

# **Fighting for space in supervision: fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies**

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In higher education the supervision of graduate research students is an uncertain practice. When given the opportunity, supervisors and students ask what it means and how it should be done. In this paper, the author interprets the uncertain state of supervision affairs as an effect of many competing and contradictory social discourses that offer us more ways of making sense of supervision than in the past. Each discourse figures its Loyal Supervisor and Student, its 'Proper' Supervision, in particular ways. These are the multiple and contradictory fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies of the title. First each discourse is described and then a close reading is given of some extracts of data from the author's research with Master's students and their supervisors to illustrate various discourses at work. Finally, there is discussion of which discourses are the most powerful at the present time and some implications, both dangers *and* fruitful possibilities, of the author's interpretation are suggested.

## **Introduction: the uncertain scene of supervision**

Right now, graduate supervision is a deeply uncertain practice. What's more, in a context of proliferating graduate student numbers and diversity, inflating fees and credentials as well as intensifying accountability, the practical questions of how much supervision is needed or expected and how it is best done are loaded. For instance, in the many supervision workshops I have done over the last 10 years with Master's and PhD students, the same kinds of questions nearly always arise (verbatim from workshop activity sheets): 'What can I expect from my supervisor, what does s/he expect from me? How often should we meet? Exactly what is supervision, assisting or directing?' The students' questions are mirrored by those of new supervisors (also verbatim): 'What are my responsibilities? What role should I take at different levels of study

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ISSN 0951-8398 (print)/ISSN 1366-5898 (online)/05/030337-18

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DOI: 10.1080/09518390500082483

e.g. how much intervention? Who/what is being supervised—the student or the research? How do you keep a student on track?’ Such questions have multiple, sometimes conflicting, answers. Moreover, they are rarely addressed in the actual practice of supervision, forming a terrain of uncertainty which the student dares not speak of and the supervisor cares not to. This terrain is a fertile ground for student–supervisor misunderstandings.

Why supervision should be so uncertain is an interesting theoretical puzzle, as well as an important practical one. I want to focus on the former here by offering a particular interpretation of the contemporary scene of supervision. In my view, there is a proliferation of discourses (systems of meaning) that produce supervision as a cultural practice. While there are limits to the ways we can ‘sensibly’ think, speak and enact supervision, these limits shift and slide as a function of the rich discursive context. Such slipperiness is a mixed blessing for the lived experience of supervision: it is potentially problematic in so far as differently positioned supervisors and students may talk past each other, but also fruitful in so far as there are more possibilities for diverse and pleasurable supervisor and student subjectivities and supervision exchanges. I argue that such abundant possibilities set the scene for the troublesome uncertainties experienced by supervisors and students.

To make my case, I sketch the outlines of the Loyal Supervisor and Student subjectivities and the Proper Supervision constituted by several more or less powerful discourses of supervision. These outlines suggest some recognizable stereotypes which function as the fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies of my title. Then I shall analyse and discuss several moments of discursive ‘richness’ in data from my research with Master’s students and supervisors in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Finally, I shall explore some implications of this way of theorizing supervision.

### **Some notes on methodology**

This article arises from a study of supervision that has several dimensions: a critical analysis of the research literature on supervision, a close examination of some institutional practices such as supervision codes and student satisfaction surveys, and an empirical investigation into the views and practices of several (five) supervisor and student pairs through interviews and audio-taped supervision meetings. The argument I forward here draws on some of the analysis of both the ‘public’ data of the research literature and the ‘private’ data from interviews with supervisors and students.

The Foucauldian idea of discourses as sociohistorical systems of meanings and knowledges that ‘intertwine with power [to] create speaking-acting subjects’ (Foucault, 1974, p. 47) is central here. In this view, every way in which we can think of ourselves as persons and agents is a historically constituted effect of a substantial social formation. Supervisors and students are just such agents—human subjects who purposively act, although *always* in constrained sorts of ways from within discourses. Because I am interested in exploring both the possibilities and the constraints for acting in supervision, the idea of discourse is useful to me: it situates our ‘private’

actions in the broader ‘public’ social context without suggesting that they are narrowly determined by any particular element of it. While for Foucault discourses encompass words and things, the sayable and the visible (Kendall & Wickham, 1999), in this analysis I have focused on language as evidence of sense-making—as evidence of the ways institutions and researchers understand supervisors and students, and the ways supervisors and students understand themselves and each other.

Broadly speaking, the methodology I use here is genealogical. Through it, I am attempting to make supervision graspable as a ‘singular ensemble of practices’ (Meadmore *et al.*, 2000, p. 465) with historical, although non-progressive, lines of descent. A genealogy points to a certain order in the proliferation of supervision practices: after all, I am arguing there are identifiable discourses at work. Yet, at the same time, it illuminates the unruliness with which these discourses play out in the lived experience of supervisors and students. So, with an eye on the past, I explore here the present of supervision as made sense of by supervisors and students. I am interested in how we come to variously understand and perform ourselves *as* supervisors and students, what pleasures and subjugations we experience through being subjects of discourses. My intention in all this is to make the familiar strange (Meadmore *et al.*, 2000) and therefore questionable, so that we might be alert to closures in our thinking about supervision, and be moved to imagine how things could be otherwise.

