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## **'I'd Like to Call You My Mother.' Reflections on Supervising International PhD Students in Social Work**

### **Abstract**

There are more international students in UK universities than at any time in the past, and this trend seems likely to continue, at least in the foreseeable future. This paper is motivated by my experiences as a white, middle-class, middle-aged woman supervising a number of international PhD students at a UK university. The title of the paper reflects a statement made by one international student, recently arrived to undertake a PhD in social work. His request resonated with views expressed to me by other international students and encouraged me to reconsider the nature of PhD supervision and my role within it. The paper argues that institutional guidelines, while helpful, do not address adequately the importance of the need to both support and affirm international postgraduate students who have made considerable sacrifices, personal, professional and financial, to come to study at a university overseas. The paper proposes that PhD supervisors should look to alternative frameworks for understanding so that we can create supervision practice which is respectful and useful to all doctoral students in social work, whether studying as overseas or home students.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, PhD, Supervision, International, Multi-cultural Perspectives, Students, Academic, Diversity, Social Work

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the topic of international PhD student supervision in social work by focusing on my experience as a PhD supervisor at a university in the UK. The title is deliberately provocative, inviting readers to confront their own reactions to a request from a male student, newly-arrived in the global North to study for a PhD in social work. It highlights questions of gender, cultural expectations and boundaries (personal and professional), and in doing so, it alerts readers to issues which rushed through my head when I met this student some four years ago. I will begin by describing the context of international students in higher education (HE) in the UK, presenting background statistical information and introducing the methodology which will be drawn on. I will then present as vignettes some of my experiences of international PhD student supervision in social work. These are followed by a wider discussion of research findings and literature on PhD supervision. I will end by offering some alternative frameworks for thinking about PhD supervision in the future.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that the term 'international students' is used in different ways in different settings. For example, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) makes a distinction between 'UK-domicile residents', 'other European residents' and 'non-European residents', where 'international students' become conflated with 'non-European residents'. In contrast, some of the literature on international students equates 'international' with English-language usage, defining international students as 'those who have had the majority of their previous study in countries where English is not the main medium of instruction in education' (Arkoudis, 2006, p. 5). This definition is, of course, institution-facing; it fails to recognise that international students may be English speakers travelling to universities in non-English speaking countries. I will use the term broadly, following the practice of Ryan and Carroll (2005), to refer to anyone who has chosen to travel abroad to study, and finds her or himself in situations where the language, culture and social setting may be very different to life at home.

## **The Context**

There is currently a more diverse student population at higher education institutions (HEIs) in English-speaking countries than at any time in the past, with increasing numbers of international students amongst the undergraduate and postgraduate student body. Figures indicate that there were 2,396,050 students attending HE in the UK in 2008/09 [Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2010]. Of these, 2,027,085 (84.6%) were UK-domicile residents. Of the remainder, 117,660 (4.9%) were from other European Union (EU) member countries and 251,310 (10.5%) were from non-EU countries. International student numbers have increased exponentially over the last 15 years or so in the UK. In 1995, fewer than

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100,000 students were non-EU residents. This figure rose to just over 150,000 in 2001/02 and almost 195,000 in 2004/05 (HESA, 2005). By 2008/09, this figure was 251,310, up another 9.4% on the previous year's figures (HESA, 2010). This shift is not accidental; on the contrary, there are strong 'push' and 'pull' factors associated with the change. Not only are UK universities working hard to recruit students from overseas (they pay premium fees and improve the HEI's image as a global university), but developing countries are keen to have their brightest and best scholars educated at the world's most 'prestigious' universities, in the hope that they will return and make a major contribution to life at home. A report commissioned by the British Council estimates that the total value of education and training exports to the UK amounted to around £28 million in 2003/04 (Lenton, 2007).

