

## REVIEW

# A self-reflection on Providing Companionship through Approaches of Postgraduate Students in Geography

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**Citation:** Ngie A. (2024) A self-reflection on Providing Companionship through Approaches of Postgraduate Students in Geography. *Open Science Journal* 9(2)

**Received:** 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2024

**Accepted:** 29<sup>th</sup> March 2024

**Published:** 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2024

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**Funding:** The author(s) received no specific funding for this work

**Competing Interests:** The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Abstract:

Postgraduate education is often perceived to take place on some independent level by the student in doing most of the required work in upgrading skills and knowledge. At the same point there is need of guidance through one or more persons usually called ‘supervisor’ or ‘promoter’. During this guidance to develop knowledge and skills, relationships are established which can either challenge the people involved to grow or break down. Through the Personal Construct Theory, this paper undertakes a self-reflection within the field of Geography to understand how the various supervisory approaches can provide companionship support to students. The experiences of these approaches in higher education around other universities were also reviewed towards providing companionship for the students. The outcome shows that approach to supervision is hardly a one-size fit all scenario and certainly requires flexibility in handling the supervision process. Some approaches like the collective or collaborative or group approach certainly provide a sense of companionship in the postgraduate journey than the one-on-one approach. However, the one-on-one approach is chosen by some supervisors and students to avoid conflicts from multiple inputs, but the latter can set up a research group that still offers the sense of companionship required by students. Therefore, whatever the choice students or supervisors make, needs to consider the aspect of companionship for a holistic journey of learning.

**Keywords:** Education, Postgraduate, Supervision, Geography, Companionship

## Introduction

The learning platforms of humans from early childhood to adult stages or first steps in higher education in most cases have been in groups (classroom) or at times forced to work in groups. Given that humans are social beings they are encouraged to learn to interact with others as they develop in knowledge and skills. This is also important since the application of knowledge requires involving other humans. The building of relationships in the learning process enhances learning through encouraging and challenging one another. This leads to experiential learning as well as building of social and empathetic skills. As one

advances into postgraduate level, there is an expectation of self-directed learning, and some students end up earning the degrees without adequate interactions with others in the field or across the field. This because we can identify learning expectations or outcomes but seemingly unable to identify exactly how and where the learning will take place (Lee and Dunston, 2011).

The postgraduate journey of learning then almost becomes 'lonely' or 'isolated' (Hockey 1994) as students feel the pressure of directing the process for themselves with guidance from supervisors or promoters (Fraiser & Mathews, 1999; Mouton, 2001). The education of postgraduate students especially at PhD level has been described as putting different experiences from various trainings, education, and even other social formations together (Hockey, 1994). It is set up in various universities through personnel (supervisor/promoter) representing the institution and brought to fruition by the student (Walker et al., 2008). Along the journey or at the very end, the student is seen as training to be or a steward of the discipline with obligations to bear. Some students then decide to take an active and more involved role to shape and direct themselves to achieving this goal. They might even become mentors to one another to be able to manage their progress as common within research groups (Pearson, 1999).

This brings to light the following question: should academic guidance at postgraduate level be called 'supervision or mentorship' or both? This question arises because supervision is within a given space and set of rules to direct. Mentorship usually can cross over to other professional or life aspects becoming more cordial even after the degree is obtained. While the two appellations mean different things, they are interrelated as teaching practices (Herman et al., 2004). Both should embody the guiding process at postgraduate level for some collaboration rather than the supervisor being viewed as a 'guru' transferring knowledge to the student. The collaboration brings a sense of value or participation since no one approaches this postgraduate journey without some level of knowledge. However, not all mentorship approaches are positive as some mentors can be seen as destroyers and egoistic (Darling, 1985; Lee, 2007) which will not bring a collaborative platform for the mentee to thrive.

The theoretical framework from which this study is based is the Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955) and its application in the field of education and specifically in postgraduate process by Zuber-Skerritt & Roche (2004). This theory considers humans as living beings with active choices to take any direction within their world without any necessary motivation to account for these choices. It then recognises humans as their own 'scientist' in which the psychological construct must be defined in terms of the individual's personal experiences to which it is being applied (Zuber-Skerritt & Roche (2004). The decision to choose supervisors at postgraduate level essentially may remain with the postgraduate students within the South African context. In most cases, this choice is guided by the expertise of the supervisor whom the postgraduate student sees as providing an element of exploration to assist in achieving their goal (degree). Therefore, postgraduate supervision can be considered as a process for practical knowledge sharing in which both parties learn by the experiences.