More specifically I have carried out a Foucauldian-infused ‘discourse analysis’ on the interview extracts below. Discourse analysis is a contested field with a variety of possible stances and tactics (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Silverman, 1993; Janks, 1997; Powers, 2001; Willig, 2001). My approach has two steps. First, I have drawn on a range of texts to identify the different public discourses that are circulating around supervision and to construct fairytale images of their ‘proper’ supervisors and students as subjects marked by different kinds of capacities. Second, I have used a close reading of text (akin to the method used in some forms of literary criticism (Lynn, 1998) to trace the presence of these subjectivities in the sense-making of supervisors and students found in interview data and to speculate on some of their effects.

Before proceeding, though, let me clarify my use of ‘proper’ and ‘loyal’. Proper, in this usage, signifies the unnaturalness of all forms of supervisor and student subjectivities, indeed of supervision, because they exist as ‘effects of a compulsory system’ (Butler, 1998, p. 722). Thus ‘proper supervision’ of any kind is a matter of sociohistorical contingency. I like the word also for its suggestion of morality, which offers us insight into the intensity with which students in particular recount experiences of having been ‘wronged’ by the other party to supervision. Moreover, as Erica McWilliam in her book *Pedagogical pleasures* (1999) points out, the way our pleasures as teachers and students are understood as proper or improper has changed over time. I would add that more than one understanding of proper pleasures coexists in the present, especially in the relatively lightly regulated zones of education like graduate research supervision (so far, at least). This can be problematic, especially where the teacher’s pleasures and the student’s are asymmetrical, such that one’s pleasure is another’s pain.

My choice of the word 'loyal' is also a deliberate one. Following Joan Cocks (1989), I'm using it to mark a posture—a way of cultivating the self—which is faithful to a certain 'cultural-political regime' (1989, p. 195). In life, not many of us are totally loyal to any one sense of self. Indeed, loyal subjects are, as I have already remarked, more fantastical than real. Nevertheless, the idea that discourses objectify (Foucault, 1986) certain forms of subjectivity is a useful one for making sense of some of the uncertainties in supervision, as I shall show.

### **Circulating discourses of supervision**

#### *To begin my task*

The discourses of supervision are found in various sites: the international scholarly literature on supervision, local institutional policies and practices, 'self-help' manuals for supervisors and students, and supervisor–student interactions. The most powerful infuse almost every site, others appear only in some. However, no discourse totally dominates the scene. In my view the four most powerful discourses competing for loyal subjects in arts, humanities and social sciences supervision in Aotearoa New Zealand at this time are the psychological, the traditional-academic, the techno-scientific and the neo-liberal. But there are others on the margins, in particular the radical and the psychoanalytic discourses and possibly an indigenous Kaupapa Maori one. Let me now give you a sense of how each discourse constitutes its Loyal Supervisor and Student, its Proper Supervision with its characteristic power relations. (I use capitals to mark these constructs as ideal-types which lived experience rarely matches exactly.)

Over the twentieth century, the psychological discourse became *the* way of understanding ourselves in Western societies (Rose, 1996). When 'we seek self-fulfilment' (interviewer cited in Foucault, 1991, p. 349), or understand feelings to be 'most relevant for morality' (op. cit., p. 352), then we are the Psy-self. The Psy-self is made of many capacities (intelligence, motivation, satisfaction, self-esteem, emotions, personality, mental well-being etc.), which are distributed unequally in populations but which can be measured in order to ascertain the position of an individual in relation to the norm. (The concept of the norm is a key psy-construct.)

The psychological discourse constitutes its loyal Psy-Supervisor as a caring, expert professional:

To take seriously, as a PhD supervisor, the creative nature of PhD research, with all the difficult personal demands it must inevitably make on its students, means undertaking a very different kind of role and responsibility from the one conventionally adopted. The quality that supervision needs above all to offer is that of *personal support*. (Salmon, 1992, p. 20, emphasis added)

While the Psy-Supervisor, as an expert or professional researcher, has a full and tested measure of key capacities such as intelligence, she/he is first and foremost a source of motivation and support for the Psy-Student. As a 'whole person' (comprising mind and body), she/he has emotions and personality, both of which are relevant to proper

Psy-Supervision. (A problem, however, is that these crucial capacities are not formally measured and so students who want to assess their ‘compatibility’ with their supervisor ask other students.) Likewise the Psy-Student is a whole person but one who is inexperienced and uncalculated with regard to the task of independent research and therefore in need of help. Proper Psy-Supervision is the process by which, through a supportive interpersonal relationship, the expert sensitively and flexibly (Hockey, 1996) guides the novice along a developmental trajectory to maturity as an independent researcher. Much of the guidance takes the form of motivation and encouragement, therefore trust and respect for the personhood of the other are central. The power relations mobilized by Psy-Supervision are like those between the therapist and the client: a complex blend of the symmetry of mutual interpersonal respect and the asymmetry of dependent trust required from the guided towards the guide. Psy-Supervision requires the Psy-Student to confess her/his struggles and failings to the sympathetic, wise and professional ear of the Psy-Supervisor in order that she/he may be helped to be successful (as she/he should be). In the contemporary academic literature (Connell, 1985; Salmon, 1992; Acker *et al.*, 1994; Phillips & Pugh, 1994) this discourse is widely present, as it is in my data.