HESA provides a breakdown of countries of domicile, 'other EU' and 'non-EU' students coming to study in the UK. This shows a significant increase over the last year in numbers of students coming from Poland and Italy (within the EU) and a huge increase in students from India and Nigeria (amongst non-EU countries) (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1 Top 10 Other EU Countries of Domicile in 2008/09 for HE Students in UK HEIs

| Country of domicile     | 2007/08 | 2008/09 | % change |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Ireland                 | 15,260  | 15,360  | 0.60%    |
| Germany                 | 13,625  | 14,130  | 3.70%    |
| France                  | 12,685  | 13,090  | 3.20%    |
| Greece                  | 12,625  | 12,035  | - 4.7%   |
| Cyprus                  | 9,640   | 10,370  | 7.60%    |
| Poland                  | 8,570   | 9,145   | 6.70%    |
| Italy                   | 5,605   | 6,035   | 7.70%    |
| Spain                   | 5,740   | 5,690   | - 0.9%   |
| Netherlands             | 3,025   | 3,200   | 5.90%    |
| Sweden                  | 3,195   | 3,185   | - 0.3%   |
| Total other EU domicile | 112,150 | 117,660 | 4.90%    |

Source: HESA Students in Higher Education Institutions 2007/08, 2008/09.

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Table 2 Top 10 Non-EU Countries of Domicile in 2008/09 for HE Students in UK HEIs

| <b>Country of domicile</b> | <b>2007/08</b> | <b>2008/09</b> | <b>% change</b> |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| China                      | 45,355         | 47,035         | 3.70%           |
| India                      | 25,905         | 34,065         | 31.50%          |
| Nigeria                    | 11,785         | 14,380         | 22.00%          |
| United States              | 13,905         | 14,345         | 3.20%           |
| Malaysia                   | 11,730         | 12,695         | 8.30%           |
| Pakistan                   | 9,305          | 9,610          | 3.30%           |
| Hong Kong                  | 9,700          | 9,600          | - 1.0%          |
| Canada                     | 5,005          | 5,350          | 6.90%           |
| Taiwan                     | 5,615          | 5,235          | - 6.8%          |
| Saudi Arabia               | 3,535          | 5,205          | 47.20%          |
| Total non-EU domicile      | 229,640        | 251,310        | 9.40%           |

*Source:* HESA Students in Higher Education Institutions 2007/08, 2008/09.

HESA statistics also shed light on the mode of study undertaken by international students. Almost half of all non-UK domicile students in 2008/09 were studying for postgraduate qualifications. More than four times as many of the non-UK postgraduate students were studying full-time as opposed to part-time. This is particularly note-worthy because a discipline like social work traditionally attracts a high proportion of part-time postgraduate students who are already working as social work practitioners, managers and educators (Lyons, 2002; Orme, 2003; Scourfield and Maxwell, 2010).

There has been no subject-specific research into international student numbers in social work in the UK. Anecdotal evidence from discussions with other social work academics confirms that many more are now supervising international students. Moreover, there is some statistical evidence that there are significant differences between the social work PhD cohort and other PhD students in the UK. In the first survey of postgraduate research experience (PRES) conducted in 2007 for the Higher Education Academy, it was found that over 60% of

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the students surveyed were 30 years or younger, and almost 46% were men (Park et al., 2007). In contrast, only 7% of those who took part in Scourfield and Maxwell's (2010) audit of social work doctoral students in the UK were under 30 years, and only 36% were men. Scourfield and Maxwell also observe that 73% of students in their sample were part-time students; again, at odds with the cross-UK figure of 48% studying on a part-time basis.

## **Methodology**

The approach adopted in this paper is to present for discussion five vignettes drawn from my experience of international PhD supervision. These cannot be viewed as research findings in a conventional sense, and nor do they claim to be good practice examples (for example, [www.scie.org.uk/goodpractice/](http://www.scie.org.uk/goodpractice/)). Instead, I have chosen them because they demonstrate key issues about supervision, as well as the learning process in which I have been engaged as a supervisor. This method of writing draws on a long tradition of autobiography (Coffey, 1999) and life history (Plummer, 1983), as well as more recent ideas about reflexivity in social sciences (Finlay, 2003). C. Wright Mills explains why this is important:

... you must learn to use your life experiences in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work. (Mills, 1959/2000, p. 196)

Napier and Fook (2000) make a similar point in writing a book about 'critical moments in social work'. They argue that practice should be seen as a kind of research, and that theory should be accessed 'through the processes of reflection on specific actions, and a linking of these with unacknowledged assumptions and features of the specific context' (2000, p. 8). The vignettes in this paper should therefore be understood as 'critical moments' which, in their own right, have the potential to open a window onto new ideas about practice.

