

# The Ethics of Postgraduate Supervision: A View From Cultural Studies

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## Introduction

To make the comparison that one should never properly make, Higher Degree Research (HDR hereafter) supervision shares with parenting its status as that topic about which every person has an opinion. Watching other people supervise can be as exacerbating as observing a nonchalant parent whose child is throwing food in a café. When a postgraduate student takes directions that one could never possibly recommend, it is easy to imagine that better training was possible, that bad choices were made at crucial junctures, and that somewhere sits a parent reading the newspaper while the floor gets covered in spaghetti. The neglectful supervisor, like the neglectful parent, is easily viewed as a person of a certain *type*, such that quotidian discussions of supervision practices easily deteriorate into a moral commentary on personal virtues and vices. Although providing short-lived pious pleasures, the urge to judgment can be damaging to higher degree research cultures. Supervision practices need to be understood not as expressions of a moral disposition (friendly, mean, forgiving) or achievements of profound intelligence (the cult of the inept genius), but as institutionally *responsive* practices within a broader tertiary system that remains unclear about what higher degree research should achieve, and apprehensive about what its graduates should aspire to afterwards.

This chapter seeks to link the development of teaching skills around HDR supervision to broader institutional issues around working conditions and knowledge production.<sup>1</sup> In particular, we identify key questions facing higher degree supervisors in the humanities and social sciences, citing Australian cultural studies research as an example. By drawing from the contemporary sociology of education, we examine different forms that supervision can take, the professional expectations placed upon supervisors, and the challenges associated with HDR supervision for cultural studies practitioners in Australia. In doing so, we link literature on research learning communities to sociological studies of class-based stratification and increased casualisation within the

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<sup>1</sup> Conscious of her related criticisms of dualistic thinking, we adopt Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of 'beside' here, as an alternative to modes of investigation that privilege maneuvers revealing the 'beneath' and 'behind' and calling for a 'beyond', instead acknowledging the multiple relations – productive and tense – comprised by this beside (2003: 8).

tertiary sector, noting the ways that intersecting issues around expertise, hierarchy and inter-dependency can shape supervisors' teaching practices.

The chapter begins by comparing critical approaches to HDR supervision, including the recent turn towards supervisors' ethical responsibilities in relation to what Christine Halse and Peter Bansel (2012) call 'learning alliances'. While endorsing ethical conceptions of learning as a collective practice, we question efforts to directly align moral obligation with a professional working identity. Furthermore, expanding the scope of ethical consideration, the chapter argues for critical engagement with the value- and community-making functions that HDR supervisors perform. Finally, we identify challenges posed by cultural studies' (anti-)disciplinary orientation in relation to the reproduction of research practices in postgraduate (a.k.a. 'graduate') students. In doing so, the chapter seeks to avoid strong prescriptions about what best practice supervision should look like, in part because the diversity of institutional circumstances makes the 'actionable quality' of such statements somewhat negligible (Morris 2008: 433). We will, however, identify points of tension between what good supervision practices hope to achieve, and the broader contexts in which these practices take place.

### **Collective Responsibility and Learning Alliances**

Across the last two decades in Australia, in conjunction with a significantly expanding doctoral population (Pearson, Evans, and Macauley 2008: 360) and concerns from funding bodies over rates of timely completion, increased attention has been directed towards producing more efficient and reliable postgraduate pathways (P. Green and Usher 2003: 37; McCallin and Nayar 2012: 64). This has often led to changes in degree structures, admission requirements, forms of assessment, and models of supervision (Halse and Bansel 2012). Yet despite the proliferation of program, department or school-based support systems, supervisors are still primary nodes of guidance and responsibility for the HDR student. Supervisors continue to orchestrate thesis timelines, endorse or reject special administrative provisions, select examiners, and act as referees if the graduate pursues employment or further research opportunities.

Unfortunately, few departments provide opportunities to showcase or disseminate good supervision practices, outside transmission from supervisor to supervisee. Formal training delivered university-wide in relation to supervisor registration and accreditation processes has, in our experience, largely eschewed important discussions about 'bad' supervision experiences, supervisors' 'self protective measures' (Halse 2011), negotiation strategies in the allocation of students, and labour considerations around supervision workload. Feedback mechanisms around supervision are also less developed than those for undergraduate teaching and, in this respect, the private

character of supervision is both a strength and a weakness. Supervision can sometimes create unique spaces for students to be intellectually vulnerable and to work through the complications arising from personal experiences as they impact upon dissertation writing. At the same time, poor supervision relationships are often tolerated by both participants because few yardsticks of adequate supervision are provided. Furthermore, while postgraduates' negative experiences can travel quickly by word-of-mouth (Tsai 2008: 452), supervision horror stories frequently come to be naturalised as inevitable injustices of an institution that is perceived to have little investment in students' well-being outside measurable indices of productivity. In the Australian postgraduate sector, few avenues are provided to identify systemic failures in supervision practices at a departmental or school level.

For this reason, supervisors can have little awareness about the spectrum of available supervision practices, each oriented to different conceptions of the postgraduate experience. Among these practices and conceptions, Anne Lee lists five:

- (1) functional: where the issue is one of project management;
- (2) enculturation: where the student is encouraged to become a member of the disciplinary community;
- (3) critical thinking: where the student is encouraged to question and analyse their work;
- (4) emancipation: where the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves;
- [and] (5) developing a quality relationship: where the student is enthused, inspired and cared for. (Lee 2008: 270-271, see Table 1: 268)

Those supervisors who prioritise functional outcomes and critical thinking fit comfortably within the 'master-apprentice' model discussed by Christine Halse and Peter Bansel (2012), to which we briefly turn.