The purpose of this study was then to reflect on personal experiences as a postgraduate student and as a supervisor as seen through the lens of the Personal Construct Theory for a holistic graduate. The focus here is therefore around geographical research. The diverse nature of geography as a subject requires a collective approach to postgraduate students in this field to contribute towards attaining a well-balanced geographer. The transactional engagement of postgraduate students under such collaborative platform is considered to produce knowledge through a reconstruction and interpretation of experiences (Pope & Shaw, 1981).

In this process, the supervisor like any human develops personal theories or models about the subject which helps in understanding his/her roles (Kelly 1955; Zuber-Skerritt & Roche, 2004). These models are developed through such learning experiences which usually starts with these supervisors when they were postgraduate students and grow through the years of practice supervising other postgraduate students. These experiences then form the foundation for personal development of knowledge in becoming a supervisor. That is why some supervisors may either walk in or away from the steps they also went through. In some cases, if the relationship with the supervisor was that which they felt comfortable with, then they also tend to adopt such approaches.

However, there is a notion of ‘personal scientist’ that the personal construct theory also introduces where people tend to develop personal theories about their universe (Kelly, 1955). This has been re-echoed in recent times by Zuber-Skerritt & Roche (2004) with postgraduate supervision as an enterprise of knowledge generation. This prevails in all fields of learning as individuals learn to understand their roles within their given environments in order to strive for excellence. This is particularly important since postgraduate students are expected to work with some level of independence not only during their study journey but also through their career to contribute towards the development of the discipline to which they belong. The supervisors also strive to grow and contribute within this space of postgraduate supervision. Therefore, every individual develops a research interest by actively engaging, reconstructing, and interpreting happenings around his/her universe to process and produce knowledge. This paper then aims to share a reflection on personal experiences as a postgraduate student and as supervisor as seen through the lens of a theoretical framework for companionship in developing a holistic graduate.

The study breaks down this aim into the following objectives:

1. to review approaches to postgraduate supervision related to the researcher’s personal experiences in Geography that provide companionship.
2. to assess some of the factors that influence postgraduate supervision approaches which could create this companionship platforms for post graduate students.

## Methodology

The design employed for this study is the life history or autobiographical account which has proven to be an excellent source of research data generation (Goodson, 2001; Busetto, 2020). This is a qualitative method that used the experiences of humans as recounted or narrated. In this study the researcher reports on experiences observed on both sides of the coin; as a postgraduate student and as a postgraduate supervisor in the field of geography which can be applicable across other fields of study. There is an increase in the adoption of this methodological approach in the field of education (Busetto, 2020 and the researcher also made use of it in understanding the need for companionship during a postgraduate journey.

The positivism paradigm has been adopted in geographical research to such an extent that it seems that the interpretivism paradigm is not common, where data collection is mostly through narratives. This is because of the unpopular nature of conceptual research within the geography field which adopts more of empirical studies. However, this is slowly changing as the many philosophies of geography expand over time especially within human geography (George and Stratford, 2005; Winchester and Rofe (2016). Other disciplines like education and other social sciences commonly makes use of these interpretivism paradigms (Walsham, 1995; Schwandt, 2005; Mohajan, 2018). However, the diversity of the subject of geography enables it to borrow or share research paradigms from other fields in the social sciences and educational fields in particular. This has seen some adoptions of conceptual research in geography through the interpretivism paradigm (Elwood, 2002; Daniels and Nash, 2004; Winchester and Rofe (2016). There has been the birth of ‘geo-narrative’ coined to include the interpretation of life stories into geographic information systems for a qualitative methodological analysis (Kwan & Ding, 2008).

The current study also adopted the positivism paradigm to interrogate for a deeper understanding, the need of a companionship platform (learning space) provided during a postgraduate journey using different supervisory approaches. This is done through some sort of triangulation process as suggested by Goodson (2006) where the life experiences are cross examined through documented text of various supervisory approaches and other testimonies of empirical studies to ascertain the situation of companionship to postgraduate students and supervisors alike. Seeking to obtain an understanding of an issue of life within our contemporary world cannot be considered as an isolated act by any human only but

also as a structure of basic experiences of life (Gadamer, 1970; Willinsky, 1989) through the narrative approach.

The choice of the interpretivism paradigm in this study was a result of this paradigm having adopted the fact that, what is considered as knowledge of reality by people is their social construction where they are the actors (Eliaeson, 2002). The reality of companionship during a postgraduate journey then becomes reality only to the 'actors' concerned (students and supervisors but my interest was on the students) and seen as a social feeling that grows with the journey to produce a holistic (with skills and knowledge gained) researcher for a contemporary society. Therefore, this paradigm provided this study with a unique way of self-reflection in order to understand the contextual depth of companionship through a postgraduate study journey.

