhanced confidence in using a variety of supervision tasks;(iii) positive impact of supervision experience on other professional practice; (iv) increased familiarity with PhD students; and(v) increased comfort in serving as a supervisor and co-supervisor. Similarly, Paglis, Green and Bauer (2006) indicated that effective supervisor and quality supervision had positive impact on PhD candidates' research productivity, self-efficacy and commitment. In the same angle of vision, Jairam and Kahl (2012) demonstrated that when the supervisor's role such as professional support, effective feed-back, advice, and problem-solving assistance is played effectively, it lead to quick doctoral completion. All these positive experiences are in congruence with what the author experienced in his PhD journey, which led to timely completion of PhD research project. That is why this paper argues that such positive experiences apply whether the supervision is done by one supervisor or two or several supervisors. Despite these positive experiences, PhD supervision sometimes imbeds negative experiences, as described below.

2.3. Negative experiences with two PhD supervisors

In line with experiences with two supervisors, Bramson (1988) argues that the serious negative experience in PhD supervision is to get two supervisors who are classified in the categories of 'difficult people'. In this regard, those supervisors whom Bramson (1988) attributes the vice of 'difficult people' are said to display bad characters including being hostile and aggressive; being super busy all the times; being complainer, silent unresponsive, negativist, know-it-all, indecisive and excessively hands-on micromanager (Bramson, 1988). Such supervisors are said to delay students in completing their PhD programs. Similarly, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson (2005) who analyzed the person-supervisor fit, with reference to value and personality congruence between a person and his/her supervisor, found that there are negative impact that prompt misfit, including bad attitudes, poor performance, withdrawal behaviours, strain and tenure (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Other negative experiences, which Devos, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Frenay, Azzi, Galand and Klein (2016) describe as misfits include (i) a mismatch between the students' and their supervisors' aspirations for the doctoral project; (ii) incongruence between the supervisors' and students' values and priorities; and (iii) a mismatch between the supervisor's supporting style and the students' needs or expectations for supervision. It is with no doubt that such negative experiences with PhD supervision hamper the smooth run of this supervision, leading to bitterness and dissatisfaction on the side PhD candidates and their supervisors as well. Hence, such negative experiences can inform the fresher PhD candidates and their supervisors, to enable them to select the best practices in the supervision journey. The next section describes the theoretical framework that guides this paper.

3. Theoretical framework guiding the reflection on lived experience

This study explores the lived experiences with two supervisors. It is anchored within the lens of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was proposed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).The main concern of IPA, as Welman and Kruger (2001, p. 8)have described it, is to understand "human behavior from the perspectives of the people involved". Based on Kilbride's (2003) description, IPA sits in the philosophical movement of phenomenology because it strongly believes in arguments put forward by the Philosopher Edmund Husserl and supported by subsequent phenomenologists or interpretivists, arguing to go "back to the things

themselves" (Smith et al., 2009, p.1) and try to understand the lived experiences based on how participants themselves make sense of their experiences. The main belief for phenomenology, as Chilisa and Preece (2005, p. 28) argue, is that "truth lies within the human experience and is therefore multiple; it is time, space and context bound".

The choice of this theoretical framework in this paper was motivated by the fact that it fits for these kinds of study on lived experiences. Such a choice is in line with Smith et al.'s (2009, p. 1) argument that IPA "is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms", to mean that it explores individual's personal perception or account of an event or state rather than attempting to produce an objective record of the event or state itself (Smith et al., 2009).In this paper, IPA as a theoretical framework serves both as an appropriate theory guiding the reflection and as a tool for analysis. As a theory, it shapes the understanding of the lived experiences based on how the participant himself, i.e. the author of this paper makes sense of his experiences, reflecting his underlying feelings and thoughts, as well as his personal world (Kilbride, 2003).In this regard, though the author of this paper is at the same time a participant reflecting on his own experience, APA enabled him to reproduce an objective record of the event, as Smith et al. (2009) have argued. As an analytical tool, IPA is characterized with its detailed and thick description as well as its analytic focus of the phenomenon under study (Smith et al., 2009). It was therefore found to be the most appropriate in guiding the reflection in this paper.