By contrast, the traditional-academic discourse of supervision—which originated in the elite nineteenth-century Oxbridge liberal education for gentlemen—figures Proper Supervision less as an interpersonal relationship and more as an intellectual apprenticeship:

Since only a tiny proportion of school-leavers went on to university ... academics could persist in the conviction that they were catering for the brightest and most dedicated. That attitude manifested itself in all sorts of ways, not the least in the *apparent indifference to students.... There was indeed an icy, magisterial disdain* in much of their dealings with us. And yet few of us resented it, because it was recognized by many—certainly by me—as *a sign of respect*. It was *a wonderful liberation to be left to your own devices* ... It seemed to mark more surely than any other ceremony our entry into the adult world, our being responsible for ourselves. (Andrew Reimer cited in Johnson *et al.*, 2000, p. 135, emphasis added)

The Trad-Supervisor is a proven scholar and master of the discipline, her/his key quality is a shining intellect; the Trad-Student is the disciple who wants to learn what the scholar knows, bathe in his/her reflected glory (be known as the student of Professor so and so), eventually (perhaps) taking up the supervisor’s mantle. The figures of both have been historically male and masculine norms of academic life infuse these subjectivities (Frow, 1988; Green & Lee, 1995; Johnson *et al.*, 2000). Proper Trad-Supervision, marked by formality and distance, offers the challenges of intellectual sparring and confrontation—‘intellectual work [is] a confrontation between two people, student and author [supervisor], where the stakes matter’ (Edmundson, 1997, p. 40). It has an intimate character in that its proper context is the privacy of the supervisor’s ‘rooms’. It is ‘highly personalized’ (Yeatman, 1995, p. 9) yet not interpersonal in the psy-sense. Indeed, it has been characterized as a pedagogy of indifference (Johnson *et al.*, 2000) or a trial by fire (Lee & Williams, 1999), from which only the fittest emerge. The power relations? Like the guru/disciple relationship, proper Trad-Supervision is infused with sovereign indifference from

the Trad-Supervisor ('charismatic authority'—Weber cited in Yeatman, 1995, p. 9) alongside grateful, even eager, subjection from the Trad-Student who submits because she/he believes in the extraordinary qualities of the specific person who is her/his supervisor. Trad-Supervision is bestowed by the Trad-Supervisor on the student, on her/his intellect in particular, by an active process of confrontation with the limits of her/his understanding. The student may or may not prove worthy of the Trad-Supervisor ultimately:

It is the *genius* of the apprentice which is responsible for how he takes up into his own creative powers the exemplary virtues and skills of the master. (Yeatman, 1995, p. 9, emphasis in the original)

Not all apprentices have the genius.

Other than in reminiscences like Reimer's (cited earlier), this discourse is absent from most sites of supervision, probably because to many contemporary minds it is seen as elitist and out of date, wrong-headed even. However, an interesting example of the apparently deliberate and satisfying deployment of this discourse is to be found in the following story of supervision, which I have annotated with italics to highlight the power relations of Trad-Supervision:

*I kept a very formal working relationship with my main supervisor and this ensured that I felt enough awe and intimidation to meet deadlines and work hard. I knew that if I worked with someone with whom I had formed an informal friendship, I would lack self-discipline.... My main supervisor was a person who spoke directly and frankly about what he thought about my ideas and direction.... The successful relationship that I developed with [him] owed much to the fact that I knew what I was going to get from him—intellectual guidance and rigor.* (Behrendt, 2001, pp. 212–213, emphasis added)

Here an indigenous Australian woman describes how she sought Trad-Supervision because of the advantages (pleasures?) she perceived it would bring her. An interesting feature of this description, however, is that it seems to report 'choosing' a mode of supervision—choice is a feature of quite a different discourse altogether. In ways similar to this example, Trad-Supervision does show its face in my data—but always in an uneasy coexistence with other discourses, as I will show.

The third influential discourse, the techno-scientific, originated with the rise of research universities from the late nineteenth century and the constitution of the social sciences in the image of positivist science. The Techno-Supervisor is a trained and expert scientist, the Techno-Student an inexperienced trainee. Underpinned by a technical rationality (Acker *et al.*, 1994), which emphasizes the means rather than the ends, Proper Techno-Supervision is a process:

... whereby an academic researcher assumes responsibility for directing an orderly, co-operatively planned and executed series of activities.... (O'Rourke, 1997, p. 32)

