# Conceptualising Doctoral Supervision in Malaysia as Small Cultures: PhD Graduates' Perspectives

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## Abstract

Research on doctoral supervision in the field of Intercultural Communication has traditionally been applied to cross-cultural comparison, especially across national systems and cultural boundaries. However, recent years have witnessed that such comparison is being challenged and re-analysed in light of potential risk of over generalisation and stereotyping in its observation. In this research, we consider the relevance of small cultures notion (Holliday, 1994, 1999) as an alternative approach to conceptualise doctoral supervisory practice as a dynamic on-going group process through which its members make sense of, in order to operate purposefully within particular contexts and shared behaviours. Narrative-based qualitative research was designed to generate and analyse the data. The participants were a purposive sample of six recently graduated PhD students at a Malaysian public university. One-on-one narrative interviews were conducted with the students to gather their supervisory narratives. Analyses of the students' transcripts were completed using a holistic-content approach (Lieblich et al. 2008). Findings reveal a distinct set of behaviours and understanding that constitute the cultures of supervisory practice in the Malaysian university context. Through small cultures notion, this research proposes that cultures of PhD supervision can be best understood through an analysis of shared norms, behaviours and values between students and supervisors during supervisory practice. This research hopes that the move from a focus on large culture (i.e. Malaysianness per se) to a focus on the meaning-making process between students and supervisors from different backgrounds can avoid education practitioners, especially PhD supervisors, from making stereotyping and overgeneralising assumptions.

Keywords: PhD supervision, Small Cultures, meaning-making process, intercultural communication

## Introduction

In the last 35 years, studies on the subject of doctoral supervision have been undertaken by various scholars, mainly in countries such as England, Australia, Canada and the US. Many of those studies have cited the link between good supervisory practice, low attrition rate and timely completion of a PhD (Golde, 2000; Marsh et al., 2002; McAlpine and Norton, 2006). Recognising the importance of doctoral supervision for doctoral students' success, many of the studies on doctoral supervision have focused on either: the mechanisms for supervisor training and development, such as supervisory styles (Acker et al., 1994; Hockey, 1996; Deuchar, 2008); the theoretical models of the different aspects of the supervisory process (Wisker et al., 2003; Mackinnon, 2004; Grant, 2005; Gatfield, 2005); the guidance for thesis writing or data analysis (Manathunga, 2005), developing

students' researchers' skills, attitudes and thesis (Ives and Rowley, 2005; Heath, 2002; Kiley, 2009); or supervision as apprenticeship for teaching and research (Pearson and Brew, 2002).

Some studies also established that doctoral supervision is a complex phenomenon. Grant and Manathunga (2011, p. 351) viewed supervision as "a place of puzzling and confronting complexity". Some scholars have also noted that the complexities of supervision are influenced by many aspects and are not necessarily connected to national differences. For example, supervision is a space where doctoral students face the challenges of becoming accustomed to the departmental, disciplinary and institutional cultures (Acker, 2011); and that there is high possibility of mismatched expectations in supervision since the students' experiences are "individual, complex, personal and contextually mediated (McCormack, 2004, p. 321).

In this paper, we consider the relevance of utilising Small Cultures notion (Holliday, 1994, 1999) as an alternative approach to understand doctoral supervision phenomenon in a Malaysian higher institution context.

## Theoretical Background

Holliday (1999) proposed Small Cultures notion as an alternative means to understand people's behaviours regardless of their ethnicity, nationality or international differences. In general, Holliday (1999, p. 237) distinguishes culture as of two types: the 'large' culture refers to cultures that are characterised by geographical places such as countries and regions (e.g. British, Chinese); and the 'small' culture which refers to social groupings such as families and classrooms. The term small cultures is also used at the same time to refer to culture as "a dynamic, ongoing process to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances" (Holliday, 2011, p. 205). In essence, Small Culture enables an understanding of cohesive behaviours of social groupings by investigating how culture operates at its basic level.

According to Holliday (1999) Small Cultures formation involves four elements: first element is the need for group cohesion or social continuity; second element is the cultural residues and influences, such as family or education, from which people draw but which do not necessarily confine their thoughts or behaviours; third element is the social construction process such as routinisation, naturalisation or institutionalisation as part of the building of cohesive behavioural norms; and the final element is the products of small cultures such as cultural practices, values and statements of culture.

Several studies have utilised Small Cultures to understand the experiences of supervision between supervisors and students coming from different background; Davcheva et al. (2011) studied the experiences of four supervisors in two UK universities and found that supervision could be seen as an emergent, dynamic, fluid space of meaning making and negotiation between doctoral students and their supervisors (p. 128). Magyar and Robinson-Pant (2013, p. 667) in their study of international doctoral students' experiences in UK universities regarded supervision as a potential space for intercultural learning. Sahar (2018) found evidence of small cultures elements within supervision, where the supervisors and students engaged in shared norms and behaviours, with recognisable conventions in order to complete the supervisory tasks successfully and meaningfully.

In our study, we extend the existing studies by conceptualising doctoral supervision as a social space whereby student and supervisor participate in a set of behaviours, share similar values and operate within recognisable rules in order to achieve agreed goals.

## Methodology and Data

Our research aim is to understand the small cultures of doctoral supervision by exploring PhD students' experiences of interacting with their supervisors and participating in the completion of supervisory tasks. To achieve this aim, we conducted a narrative-based qualitative research to

generate and analyse data. In the study, we conducted one-on-one interviews with six local and international PhD graduates from one of the public universities in Malaysia. The interview transcripts were transcribed and analysed using a Holistic-Content approach (Lieblich et al. 2008). The emerging key themes were then interpreted and discussed in light of the theoretical framework and research objective.

## Findings

The results of the study reveal key characteristics of small culture formation within supervision.

1. *Group cohesion or social continuity:* The needs for group cohesion vary from guidance to validation:
   a. Striving for guidance
   b. Pursuing mentorship
   c. Seeking knowledge
   d. achieving graduation on time
   e. requesting validation of knowledge and skills

2. *Cultural residues and influences:* The students' meaning making process during their supervision is shaped by micro and macro cultural contexts:

   Micro
   a. Personal: values and beliefs
   b. Family: emotional and financial
   c. Prior education: academic and research skills
   d. Professional/ career background
   e. Peers/ colleagues

   Macro
   f. Postgraduate Research environment: Administrative and support
   g. The university Policy and regulations
   h. Ministry of Higher Education Policy
   i. Internationalisation of Higher Education

3. *Social construction* process involves routinisation and institutionalisation that contributes to cohesive behavioural norms:

   a. Completing Postgraduate coursework
   b. Supervisory meeting
   c. Receiving Feedback
   d. Learning Process
   e. Managing the writing process

4. *Cultural Products* can be categorised into visible and invisible goals and statements of cultures:

   a. Visible goals: thesis submission, graduation on time, awards, publication, conferences
   b. Invisible goals: discipline, satisfaction, friendships, becoming scholarly, responsibility, promotion

c. <u>Statement of cultures</u>: multifaceted roles of supervisors, supervision continuum, mismatched supervisory expectations

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have presented the relevance and significance of Small Cultures notion in understanding the complexity of supervision practices between students and supervisors from diverse background. Within this notion, supervision is seen as a dynamic space where supervisor and student meet, interact and participate in a set of established routines and rules. The students' meaning-making process is enhanced by drawing on their micro and micro cultural contexts in order to complete the supervisory tasks and achieve shared goals.

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