4. Methodology

As highlighted in the theoretical framework, the theoretical lenses that are guiding this reflection on experiences with two PhD supervisors are based on personal lived experiences. That is why the adopted methodology builds around the personal narratives and personal stories (Creswell, 2013; Orodho, Nzabalirwa, Odundo, Waweru & Ndayambaje, 2016), whereby the personal lived experiences constitute the data bank, which the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) attempts to analyse and make sense out of it. The fact that this reflection is based on personal lived experiences gives credit to revelation of some components of the author's and the supervisors' biographies, though it may sound unethical. However, the argument about studies on lived experiences is that they give credit to such revelation, as they are part and parcel of those experiences, constituting the data that feed the arguments. It is within this context that it is to be revealed that the author of this paper worked with two supervisors for his PhD research project and managed to complete his PhD by research in three years and three months. The lived experiences that are being narrated in this paper cover the period of three years and three months, that is from 15th September 2011 to 31stDecember 2014. I had two supervisors for my PhD research project, a Professor and a Senior Lecturer.The next section reflects and discusses such personal lived experiences.

5. Reflection and discussion on lived experience with two supervisors

As described in the theoretical framework section above, the reflection is guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which is adopted in this paper, to recount the lived experience with two PhD supervisors. This reflection displays how the author managed to work with them, the challenges he encountered, how he handled them, the attitudes and the strategies he adopted and how his experience can inspire fresher PhD candidates and junior supervisors locally, regionally and beyond. Indeed, experiences might be similar even

if the contexts might be different. Those experiences that embed the secrets that helped him to perfectly work with two supervisors and finish before the allocated four years are summarized into three main experiences, which are the following:

Experience 1: Balanced attitudes and supervisors' seniority awareness

"When I arrived at the university for my PhD studies, my faculty informed me that I had two supervisors, but it was not clear who was the main supervisor and who was the co-supervisor". In such a situation, I was not sure whether the Faculty did it intentionally or by error. I was about to ask officially from the Faculty, but my consciousness advised me not to bother about it, just to treat them on equal footing. I treated them like this until I completed my PhD; I never asked them who was the main supervisor or the co-supervisor. They always signed as equal supervisors, or whoever was available assisted me as the main supervisor".

"Such a state of affairs worried me in the beginning, but it was beneficial for me as a PhD candidate in the end. The benefit was that there was no power-relations conflict based on seniority among the supervisors. Hence, I never observed any superiority or inferiority complex in my supervisors based on being the main supervisor or the co-supervisor. Rather, the supervision meetings were held with mutual respect, both of them present and treating one another equally. I preserved such attitudes of treating them equally from the beginning to completion and I can testify that my perseverance or my attitudes towards such a state of affairs yielded positive results. I therefore qualify this experience as '*Striking the balance between your attitude and your supervisors' attitudes (attitudinal orientation) towards supervision*'".

Such an experience tends to be in line with Gazzola et al.'s (2014) positive experiences, especially on the component of increased comfort in serving as a supervisor and co-supervisor, whereby my supervisors did not bother with these supervision positions. Rather, I observed that they were animated by effective and quality supervision (Paglis, Green & Bauer, 2006); as well as providing professional support, effective feed-back and advice, as described in Jairam and Kahl's (2012) study. I observed that my experiences with my two supervisors did not exhibit Bramson's (1988) bad attributes or bad characters of some supervisors, such as being hostile and aggressive; being super busy all the times; being complainer, silent unresponsive, negativist, know-it-all, and indecisive because I never observed such characters from my two supervisors. Such experiences can serve a lesson to be emulated by supervisors and fresher PhD candidates at the University of Rwanda – College of Education.

Experience 2: Matching the supervisors-supervisee working pace

At the beginning of my PhD journey, my working pace was higher than the one of my two supervisors, but I had to slow down to accommodate to their pace. "I remember I produced a 70 page document within the first two months. When I submitted it to my two supervisors, it was returned unread, with two diverging comments: that it was too early to produce 70 pages, and that it was too ambitious…!"