Techno-Supervision is a predictable and orderly process of research skills training; the Techno-Student's progress is 'subject to improvement and control by devices such as skills training or introducing incentives for swift completion' (Acker *et al.*, 1994, p. 484). The power relations mobilized are those of the expert's close surveillance of the efforts of the Techno-Student, who must be trained into the right

methods of research. The malleable and obedient Techno-Student listens, tries and reports; the Techno-Supervisor observes, judges, instructs. This discourse appears occasionally in the academic literature (usually accompanied by criticisms of its shortcomings), but almost never surfaced in my data—maybe because none of the students was doing positivist research. However, and unsurprisingly, the technological discourse is dominant in national-level policy debates on postgraduate ‘training’: its orderly and predictable trajectory informs the norms and funding arrangements for postgraduate research enrolment; as well, because of its affinity with aspects of neo-liberalism (below), it has come to set the terms for institutional accountability. Ultimately, because of this, it exerts pressure on supervision, in particular pressure on students to limit their ambitions (the scope of their projects) and make steady progress so they will complete on time.

Newest on the scene, the neo-liberal discourse of supervision is associated with the sweeping economic reforms of the 1980s. In reconfiguring education as a commodity, and educational institutions as commercial enterprises, it constitutes the Com-Student as an ‘autonomous chooser’ (Marshall, 1997, p. 598), a consumer of services, and the Com-Supervisor as provider of those services. (With the expansion of distance modes of supervision, there are now e-Com variants of these subjectivities as well.) Proper Supervision is the satisfactory exchange of services according to the terms of a consumer ‘contract’:

[N]ew contractualist technologies of managing individualized relationships are of a kind as to provide the structure that is needed [in supervision]. These are infra-legal mechanisms of contractual relationship which, *within* the relationship concerned, embed ways of making both parties accountable to each other for their respective parts within a shared project. (Yeatman, 1995, p. 10, emphasis in the original)

In this view, supervision is not valuable intrinsically as a ‘relationship’, or for its role in producing scholars, but for the usefulness of the transferable skills it imparts and the credential (commodity) gained. The power relations mobilized are of a quasi-legal nature: both Com-Student and Com-Supervisor are parties to an explicit contract whereby both have specified rights and responsibilities. In addition, the Com-Student, as the service chooser and consumer, has the power of the purchaser and expects value for money. This discourse is rarely found in the scholarly literature on supervision and appeared infrequently in my data. With the commercialization of higher education, though, it has been taken up by institutional administrators with a vengeance, producing a plethora of institutional practices designed to keep the customers happy—student satisfaction surveys, glossy handbooks, well-appointed graduate student centres, supervision contracts, charters of rights, grievance procedures, as well as expanding coursework components and modules which reconfigure the curriculum as a smorgasbord of more easily consumed chunks of knowledge. At the same time it has other effects, some of which place tensions directly on supervision such as increased pressure on students to finish on time (i.e. within the period of the ‘contract’ which is the period covered by government funding). In its instrumentality, neo-liberalism is akin to the techno-scientific discourse (which may account for

the latter's seemingly strengthened position in policy debates): in particular, it privileges the rational specification of process (services) and product.

The powerful discourses described so far rely on a view of social relations in which supervision is understood as a fundamentally rational and transparent practice between autonomous individuals. There are, though, marginal discourses which speak back critically to this view. For instance, radical discourses (including progressive, critical and feminist ones) have emerged from the upheavals of the 1960s and '70s to place social interests and power relations at the heart of supervision. Loyal Rad-Supervisor and Rad-Student are gendered, classed, ethnically situated, sexually orientated (and so on) and these social positionings play out in supervision. The power relations immanent in Rad-Supervision mirror those between differently socially located individuals in the wider society. Further, even where Rad-Supervisor and -Student share social position(s), their interests cannot be the same because of their different, and unequal, institutional positions. The Rad-Supervisor is powerful in a way that the Rad-Student cannot be. Proper Rad-Supervision is a fraught terrain as these differently interested and weighted individuals often talk past each other. One response to this 'problem' has been an effort on the part of the Rad-Supervisor, and sometimes the Rad-Student, to overcome the power difference and establish a non-hierarchical, even power-free, relationship with the other:

My chief supervisor never had Dr, he always had his first name, because he was very egalitarian and democratic and we didn't believe in all this bullshit about hierarchies of the university and that kind of stuff. (Interview subject cited in Middleton, 2003, p. 14)

The radical discourses are producing a growing body of academic work within feminism in particular (see for example, Moses, 1992; Schroeder & Mynatt, 1993, 1999; Conrad, 1994; Dowling & Jones, 1998; Hammick & Acker, 1998; Hassall & Wilson, 1998; Lee, 1998; Bartlett & Mercer, 2001). Institutional policies and practices, however, are rarely infused by it—except in the form of anti-harassment policies or policies and codes governing the conduct of amorous relationships between supervisors and students. The radical discourse surfaced only occasionally in my data.

