Introduction

This chapter presents an autoethnographic perspective on the generally unwritten contract that connects both supervisor(s) (advisors) and student into one of the most intense, long-term, collaborative partnerships in academia. Adams and Manning (2015) recognised that the embodiment of autoethnography possesses six criteria that necessitate the relating of an individual’s lived experience. These criteria included that the story illustrates and evaluates the researcher’s personal experience; recognises the significance of the researcher’s relationships with others; is intensely reflexive; makes meaning of life experiences; is authentic and methodologically sound and can be an agent for social change (pp. 1–2). Building on this work, the authors have compiled what they are referring to as a ‘checklist for change’.

The story must be:

• Analysed in such a way that is systematic and relatable for the reader,
• Authentic in that it speaks to the lived experience of the authors and that it applies a rich description of the experience,
• Agentic in order to allow a growth in the subject topic and to make a contribution to the field, as well as to society,
• Relationship-based so that the authors establish an ethical connection between themselves, the participants and the audience,
• Reflexive and considered over time so that the writing is a conscious act of embodiment within the phenomenon, and
• Rigorously researched so that it conscientiously follows the nature and purpose of the methodology.
All stories are contextual and multi-dimensional. The authors of this chapter situate their story within the complex topic of doctoral supervision. We further locate our writing in the exponentially developing and much-investigated field of identity work and the impact of its subjectivity on two individuals at the ‘coal face’ of doctoral supervision in a contemporary Australian university. We wanted to drill down into the heart of best practice, not only for the supervisor but also for the student. Implied within this chapter is the notion that the doctorate is a collaboration between supervisor and student, each with a fundamentally important role to play in its production.

We view the act of supervision through the experiential lens of supervisor (Naomi) and student (Debbie). We tell the story (Adams, 2021) of how we came together in the first place and what we are jointly practising in order to remain united for the duration of Debbie’s doctoral journey. The uniqueness of this narrative is highlighted by the supervisor’s relative inexperience at the time of writing and the student’s more familiar approach to the doctoral process.

Naomi tells her story from the perspective of a novice doctoral supervisor. She is an established academic and a respected lecturer at the university that hosts Debbie’s doctoral endeavours. Although she supervises multiple master’s students, Debbie is her second doctoral student but her first PhD student. Naomi fulfils the role of associate supervisor in Debbie’s supervisory team of two.

Debbie is a relatively experienced doctoral student in that she is currently undertaking her second doctorate. Her first doctoral topic involved older men and suicide ideation (Mulligan, 2018; Mulligan, 2020a; Mulligan, 2020b). Her study was a qualitative research design that included a wide geographical landscape for fieldwork conducted in South East and South West Queensland, Australia. Data were collected and analysed from 264 Likert Scale surveys, 29 semi-structured interviews and six focus groups. Her second doctorate is a complete juxta-position of methodology. It is autoethnographic in nature and focuses on the narrative of her own grief work after the death of her teenage son from a rare cancer. Fieldwork is carried out in the landscape of her mind with herself as sole participant. Data are collected from multiple sources. These include the processes involved in the completion of her first doctorate (thesis, publications, presentations, personal interactions with academic peers) as well as “headnotes” (Wall, 2008, p. 45) and personal journals.

Much scholarship has been dedicated to the issue of doctoral supervisory praxis and life as a doctoral student. Blogs are written about it (Guccione, 2022; Patter, 2022; The Project Team, 2022; The Supervision Whisperers, 2022; The Thesis Whisperer, 2022), vlogs are recorded about it (for example, Brabazon, 2016; Bro, 2020; Nicholas, 2018) and articles and books are published about it (Albertyn & Bennett, 2021; Bednall, 2018; Delany, 2009; Wisker, 2005; Wisker & Robinson, 2016; Wood & Louw, 2018).

However, it is our contention that, at the heart of the matter, there are really only three essential questions that should be asked of both supervisor and student. “What do you bring to the doctoral relationship?”; “What do you bring to the doctoral process?”; and “What are you most afraid of?”