I got frustrated with such negative feedback, and the strategy that I adopted was to sit down and analyze my two supervisors' schedules, one by one. Thereafter, I opted to submit chunks by chunks, sections by sections, or chapter by chapter, but at regular intervals and it worked perfectly. By submitting manageable chunks or sections at regulars intervals, my two supervisors got used to my pace, and slowly by slowly, we

ended up moving on the same pace. After submitting any section or any chapter, I tried to concentrate on the supervisor whose schedule seemed to be less tight for quick feedback. The problem in this regard was that my two supervisors had adopted to give me feedback together or simultaneously in a supervision meeting; but I always strived to get some views from one of the supervisors in advance. To get quick feedback, I used to send regular but very polite reminders for appointments and for feedback, sometimes through informal encounters. All these strategies helped me to match my working pace with the one of my two supervisors and I qualify this experience as *"matching your schedule or working pace to those of your two supervisors or chairing your schedule together with concomitant or diverging schedules of your two supervisors"*.

With this experience, the fact that my supervisors returned the initial draft unread seems to be in line with Devos et al.'s (2016) misfit or mismatch between the supervisors' aspirations on the PhD project and my aspirations and expectations. Viewed from Kristof-Brown et al.'s (2005) perspective, I can say that this rejection of the initial draft represents the student-supervisor misfit at the beginning. However, the fact that the mismatch was addressed very soon recalls Devos et al.'s (2016) solution to the misfit where the student manages to address the issue with their supervisor. The subsequent smooth run of the PhD journey is in line with Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson's (2005) description of the person-supervisor fit, where value and personality congruence is observed between a person and his/her supervisor.

Experience 3: Handling two supervisors' diverging content orientations

"I was to present my theoretical framework at one of the PhD weekend sessions; I prepared the slides for presentation which I had to discuss and agree upon with my two supervisors before the presentation. We scheduled the meeting on Friday evening, and the presentation was on the following morning. At my arrival at the meeting place, one supervisor was present, while the other was busy in the School management meeting. The one in the meeting requested me to email him the slides, and then I started working with the supervisor who was present. I and this supervisor agreed on the theoretical framework, we shaped it and backed it perfectly. By the end of the discussions, around 11.00 p.m., the second supervisor sent an email refuting completely the theoretical framework we had adopted and suggesting totally opposing theories…!! Seeing this feedback, I got puzzled and it was already midnight. The supervisor had to leave, he left me with the message that I was the one to make judgment, after all it was my study and not the supervisors".

Having observed the diverging theoretical orientations from my two supervisors, I immediately went to my room, puzzled. It was already midnight and my presentation was scheduled the following morning. I knew my supervisors would be present in the presentation, assessing how I abide to the theoretical principles of each. I decided to spend the whole night seeking the balance between their diverging theoretical orientations. I merged their theories and came up with a blended one. The following morning, I presented the blended theory, and noticed that everyone was nodding as a sign of satisfaction. At the end of the presentation, they congratulated me, saying that they were happy with the way I came up with a blended theory. Such a strategy of fusing the theoretical views from the two supervisors was beneficial and enabled me to move forward, with both of them satisfied. That is why I have qualified this experience as *"managing the two supervisors' diverging but complementary views or their diverging content orientations"*

Again, this experience and the strategy adopted allude to Gazzola et al.'s (2014) positive value of feedback and high confidence instilled in the PhD candidate. This is because as much as I received positive, complementary but diverging feedback, I had developed such high level of confidence that I developed a blended theory from the diverging orientations that I got from my two supervisors. The next section highlights the lessons that candidates who have embarked on PhD journey recently can draw from this paper.