The master-apprentice model is described by Halse and Bansel as 'based on a hierarchical power relationship whereby the doctoral student is constituted as requiring instruction and discipline by an academic supervisor who is able and authorised to accomplish this task by virtue of his or her knowledge, skills and expertise' (Halse and Bansel 2012: 379). Taking a psychoanalytic approach, an oblique argument for the master-apprentice model of supervision has been made by John Frow (1988), who characterizes the process for PhD students as involving a temporary loss of ego, entry into 'a community of novitiates', a period in a liminal state, and the crossing of multiple thresholds into academic maturity (Frow 1988: 318). Higher degree research cultures are commonly shaped by supervisees' desires for the approval (sometimes sublimated into hostility) of one or more senior staff members; by libidinal investments in disciplinary figureheads, texts, and journals; and by the wonderfully Freudian tendency for postgraduates to dismiss their thesis proposals as 'shit'. In the humanities in particular, the wide array of possible frameworks available for developing theories and methods are matched only by the vast edifices of

criticism possibly directed towards one's choice of object and argument. The disorienting collision of competing theories, methods and criticisms provides heightened demands for signifiers of mastery to secure a sense of intellectual coherence and professional credibility. For the initiate to assume a position as future member of a discipline that privileges interpretation and judgement, the supervisee must assume the existence of a 'subject who is supposed to know' (Frow 1988: 314). In this context, the supervisor can perform an important prohibitive function ('you *cannot* say this') while providing intellectual securities in the face of unknown risks ('it is possible to do that').

The master can never be an infallible figure. Authority depends, in part, on the seniority of the supervisor and the changing professional and academic experience of the supervisee. Eve Sedgwick's observation about undergraduate students easily resonates with HDR teaching: 'There are students who view their teachers' hard work as a servile offering in their honor – a distasteful one to boot. There are other students who accept the proffered formulations gratefully, as a gift, but without thinking to mimic the process of their production' (2003: 154). The master-apprentice model cannot function on the assumption that authority is granted to the supervisor, nor will obedience to the supervisor's every whim necessarily make for a healthy supervision relationship. Insofar as learning can take place through disagreement and well-timed discord, it may be more appropriate to adopt Gilles Deleuze's variation on the apprenticeship narrative: 'We never learn by doing *like* someone, but by doing *with* someone, who has no relation of resemblance to what we are learning' (Deleuze, 1972: 22, emphasis). The apprentice does not receive knowledge like a glass receiving water, but rather more like a ship moving across open seas, sometimes calm and without resistance, leading to a sense that one is barely moving at all, and other times pushing too quickly forward, or suddenly resisting, or shaping new itineraries altogether. The sea does not resemble the ship, but does make opportunities for motion available when previously there may have been none. Furthermore, as the widely circulating cliché would have it, postgraduates upon completion may know more about their topics than their supervisors. This shift can even happen much earlier – too early, sometimes, for the supervisor to adopt the role of expert. In such cases, supervision may involve some creativity in staging dialogues and feedback exchanges that allow both supervisee and supervisor, 'apprentice' and 'master', to learn.

The drawbacks of the master-apprentice model are well documented. Supervisors can feel excessively responsible for supervisees' progress; the dyad can be socially isolating and dysfunctional practices can remain institutionally invisible; and it can cement existing institutional hierarchies, working 'to shore up outdated knowledge, traditions and practices by replicating the supervisor's prior work and reproducing an exclusionary elite' (Halse and Bansel 2012: 379). Conversational recollections of disaster supervisions tend to cite supervisors who adopt a strict version of the master-

apprentice model, with anecdotes ranging from benign neglect to irresolvable antagonism.

As an alternative, supervision that seeks to provide enculturation, emancipation, and quality relationships can tend towards a 'socio-cultural' approach wherein supervisors facilitate access to a broader world of practicing teachers and researchers (Halse and Bansel 2012: 378). One of the significant functions of the HDR supervisor in the contemporary university is to integrate students into learning communities that can sustain students throughout and beyond candidature (see Amundsen and McAlpine 2009: 335). David Boud and Alison Lee shift their focus away from 'supervision' and 'provisionism' to consider HDR through the specificity of peer relations by refocusing on 'distributed' and 'horizontalised' pedagogies 'with an associated dispersal of responsibility and of agency' (Boud and Lee 2005: 501-502; see also B. Green 2005: 153). Learning communities can provide forums for discussing projects, for sharing institutional knowledge, and for personal support (Connell 1985: 38), while HDR writing groups in particular have also demonstrated improved writing outputs (McCallin and Nayar 2012: 68). Boud and Lee recommend 'programmes of seminars and workshops, supervisor selection and training and linking of students with active research groups', as well as 'monthly meetings of research students around topics of concern, the use of an online environment and, notably, a research student conference' (Boud and Lee 2005: 506).<sup>2</sup>

One of the most developed models of collective learning practices is what Halse and Bansel call 'the learning alliance'. The learning alliance prescribes 'an ethical approach for the "morally-committed" actions necessary for praxis' linked to 'the moral grammar of doctoral education', and structured by 'ethical relations of responsibility' that require scholars to consider 'relations among multiple actors, and their practices and policies' (Halse and Bansel 2012: 384-385). The goal of doctoral supervision, Halse and Bansel suggest, is 'praxis', and this involves an alliance 'between multiple institutional agents grounded in a relational ethics of mutual responsibility' (Halse and Bansel 2012: 377). The concept of ethical 'praxis' is then elaborated:

Praxis is concerned with the shared practices, including policies, procedures and processes, of individuals and organisations 'who are conscious and self-aware that their actions are "morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions" – like the traditions that orient the work, the being and the becoming of people' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 5). Thus, the learning alliance is much more than a pedagogy of doctoral education. (Halse and Bansel 2012: 378)

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<sup>2</sup> Margot Pearson and Angela Brew (2002) argue that HDR students require high quality research learning environments characterized by 'access to resources, including expertise, flexibility and choice in learning and research conditions, engagement with other students, practising researchers and a "community of peers/experts/others", as well as attention to career goals and opportunities' cited in Boud and Lee (2005: 502).