These questions are based on a number of underlying assumptions about the commitment that both supervisor and student bring to the interaction. These expectations include:

- Both parties want the partnership to be successful for all stakeholders.
- Both parties have direct and indirect experience of unsuccessful academic collaborations.
- Both parties value transparency.
- Both parties have the same end goals.
This chapter is predicated on the acknowledgement that doctoral supervision can be fraught with missteps and miscommunications, no matter how much the supervisor and student like and respect each other. Owler (1999) stated: “The difficulty of managing the PhD supervisory relationship is a well-known one. The intensity with which this relationship can be played out reveals that much more is involved than a simple transference of knowledge from one individual to another. On the contrary, each individual is revealed to have complex investments in this relationship” (p. 132).

**What do you bring to the doctoral relationship?**

**Debbie**

**Friendship**

Naomi and I were friends before we became entangled in my second doctorate. We met on campus in the pre-Covid era when university refectories and classrooms were full of life and you could smell the love of learning in the air. It was an exciting and vibrant time and I long for its return. The two of us initially met through a postgraduate and early career researcher group (PGECR) that one of the university professors facilitates. Meetings were held fortnightly with some people (students and supervisors) who were physically present in the boardroom where we met and others joining in over Zoom. Of course, it now continues as a full Zoom participation event and as much as I still enjoy the scholarly interaction, I miss the ad hoc pre-session chatter that forms academic friendships. This was the fertile ground upon which my relationship with Naomi was formed as we were both avid physical attendees of PGECR.

**Trust**

Thus my friendship with Naomi was well established a matter of years before I asked her to be my associate supervisor. Enduring friendships are based on commonalities and the willingness to engage in shared histories. Naomi knew about the death of my son and the resultant issues arising from grief. I knew that I could trust her with my emotional journey through the doctorate as she had some prior knowledge of my circumstance and I always found her to be an empathetic and considerate listener. We share many personal characteristics such as the same sense of humour and irony (a necessity in the intense and highly charged process of doctoral writing); commitment to family; and an intense need for goal setting as a means of self-direction. We trust each other.

**Connection**

Although I do not remember a lot of the minutiae of my first doctoral journey, Naomi tells me that we submitted around the same time. I do remember that we journeyed together to get our doctorates to fruition and shared many a coffee over the challenges of research design and reference lists. I witnessed (just as she did for me) her doctoral struggles and her strength and tenacity to overcome them. We share the connection of hard-earned academic success and we actually graduated a week apart.

**Naomi**

**Friendship**

Firstly, I was honoured that Debbie invited me onto her supervisory team knowing that she had already navigated this path once before, solely with her Principal Supervisor, with whom she had developed a very
strong academic and personal relationship. I had developed my friendship with Debbie whilst we were both in the throes of finalising our doctorates in the few years preceding her embarking on her second. I was already an academic working within the institution and had started supervising research masters and professional doctoral students. Debbie would become my ‘first’ PhD student, my other student undertaking a Professional Doctorate. Our friendship was strong, developed on mutual respect and understanding of life as a doctoral student. Debbie had been integral to me completing my thesis revisions after examination and helped me to focus on not giving up. Without her support at the time, it would have been more challenging for me to get to the end. So, when asked to be her associate supervisor for her second doctorate, I immediately held self-doubt about what I could bring to this experience. Whilst I knew we had a strong friendship, I saw myself as less than an expert and questioned what I could possibly contribute to this doctoral supervision team. I also felt pressure as a relatively new supervisor to be an ‘expert’. I had been supervising masters and professional doctorate students as an associate supervisor, with only one masters student nearing successful completion at the time. This pressure was most likely self-imposed and underpinned by a fair dose of imposter syndrome. Trusted colleagues have since helped me to focus on what a beginning supervisor can do to learn and develop their supervisory skills.