Companionship is a human behaviour that can be observed or recorded for onward transmission or interpretation. The interpretivism paradigm supports the qualitative research methodology which in this instance will include the telling of a life story or narrative approach (Polkinghorne, 1988; Goodson et al., 2010). According to Kivunja & Kuyin (2017), such narratives have the capacity to transform the experiences encountered by the person. This feeds to the self-construct theory where this study is also meant to support growth through shared experiences since no new knowledge is uncovered but socially constructed to also contribute to the pedagogy of postgraduate supervision. In order to understand what the companionship action means required an interpretation of actions experienced and in some cases as cited from empirical studies experienced by others (Schwandt, 2005). Therefore, through interpretation of concepts there is a deeper understanding of our contemporary social world inhabited by humans living and interacting within it (Chowdhury (2014).

## Results and discussion

### *Approaches to postgraduate supervision and companionship provision*

The acquisition of knowledge can be realised in different ways and places through varying means of delivery. Scientific knowledge has been described as that which is obtained by abstract-symbolic reasoning with understanding in practice being generated (Schwandt, 2005). This kind of knowledge places some pressure on the one learning to fit in if they are going to be expected to contribute to that field. The process becomes that of being self-conscious to every step taken to make a mark in the field of study. The knowledge acquisition through interactions at postgraduate level has been described by some researchers as being within a private space (Hutchings, 2017). At the end of it all, it puts postgraduate students in some feeling of isolated space to thinking about themselves as individuals while approaching their studies.

The expectations of postgraduate studies to be self-directed or independent to contribute to the knowledge in their field of studies especially at doctorate level is one of the driving factors of feeling lonely in the journey (Stracke, 2010; Hutchings, 2017). This expectation pushes postgraduate students to take the responsibility of earning the degree as an individual rather than being the machine or vehicle through which a collective effort to deliver a contribution is made in the field of study. It has even put some students in contestation with their supervisors instead of being complimentary and such had bred unhealthy conflicts if at all there is any that is healthy (Robertson, 2017). The students then bear ideas instead of sharing to open up for inputs become defensive to protect it. I have experienced postgraduate presentation sessions for interactions where students argue with supervisors as if they have not met before such sessions, at times in a bit to prove unnecessary points, and you can easily read that someone is trying to journey as an individual than cooperate.

In light of the above, some systems of higher education like in Sweden and other countries established the recruitment of PhD students without a supervisor (Agné and Mörkenstam, 2018). The students there, like elsewhere, have the responsibility to choose a supervisor but guided through this first year to avoid premature selection of these supervisors. This responsibility to an added one to that of self-directing their research and

even the administrative processes like terminating the inputs of these supervisors at the end point of the research. In all these instances as well, the universities have no right to terminate their studies if they choose to prolong their study time by taking employment elsewhere even with the compulsory funding of 48 months. This can be seen as adding pressure to the students which can contribute to the PhD nickname of ‘permanent head damage’ and drive the students to a sense of loneliness. However, this is somehow averted to an extent by such systems through the collective supervision approach which now enforces guidance through the huge responsibilities.

The postgraduate research community is usually seen as the student-and-supervisor-only kind of or primary relationship with the institution or other role players like experts are considered as secondary and, in some cases irrelevant. This supervision model has been termed as an individual supervision or the one-on-one supervision and is widely used around universities globally (Robertson, 2017). The growing number of postgraduate students is forever and globally putting pressure on the supervisors or promoters to deliver. A reconsideration of approaches to supervision could be in light of relieving them of this pressure (Bitzer and Albertyn, 2011) since many still use the traditional approach of one-on-one supervision. I have seen cases of a single supervisor having more than twenty postgraduate students in addition to teaching other modules at undergraduate level. They rarely use other approaches to involve others and you will wonder how long it will take before each student gets the deserved attention. It becomes a cycle to keeping the students longer than expected completion time. Whereas, if the group approach is applied or setting a collaborative platform for these students a lot of details that the supervisor spends time on could be eliminated and speed up response time to student feedback and completion time (O’Niel et al., 2016).

There are usually discipline specific or interdisciplinary approaches to postgraduate supervision that might influence the way postgraduate studies are carried out. While some curriculums like professional programs tend to encourage specific approaches to postgraduate guidance in research (Lee and Dunston, 2011), others are flexible (embracing more than one approach) like in the case of natural sciences with Geography especially being a cutting-edge subject. These approaches all have their advantages and disadvantages but will be suitable according to the case in time. However, it is necessary to have a flexible approach towards this process to allow for each student’s needs to be fulfilled and the demands of an ever-changing world or age of super complexity as described by Lee (2007), to be met.

