

Emotional aspects in the doctoral supervision relationship. Limitations and permissibility

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Abstract: The supervisor-doctoral student interaction is no exception, in my opinion, in the foundations on which it is built, ultimately involving criteria similar to any type of relationship. It is obvious, however, that, settling between two personalities (supposedly) in a relationship of subordination at least from a professional point of view, but (possibly) also character-wise, there will be factors that determine and establish it different from the usual communication. The purpose of the lecture with the above title is to distinguish and establish, as far as possible, the “boundaries” that are imposed in this relationship, the emotional impact on the two partners during the doctoral course, the various situations in which it can be manifested, but also its possible excessive presence leading, perhaps, to the interruption of the collaboration between them. Taking into account the fact that I have not yet gone through the whole process, I will especially use the materials based on the study of the psychology of relationships registered in this category and on the examples provided by others in the field in which I am active (and not only), but also on my short experience on this fragile ground. I do not propose to approach this topic as an exhaustive one, considering this impossible to achieve taking into account the dynamics of this type of communication, but intending that at the end of the lecture I have managed to offer as comprehensive a perspective as possible on the rules that must be respected (by both partners), as well as on the level of tolerance that can be reached in specific situations.

Keywords: emotional, supervision, ethics.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the plethora of information in any field, with diverse and often unverifiable sources, can in many situations be a real impediment in providing an accurate perspective on a given topic. I am convinced that, particularly in the case of a topic such as the one announced by the title above, the applicability of some of the theories put forward in the materials consulted may be questioned, contradicted

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or even rejected by those who will read them. The term *emotionalness* (a noun derived from the adjective *emotional*) has been used in this study to encompass the emotions and emotional reactions that can occur in any relationship, but with an emphasis on their effects in the development of a doctoral thesis. It is not easy to provide a clear definition of what *emotion* is, and out of the numerous attempts to define it, I finally chose the one from the DEX, namely: “An affective reaction of average intensity and relatively short duration, often accompanied by changes in the body's activities, reflecting the individual's attitude to reality”.

As for the types of basic emotions, they are classified in different hierarchies depending on the source used, into: *anger, surprise, disgust, joy, fear, sadness and contempt*. As an extension of this classification, I consider it appropriate to add a brief overview of the seven types of interpersonal relationships, including the ones in focus for the present study, namely: *the relationship with oneself, the relationship with one's partner, the relationship with family members, relationship with friends, the relationship with partners (business partners, associates or collaborators), the relationship with colleagues, the relationship with casual acquaintances*. Another defining aspect for the chosen theme, namely the behavioral attitude of the individual, also dictated by their belonging, I will also point out through the following quote: “Highly context-dependent cultures refer to networks of highly interconnected people who share a considerable biographical and social history. Many behavioral aspects are not explicit, as most members activate particular behaviors, depending on the nature of the situation and the symbolic capital of the role partner. The typological landmarks of such cultures are the Near East, the Balkans, Asia, Africa and South America, which produce more spontaneous, intuitive, contemplative, collectivist strategies of self-opening. (...) In contrast, cultures that are context-independent, such as North America or most Western European countries, produce logical, linear, predictable, individualistic and action-oriented individuals. In these cultural areas, rational gestures, actions, directness, frankness are more valued.”²

2. Emotional aspects in the doctoral supervision

As it is to be expected in the case of such a topic, I didn't intend an exhaustive approach to this relationship, considering this impossible to achieve, taking into account the dynamics of the type of communication, but I intend this study to prove useful to as many readers as possible interested in this important dimension of the process of developing a work of considerable complexity and scope.

The theme of this study was not randomly chosen, three factors determining the development of my interest in relationships of this kind: the position I have held

² Alin Gavreliuc (2011), *Psihologie interculturală* [Intercultural psychology], Editura Polirom, Iași, pp. 150-151.

for almost 20 years, that of actor in a theatre for children and youth, my experience in the English language department in high school and the academic environment for 7 years – which preceded the one mentioned above – and my role as a parent, a role in which you become, at least in the first years of your child's life, the coordinator of his or her actions. Without dwelling on this first statement, I will briefly summarize the three, shall we say, influences on my concern for human interactions of the coordination-subordination type, namely: as an actor-puppeteer there were not a few occasions when I went beyond my role as a character on stage and descended into the “crowd”, either to bring the young audience (and sometimes the grown-ups as well) closer to what they had only seen from a distance, or even to try to tame the sometimes too loud enthusiasm of the onlookers caught up in the story they were witnessing; as a teacher, it goes without saying that I found myself in the position of leading the various classroom activities, demonstrating, in turn, exigency, seriousness, but also understanding, kindness or compassion, and as a parent, my relationship with the children encompassed all the manifestations already listed, but expressed at the level of this unique interaction.