Supervision work is expanded beyond outcomes-based learning to a more holistic model of care. The notion of 'work' being deployed here follows an earlier discussion, which reformulates work (in Hannah Arendt's terms) as a 'fruitful, creative activity that produces long-lasting objects and effects' and as 'the prerequisite for the possibility of action – the unique and visible acts that produce change and constitute the realm of great deeds and words' (Halse and Malfroy 2010: 83). Supervision work can foster extended social relationships; cultivate habits of mind that maintain interest in the student's needs; enhance students' 'techne', as 'the creative, productive use of expert knowledge to bring something into existence or accomplish a particular objective'; and implement contextual expertise to facilitate the student's disciplinary and institutional progress and achievement (Halse and Malfroy 2010: 87).

The learning alliance is a moral community distinct from the alienated social relations of the university bureaucracy. Halse and Bansel appear to advocate overlaying professionalised social structures – mediated by the vast apparatus of university bureaucracy – with unmediated social attachments guided by principles of responsibility:

Whilst we may not be responsible for the design and implementation of the policies and managerial practices through which doctoral programmes, candidature and supervision are regulated, they create the conditions under which we must assume responsibility and that responsibility is collective rather than individual.... This is not an ethics where a certain end justifies the means to achieve it – timely completions, publications, etc. – but an ethics of responsibility that is attuned to the consequences of human conduct in the existing context and willingness to take responsibility for them. (Halse and Bansel 2012: 387)

The learning alliance enlarges the scope of what 'good supervision' looks like, and expands the university's obligations well beyond 'administrative matters of risk control, audit, surveillance or crisis management when a problem arises with a student, supervisor, or in the supervisory relationship' (Halse and Bansel 2012: 384). Ethical learning communities promise genuine alternatives to the market-based logics of competitive enterprise currently dominant within Australian universities. As Connell puts it, 'a supervisor's role is to protect the student from the institution, as far as one can, and encourage originality and radical thinking' (Connell and Manathunga 2012: 8).

Nevertheless, the sociology of higher education cannot content itself with an uncomplicated endorsement of the learning community as inherently ethical. The serial effects of social relationships assembled within tertiary settings can diverge from the effects intended by any single actor. The following section

argues that learning alliances are embedded in professional communities fractured in two ways: inwardly, through the uneven distribution of labour within formal and informal social hierarchies; and outwardly, through processes of social capital accumulation that can generate their own distinct harms. Reflecting on the necessary move made towards collective responsibility in Halse and Bansel, we want to stress that learning alliances themselves can pose political problems, if not organised with the same critical consciousness directed towards neoliberal individualisation in the academy.

### The Casual Supervisor

Working conditions vary widely among those charged with building learning alliances. These variations are frequently masked by the ‘myth of egalitarianism’ (see Gill 2014: 24) cultivated by university upper management through the rhetorics of knowledge communities and collective enterprise. In seeking to expand the dyadic form of supervision, Halse and Bansel make important connections between the labour of academic work and other kinds of ‘ethical’ social relationships. This is, however, a risky move. Universities already thrive on the surplus labour extracted from salaried academics, but casual and sessional employees are particularly vulnerable. In 2012 it was estimated in Australia ‘that less than 36% of university employees are employed on a secure basis’ (Mayhew 2014: 265),<sup>3</sup> and the attendant ‘culture of anxiety and resentment has a pernicious effect on academic research cultures’ (Mayhew 2014: 268). Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa concur, noting that casualization

directly relates to issues of quality, security and collegiality. Casualisation individualises responsibility for quality and casuals self-exploit out of a sense of personal and professional obligation to students. Lacking income security, casual teachers become a highly responsive and manipulable pool of labour, bent to the will of the contract. (Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa 2010: 22)

Casualisation produces a labourer that is simultaneously the *subject* of responsibility (in relation to students) and the *object* of responsibility (in relation to senior staff). For casuals, ‘the issue of quality of education is subsumed into the question of payment-time for “ancillary activities”’, and when casual staff do produce quality outcomes for students, this quality ‘is directly related, in the reported experience of casual staff, to their rate of self-exploitation’ (Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa 2010: 19). Casualisation can also have an impact on HDR students directly, who alongside Early Career Researchers (ECRs hereafter), are frequently ‘charged with delivering mass

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<sup>3</sup> These figures refer to academic and professional staff, where ‘secure’ refers to employment on a permanent (or ‘tenured’) basis. Similar figures hold in the United Kingdom and the United States (see Gill 2014: 19).

undergraduate programs without training or support' (Gill 2014: 19). Accountability mechanisms designed to increase timely completion also mean that supervisors are required to train HDR students in more skills in less time, or what Pam Green and Robin Usher (2003) call 'fast supervision' (44). The same institutional pressures that truncate the time of supervision and place postgraduates in competition for funding and employment are also those that create employment insecurity among supervisors themselves. The hazards of casualisation, in particular, can limit supervisors' capacities to secure their own positions within the organisational hierarchies into which they are expected to facilitate students' access. If ECRs, casual and sessional workers cannot picture their own careers in five years, then picturing their students' careers becomes an unsettling enterprise of the imagination. And of course, basic amenities matter too: the notion that supervisors can 'open doors' for their supervisees becomes doubly fraught for those who do not have office doors in the first place.