Another marginal 'critical' discourse is the psychoanalytic. It constitutes the Loyal Psycho-Supervisor and Psycho-Student as having unconscious desires, which are activated by the structural inequality of supervision and worked through over the course of the supervision. Proper Psycho-Supervision is infused by processes of transference and counter-transference and criss-crossed by the Psycho-Supervisor's and -Student's desires for the other which, giving an erotic charge to supervision, make it work—for better and worse. The power relations of Psycho-Supervision are those of the analyst and analysand: the relatively stable and asymmetrical relations between the 'unhappy' one who needs the other's talking cure; and the unpredictably shifting relations of transference and counter-transference that ensue in such heavily charged encounters. The psychoanalytic discourse appears in a small body of writing on supervision (see for example, Frow, 1988; Simon, 1995; Threadgold, 1995; Sofoulis, 1997; Oowler, 1999; Gallop, 2001; Giblett, 1992), never in institutional policies and practices and, like the radical discourses, appeared only occasionally in my data.

New discourses of supervision will continue to emerge as social relations shift and new power/knowledge formations come into play. These discourses will offer different versions of Loyal Supervisor and Student and proper Supervision. For instance I have already mentioned an indigenous Kaupapa Maori discourse that may be operating in informal reports from Maori students. Some describe being supervised as a collectivity in which supervisors and students work together, understanding the success or failure of an individual as the success or failure of the group. (A Kaupapa Maori theory of education and education research more generally is described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Russell Bishop and Ted Glynn (1999).)

### **Fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies**

Why are individuals positioned within particular discourses? A Foucauldian view insists this is a matter of necessity, not choice. To be active participants in the world, we must be recognizable subjects and so, for reasons of social intelligibility, we are ensnared by discourses that structure our sense of self, our pleasures and desires. The discourses that hail us as their subjects offer us subjectivities which ‘feel right’, which satisfy and please us. In this sense, they are entangled with, and productive of, the fantasies and fictions that motivate but complicate all our relationships. (This assertion is informed by many experiences of listening to students and supervisors talking about their hopes and frustrations around supervision.) But, because we have diverse social positions, we are the subjects of more than one discourse—and in the complexity that ensues we find contradictions and tensions that offer possibilities of an exciting and dangerous kind. Let me now offer four extracts from my data that show multiple discourses at work—traversing and structuring the narratives (Britzman, 1995, p. 232)—and my thoughts about the possible effects.

#### *Example 1: A student speaks ...*

*... I see ... the supervisor as the guiding hand maybe, who um—I am saying this in a kind of reserved way because I know that it’s not necessarily the reality of it. But as a person who kind of picks up the pieces where they’re needed and fills in the gaps and points direction and gives focus and clarity. And pushes a little and is realistic a little, you know, about how much can be done. Who is a kind of support, a fall-back-on person, who is constant throughout the process, the journey, of doing a thesis. And who can add, you know, I did pick my supervisor as somebody who could offer me things, intellectual things, you know, intellectual stimulation, and I respected her writing style and method—although it is quite different from mine—I kind of respect it and thought I could learn a lot from that and it complemented my weaknesses of being fuzzy when I write. She could add clarity and structure to my kind of cloudiness. (St3, initial interview, p. 5)*

More than one discourse operates to produce this student’s understandings of her supervisor’s role. It seems from her tone that some seem to be more ‘legitimate’ to her than others—she can be more easily loyal to them. First, somewhat tentatively (‘I am saying this in a kind of reserved way’), she seeks the guiding and supportive hand of the Psy-Supervisor who will ‘pick up the pieces’, ‘fill in the gaps’, ‘point direction’, be ‘constant throughout the process.’ As well, it seems this supervisor, in being

able to ‘push a little’ and be ‘realistic a little’, will have insight into her ‘soul’. Second, but more surely, the student desires the Trad-Supervisor who will challenge her. The Trad-Supervisors will offer her ‘intellectual stimulation’, and teach her something that she lacks (‘complementing my weaknesses’) through modeling scholarly method (‘adding clarity and structure to my kind of cloudiness’). Third, the student positions herself with some certainty as the Com-Student—‘I did pick my supervisor’—choosing her supervisor because of what that person could offer her by way of services.

Entangled (but not powerless) in a wide discursive net, the student expresses many expectations and desires, even fantasies, of her supervisor—to be taken care of, to have her deficiencies made up, to be intellectually stimulated, to learn something, to be given good service. This is a potent cocktail of wishes, some which seem quite contradictory and, from a particular discourse’s vantage point, ‘unreasonable.’ (For instance, Proper Trad-Supervision does not offer the support looked for in the first half of the extract. These matters are ‘personal’ and have no place in supervision.) We cannot predict the outcome for this student and supervisor: incipient pleasures and dangers for both loom on the supervision horizon. On the one hand, if the supervisor meets the student’s wishes, then the student may be happy. Yet even this cannot be assumed—our desires to be taken care of, for instance, are often contradicted by our desires for autonomy. On the other, how likely is it that an ordinary busy academic will be able to fulfil the fantasies expressed here? Not very. (For instance, the skill base required for effective therapy, which is what Psy-Supervision is analogous to, is the fruit of intensive training. The interpersonal encounter is the central work of the therapist, not a part-time activity as the supervision meeting is for the supervisor who is ‘really’ an academic.) An order of disappointment seems likely, although this in turn will depend on her supervisor’s view of Proper Supervision. As well, the student opens her comments with a reservation—‘I am saying this in a kind of reserved way because I know that it’s not necessarily the reality of it’—so perhaps if her desires aren’t met it won’t matter because she doesn’t really expect them to be.