Using personal experiences inevitably demands attention to ethical questions. It could be considered (with some justification) that what I am writing is confidential; that my account might create, at least, embarrassment and, at worst, harm to the individuals concerned. For this reason, I have sought permission of all the past and present students who are mentioned in the vignettes and shared versions of the paper with them. Giving feedback to informants is a central part of any research enterprise (Satterthwaite et al., 2008). My intention was not, however, simply to give feedback. It was, instead, to involve the past and present students in the process of reflection which preceded and accompanied the writing. This was itself illuminating, because it allowed some of my perceptions to be challenged and changed, as well as giving the students/graduates insight into my own thought-processes.

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## **Experiences of Supervision**

My first experience of supervising an international student in social work was not a happy one, for the student or for me. Everything started well enough. The student had come from another European country, one which I had visited on holiday and liked very much. We were of a similar age. We were both mothers, at a fairly similar stage in our careers. Her topic was within my general area of interest and we began working together along with a senior, male colleague who held the role of 'first supervisor'. Significantly, he had also been my 'first supervisor' on my own PhD which I had recently completed. (All PhD students in my university have two supervisors.) The three of us met regularly to discuss the student's developing research proposal through the course of the first year, and I gave detailed feedback on her written work. We had almost no contact outside of these formal meetings. Unfortunately, we became so bogged down in difficulties in communication that at the end of that year, the student asked for a change of supervisors. She felt angry, criticised, unsupported, and most critically, let down by me, while I was at a loss as to how to improve the situation. The student went on to complete her studies successfully with a new supervisory team. Since then, not only have I reached a better understanding of some of the things that went wrong, but, thankfully, the former student and I have become friends.

My next experience of supervising an international student was a year or two later. This student, in common with many of the social work PhD students who apply to my university, was a woman in her 30s who had been working as a lecturer at a university in her home country (India). She arrived in January, leaving behind a high status job, her family, friends and, of course, sunshine, to be faced with below zero temperatures, a shared flat with a young student who did not speak any of her languages (including English) and a part-time job working behind a supermarket till. She came for supervision wearing five or six layers of clothes and was still cold; she had repeated problems with computer viruses as she attempted to keep in touch with family members at home; her self-confidence took a battering as she found her knowledge and skills were not sufficiently valued in her new context. This time, I took a more proactive and less formal approach to supervision, albeit again in the role of 'second supervisor'. I visited the student at home, and invited her to my home. I offered help with her studies when it seemed to be needed, and was less inclined to wait for the student to ask for help. At the same time, I asked the student to help me, engaging her in part-time tutoring and some teaching of undergraduate students. She completed her studies and graduated with a PhD.

When another student, this time from Nigeria, arrived at my HEI, I took on the role of 'first supervisor'. I introduced her to the PhD graduate above (who was now working in Scotland), and asked the graduate to keep a watchful eye over her. I also brought her to meet my family, and introduced her to the choir in which I sing. I involved her in teaching and tutoring our undergraduate students, and drew her into some of my own research, on a different topic to

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her own, but one to which she was able to make a genuine contribution. This student graduated in November last year, and a huge family party was held afterwards at her church. I am now supervising another student from Nigeria, and have tried, where possible, to replicate some of the aspects of supervisory support which the first Nigerian student had found helpful. I have also tried to be generally attentive and respectful to other international students in my department. It is one of these students referred to in the title to this article.