The professional subjectivities of inexperienced supervisors also merit special consideration. Most academics receive little formal training in supervision practices, and find themselves 'becoming a supervisor' as an improvised byproduct of becoming an academic (see Barcan 2015). The preparation processes that do exist are largely informal and tacit, and (as noted above) often unsatisfactorily addressed by institutional training focused on 'techné' and 'contextual expertise' (Halse and Malfroy 2010: 88). With or without training, Elspeth Probyn notes that 'feeling like a fraud is routine in the modern university' (cited in Barcan 2013: 192). Ruth Barcan argues that such feelings of fraudulence are exacerbated by post-disciplinarity (the porous borders of conventional disciplinary expertise), globalization (the geographical and cultural mobility of both researchers and students), productivism ('one can never, by definition, have done "enough"') and casualization, where 'overworked permanent staff and the undervalued casual staff are two sides of the same coin' (Barcan 2013: 199-200). Claims that 'a deep substantive knowledge of their discipline or specialization [is] essential for supervising doctoral students', and about the importance of professional networks for facilitating supervisees' examination and future employment (Halse and Malfroy 2010: 86-88; Lee 2008), can further consolidate a sense of incompetence for ECR supervisors (see also Amundsen and McAlpine 2009: 338; Barcan 2013; McCallin and Nayar 2012: 61).

Feelings of fraudulence can sometimes be useful. The relative vulnerabilities of junior supervisors can provide opportunities to build bridges across institutional gulfs, in keeping with Barcan's analysis of academic insecurity: 'refusing to allow our students to feel that they are not the only person in the room who doesn't know enough, or shouldn't be there, or doesn't understand, or isn't convinced, or doesn't have the right background for this, is not only an ethical imperative, but also a political pedagogical challenge' (Barcan 2013: 193). Acknowledging insecurity may allow supervisors to model



important lessons about limitation, failure, humility, and intellectual generosity, as well as to affirm a collective confidence in the '*right to be somewhere*' (203, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, while the vulnerabilities of precariously employed supervisors can open up a range of important dialogues across stratified institutional spaces, they do come at a cost.

The surplus labour of academic workers within learning alliances is not evenly distributed. In the United Kingdom, for example, recent research indicates that those who are perceived as embodying social diversity within the university (e.g. around class, gender, race, sexuality, religion) are frequently required to do informal and affective labour in supporting HDR marginalised students, legitimating diversity initiatives and diversifying curricula, and navigating colleagues' conflicting expectations around the 'diversity work' required of them (Ahmed 2012; see also Taylor 2013). This is the informal performative labour necessary for cultures of difference that exists alongside the non-performative statements of institutional diversity policy (Ahmed 2007). Working hours for supervisors identified by students as accessible resources for affective labour and diversity work can easily remain invisible in relation to the ever-proliferating 'metric assemblages' around academic performance (see Gill 2014: 21-22). Furthermore, affective and interpersonal labour is commonly treated as a requirement for women but a special achievement for men, and this can produce serious imbalances in the amount of work expected of women in workplaces, and in the professional recognition received for such work.<sup>4</sup> Insofar as women are 'overrepresented in lower grades and temporary positions' (Gill 2014: 19), increased casualisation among staff can be a crucial pivot in the reproduction of gendered organizational and disciplinary hierarchies. Evidence from the United States suggests that similar imbalances can hold around the intersections between race, class and gender, albeit with some marked disciplinary variations (see the studies collected in Muhs et al. 2012).

The learning alliance provides a way of modelling alternatives to the individual burdens placed on supervisors, by urging academics to diversify the resources and relationships available to supervisees. Yet the employment of *ethical* justifications for broadening supervision and forming communities can cut both ways. Learning alliances are not formed through collective consensus: research and teaching communities assemble themselves through a series of uneven desires, compromises and coercions, wherein informal gift economies further consolidate the nestled enclaves of higher education. The testimonies compiled in Brown, Goodman, and Yasukawa (2010) confirm that feelings of ethical obligation can further wedge supervisors who themselves are dependent on supports from institutions that continue to erode their conditions of practice.

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<sup>4</sup> On gender and affective labour in the modern university, see Gregg (2010: 189-190).

We are not arguing for a curative ‘return to Marxism’ as an alternative to the pedagogical problem of selecting the best supervision practices. By pointing to what Rosalind Gill (2014: 25) calls ‘the hidden injuries of academic labouring in the Western University’, we also heed her caution about not disavowing the privilege of academic workers. The top-down extraction of surplus value does not necessarily provide a better explanation for the production of affective labour than the bottom-up social habits of university workplaces, and industrial relations hardly capture the disparate motivations that shape supervisors’ everyday professional investments. Teaching work can, after all, involve many unexpected pleasures and always contains some ‘room for maneuver’ or even possibilities for ‘exhilaration’ (Ross Chambers in Morris 2013: 450). Nevertheless, the labour of community building is uneven in its social distribution and imbalanced in the rewards it can deliver. The first step in producing viable learning alliances to support supervision may not necessarily be the ethical and altruistic one – expanding sites of care for students – but rather the pragmatic and even self-interested one: create security and balance in the working lives of teachers (and these can include supervisees who teach), and ensure that any ‘relational ethics of mutual responsibility’ is grounded in sustainable relationships with the university itself.