Through various engagements during postgraduate supervision workshops there have always been exchanges of experiences and ideas that could strengthen the process for supervisors. A case shared by a colleague in education during one of such workshops is of co-supervising where both supervisors are required to read written submissions, meet as supervisors to deliberate for a common ground before meeting the student. This was different experience from what the author has experienced with co-supervision where we are both contributing from our various fields of expertise. In this case we each respond to written submissions according to our area of interest and most or all of our meetings with the students are also engaged that way unless when it comes to general scientific or administrative issues that we both can comment. This has been working and it is so because the basis of co-supervision was around the fields of expertise. In the case where it might be the same fields of expertise, we might observe the conflicting ideas which might negatively affect the student(s). Therefore, in addition to assigning roles and responsibility for each supervisor involved in a postgraduate supervision, it is vital to define why that additional person is required.

At times even within the same field of expertise, the other person might be more experienced and required on the team to overview the process. This has been another area in which the author has ventured into as an emerging researcher, having other mentors in as co-supervisors to guide the author to undertake the supervision responsibility. In this case, the mentor does not attend all the required meeting unless when vital things are to be discussed. The reading of submission is done at a later stage after some of the inputs might have been done by the emerging researcher. This goes a long way to boost not only the confidence of the emerging researcher as the co-supervisor but also that of the student to have known that a high-profile scientist was involved in their journey. This process of constructing geography researchers becomes both for students as well as supervisors. As

we grow as established researchers it is vital to involve other emerging researchers in co-supervision wherein, they as well as the students should feel the sense of companionship in their career.

There is, however, the issue raised by colleagues during workshops of junior supervisors doing the work while the senior colleagues take the credit. The author would think it is worth the while to weigh your options before getting into such relationship of co-supervision since some could be breeding ground for conflict. In the author's experiences from receiving guidance from multiple supervisions to acting in such capacity, the request or those involved have known themselves and should be able to weigh in if it will work or not before commencing. Quite often the student is not the agent of the conflict and usually is not consulted, however the way the supervisors will relate has a huge impact on the student.

There is also the model of supervision known as group supervision (Samara, 2006). There might have been little empirical research to support the importance of this model of supervision, but it is increasingly crucial to look into the few that have actually proven the benefits of adopting the group supervision model. The author believes our educational systems are centred around the interest of the students and one of those issues plaguing postgraduate research students is the feeling of undertaking an isolated journey. The results from the support system from a group supervision have not only been the early completion rates (Agné and Mörkenstam, 2018) but also the nurturing of relationship development that sustains scholarship (Hutchings, 2017) as well as readiness to deliver the knowledge and/or skill gained after completion.

There is another collaborative approach which is like group supervision and also known as collective supervision. This was suggested and tested on first year doctoral students in Sweden with a good sample size of 145 over the period of 1991 to 2014 (Agné and Mörkenstam, 2018). In this study they tested the probability of students completing their theses on time as a result of the collective supervision obtained in their first year of studies. This process of collective supervision entailed using two to four supervisors for the students to interact with throughout their first year. The collective supervision at first year was particularly pertinent in this case because of the recruitment process of these students by the universities. The fact that universities launch competitive calls to doctoral studies and for students to get in, in most cases mean the students are not yet familiar to supervisors or even to the field they will be researching in. While they usually have a course work, the award of the degree is greatly based on the defence of their research thesis. Therefore, the study realised that the collective supervision in this first year of their studies was key in stimulating the peer learning in a wider academic environment while allowing the students the opportunity to obtain necessary values as well as ethical behaviours within each research discipline. It was quite important for these students since it is only after this stage that they can choose supervisors. The study through statistical analysis of significance then established that the collective supervision significantly increased the probability for these students to complete their thesis and reduced their completion time.

The benefits to both students and supervisor in group supervision have been recounted and outweigh the challenges (O'Neil et al., 2016). The group facilitates a much more engaging team since they are able to see what others are doing or going through and to easily learn from it. In this way some common errors are easily corrected by each student without necessarily going through the supervisor each time. Also, it grants an opportunity to the supervisor to be able to see where the common mistakes are in the group and address them timeously or collectively. However, the challenge with this as recounted in their article is that those sessions were almost turning into lectures rather than discussion or interactive one. The other problem was having students at different points of the research, which also meant their challenges might be different and can be difficult to address in a group as such. This was also seen to be boring for the students who might not have the time to listen to things not relevant to their study, since most postgraduate students in the group were working.