When this student arrived from Bangladesh, he initially had neither a computer nor a desk to sit at (although both are routinely provided to PhD students, they were not immediately available to him). I was not one of his designated supervisors, but I was aware that he was hanging about the office, unhappy and insecure. I had recently bought a new computer, so I offered him my old computer. I then helped him to get settled at a desk. This all seemed a tiny amount of support on my part, but was hugely important to him. He brought me a gift the next day, and asked if he could call me his mother. I was aghast, and said so, telling him that this was not what I wanted at all. On the contrary, I said that I aim to work with students in as egalitarian a way as possible, not dismissing the intrinsic power in the supervisory relationship. The student went on to explain to me that his wish to see me as his 'mother' expressed his respect for me as a senior academic figure. It also, however, indicated his wish that I continue to adopt a generally caring approach towards him. I have reflected on this further in conversation with my current Nigerian student who always addresses me as 'Ma', which in Scotland is an informal word for 'mother'. I have learned that a 'mother-daughter' relationship is not necessarily one characterised by dependence. In a culture such as hers, where children are likely to have a large number of 'aunties' (not all of whom will be biologically related to them), 'Ma' or 'mother' is someone who looks after you, but more than this, looks out for you.

### **Locating the Vignettes in the Wider Research Literature**

The vignettes highlight the stress, hardships, loneliness and isolation which many international PhD students have to endure, as 'strangers in a foreign land'. They also draw attention to the students' resilience and their determination to complete their studies, come what may. One of the first UK-based studies to explore the perspectives of international students was conducted by Bradley (a social work academic) in 2000. In a research project on the mental health needs of students, Bradley carried out focus groups with international and 'home' students between 1997 and 1999. The international students said they felt 'very alone', 'marginalised and isolated' from the UK home students (2000, p. 426). They said that relations with local students were friendly but rarely went beyond the superficial; a student culture which was centred on bars and alcohol was often not acceptable to them; concern about political unrest at home was never far from their thoughts; financial insecurity



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perpetually worried them. They were afraid to ask for help because they, in common with home-based students, were concerned about confidentiality in accessing support services such as student counselling. A more recent study by Irizarry and Marlowe (2010) asked 22 international social work students on a Masters' degree programme at Flinders University in Australia about their experiences. The students reported lack of confidence academically and socially, different teaching methods, language difficulties, social isolation and high levels of stress during their first year of study, although thankfully, things did improve over time. Significantly, they stated that 'active on-going assistance' was most helpful throughout their educational experience, 'in preference to one intense block of orientation which is most often arranged near the beginning of the students' academic study' (2010, p. 105).

In researching the difficulties faced by 'second language' students, Paltridge (2002) and Paltridge and Starfield (2007) point out that academic conventions and expectations in one setting may be quite different from conventions in another. Moreover, such conventions are not always clearly stated, so that new students may not know sufficiently what is being expected of them. In another study, Ramburuth and McCormick (2001) compared the experiences of Asian and native Australian students. They found that, contrary to expectations, Asian international students' overall approaches to learning were not very different from those of native Australian students. This did not, however, mean that there were no differences between the different groups. On the contrary, the international students had had very different prior learning experiences and were more likely to have fewer distractions while studying away from home and family pressures than their home-based counterparts. The study also found a marked preference for group learning and for collaborative approaches to learning amongst the Asian students, indicating that cultural values relating to collectivism and individualism may be significant in students' choice of learning styles.

Returning to the vignettes, I believe that the communication difficulties which my first PhD student and I experienced were compounded by my personal issues in becoming a PhD supervisor for the first time. Reporting on their study of the accounts of 94 doctoral supervisors at British universities, Delamont et al. (1998) note that supervisors frequently reflect back on their own experiences of being supervised and are keen to do better; to be more supportive and better organised than their own PhD supervisors had been. As a beginning supervisor, I was over-anxious and, at times, over-attentive to detail, making communication more, not less, difficult between the student and myself. I was also unsure what the 'rules' were in terms of the supervisory relationship, and I probably relied too heavily on my own prior experience as a 'home' PhD student. This led me to be too formal in my approach and not sufficiently attentive to the student's need for support.