### **The Social Life of Knowledge**

The issue of working conditions for supervisors leads to a second issue for learning alliances concerning the formation of disciplinary communities around professionalized practices of knowledge production. In extant literature on supervision practices, the rewards of completing a thesis are broadly couched in humanist terms for the student (who contributes to knowledge), to the supervisor (who guides and learns from this contribution), and to the discipline (which is reinvigorated with new perspectives, approaches, and concepts). Some studies also frame the production of higher degree knowledge as a contribution to ‘knowledge economies’ intended to make ‘a significant contribution to change and development in the workplace’ (McCallin and Nayar 2012: 69). When noted at all, ambiguities around the virtue of knowledge production are mostly attributed to external influences, like ‘economic competitiveness’ (Halse and Bansel 2012: 387) or ‘adversarial models’ of education (Bartlett and Mercer 2000: 197). But knowledge is always produced in a particular place, for a particular professional community, and within the parameters of what is already considered to *matter* – culturally, historically, politically (Connell 2007). Practices of HDR supervision and research accreditation bring together historically specific ways of certifying and remunerating knowledge production; of separating individuals on the basis of authority (e.g. tutors, lecturers, professors), discipline (e.g. archeology, cultural studies), and institutional tier (e.g. technical colleges,

'Oxbridge', the enterprise university); and of stratifying non-tertiary spaces in relation to mandatory educational qualifications (e.g. professional gatekeeping).

We cannot do justice to the complex relationship between socialised knowledge production and social class stratification, but we can point to some observable tendencies that may be familiar to HDR supervisors. The possession of knowledge does not automatically place an individual in an academic 'class' (Devlin 2013; Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, and Bereded-Samuel 2010), and correspondingly, those claiming membership in the 'knowledge class' do not necessarily possess more knowledge than others (Frow 1995: 117). Nevertheless, some persons are equipped with resources – social capital, cultural capital, embodied capital – that allow them to make claims *over* knowledge (Bourdieu 1997). John Frow characterizes this relationship in the following way:

The knowledge class acquires legitimacy through the acquisition of credentials, and at the same time achieves a measure of class closure by integrating the community of those with appropriate credentials and excluding those without it; it structures its Other in terms of its own claim to knowledge. (Frow 1995: 126)

To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu (1984), the knowledge class is defined by its capacity to classify knowledge, and in doing so, to classify itself in relation to the disciplines and institutions that authorize the claim to knowledge.

Disciplinarity is never a purely theoretical-ideological problem or a methodological-practical problem. Disciplines are constituted through fields of social practice, organized around communicative technologies (e.g. publics), institutional alliances (e.g. departments), and rituals of various kinds (e.g. conferences). While attempts to measure research quality using standardised metrics are rightly criticised for discouraging innovation and enforcing conservative criteria, it must be remembered that social formations have their own impulses towards reproducing the status quo, and that the classification of knowledge as 'academic' never sits outside the cultural politics of the institution itself.

HDR trajectories provide are strongly marked by 'social capital', or 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (Bourdieu 1997: 51). The HDR dissertation is not a commodity as such, but is rather an instrument of commoditization in an inter-institutional market formation, and thus best understood 'as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being' (Kopytoff 1984: 63).

For those situated in Australia's research-focused Group of Eight (Go8)<sup>5</sup> universities, in particular, the gap between disciplinary belonging and social belonging can easily be closed. The latent value of a dissertation can be converted into social and cultural capital through the transformation of the 'strong tie' between supervisor and supervisee to the 'weak ties' of extended professional affiliations (Granovetter 1985). For the postgraduate student, social capital is crucial in 'providing access to key scholarly networks or opportunity structures, and investment in deciphering the unwritten rules of the institutional culture and the larger discipline' (Zambrana et al. 2015: 5). Consider Lee's account of supervision as a pivot of institutional power:

[Supervisors] will provide some specific expertise, but will also be a gatekeeper to many more learning resources, specialist opinions and networks. The supervisor can choose which gates to open, particularly in the early stages of the researcher's life.... The struggle can be political on several levels. The student needs to be aware of how powerful (or not) their supervisor is in the institution, and discussion about enculturation as a concept or an expectation could help the student to make realistic decisions. (Lee 2008: 272)

Social capital can bridge the gaps between the closed environment of an academic department and the wider job markets – both academic and non-academic – in which graduates seek work. Supervisors must constantly navigate the tension between commitments to an expanded sense of 'responsibility' as a tacit alliance with colleagues and students, and the risk of heightening existing investments in what Philippe Ariès, commenting on bourgeois education, concisely characterized as 'a host of little societies' (Ariès 1962: 414).

Tertiary institutions do not merely reflect, absorb, integrate, or mediate pre-existing social differences. Universities are classifying machines: they rank, reward, include, and exclude. Research in Australia has considered the trajectories of students from Low Socio-Economic Status (LSES) areas passing into higher education, noting the impact of both cultural and social capital in students' university experiences (Devlin et al. 2012; Devlin 2013). However, despite a handful of longitudinal studies (e.g. Walpole 2003; Zweigenhaft 1993), relatively little is known about the relationship between HDR research trajectories and social capital accumulation, and the aggregated effects of social networking have never been mapped at the level of an entire discipline. Recent research in the United States indicates that scholars from 'minority' backgrounds 'are hindered by limited access to material resources, social capital, and prior experiences in segregated or underserved neighborhoods and schools' (Zambrana et al. 2015: 44), but comparable research is yet to be

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<sup>5</sup> The University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne, the University of Adelaide, The University of Western Australia, The University of Queensland, The University of New South Wales, Australian National University and Monash University.

conducted across the Australian tertiary sector. What we do know, however, is that Australia's Go8 coalition profits greatly from what Simon Marginson (2006) characterizes as the 'positional' market for Australian higher education. In a segmented sector where 'prestigious' brand value frequently trumps teaching quality for the purposes of attracting students, 'elite degrees and other positional goods confer advantages on some only by denying them to others' (4). The preservation of certain disciplinary traditions and specialisations as inherently 'prestigious' or 'scholarly' is linked to the reproduction of inter-institutional hierarchies that implicitly classify some postgraduates as inherently more valuable than others.