*Example 2: A supervisor speaks ...*

*... I don’t think one has to be an expert to supervise. And I think that is a, to be honest, that is a view that I find frustrating dealing with some of my colleagues here who feel they have to be a specialist. And if I was cynical I would say that is a crutch to prop oneself up so one doesn’t have to supervise too many students. But then I think also we are a ... department that straddles the humanities and sciences and I think those among us who are of the more scientific mindset would be the ones who would see they have to be more specialists and, you know everyone is a product of their own sort of socialization as scholars, and I think scientists do construct themselves as specialists and experts more than people in humanities in general who, to do a generalization, are probably more generous ... (Sr4, initial interview, pp. 12–13)*

This supervisor is talking about supervising a student in a sub-field in which he is not a scholar. The psychological discourse, in which the supervisor’s authority rests on his training as a ‘professional’ researcher, offers him the Psy-Supervisor position in

which it is fine to supervise under these circumstances: ‘I don’t think one has to be an expert to supervise.’ Yet he is aware that some of his colleagues are positioned differently—as Trad- or Techno-Supervisors—and this allows them to ‘avoid’ what he sees as their supervision responsibilities. In this moment of discourse disjuncture, we can see how Proper Psy-Supervision makes mass graduate education possible in a way that Proper Trad-Supervision does not. (It would be impossible to supervise large numbers of students on the master/disciple basis of Trad-Supervision.) At the same time, although the supervisor is frustrated by his colleagues, the coexistence of the two discourses makes it possible for him to reason through his frustration by speculating on the reasons for this difference. (He attributes the difference to diverse academic socializations, an explanation which offers him the possibility of ‘forgiving’ his colleagues for their actions.) However, his positioning as Psy-Supervisor is conflicted and incomplete as we can see when he returns to the issue a few minutes later in the interview:

*I mean the thing is Barbara, that I can say that you don’t need to be an expert to supervise. However, I think if I was really honest—which I will be with you—there are sort of outwardly spaced rings of expertise and what [Student A] is doing is more central to the area that I would be involved in—in terms of reading, international colleagues, all that sort of thing. So I can place what she is doing and I think I can provide more informed critique. I would be less comfortable supervising a student doing what [Student B] is doing if that student was not of the known abilities that [he] is. So the fact that he has come through my knowledge of him at stage 3, and then first-year master’s, gives me the comfort level to say, oh okay, I’ll supervise [him], yeah.... I will learn something from it.... I find that exciting. I find it an honour to work with students who sort of entrust me to supervise when you know I’m not published internationally on a topic like that. Whereas, I know it sounds conceited but I am internationally known [in Student A’s field]. (Sr4, initial interview, p. 16)*

There is a thread of anxiety in the way this supervisor is negotiating the ‘choice’ between being Psy-Supervisor or Trad-Supervisor. It seems he doesn’t want to *not* be the Trad-Supervisor who is the leading authority in the field. There are benefits for his student, and pleasures for him, in this position: ‘So I can place what she is doing and I think I can provide more informed critique.’ But we see here the pleasures offered by the Pys-Supervisor position as well: ‘I find that exciting. I find it an honour to work with students who sort of entrust me....’ What is the ‘honour’? Within Pys-Supervision, perhaps it is the implication that the student chose the supervisor for qualities other than academic profile, more personal ones say; within Trad-Supervision it may be more to do with some anticipated honour that will come in the form of ‘reflected glory’ as the supervisor behind a brilliant thesis.

Visible in this second extract is the fictitiousness of the dream of mass higher education as an extension of the privileges and status of the elite to the whole population (a dream which drives many students, employers and governments): the subject position of Psy-Supervisor which makes supervising a wide range of graduate students possible (because the Psy-Supervisor does not need to be an authority in each student’s subject area) is only really ‘comfortable’ when the student is of

‘known abilities’, a top (or elite) student. This implies that in other circumstances it is not comfortable. Yet these other circumstances are the new reality of higher education which includes many more students with non-traditional profiles in the graduate cohort. Here we get a hint of the fraughtness of contemporary supervision in which—amid the contradictions of Psy-, Trad- and Com-Supervision—an individual supervisor, lacking extensive knowledge of the topic, supervises a student of unknown ability, within a context of heightened accountability for outcomes. It is hard to see how supervision in this context can be other than uncomfortable, much of the time.