All the vignettes draw attention to the importance of support to international students, but this is not always straightforward. Research on PhD supervision has demonstrated that it can be

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difficult for supervisors to manage the 'delicate balance' between allowing PhD students to work independently, on the one hand, and taking charge of the student's work, on the other (Delamont et al., 1998, p. 160). One supervisor in Delamont et al.'s study expressed this clearly:

... how much should you be spoonfeeding? Should they be doing it themselves? Should I be in the library sussing out this? How much re-writing? Do you go through it with a tooth comb? ... There are no guidelines at all. So I find it very problematic. How much to help the weaker ones, how much to try to keep up with the brighter ones? They are so different, they're not off-the-peg. (1998, pp. 160–161)

Educational researchers, Eley and Murray, agree that 'striking the balance between "freedom" and "neglect" may be the most difficult task for a PhD supervisor. Getting it right every time, all the time, may be close to impossible' (2009, p. 49). They acknowledge that there may also be times when students and supervisors disagree about whether the balance has tipped one way or another. They urge supervisors to 'take responsibility for helping students to understand and manage this freedom' by encouraging them to say what they want and need from supervision (Eley and Murray, 2009, p. 49); but they admit this may not be easy, because some students may be reticent about expressing their views and concerns. Another researcher, Ryan, observes that international students may be 'totally unprepared for the independence and isolation of postgraduate study' (2005, p. 101), and have little real experience of literature searching, critical reading, or specialised research skills. They may express discomfort at what they perceive as insufficient structure and a lack of control exercised by staff. For their part, supervisors may resent the additional time an international student requires. Ryan recommends that the early clarification of roles and expectations of the relationship is essential. Thereafter, she urges that supervisors must acknowledge the additional pressures which international students face, and seek to ease these by, for example, guidance on targeted reading, as well as practical help in the form of research skills training, help with writing, and providing introductions to other students 'for learning and for social support' (2005, p. 105). Cultural differences again play a part here. Irizarry and Marlowe point out that even when students felt that staff were 'approachable, friendly and helpful', they did not feel comfortable asking for support. Moreover, several international students said that it was 'not a common practice to ask a lecturer for help' in their home countries (2010, p. 103).

The 2007 and 2009 Postgraduate Research Experience Surveys (PRES) provide additional insight into the perspectives of postgraduate research students, although unfortunately, international students are not separated out from home students in the results ([www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/)). Most significantly, students rate supervisory support and guidance as the most important item for successful completion of their studies. Furthermore, supervision is the most important of the six PRES scales in

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explaining variations in students' views on their experience (the scales cover supervision, skill development, infrastructure, intellectual climate, goals and standards and thesis examination) (Kulej and Park, 2008, p. 125). Nearly three out of four students (71%) rated their satisfaction with supervision as high or very high, and even more (79%) rated their experience as having met or exceeded their expectations (Kulej and Park, 2008, p. 15). More detailed results from the 2009 PRES provide further illumination (see Table 3).

Table 3 Supervision: Findings from PRES 2009

| <b>Supervision</b>   | <b>% Agree</b> |
|--|----------------|
| (1a) My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to adequately support my research | 84.40%         |
| (1b) My supervisor/s make a real difficulty to understand any difficulties I face            | 76.00%         |
| (1c) I have been given good guidance in topic selection and refinement by my supervisor/s    | 73.00%         |
| (1d) I have received good guidance in my literature search from my supervisor/s              | 64.80%         |
| (1e) My supervisor/s provide helpful feedback on my progress                                 | 73.80%         |
| (1f) My supervisor/s are available when I need them  | 74.70%         |

The PRES results demonstrate not only how important supervision is in general, but also how unsupported some students feel, with one in four unable to get hold of their supervisor when they needed to. The PRES does not ask about social support, but this is a theme which runs through the vignettes and through other research studies. The international students with whom I have worked want more than academic support; they want someone to take an interest in them as whole people. In a study skills textbook targeted at PhD students, Rugg and Petre begin by identifying the need for compatibility between supervisor and student, arguing that although there is no single 'right' student or supervisor, the relationship must 'work' all the same, and may need to be 'worked at'. They go on to indicate a number of

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'possible roles' which may be required, but are likely to be invisible to students (2004, p. 44). All go beyond the 'minimum supervisory role' (that is, filling in forms, writing annual reports, liaising with fieldwork organisations etc.). The roles are paraphrased below:

- specific technical support (with library or software; help with structuring the thesis; training in critical reading);
- broader intellectual support (help with intellectual skills; providing knowledge about the field etc.);
- administrative support (finding funds and other resources; publicising the student's work);
- management (providing a structure through meetings, deadlines and goals); and
- personal support (career advice, counselling and emotional support) (2004, p. 46).