Trust

As Debbie has already mentioned, she brought trust to the supervisory relationship. I also consider this has been a fundamental element of my contribution to her doctoral supervision. Having developed a friendship through our doctoral journeys I became acutely aware of Debbie’s grief for her son Rory. When Debbie discussed her completion of a second doctorate examining her grief work as doctorateness, I not only admired her courage to do this but felt extremely protective of her in what I could only imagine would be a highly emotional and triggering process. Becoming her supervisor, even though I initially doubted my usefulness, I knew that Debbie could trust me in this process. I felt she could trust that I would be able to give her the space and time to delve emotionally into her work and be aware when she needed to remove herself and reset. I felt a sense of protectiveness when Debbie was completing her confirmation of candidature. I discussed the process with her Principal Supervisor who had sought approval to ensure it was a closed session, that only the panel members and supervisors could attend, preventing any further pressure for Debbie to present on an extremely personal and sensitive topic to a wider unknown audience. I had witnessed how triggering the rehearsal of her confirmation of candidature was and could also say I was not unaffected by this. I knew the actual presentation would be traumatising for her and both her Principal Supervisor and I respected and acknowledged her commitment and courage and did what we could to ensure Debbie was supported in the best way possible through this process. It is this trust to ensure a student is protected and supported and their feelings validated that I believe is important in a supervisory relationship.

What do you bring to the doctoral process?

Debbie

Willingness to learn

I bring to the table a desire to share ideas and to grow intellectually. I am a lifelong learner and as such embrace this form of academic growth. I recognise that I don’t know everything and I am open-minded enough to admit my faults and foibles. I believe that honesty is a necessity and if I can’t or won’t do something, I’ll explain my point of view. At the same time I will consider the advice of my supervisors as that’s what they’re there for.
A comparative autoethnographic lens on the doctorate

Commitment

I’m committed to the process. Within the ‘life is messy’ category, I pledge to my supervisors (and myself) that I will do the following:

• arrive on time for our meetings, whether they be face to face or Zoom
• email/text as far ahead of time as I can if I can’t get to a meeting
• meet my deadlines for drafts if at all humanly possible
• conscientiously consider feedback from my supervisors and deliberate on how their suggestions may strengthen my doctorate
• be respectful – if I don’t agree with my supervisors on a subject, I’ll tell them and present my perspective in a calm and systematic manner
• be understanding if they are unable to occasionally come to a prearranged meeting
• express interest in them as people above and beyond their role as supervisors.

In return, I expect that my supervisors will:

• commit to meeting with me regularly for at least half an hour (at a schedule appropriate to both of us) – either face to face or over Zoom
• provide written feedback in a timely manner and in a way that I am comfortable with (e.g., track changes NOT hand written, incomprehensible notes)
• allow time for conversation about my doctoral needs. This could include discussion about fieldwork glitches, writing/referencing frustrations, writer’s block, uncertainty about future writing/goals/direction, examiner choices, academic life beyond the doctorate.
• express some interest in me as a person above and beyond my immediate needs as a student.

Naomi

Support

As a supervisor, I pride myself on bringing a high level of support to the relationship. My background in careers counselling and teaching into pathway programs is an indicator of the type of person I am and my desire to help people. It remains true that I like to support people and see them succeed in their endeavours. I draw on my counselling knowledge and techniques to work with students, listen to their concerns and to collaborate and facilitate actions they are comfortable with. I assist them to draw on their own resources to gain motivation, self-efficacy and to overcome challenges as they arise.

From my initial experiences of supervision and drawing on my own doctoral journey, I want to be a supportive supervisor. I believe that students, whether masters or doctoral, are embarking on a lengthy and challenging journey to conduct their research and write a thesis. It is a lonely journey which can be time-consuming and demanding, and one which I feel needs a supportive supervisor. This profile includes someone who will listen to their concerns, develop an understanding of their personality and the way in which they work, and guide them through their academic endeavours.

Commitment

I am fully committed to my students and make sure that I meet with them at the very least once a fortnight. This can either be face to face or online via Zoom. This is beneficial for both me and the student. Such a practice keeps me up to date and on track whilst it is motivating the student to continue to make appropriate progress to ensure a timely and successful completion.
Commitment extends to ensuring I meet the student’s needs by being available to answer questions, read drafts and provide comments, and complete administrative requirements in a timely manner. Within this there is the commitment to be honest about what can be done in time frames. Letting students know where you will have difficulty getting something back to them within a few days but advising them to keep working on something else is an approach I like to think works in keeping commitments.