*Example 3: Another student speaks ...*

*Do I feel I am wasting [my supervisor's] time? I've decided that that is my problem to an extent, not his. I mean he has reassured me on a number of occasions ... I hate to class myself in the consumer category but I've paid fees and those contribute to his wages and I've got to make sure that I get the most from this relationship myself.... And I certainly hate, I can't stand students who choose to appeal to fee paying as an excuse for demanding service because I think that is what a university should be about ... irrespective of whether you are paying fees or not and it is an absolutely appalling argument to make.... I think that, you know, I'm trying to make a contribution to [my discipline] and I think it is a small one but I think it is a useful one and, I mean I was fortunate enough too that [my supervisor] got some funding from [an outside organization] and they chose to give me a graduate scholarship out of it, a small one, to help fund this research and there is an expectation that we will put a paper together and I will probably publish with [my supervisor] out of it too. (St5, initial interview, pp. 39–40)*

This student seems to understand himself most loyally as the Trad-student. He asserts his autonomy in a number of ways: he owns the problem of whether or not he is wasting his busy supervisor's time by requiring supervision meetings ('I've decided that that is my problem to an extent, not his'). More tellingly, he sees himself as a scholar who is 'trying to make a contribution to' his discipline; he relishes the expectation that he and his supervisor will 'put a paper together' and publish from his thesis. He is supported in this sense of self by being chosen for a graduate scholarship, a process that includes him in an elite subset of students. At the same time, even though he says he 'can't stand' students who see themselves as consumers (the Com-Students), he quite self-consciously and strategically appeals to Com-Supervision to justify his demands of his supervisor on the grounds of a consumer contract: 'I've paid fees and those contribute to his wages and I've got to make sure that I get the most from this relationship myself.' The neo-liberal discourse of supervision offers this student (and many others) a way to argue for something which would be difficult to argue for from the position of Trad-Student—for example, as an independent scholar-in-the-making, how can he justify asking time from his busy supervisor? There is an implication in that way of understanding yourself which suggests you shouldn't really need help, especially at the expense of another scholar's work. Being left to your own devices is, as Andrew Reimer's quote indicates earlier, a mark of respect. So there is the persistent, 'unjustifiable' anxiety about taking his supervisor's time, an anxiety which needs to

be rationalized and dealt with. To do this, he takes up the position of the Com-Student, which he otherwise despises.

*Example 4: Another supervisor speaks ...*

In this extract a supervisor is talking about her own experiences of being supervised in the USA some years earlier:

*In retrospect, I am incredibly grateful for [my supervisor over-correcting my writing] now—and even at the time I knew—so after I got over the sort of oh god feeling—even at the time I was sort of grateful but not as grateful as I am now. And in a sense you sometimes need someone to tell you the ropes and he did that for me ... because of his over-controlling personality really and he wanted to sort of mould me into this little version of him.... Yes, he could go around saying that's my student—which he does now anyhow.... His personality is kind of interesting as well, I mean he just wants to be loved, at a certain kind of level. He just wants his own kind of professional approval and I mean because of his own sort of bad family stuff, not having a father in particular, he just craves male, parental figure kind of approval, and he has to be loved and all this stuff. (Sr3, initial interview, p. 12)*

Earlier in the same interview, this supervisor describes her experience as having been 'incredibly fraught, and emotionally demanding, wrenching stuff' (p. 6), a good deal of which she attributes to the way she was supervised by her main supervisor. Looking back though, she can see that she learned some useful things about academic writing from him: 'In retrospect, I am incredibly grateful....' Elsewhere in the interview she acknowledges this explicitly: 'the one thing I can say is he taught me to write and made me able to write academically' (p. 2). She employs Trad-Supervision to make sense of this experience of being supervised by a dominating academic who seemed to want to make a clone of her by saying: 'in a sense you sometimes need someone to tell you the ropes'. This invokes the classic master-disciple relation of Trad-Supervision in which the student depends on the experience and authority of the supervisor. Her story of supervision is that of Proper Trad-Supervision, an experience marked by trials and persistence on the part of the student, with a kind of indifference from the supervisor. Ultimately though, the disciple's success shines glory on the master: 'he could go around saying that's my student'. Yet, at the same time, we can also see her use of Psycho-Supervision to make sense of the supervisor's controlling behaviour towards her and her work which was very painful for her at the time. She sees that it was driven by his need to have his students look good and be approved by others. She says of him later: 'So, he was sort of channelling me to be the kind of person they [the people he admired] would approve of in a certain kind of way ... this is a driving force for him and for many people—the number one thing is people have to think you are smart' (p. 13). She interprets this drive as a product of his desire to be loved and approved (by other significant males in particular), a desire which she 'knows' to have been thwarted in his childhood: 'because of his own sort of bad family stuff, not having a father in particular, he just craves male, parental figure kind of approval, and he has to be loved'. Having this way of understanding him helps her to make sense of the

supervisor's apparent obsession with being an academic 'top dog'; it also seems to allow her to reconcile the helpful dimensions of his supervision practices with the awful ones.