This list speaks to my own experience and mirrors literature on supervision in social work. Kadushin (1992) argues that good supervision has three functions—administrative/management, educational and supportive—and that attention must be given to all three if it is to be successful. My experience has been that academic supervision in the UK, to date, has usually focused on the administrative/management and educational aspects of supervision, preferring to leave support functions to peers or to other university departments (such as student counselling services). This may, of course, be indicative of pressures on academics and HEIs in terms of the increase in student numbers and heightened expectations for research and publications. It may also, however, signpost a lack of institutional interest in the more personal and emotional aspects of students' lives.

Wisker, in her book *The Good Supervisor*, brings a different slant to this issue. She argues that lack of attention by the HEI to needs such as money, family, food, warmth, housing, access to communication, to computers and libraries, work is a form of 'academic imperialism' (2005, p. 192). Such imperialism might come about, she claims, because of 'cultural arrogance', that is, an assumption of superiority of ways of going about research, or 'discourses of power in the supervisor–university–student relationship' (2005, p. 192). It may, however, at a more basic level, be lack of attention to the physical matters which might inhibit good concentration and study for international students. Wisker asserts that embarking on research is an investment in terms of time, money and self-development. Students from different cultural backgrounds may view this quite differently to students who have come from Western contexts. Their learning backgrounds and previous experience may be quite different, and their approaches and desired outcomes may also be different. She continues:

Supervisors need to be aware that their international students bring with them both culturally-influenced ways of undertaking research and culturally-influenced constructions of knowledge. It is incumbent on supervisors not merely to tolerate those but to learn from them

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and where possible, share them with indigenous and Western students, who could benefit from skills in culturally influenced research. (2005, pp. 192–193)

Wisker concludes that 'both halves of this relationship [must] work in the context of some understanding of each other's cultures, expectations and learning backgrounds' (2005, p. 19). This connects with the discussion in the vignettes about support and care, and also with the use of the word 'mother' in supervision, suggesting that it may be helpful to look to alternative frameworks for analysing international PhD supervision further.

### **Alternative Frameworks**

Transactional analysis (TA) offers a very different way of conceptualising the supervisory relationship. Introducing TA in the 1950s, Eric Berne suggested that each personality is made up of three ego states: the Parent (the voice of authority, absorbed conditioning, the messages we have picked up since childhood); the Adult (through this we are able to think and take action for ourselves, weighing up possibilities and keeping our Parent and Child under control); and the Child (the Child is formed by our reaction to external events; it is the seeing, hearing, feeling and emotional part of ourselves) (Berne, 1961, 1964). Berne believed that when we meet another person, a transaction between ego states occurs. For communication to be successful, transactions must be complementary; where this does not occur, then either communication will be ineffective, or people will get upset or angry. So, for example, if the stimulus is Parent–Child, the response should be Child–Parent, and vice-versa. If it is Adult–Adult, the response should mirror this as Adult–Adult.

In reviewing the potential usefulness of TA for PhD supervision, I am aware that critics could argue that this is a Western, male framework; moreover, PhD supervision may not be comparable to a therapeutic relationship. But I believe that TA can nevertheless inform what happens in PhD supervision. So, a beginning student may look to their supervisor for guidance, information and boundaries. Where the student has recently arrived in the country or city, the need for a 'Parent' may be even greater than for a home student. As time progresses, this need is likely to shift, until a point where the supervisor and student may be able to function on a more equal, Adult–Adult level. They may also be able to enjoy creative and fun times as Child–Child. By the final stages of the PhD, the student is likely to be more expert in their subject than anyone else including the supervisor, and may therefore take on a parenting/educational role with the supervisor. 'Kaupapa' supervision (Eruera and Stevens, 2010) in New Zealand echoes this idea. Here it is understood that there is an intrinsic connection between academic/professional knowledge and indigenous (Maori) knowledge, and between elders (skilled teachers and practitioners) and beginners (students). A Maori saying expresses this as follows:

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Na te tuakana ka totika te teina

Na te teina ka totika te tuakana

From the older sibling the young one learns

From the younger sibling the older one learns. (Eruera and Stevens, 2010)