Genuine interest

The doctoral supervision relationship for me also needs to include genuine interest in the topic the student is studying and also in their life pursuits. Without delving into a student’s personal life, it is easy for me to understand and take an interest in their topic to gain a better understanding of the support I can offer, and I therefore take an interest in their life in general. If I can see the student is balancing a difficult job, family responsibilities and their PhD it helps me to find out how they are managing and suggest ways in which some things can be alleviated. It also helps to acknowledge and celebrate successes along the journey and be there to support if they face significant challenges that affect their progress. Providing a solid relationship where the student feels safe to share their concerns is very important to me. I take a holistic view of the doctoral process.

What are you most afraid of?

Debbie

Failure – letting myself down

What if I get halfway through and decide (for whatever reason) that I don’t want to/can’t go any further? Life is uncertain and we live in volatile times. Juggling a family and work commitments can be difficult enough without the additional tensions that arise from doctoral work in the time of a global pandemic. I have begun my doctorate with the full intent that it will be completed in a timely manner but mine is a challenging story to tell. Autoethnography demands authenticity in a research topic that is mired in grief and is heartbreakingly personal. In order to fully meet the requirements of the research design, I must revisit places in my memory that have been vaulted for many years. The process of unlocking the vault is painful – emotionally, spiritually and physically and there are times when I shy away from the rigour of data collection.

Not meeting expectations – letting my supervisors down

The risks that both supervisors and students take when embarking on a project of this length and magnitude are not to be underestimated. The contract entered into has ramifications for all stakeholders. I began my first doctorate a matter of months after my son died. During this period, I was newly traumatised and my mind would shut down from time to time – almost like it needed a rest from living with death. This is hardly the trait of a promising doctoral student who actually needs to be mentally fit and ‘en pointe’ to undertake such a protracted and academically intensive project. At no time during my first doctorate was I ever put under any pressure by my supervisors. They had faith that I would endure. The belief that others have in you, particularly if you admire and respect them, is a priceless gift. I am indeed fortunate that I feel the same about my current team. My advice to any student who asks about supervisory practice is to find supervisors who will stay the course and who will be wholly supportive of your endeavour. Unfortunately, this is not always immediately apparent; however a good rule of thumb is to seek recommendations from others. If the collaboration doesn’t work to your advantage, leave and seek wisdom from someone else.
A comparative autoethnographic lens on the doctorate

Falling out

I am conscious that Naomi and I are friends. I am also conscious that the doctoral process is demanding and that there are times when I may disagree with her about the direction in which to take my research. We have mutual respect and a shared history and as such are both prepared to talk out any problems that may arise. As long as we keep the channels of communication open, I can’t foresee any major issues. Both of us are committed to the process.

Naomi

Not being enough

My biggest fear that presented itself when commencing the doctoral supervision journey with Debbie was that I would not be useful enough. After all, how could I possibly contribute to her study when she was completing her thesis as an autoethnography of her grief work as doctorateness? My concerns lay in the fact that Debbie already had achieved a doctorate, at the same time I did, that she was experienced in my eyes and that she was someone I respected and admired. In the initial stages I did not think about the expertise that I could bring to the partnership such as my knowledge of institutional processes, being a supportive supervisor, reading and reviewing to provide relevant feedback.

Further to the notion of ‘not being enough’, I am also concerned about my methodological knowledge as the chosen methodology is not one that I have specialised in. I am afraid my students will judge me and not be happy with their decision of supervisor. This way of thinking fits into the imposter syndrome I have experienced as a new supervisor. I have, however, since been able to dispute this thought when I relate to my own doctoral supervisors who were not experts in my methodological approach. I am also active in learning about the methodologies my students use and allow myself to place my trust in the students that they are comfortable with the approach they use because they have done the necessary investigating and will continue to develop their skills.

Discussion

In 2018, over one and a half million students entered doctoral programs in OECD countries (Gorup & Laufer, 2020). In the 21st century knowledge economy, doctoral students are the fuel that light the fires of higher-level skill development. Doctoral students are respected for their intellectual tenacity and their ability to recognise original research.