### **Reflections on and implications of this interpretation**

A way of speaking about what we do has gone dead on us: Once we had a vocation, then we had a profession and now we find we're service providers who produce 'outcomes'. The rest of our present fate follows from that. (Eggert, 2001, p. 8)

There is a sense in which both modern and postmodern, and maybe even traditional, forms of identity can be said to coexist in the contemporary world providing a complex pattern of overlaying and interaction. (Usher & Edwards, 1995, p. 20)

While I support Paul Eggert's view that academic subjectivities have recently undergone certain sorts of changes, the interpretation I offer here does not support his fairytale of better bygone times, nor does it uphold his pessimism for the present. Rather than the 'old' ways of making sense of ourselves (discourses) being dead to us, in the scenes of supervision I have shown here they seem to *compete* with newer discourses for loyal subjects creating the complex social world of Robin Usher and Richard Edward's view. Competition is an effect of the intensely political character of discourse which is always 'in flux and characterized by martial relationships' (Kendall & Wickham, 2001, p. 158)—so when some discourses establish themselves as dominant, as natural and commonsense, the marginal others appear as more or less ridiculous, outrageous, unethical, improper or unspeakable. Further, because discourses tend to be associated with particular social groups, they are more or less accessible to different individuals by 'virtue' of birth and inclination.

So, which discourses are likely to be most powerful now in the supervision of Master's research students in the humanities, arts and social sciences in a research university in Aotearoa New Zealand? Broadly speaking, I think the psychological discourse is in the ascendant, pervasively constituting supervision as first and foremost an interpersonal relationship. Given the impersonal nature of much of higher education, this is not surprising—Psy-Supervision offers an opportunity for pleasuring the relationship-hungry psy-selves that so many of us, students and supervisors, understand ourselves to be. At the same time, there will be certain effects—for instance, the trend towards supervisors not examining theses (because the tensions between being the supportive and motivating Psy-Supervisor and the objective examining Trad-Supervisor are seen to be too great), which will have unpredictable consequences. Given my own training (as a primary teacher) and subsequent marginal positioning within the academy (working as an academic adviser with students), my stance has been and remains inevitably complicit with Psy-Supervision and its trenchant criticisms of the elitism of Trad-Supervision. When I look back over a decade of work in the area during which my colleague Adele Graham and I ran many workshops for supervisors and students, developed supervision 'tools', and advocated a certain kind of stance towards supervision (Grant & Graham, 1994, 1999; Graham & Grant, 1997), it is clear to me now how infused with psychological assumptions

that work has been. I am not disavowing our work as such, but I have become more aware of the limitations of the fairytale of Proper Psy-Supervision where I was once convinced of the possibilities for happy endings it offers. Every Proper form has its risks as well as its peculiar pleasures: Psy-Supervision in particular has all the risks that come from trying to have a satisfying interpersonal relationship in a context of significant institutional and social differences and limitations.

Although Psy-Supervision is powerful, it competes with the traditional-academic discourse, which is still a potent subjectifying force offering different kinds of persistent pleasures and risks. In contrast, neo-liberalism seems to have much less of a grip at the level of on-the-ground supervision practices than we might think (say, from Eggert's view). It seems that the pleasures of customer satisfaction have yet to exert much force on students' desires—maybe the implausibility of construing education as a consumer transaction (which appears to elude policy makers) is all too obvious to those who practise supervision.

If we take discursive complexity for granted, then dangerous multiple and contradictory fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies are to be expected in supervision. Where supervisor and student understand self and other through different discourses, they may simply 'talk past' each other, although sometimes to the detriment of the project and the student's grade (future ambitions even). Or, as I have illustrated in the first example above, the coexistence of several discourses may legitimize ever-increasing and more diverse expectations, which entail frustration and disappointment when the other party cannot meet them. More gravely, students and supervisor may not recognize each other as 'serious' about their role to the point of finding the other unacceptable, even unethical. This is because the subjectivities that discourses constitute are imbued with the laws of their own formation. These in turn give their loyal subjects a sense of 'morality', a sense of the 'right' way to be. In a heavily invested pedagogy like supervision, people who judge each other as acting wrongly may end up 'talking against' each other, accusing each other of negligence, over-dependence, harassment and the like with all the destructive and painful consequences that ensue.

But I want to close on a less troubled note. I want to argue that multiple and contradictory fantasies, fairytales, fictions and fallacies do offer pleasures as well as dangers. What is potentially problematic turns out to be simultaneously problem-solving. In a real sense (as we can see in some of the extracts above), discursive richness can be fruitful, offering students and supervisors a range of possibilities for making sense of their experiences. Different discourses produce novel ways of thinking and acting that can be useful for addressing unanticipated situations, in particular providing resources with which to 'resolve' some of the problems the complexity and ambiguity of supervision throws up. As well, more discourses mean more possibilities for diverse individuals to see themselves as the legitimate subjects of supervision. To have these fruits, though, students and supervisors may need to learn to find pleasure and possibility among the uncertainties that I identified at the opening of this paper, rather than understanding them as a sign of their own or each other's inadequacies. More, in the midst of such uncertainties, they must find ways to act as supervisors and

students that bring the outcomes they seek. Indeed, universities have a responsibility to assist them, maybe through academic advising and other services. The interpretation I offer here is intended to encourage this ongoing work.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the members of her writing groups: Bernadette Guerin, David Semp, Deb Payne and Melissa Spencer, and Kate Buchanan, Louisa Allen and Treasa Dunworth, for their valuable input. She would also like to thank the research participants whose quotes have been used and the anonymous *QSE* reviewers for their helpful comments.

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