From the three types of experience discussed in this paper, the fresher PhD candidates and junior supervisors can draw the following lessons:

Lesson 1: This paper can inspire every PhD candidate who has two supervisors to strive to accommodate his / her attitudes and behaviours to those of his/her two supervisors or at least to one of the supervisors;

Lesson 2: They can learn to be perseverant and be less mindful about the position of the main supervisor and the co-supervisor; because, sometimes it is beneficial not to bother about their positions but about their ideas;

Lesson 3: They should strive to be confident as PhD candidates; and they should strategically maneuver to match their working pace to the one of their supervisors;

Lesson 4: They should always consult their supervisors, but they have to take the lead in their PhD theses because "it is their theses in any case and not their supervisors'";

Lesson 5: They always need to consider their supervisors' diverging views on content, but they must strive as much as possible to convince their supervisors with their argument.

6. Implications of this paper

The reflection and arguments from this paper have policy and attitudinal implications. From the experience with less mindfulness about the position of the main supervisor and the co-supervisor, as reflected in this paper; it can be argued that universities need to revisit their policies and attitudes about focusing on the position of the supervisors. It is a common practice for almost all universities to allocate the main supervisor and the co-supervisor, with much legalization of the positions. This sometimes creates imbalanced power relations between supervisors, leading sometimes to poor supervision. Experience in this paper shows that less mindfulness about supervisor's position and seniority leads to quality supervision. Hence, this paper recommends universities and institutions of higher learning to review their PhD supervision policies and allocate supervisors on equal footing, putting aside the positions of main supervisor and co-supervisor. In this regard, the paper advises prosperous universities to remain silent on these positions of PhD main supervisor and co-supervisor, but rather appoint them with equal status and invite them to work cooperatively and responsibly. The paper recommends this because some PhD students would tend to think that the main supervisor's comments matter than the ones from the co-supervision and this can cause some academic conflicts. Additionally, the two supervisors should equally be hold accountable about the progress of PhD supervision, instead of leaving the main responsibility to the main supervisor, as it is observed in various universities and institutions of higher learning.

Another implication is about attitudinal change on the side of PhD candidates. The current attitudes show that various candidates view PhD research project as intimidating and difficult to complete on time. For sure, it requires tedious work and high level of commitment, as various studies have revealed, but the experiences described in this paper gives encouragement that with strategic interpersonal skills and positive

attitudes, fresher PhD candidates can complete it within the allocated time and even less. Again, we are cognizant that there are other factors that may contribute or hinder the timely completion and smooth supervision of PhD programmes, but the focus of this paper was about supervision with two supervisors.

Conclusion

Postgraduate studies, including PhD programmes, are sometimes intimidating but they are achievable. If others have managed to complete them, fresher PhD candidates should build confidence and hope to complete them even quicker. It is within this spirit that this paper has explored the lived experiences with two PhD supervisors. The overall argument in this paper is that experience with two PhD supervisors is both enjoyable and challenging, but it has to be tackled strategically by endeavouring to strike the balance in terms of views (content orientation), attitudes (attitudinal orientation) and working pace. Hence, for successful supervision and quick completion of PhD research projects, every candidate and his / her two supervisors need to draw from the portrayal of a particular moral and professional identity (Goffman, 1959); and from the depiction of 'moral realities' (Silverman, 1985)as academic researchers, because, this paper has demonstrated that positive moral portrayal prompts smooth and quality PhD supervision.

To sum up, the experiences described in this paper are in agreement with the argument that PhD journey is enjoyable with a slogan "Knowledge is power", especially when it is viewed from Turner's (2015) perspective as 'a higher level and enjoyable discussions of science'. Similarly, some other experiences described in this paper support the view that such a PhD journey is also a challenging even if it is inspiring and enjoyable. In this paper, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with its detailed description and its analysis based on the informant's understanding of the lived experiences has enabled the author to reflect on his lived experiences with two PhD supervisors from phenomenology perspective. The softness and hardness of the PhD journey with two supervisors have been tackled from three angles reflected in three experiences, and the key lesson and recommendation for fresher PhD candidates, is that PhD journey becomes shorter when tackled strategically, with positive attitudes, strategic interpersonal skills, critical thinking, situational analysis of every PhD stage, and above all with the two supervisors working cooperatively and responsibly.

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