Discipline-based social capital is something potentially offered by the HDR supervisor. Institutional expectations that supervisors support supervisees' social and institutional progress (see Connell 1985: 41) are buttressed by an affective component linked to memory and trauma. Most students experience the supervision relationship as ground zero for the accumulation of social capital in its disciplinary aspect (or 'disciplinary capital'), as distinct from existing social networks. Following Karl Marx, we could call this *primitive affective accumulation* (see Marx 1993: 279). The interpersonal tribulations between supervisor and supervisee – missed deadlines, arguments, tears, negotiation, prohibition and warning, conciliation and congratulations – accumulate as shared affective memory. The spoils of primitive affective accumulation are then converted into mobile social capital if the student pursues an academic career. One idiosyncrasy of this conversion is that even fraught supervision relationships can produce enduring social connections, because traumatic supervision can heighten the supervisor's own investment in the candidate and the project.

Affective labour in the HDR space therefore has distinct faces. Firstly, an inwardly facing component of uncounted social work by supervisors who subscribe to what Lee calls the 'quality relationship' model of practice. Secondly, the outwardly facing extraction of social capital from HDR candidature enabled through primitive affective accumulation. These can be two ways of describing the same general tendency: as market-based interactions are increasingly embedded within academic life,<sup>6</sup> affective relations and informal circuits of social capital provide relative securities in otherwise volatile institutional climates. Affective work is not only a site for strategic exploitation by the 'neoliberal' university, but is also a tactical response to the social erosions caused by the heightened mobility of postgraduates and non-tenured academics in a highly competitive employment sector.<sup>7</sup> The formation of 'little societies' bound by affective investments makes sense from the viewpoint of local situations shaped by market-based volatilities, but its potential follow-on effects in Australia's

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<sup>6</sup> See Granovetter (1985) on socially embedded markets.

<sup>7</sup> On this distinction between strategies and tactics, see Michel De Certeau (1988).

stratified higher education sector does prompt broader questions about barriers to entry for academic communities.

For at least some of the issues raised so far, a range of simple correctives may be available. When supporting peer-based networks of learning among postgraduates, staff could make sure to include part-time students, students off campus, international students, or interested students from other universities. When casual or sessional staff are engaged in supervision, other staff could make sure to include them in 'teaching alliances' that provide social supports and offer opportunities for difficult supervision relationships to be co-supported by supervisors with more institutional security. Nevertheless, the effects of social capital investment are somewhat harder to counteract, and primitive affective accumulation takes on a distinctive value in relation to disciplinary affiliation. In this final section, we outline specific issues around research supervision for cultural studies practitioners, noting the ways that social relationships can acquire disciplinary value.

### **Higher Degree Research in a Cultural Studies Context**

Cultural studies can find itself unexpectedly conflicted in the HDR environment. On the one hand, higher degree research provides opportunities for cultural studies to flourish by inviting junior researchers to pursue exciting questions in depth. Higher degree research and supervision session can also be formative spaces where students develop a critical approach to knowledge production itself, and for those not intending to pursue academic careers, such critical approaches can contribute to a broader public good elsewhere. On the other, the supervision dyad and the gatekeeping functions of doctoral assessment challenge cultural studies to confront practices seemingly incongruent with its own political orientations. These latter include the articulation of strict hierarchies between institutional and non-institutional forms of expertise; the exercise of institutional authority often linked to punitive (and not necessarily rehabilitative) mechanisms; the commonplace reification of "knowledge for knowledge's sake" in many HDR dissertations; the valorisation of the mind over the body, or the being of ideas over the pragmatic doing of ideas; and the enforcement of distinctions between what cultural studies *is* and what cultural studies *isn't*. To make this argument, though, we need to first pinpoint distinctive features of cultural studies as a research framework.

Cultural studies in Australia is described by Frow (2007) as both a 'common project' (72) and as 'a kind of "clumping" of intellectual energies at key places and times' (71), including the formation of a number of new academic journals and the communities that underpinned them; increased government investment into the culture industries in the 1970s and 1980s; and new (or 'non-sandstone') education institutions which sought to distinguish

themselves from the established universities through their interdisciplinary and vocational programs (Frow 2007). It also matters whether we transmit the history of cultural studies through the names of those who directly identify with the legacy of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies,<sup>8</sup> or through those critical social movements that created the political and intellectual spaces that cultural studies now fruitfully occupies, including feminism (e.g. Morris 1988) and critical responses to multiculturalism, often themselves framed in feminist terms (e.g. Gunew 1988). For the sake of brevity, but possibly at the expense of nuance, we will focus on features of cultural studies that circulate most widely as relevant to teaching.