In order to succeed in giving coherence to the approach of a topic as offering as it is rich in nuances and subtleties (from the point of view of my profession), I have channeled my attention to six points that I considered of major interest for this study, namely: 1. the choice of the supervisor, someone previously known, recommended or imposed, 2. the need to establish rules of approach and conduct from the outset, 3. the contribution of the supervisor/doctoral candidate's contribution in the choice of documentation (supervisor's opinion/doctoral candidate's opinion: modifications or renunciations of personal ideas on the part of both partners), 4. support (encouragement)/criticism, 5. the emergence of conflicts/the resolution of conflicts/the abandonment of collaboration, 6. the age differences between the two.

During the three or, more recently, four years of doctoral studies, situations undoubtedly arise which neither of the two partners can foresee and which I cannot say I will be able to cover in this study, all the more so as my own perspective is permeated by the unassailable subjectivism of most of the actors who live from and through emotions. It is also worth mentioning that the different duration of information gathering and writing, as well as the presence of only two participants in the educational process, entail undeniable changes compared to the process carried out at pre-university or even academic level, corresponding to the years of study preceding the award of the bachelor's degree.

Structurally, this study is based both on personal opinions and on a series of classifications and clarifications offered by socio-psycho-pedagogy applied in human relations of coordination/subordination. I also made use of basic observations drawn from school pedagogy, extrapolating common principles, taken up and adapted to academic pedagogy. “Pedagogical knowledge is of a particular type, it is primarily aimed at action and not explanation (...) Pedagogical knowledge

is highly contextualized and instrumentalized (...) The teacher's activity is embedded in the contingent and therefore cannot be based entirely on highly formalized theoretical knowledge, but also on procedural, contextualized, situational knowledge (...) Teachers must combine a high-quality professional culture with sensitivity, imagination and improvisation.”³

I felt the need at this point in the study to clarify, as much as possible, a key element in establishing any type of relationship: *communication*. It is a term that has been given various definitions, none of which, as those concerned with clarifying it themselves admit, can be declared the most appropriate or the most comprehensive. I have focused my attention on two explanations which I considered conclusive: “Communication is a *social phenomenon* which supposes, in equal measure, an intention to send and an intention to receive a message. (...) Communication is not reducible to the action of an individual in emitting a complex of signs, even if we admit that it is not done gratuitously, but with a view to the consumption of the *symbolic content* by someone else.”⁴ I found the example of a letter that has been drafted, but which only becomes communication when it reaches the addressee, who also reads it, to be a striking illustration of this. Otherwise, one can only speak of the intention to communicate.

Collaborations between the supervisor and the doctoral student can be based on different types of relationships: *a strict*, teacher-student relationship in which the supervisor is all-knowing, inflexible and austere; *a cooperative relationship* with contributions and two-way exchange of ideas; or a relationship based on the elements of *a friendly relationship*, but not exceeding the norms required for such a relationship. In this respect, David Long, an assistant professor in a systems engineering department in the United States, gave the following answer on Quora to the question of the relationship between doctoral student and supervisor: *Your advisor advises you. /Your advisor is not your boss. /Your advisor is not your mother. /Your advisor is not your friend.*⁵ I also found Kenneth Johnson's categorization, on Quora, of the basic characteristics of good communication between the two partners equally useful: *mutual trust*, of the professor in the responsibility, involvement and ability to gather pertinent information of the student/doctoral candidate, and of the latter in the mentorship, unquestioning support and guidance offered by the former during the doctoral research years; *the dynamics of the supervisor-PhD student relationship* involving a high degree of mutual respect and trust; working together as a team with a common interest; *the independence* deriving from the student's

³ Emil Păun (2017), *Pedagogie. Provocări și dileme privind școala și profesia didactică* [Challenges and dilemmas regarding the school and the teaching profession], Editura Polirom, Iași, p. 55.