Why is it that some doctoral partnerships are successful and some are challenge-laden? When considering this question, we note that the core of any efficacious collaborative endeavour is a generalised ‘willingness’. This willingness applies to both parties – the supervisor(s) and the student. Both must be willing to commit to the process with all of the tension and pressure that is produced as the doctorate proceeds to completion.

Wichmann-Hansen et al. (2012) observed:

A good student is a curious and committed individual who is ambitious and prepared to be dynamic and take initiatives during the [doctoral] degree programme. Similarly, a good supervisor is an individual who – in addition to relevant academic knowledge, international networks and solid research production – is good at communicating, creating the right environment and promoting personal and academic growth in the PhD student.

(p. 55)

This chapter explores the relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student. It is our contention that building and maintaining a healthy doctoral relationship is the responsibility.
of both parties. Several points of note arise from the section above whereby both Debbie and Naomi answer the three essential questions around doctoral supervision.

**What do you bring to the doctoral relationship?**

Both Debbie and Naomi value the pre-existing friendship they have. They view this as beneficial in that they have a shared academic history, so they maintain a certain level of comfort in their interactions together. They are also cognisant of a shared work ethic that exists between the two of them. Not all doctoral students can claim an initial connection of friendship with their supervisors; however, shared axiological assumptions about the value of interpersonal relationships and ethical behaviour is suggested. If possible, students should seek out their proposed supervisors both physically and online. This may be in the form of recorded/live conference presentations. Listen to their particular perspectives about education and the topic upon which your research is based. Are they enthusiastic about the field you wish to enter? References from other doctoral students may also be helpful. Speak to other researchers under their supervision – does your prospective supervisor actually honour their apparent beliefs about the importance of scholarship? In lieu of friendship, rapport and mutual respect are to be valued at the outset. “Ultimately, what makes a good supervisor is someone you can build a rapport with, who helps bring out the best in you to produce a well written, significant body of research that contributes novel findings to your subject area” (Hoithi, 2020).

Naomi mentioned the negativity of imposter syndrome when she related the pressure she felt about being part of Debbie’s supervisory team. It is interesting that this is a universal phenomenon! This self-imposed tension can be quite debilitating. “Imposter syndrome, also called perceived fraudulence, involves feelings of self-doubt and personal incompetence that persist despite your education, experience, and accomplishments” (Raypole, 2020). It is a sign of her professionalism and commitment that Naomi has sought counsel from trusted colleagues.

**What do you bring to the doctoral process?**

Debbie compiled a checklist of expectations of herself and her supervisors. Students can enter a doctoral program with minimal comprehension of the stressors involved in this level of higher education studies. It is wise, at the outset, for both parties to discuss the process in terms of what each actor is prepared to bring to the relationship in terms of expectations. “The doctoral journey is a shared one. To make the journey as positive as possible, supervisors and candidates need to articulate their expectations clearly” (Moxham et al., 2013, p. 345).

Naomi stressed the role of support in the doctoral process. Clegg and Gower (2021) emphasised that: “Supervisors are intrinsically motivated and want to support researchers” (n.p.). In the survey that they conducted with 3,435 research supervisors, overwhelmingly the respondents stated that they enjoyed the responsibility of doctoral supervision. This is reflected in Naomi’s holistic view of supervisory praxis which encompasses her commitment and genuine interest in tailoring her students’ experience of collaborative wellbeing. Extrapolating on the imperative for goodwill within doctoral processes, it has been suggested that supervisors may wish to do the following:

Create a group manual, with protocols, policy and helpful information, being specific about whatever you consider to be important for students to know. Include information about where trainees can find help if they have a personal or project issue – including problems with you.

*(timeshighereducation.com, 2017)*
At the very least, conversation around these processes will allay misconceptions on both sides as to the praxis of that individual supervisor.

**What are you most afraid of?**

Failure was a major concern for both Debbie and Naomi. This fear of a disappointing outcome was a multifaceted concept that for Debbie expressed as “letting myself down”, “letting my supervisors down” and testing the boundaries of friendship under the pressure of doctoral study. Naomi’s initial concerns centred on the notion of her degree of usefulness. She was worried that she “would not be useful enough” and generally “not being enough”. She has since remedied these insecurities by recognising her institutional expertise being thoroughly familiar with the university requirements. She also acknowledges her agency as a respected academic who has recently been through the doctoral process. As such, she brings an understanding of the tensions involved from the student’s perspective of seeing the doctorate through to completion. She also brings her experience as a supervisor of multiple methodologies, each one adding to her skillset.