Where the social sciences are typically defined by their methods, cultural studies is defined by its problems. These problems may involve drawing from ‘whatever fields are necessary to produce the knowledge for a particular project’ (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 2), and the resulting ‘problem-spaces’<sup>9</sup> can be understood as ‘an interrelated set of questions that generates a body of knowledge – with the proviso that the singularity of this problematic is as much self-consciously constructed as it is given in advance’ (Frow 2007: 68). Cultural studies would appear to have no attachments to particular facts about the world, or even attachments to ways of producing such facts, although it does have attachments to the notion that both facts and methods are contingent on the problem at hand. A logical card trick would enable this contingency to be reclaimed as a new philosophical foundation (e.g. Meillassoux 2008), but this is not the move most often made in cultural studies, nor should it be.

Cultural studies *does* have relatively constant attachments to facts regarding education. When confronted with specific social phenomena – intimacy, violence, depression – cultural studies has consistently asserted, albeit using a range of vocabularies, that aspects of these phenomena are *learnt*. Cultural studies teachers must believe that human beings are not born smart or dumb, creative or rational, ‘indoorsy’ or ‘outdoorsy’. These labels are cultural in origin and they attempt to describe practices that are themselves products of culture. The capacity to learn is always linked to what one has already learned; the desire to learn is linked to already existing desires, shaped by other sites of learning; and new beliefs are acquired in relation to already held beliefs. Cultural studies’ pedagogical orientation therefore dovetails with John Dewey’s philosophy of education, which prioritises the ‘capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction’, and seeks to articulate ‘purposes’ through ‘cooperative enterprise’ and ‘social intelligence’ (Dewey 1997 [1938]).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, recent commentaries in Bennett (2015), Frow (2007) and Turner (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Synonyms may include ‘conjunctures’ or ‘events’ (see Laurie 2015: 24-25).

<sup>10</sup> What education researchers call problem-based learning (PBL) follows principles already welcomed by cultural studies scholars working with this Deweyian disposition. Universities are now more holistically placing emphasis on the development of HDR students’ transferable skills, such as ‘problem solving, collaborative work, leadership and knowledge application’ (Green and Usher 2003: 39).

Cultural studies has firm intellectual investments in cultivating social spaces where unexpected and irreverent ideas can be explored and developed. For this reason, among others, Graeme Turner's *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* foregrounds undergraduate teaching as an important base from which cultural studies programs have developed in Australia, and as a crucial site for the kinds of pedagogical interventions that cultural studies is readily, if not uniquely, equipped to make. '[Early] cultural studies programmes were taught in ways that explicitly and deliberately built on their own students' popular cultural capital', suggests Turner, and 'their focus upon the media and popular culture enabled students to immediately engage in conversation with the discipline' (2011: 79). Just as cultural studies research takes seriously the phenomena of everyday life – its pleasures, frustrations, contradictions, aspirations – so too should the discipline enable students 'to learn something new about their own experiences, location or patterns of consumption' (87). For similar reasons, recent reflections on cultural studies have shared critiques of sycophantic orientations to well-known persons and texts (e.g. Grossberg 2010; Rodman 2014), and Turner strongly recommends against the 'mystificatory approach to the teaching of cultural studies theory that privileges the authority of the knowing teacher rather than enables the curious student' (2011: 78; see also Turner 2013). At a social level, studies of primary and secondary education have noted that students can benefit from adopting the position of teacher (Harris and Lemon 2012: 423), and some higher education researchers recommend that the 'breaking down of barriers between the "experts" and the learners is ... necessary for engaging in a genuine dialogue' (Durden, Govender, and Reddy 2014: 150).

The scandal of cultural studies teaching is that many undergraduates in cultural studies do not do cultural studies, or at least, not according to the normative definitions provided above. Problem-spaces, conjunctures, and collective projects emerge as the result of collective labours, usually informed by immanent contributions from adjacent disciplines. If, as Tony Bennett argues, 'cultural studies matters as a meeting place for heterogeneous forms of socio-cultural and cultural-economic analysis that have diverse forms of practical engagement' (2013: 439), then the undergraduate version of this meeting place is a busy metropolitan intersection. Cultural studies Bachelor programs in Australia are likely to combine students' adjacent disciplinary specialisations (say, in English or sociology) with key terms, arguments or methods claimed 'as' cultural studies, but that were originally developed in, and continue to be claimed by, many other disciplines. Successful cultural studies teaching may therefore involve introducing a philosophy student to sociology, or a documentary film-maker to postcolonial literary theory, rather than enacting a conversion to cultural studies *tout court*.

Higher Degree Research both accentuates and displaces the challenges of the undergraduate cultural studies classroom. While research students may



continue to benefit from the adage that learning is doing (see Durden, Govender, and Reddy 2014: 149), the kinds of reflexive identity work and peer-based discussion commonplace in cultural studies' undergraduate classrooms are less likely to fulfil the criteria for a HDR project. Supervisors cannot always engage supervisees through the same kinds of experience-based learning activities that continue to inspire and exhilarate undergraduates, and ongoing coursework is rarely a feature of HDR experience in Australian universities.

Just as importantly, cultural studies cannot know in advance what kinds of research projects will be relevant to its purposes. Supervisors, supervisees and markers must place a great deal of confidence in 'immanent' criteria linked to the particular problems posed by the research piece at hand. Undergraduate teaching can accommodate a degree of intellectual dilettantism, linked in part to the pedagogical device of exploring everyday experiences and adapting scholarship to suit these purposes. By contrast, cultural studies research at a postgraduate level must be committed to its own historicity: how is this problem being approached *in and for the present*? Where undergraduates in cultural studies are invited to explore different methods and approaches, postgraduates are expected not only to demonstrate mastery over one or several methods, but also to justify their methodological choices in historical and cultural terms. Such justification is internally important to postgraduate research projects, but also on behalf of facilitating individuals' transition into non-academic labour markets by demonstrating the seriousness and value of cultural studies research (Frow 2013: 448). This is practically important because not all HDR students desire careers as academics, nor would absolute institutional retention be at all desirable for cultural studies.