⁴ Gheorghe-Ilie Fărte (2004), *Comunicarea – O abordare praxiologică* [Communication, a praxiological approach], Editura Demiurg, Iași, p. 19.

⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-relationship-between-a-professor-and-his-her-PhD-student-like-How-much-trust-is-there-between-them>.

ability to carry out research autonomously; *communication*, open and effective, materialized in regular meetings, constructive discussions and suggestions, doubts and expectations, while taking into account that there are obvious variabilities depending on the field of study, cultural norms and the background of the two.⁶

Also in this respect, I discovered in the *Annex on the Code of Doctoral Studies*/29.06.2011 and in the *Regulations of the Institute of Doctoral Studies of Law* of the Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj, 2018, some enlightening paragraphs for the topic at hand, which I reproduce below in case they are consulted by other interested doctoral students, who can, moreover, check in the above cited code, *Articles 71* and *72*, their rights and obligations, as well as those of the doctoral supervisor, namely: *Article 20*: (1) The doctoral school together with the doctoral supervisor have the obligation to inform the doctoral student about scientific, professional and academic ethics and to verify compliance with them, including: a) compliance with the deontological provisions during the doctoral research; b) compliance with the deontological provisions in the writing of the doctoral thesis. (2) The Doctoral School and the IOSUD shall take measures to prevent and sanction breaches of scientific, professional and academic ethics, in accordance with the institution's code of professional ethics and deontology. (3) In the case of possible academic fraud, violations of academic ethics or misconduct in scientific research, including plagiarism, the doctoral student and/or the supervisor shall be liable according to the law. The resolution of possible conflicts between the two parties is stipulated in *Art. 24*: (1) Conflicts between the doctoral student and the doctoral school are mediated by the CSUD, (2) Conflicts between the doctoral student and the doctoral supervisor are mediated by the doctoral school council, and if the conflict is not resolved at this level, it is mediated by the CSUD, and, regarding the doctoral supervisor, *Art. 29* of the mentioned annex states that: (1) Upon a reasoned request by the doctoral student, the doctoral school council may decide to change the doctoral supervisor if it is found that the supervisor has failed to fulfill the legal or contractual obligations assumed by the doctoral supervisor or for other reasons concerning the mentoring relationship between the doctoral supervisor and the doctoral student. In the above mentioned *Regulation*, *Art. 5*, in view of the fact that I had unknowingly taken into consideration the situation in which the doctoral supervisor and the doctoral student are related, it is stipulated as follows: (1) It shall be forbidden for a candidate for doctoral studies to be the spouse, in-law or relative up to and including the third degree of a member of the admissions committee with which he/she must sit the doctoral admission tests, (2) It shall be forbidden for a doctoral student to be the spouse, in-law, or relative up to and including the third degree, of a member of his/her supervisory committee or of the committee for the public defense of his/her

⁶ <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-relationship-between-a-professor-and-his-her-PhD-student-like-How-much-trust-is-there-between-them>

doctoral thesis, (3) People who are spouses, in-laws and relatives up to and including the third degree may not be appointed to the same doctoral admissions committee, doctoral student supervision committee or doctoral committee.

Returning to one of the above statements, during the collection of documentation for this study, I used information from school pedagogy that I consider applicable at university level. I discovered the following statement: “The congruence of the two entities - the educator and the educated - is still too much spontaneous and therefore not sufficiently deliberately and systematically pursued, with the risk that they will follow parallel paths. Traditionally established places and roles divide the school community into two *sides*, not necessarily opposing, but somewhat distinct, as if they belonged to different worlds, with different concerns, actions and goals. (...) The flow of information and affective communication between teacher and pupils is often hindered, jammed, obstructed by certain blockages, even to the point of impermeability, which leads pupils to react with resistance, rejection or indifference to educational interventions.”⁷

How much of this would be true in the case of a relationship between two participants in the educational process, the educator and the educated, respectively, but at university level? How would this relationship change if there were only two participants in the educational process at academic level? Are these statements not also valid here, especially since in most cases doctoral students choose their supervisor on the basis of suggestions or having only one option for their chosen topic? Can we speak of similar reactions from the doctoral student? Does the sound judgement that the PhD candidate is supposed to show play a role in reducing them? Is initiating the action to participate in the doctoral process, which is supposed to be the sole responsibility of the person considering enrolment in a doctoral school, a guarantee that these blockers will be removed or alleviated? What capacity would the doctoral student have to influence this relationship for the better?