**Conclusion**

When undertaking the heavy load of doctoral work, students’ wellbeing and formation of academic identity is impacted by their relationship with their supervisor(s). “Any researcher development journey interlocks personal … and intellectual … dimensions from the start, linking learning, personal/professional, and institutional dimensions” (Wisker & Robinson, 2012, p. 151). Poor supervisory relationships can add to an already stressful situation and may mean the difference between abandonment or completion. This association may fail through no fault of anyone, as even with the best of intentions, connections are broken. This leaves both the doctoral student and the supervisory team frustrated and with feelings of misrepresentation.

There are many dyads that describe the roles of supervisor and student. Most of these are built on the power imbalance of academic inequality between supervisor and student, such the “master/slave” dichotomy as described by Manathunga (2007). We refute this trope and refer to Ismail et al. (2013), who cited James and Baldwin’s guide to best practice conducted by a supervisor. The following three categories addressed the role of supervisors:

1) the “core” (p. 166) of supervisory praxis – recognising effective partnerships, evaluating student requirements, enacting mutually agreed-upon expectations; ascertaining a learning/procedural plan
2) the “momentum” (p. 166) of supervisory praxis – foster early writing, meet regularly, deliver effective feedback; generate belonging in the academic community; extend support if/when personal or academic tensions arise
3) the “final stages” (p. 167) of supervisory praxis – offer suggestions for a viable academic life for the student beyond the doctorate, monitor this end stage to completion.

We would add a further category to this comprehensive list:

4) the “throughout” of supervisory praxis – encourage public (conference/ seminar/symposia) presentations early in the process, establish authorship of any journal articles/chapters arising from the research, discuss avenues of financial support for the student.
What then of the responsibilities of the vulnerable doctoral student? Drawing on the categories provided by Ismail et al. (2013) here is our list for best student praxis:

1) the fundamentals of student praxis – *connect* – have a research plan to discuss with your supervisor, set mutually achievable goals with your supervisor (these can be reframed during the doctoral process if necessary)

2) the impetus of student praxis – *commit* – write early and often, address feedback in a timely manner, know what you need (personal and academic) and be prepared to ask/fight for it

3) the closing phase of student praxis – *conclude* – seek personal and professional avenues for a life beyond the doctoral journey and discuss these with your supervisor, acknowledge the support given to you by your supervisor.

4) the graduation – *celebrate* – your achievement.

**Reflection**

As we reflect on the meaning behind our words, we revisit our ‘checklist for change’ based on the work of Adams and Manning (2015). In telling our autoethnographic story about doctoral supervision, we have attempted to provide an embodied experience told by both supervisor and student. We hope that we have *analysed* our topic in such a way that it resonates with the reader and that we have conveyed our lived experience in an *authentic* manner that “makes life experience come alive” (Walker in Adams & Manning, 2015, p. 350). The *agentic* nature of our relationship is exemplified in our writing in that each of us feels a responsibility for a good outcome as a result of our doctoral collaboration. We trust that we have demonstrated a *relationship-based* preview of our supervisor/student connection that is based not only on friendship, but also on a genuine willingness from both of us to make it work effectively. Our collaboration is built on mutual respect. In order to write our chapter, we communicated frequently to discuss the main points that we felt were important when we take a deeply *reflective* stance on supervision. We have followed the protocols of autoethnography with a *rigorous* approach a methodology that utilises the researchers themselves as the data source.

We hope that this collaborative autoethnographic account resonates with the reader and that we have provided a richer, more expansive contextual positioning of the supervisor/student relationship. Supervision is such a contentious doctoral topic and should be examined with balance and sincerity. Too often its story is one-sided and biased from one particular point of view. We have all heard examples of incidents from both parties about supervision gone awry. This can have a disastrous effect on the supervisor, who really thought that they were living best practice, and the student, whose future may depend on earning the award. It’s so important to garner perspective from both sides. We hope you agree.

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