Foucault's (1977) analysis of power is instructive. He argues that power is not only 'top down'; instead, it is diffuse, and where there is power, there is always resistance. From a Foucauldian perspective, then, our international students also have power, and if we are open to see this, they will change our supervision practice in their daily encounters with us and the HEI. Ryan and Carroll's (2005) analysis of the experiences of international students in Australia and the UK explains this further. They point out that the increased numbers of international students bring challenges to lecturers and students alike. Lecturers may be unsure how to respond to these students, and students, for their part, face 'significant difficulties' in their new learning environments (2005, p. 5). But, Ryan and Carroll argue, the students bring opportunities as well as challenges; rewards as well as difficulties. They liken international students in Western universities to 'canaries in the coalmine', 'harking back to the time when coalminers used to take canaries into mines to monitor air quality. If the canaries died, they knew that the atmosphere threatened the miners' well-being, too' (2005, p. 9). Ryan and Carroll argue that the international student 'canaries'

... point out aspects of our teaching that all students will probably experience as challenges. By paying attention, we can change conditions to make sure that everyone can thrive in the higher education environment. If we improve conditions for international students, we improve them for all learners. (2005, pp. 9–10)

Feminism also has something to contribute here. Writing as early as 1978, the feminist psychologist Nancy Chodorow observed that girls learn to be good at relationships and to care for others through their own experience of being cared for by their mothers. Joan Tronto (1993) brings a new slant to this. She argues that 'we need to stop talking about "women's morality" and start talking about a care ethic that includes the values traditionally associated with women' (1993, p. 3). She describes care as follows:

... caring is not simply a cerebral concern, or a character trait, but the concern of living, active humans engaged in the processes of everyday living. Care is both a practice and a disposition. (Tronto, 1993, p. 104)

Tronto identifies four analytically separate but interconnected phases in caring: caring about, taking care of, care-giving and care-receiving. Furthermore, she outlines four moral principles of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness. From this perspective, PhD supervision should be less concerned with rules and regulations (how many

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times it should take place each semester, whether a formal report is written each year, etc., etc.) and be more concerned with care, building from what students themselves identify as their needs and wishes. At the same time, we should be thinking about 'mothering' in terms of care, rather than as a gender-specific activity. This approach is echoed within writing on African-centred social work. Mekada Graham (2002) insists that academic and professional values and practices are culturally-specific and ethnocentric: they are built on Western knowledge and ideas which tend to be highly individualised and fail to acknowledge the importance of family and community which are central to an African-centred paradigm. This viewpoint raises questions about the individualistic, competitive approach which is currently central to academic supervision, and encourages us to look beyond to community and peer focused approaches to supporting PhD students and their learning.

## **Conclusions**

Determined efforts have been made in my university and other HEIs in the UK to give better support to PhD students: 'buddying' and peer mentoring schemes, social spaces for postgraduate students, opportunities for staff and students to meet socially, seminar series and online social networking opportunities have all played their part in improving the learning environments for students. We have also seen a gradual professionalisation of PhD supervision in the introduction of the QAA Code of Practice for research degrees and the UK Research Councils' creation of a required set of research skills and techniques, as well as in HEFCE's insistence in the importance of 'timely and successful completion of postgraduate research programmes' (Fry et al., 2009, p. 180). Such developments will, we might anticipate, lead to better support for PhD students across the board in the UK, but whether they will give international students what they feel they need and want from their supervisors is less certain.

Connell has referred to postgraduate supervision as one of the 'most genuinely complex' and 'least discussed aspects' of academic teaching (1985, p. 38). I have argued that as more international students have come to study in HEIs in the global North, so social work as an academic discipline has a new, relatively unexplored and unacknowledged student population which brings with it both challenges and new possibilities. Looking ahead, I think it is vital that we have an honest discussion about issues of power and difference, and that we face up to the reality that supervision must also involve a kind of care. This is not just about needs; it is about recognising the strengths and gifts which international students bring in terms of their knowledge and values. From this perspective, PhD supervision is a moral activity, as well as an educational one. The student who asked if he could call me his mother knew this; it has taken me a little longer to understand this for myself.

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