I see these questions as open-ended, with varied answers and interpretations, given the different situations encountered between the two participants involved in a different type of relationship than that between the student and his or her educator. It is not to be neglected that the doctoral students, at a greater or lesser distance from the completion of their undergraduate studies, position themselves differently to the doctoral supervisor, the knowledge acquired at university level placing them in a closer relationship with the professor responsible for the smooth running of the conception and defence of their thesis.

I also found three other definitions of *leadership* relevant: “Leadership is a way of optimizing human activity; leadership involves choosing actions, determining the organizational structures and responsibilities of the agents,

⁷ Elena Truță, Sorina Mardar (2007), *Relația profesor-elevi, blocaje și deblocaje* [The teacher-student relationship, blockers and enablers], Aramis Print s.r.l., Iași, p. 8.

formulating their tasks and duties, controlling the accomplishment of tasks, and evaluating the results.”⁸ The one on the teacher's influence on students:

Both the informational-cognitive and affective relationships are established with the aim of *influencing* students in multiple senses: to acquire knowledge, to determine affective states conducive to receiving the message delivered by the teacher, to bring about changes in behaviour or stabilize character traits, etc. (...) The effectiveness of the influencing action, the meaning and intensity of the influence that the teacher exerts on the students depend to a large extent on the emotional tone of his or her relations with the pupils. Through his or her affective behavior, the teacher imposes a certain individual and group behavior on part of the students⁹,

as well as that by which *cooperation* is considered to be “...the coordination of efforts to achieve common objectives which cannot be attained by individual effort, and, in view of the fact that the tasks to be solved in social life are increasingly complex and are solved by teamwork, the young person must be trained in the spirit of willingness and skill in cooperating with his fellows.”¹⁰

Translating these ideas into the present study, we can state that in the case of the PhD supervisor – PhD student relationship we can also talk about team work, even if it is made up of only two members who cooperate in order to achieve the goal that should be common – which is to finally obtain a thesis as complex as possible. One of them, i.e. the supervisor, influences the doctoral student intellectually and emotionally in order to optimize his work, controlling its development and evaluating the results obtained by him, having, in addition to the academic environment, the support of the other three members of the doctoral committee. The role played by the supervisor's character undoubtedly plays a substantial part in the development of a harmonious collaborative relationship with the doctoral student, through self-control and balanced behavior. At this point, I am convinced that the absence of unrealistic expectations on the part of each of the two from their work partner also makes an important contribution to the smooth running of a viable team, as the strengthening of cooperation between them is the result of a natural process of mutual knowledge and trust.

Taking into account the fact that the theme chosen focused on the role of emotion in the relationship between two partners involved in an educational process, the use of materials from human psychology is, as already noted, unavoidable, as they constitute the theoretical basis of personal observations. Psychologist Marius Milcu notes: “...in a long-term interaction, we can witness multiple and rapid successions of interpersonal relationships. Initially starting with a cooperative approach, a given task may turn, for example, into a competitive one, then into a

⁸ Elena Truță, Sorina Mardar, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 84.

conflictual one, and finally return to the cooperative approach”, adding a few lines later a further comment that I found valid in the context of the present study, namely: “... social situations are frequently encountered where one of the participants in the interaction has a cooperative approach, while the other one reacts competitively or even conflictually within the task in question.” and “...the social environment subordinates cooperation, competition and conflict to a set of *rules and conventions*, institutionalizing to some extent these interpersonal relationships, regulating them, keeping them under control, thus sanctioning the undesirable ones and rewarding the accepted and desirable ones at a given moment in a social group or society.”¹¹

I found it interesting to discover that the materials consulted, while providing sound theoretical information, did not provide a list of rules, conventions and sanctions that could result from their violation. In other words, the pages did not show the sanctions that could be applied in the event of inappropriate behavior on the part of one of the participants in the relationship, which could, moreover, mirror the inappropriate behavior of the other or stem from a lack of constant self-control. A concrete example, which, unfortunately, I would venture to say is not an isolated situation in my homeland, is when one of the two partners shows up for counseling inebriated, be it the student or the supervisor. What sanctions apply to such a situation? How often should this situation have to repeat to result in termination? Is this provided for by law or, as we say, do the two “reach an agreement”, which can lead either to the perpetuation of this situation or to its “extinction” when dealing with a person who becomes aware of the damage to his or her credibility which can, in the case of the supervisor, remove him or her from the list of supervisors eligible for future doctoral students, who have been informed of this habit by their former colleagues.