Cultural studies makes multiple demands of its postgraduate researchers, encouraged to participate in its 'meeting place' of ideas but also required to navigate a (sometimes tacitly disavowed) disciplinary history and set of expected research methodologies, especially on behalf of academic employment. Such broad training makes a particular version of the learning alliance desirable, insofar as interdisciplinary learning requires being able to speak both *to* and *through* many different voices.

Insofar as the risks of cultural studies research produce distinctive forms of intellectual vulnerability, it should also not surprise us that cultural studies has an equally distinctive versions of the canon and the *clique*. In the absence of methods-based rules for disciplinary inclusion and exclusion, cultural studies can become particularly dependent on tacit collective understandings of which problems are currently viable, which pathways have been exhausted, and which concepts remain salvageable from adjacent humanities and social science disciplines. For postgraduates in cultural studies, it can be important – but also very difficult – to imagine the 'ideal reader' for an experimental or interdisciplinary thesis.

Criticisms of canonical authority in cultural studies can be re-evaluated in this context. In contrast to Stuart Hall's formulation of a 'Marxism without guarantees' open to the 'relative indeterminacy' of 'political action given by the terrain on which it operates' (Hall 1996: 44), HDR programs are the sites where guarantees are most furiously sought after, and where the contingency of the terrain creates the greatest anxiety for those vulnerable to failure. Even the postgraduate student who is encouraged to draw on their everyday practices must become confident in the authority of the person who gives encouragement (or in the disciplinary authority conferred upon, say, autoethnography). Supervisees must have confidence in themselves in relation to their supervisors, and also confidence in their supervisors *vis a vis* the discipline being travelled. In this context, the prized names of cultural studies and its 'host of little societies' may come to matter to those learning to speak *in the name of* a discipline. The phylogenetic development of cultural studies – the emergence of great names and works over the last five decades – can provide a speculative roadmap for the ontogenetic growth of the postgraduate's own research identity.

Learning trajectories in cultural studies involve complex social attachments and decisions, and many examples will not conform either to the Machiavellian mechanics assumed by the 'social capital' model (see Low 2013), or to the pathological model of canonical investments motivated by the fear of failure. Academic communities produced through networks of affiliation and association can be joyful in addition to their 'capitalising' functions, and in the context of cultural studies, Meaghan Morris notes the importance of 'any self-motivating group that is sustained, within as well as without the silos of highly industrialized sectors, by a shared commitment to an educative project that acts as a source of ethical and emotional value for those involved' (2011: 126). As part of cultural studies 'educative projects', we hoped to have signaled some of the specific challenges the discipline poses for HDR students, and to have marked important points of difference between the Deweyian ideals of the 'bottom-up' undergraduate classroom, and the more unwieldy demands of the cultural studies postgraduate space.

## Conclusion

This chapter has moved between two schematically distinguishable kinds of discourse that circulate within the sociology of higher education. One discourse considers the practices required to achieve a single broad outcome: best teaching practice. For those teaching HDR students, the criteria for best practice may involve progressing students toward a timely completion, and creating the best conditions for the student to later pursue an academic or non-academic career. Best practice discourses weigh up variations in a

process that leads to an agreed-upon goal, and are therefore goal-independent. By contrast, goal-variable discourses interrogate the perceived outcomes of Higher Degree Research in an institutional and social context, noting the serial effects of institutional practices across and between different parts of the tertiary sector. The goal-independent discourse is best adapted to the phenomenological experiences of teaching and learning, while the goal-variable approach is better able to scrutinize the patterns, cycles, and cumulative tendencies that shape the reproduction of programs, disciplines and institutions. Some of the issues identified in this chapter concern phenomenological practices (e.g. the master-apprentice model), while others interrogate the goals of supervision (e.g. the social capital model).

One distinctive feature of HDR spaces, however, is that the separation of teaching as a discreet activity from its broader institutional context can be difficult to make. Boundaries are frequently blurred between teaching and socialising, instruction and collaboration, and between the labour time of candidature, and the post-candidature alliances that shape supervisees' institutional trajectories. This blurring can produce unexpected joy, relief, excitement, security, anticipation, reminiscence, and nostalgia. At the same time, from a pedagogical viewpoint, the work of HDR supervision is never done. The parameters of a successful supervision could extend well into the future of an academic career, or sideways into unexpected professional pathways that nevertheless benefit from positive supervision experiences and ongoing mentorship. Given that postgraduate supervision does blur activities that, within the learning alliance model, could implicate a network of actors and practices, an ethics of supervision must be able to scrutinise the broader institutional conditions by which an individual comes to supervise and be supervised. In particular, the promotion of learning alliances as a response to deficiencies in the master-apprentice model of supervision need to be sensitive to the organizational structures within which such alliances are embedded. The expectation of broad pastoral responsibilities for supervisors can disproportionately affect casual or sessional workers, for whom academic teaching is often experienced as a vocation bundled with the anxieties of precarious employment. Acknowledging the demands placed by universities on postgraduate productivity, supervisors should be conscious of best practice teaching and scaffolding multiple systems of support, while remaining prepared to engage with the institutional politics that continue to distribute support unevenly for both supervisors and supervisees across the Australian tertiary sector.

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