However, conflicts can prove beneficial in many cases, both in the short term, in the collaboration in question, and in the future, with the possibility that, in case of realizing the mistake, the “guilty” party may try to redress or even give up the determined factor of the conflict. In the above-mentioned work by the psychologist Marius Milcu, we found a clarification of the changes for the better in conflict situations, which can lead to prioritizing the objectives and goals of the activity being carried out, relegating to the background those that had unjustifiably occupied a central place and bringing to the foreground those that are truly important. At the emotional level, conflict, once resolved, can revive the relationship between the participants; at the social level, it can transform hostility into cooperation or lead to the end of an unhealthy relationship, the value systems of the two parties can also be transformed, certain rules and norms can be replaced by others that are beneficial for the continuation of a solid collaboration, communication can become more fluid and the exchange of ideas and opinions can become more constructive. Let us take

¹¹ Marius Milcu (2008), *Psihologia relațiilor interpersonale – competiție și conflict* [Interpersonal Relations Psychology - Competition and Conflict], Editura Polirom, Iași, pp. 31-32.

an example that is within reach for all of us, whether we belong to the world of the arts or not, when a work, treatise or article proposed by a doctoral student does not prove at first to be to the liking of the supervisor; the latter initially rejects, whether with or without reasoning, the use of such material in the thesis, creating a conflict, no doubt, but at the student's insistence, after further analysis of the proposal, reconsiders and allows the former to use the material in his or her thesis. In this common case, I would say, the benefits of the conflict listed above are amply demonstrated. I would continue with the question, which is less easy to answer: what would happen when we have a situation in which a material proposed by the supervisor is not well received by the doctoral student or even rejected by the latter? Can we speak, in particular if the coordinator belongs to the strict category mentioned in the opening of the study, of the possibility of resolving the conflict? If so, how? By the PhD candidate accepting the proposal? Or by his lobbying the supervisor to withdraw the proposal, trying to make the best possible case?

To what extent could the doctoral student's argumentation be considered relevant, taking into account the (supposedly) richer experience of the supervisor? At this point, would the question raised by the assertion above, i.e. in the case of an insignificant age difference between the doctoral student and the supervisor, would the doctoral student be more likely to be approved not to include the recommended material in his/her thesis? Could this be seen as an act of weakness which could possibly be exploited later either by the same doctoral student or by other doctoral students who follow him or her and who have been informed by him or her of the supervisor's behavior? To what extent can this weakness become a "weapon" turned against the doctoral supervisor?

Could we consider writing the PhD thesis a guarantee that the relationship between the two is developing more harmoniously, given that the "visibility" of the doctoral student is automatically reflected in the "visibility" or increased credibility of the doctoral supervisor? Could each of the two participants let go of conflict more easily by helping each other grow? The many questions raised so far, I am convinced, cannot acquire a certain answer, once unforeseen situations are brought into the discussion, in which both partners may be taken by surprise by their own reactions, especially in an artistic environment. Also worth mentioning at this point is conducting a joint PhD thesis, a situation that can be made all the more complicated by the distance that restricts the face-to-face relationship between the two, which has undeniable benefits, too, especially in the situations outlined above.

3. Conclusions

As I stated at the beginning, this study is not meant to elucidate the mystery of the role that emotion plays in a partnership, be it at university level, where you obviously expect amicable solutions to conflicts or at least a greater openness in

terms of conflict resolution, given the academic framework in which this process takes place.

To conclude, I have chosen a number of four other open-ended questions, namely: 1. How do you manage a collaboration that goes beyond the inherent emotional manifestations and degenerates into a physical or even romantic relationship?

2. What about the emergence of a knowledge gap between the two partners, in the situation where the doctoral student turns out to have more information than the supervisor?

3. How might the image of the doctoral student be affected by a change of supervisor? What about that of the supervisor in the same situation? and

4. Would it be appropriate to continue the collaboration in the absence of a useful and harmonious relationship?

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