It is worth noting also that the collective approach to postgraduate supervision can also experience challenges on the part of the students which each supervisor or those concerned can watch out for in order not to assume all is well. In an empirical study to investigate these challenges Wichmann-Hansen et al. (2015) reportedly summarised them into three on a collective academic supervision process for master's programme in Denmark. The

challenges were mainly reported through experiences observed by supervisors who involved with the programme. These included: being able to facilitate equal participation among a diverse or heterogenous group of students; being able to create a balance between student involvement and providing them with possible solutions; and lastly being able to identify as well as develop the analytical skills of the students involved. Their research seems to have had shortcomings, among which was that their observations were done on video, and this is of concern since the whole essence of this collective approach is centred around interactions and more engaging among a diverse group. However, it also shows how important it is to identify the individual students before involving them in this collective approach. Another aspect standing out is the importance of identifying the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in such an approach. Whether it is multiple supervisors to a group of students or a single supervisor to a group of students, everyone's roles and responsibilities must be identified at the very beginning without any assumptions. The task of identifying the roles and responsibilities of everyone cannot be a once-off activity but rather should be continuously visited throughout the life span of the project to make sure all is still going well, and new developments are accommodated.

In addition to the above challenges in the South African context, is the fact that most experienced academics are usually involved in administrative activities (Ungadi, 2021). This structure leaves them with very limited time to engage with postgraduate supervision. In the case of one-to-one supervision, some rush casually through this process without the students gaining adequate skills, and for group supervision the complains as registered above that they do little and allow junior colleagues to carry the weight. Just like mentioned before by the author, that this should be seen as an opportunity for collaboration and grooming of the emerging geographers or researchers as a whole in which defined roles and responsibilities can limit conflicts.

Ungadi (2021) pointed out challenges of communication and use of information communication technologies (ICT) by some of these experienced supervisors with a lot of administrative duties. While this might sound strange, the current pandemic of covid-19 pushed interactions at virtual level more and most of such 'old-school' supervisors were forced to embrace advancing technologies. This category of supervisors will hardly want to engage in group supervision with a diverse group who need regular communication. No doubt Ungadi reported that the sample of supervisors used for the research were those involved in one-on-one approaches. This further confirms the delays reported by the students involved with such supervisory approach. Therefore, the supervision approaches seem to be that which institutions must take lead position to driving execution.

### *Some factors influencing postgraduate supervision approaches*

Funding sources to support research within tertiary institutions might determine the engagement approaches involved. The various funding opportunities call for the collaborative approach to offer not only holistic results but also holistic researchers. The relevance of research to most funders is usually related to society. The complexity of society does not always allow uni-disciplinary approach but rather a multidisciplinary one. This calls for interaction across discipline which can easily be foster through a group or collaborative approach where the various players can speak and listen to one another. For example, in the Environmental or Geography fields, it is realised that the spatial component is driven by factors from different spheres. These could be physical as well as human driven which needs components to be considered in most of the research projects. This situation causes building a team for a research project proposal for such huge funding organisations like the UNESCO, European Union, USAID, and many others to comprise of a diverse group. The diversity of the group is usually not only in terms of the knowledge expertise but also issues like gender, race and age group. Such opportunities might be difficult for researchers who have never experienced group dynamics whether as postgraduate students or supervisors.

Most universities have shortage in resources to postgraduate supervision and such an approach of bringing these students together will optimise the use of these limited resources (Bitzer and Albertyn, 2011; Agné and Mörkenstam, 2018). For instance, looking at the common challenge that supervisors face of writing by most postgraduate students, writing

centres are usually not able to address this as the students feel reluctant visiting them. However, in cases where there is a community of practice (Wisker et al., 2007; Smit, 2010) within the discipline or project area that the students can write and read to one another or read one another's work, may strengthen their writing skills before reaching the supervisor. It then becomes less work for the supervisor while at the same time the students gain editing skills to improve their writing. Another experience in improving writing skills was reading out what was written for someone else to listen and interpret what they understood. This might seem as time consuming but was helpful to the author as a postgraduate student and looking forward to try the approach with an established group on a common project. Therefore, the collaborative approach is both beneficial to the supervisor and the student at the same time, while being an empowering phase to the students (Schulze, 2012).

The pressure of publishing articles on postgraduate especially PhD students becomes easier with collaborative approach to studying rather than being in a solitary space. When postgraduate students work together under the supervisor or group of supervisors, brainstorming can become more fruitful and can easily breed healthy competition to produce. This is in a case where they agree to share or co-author publications. The listing on every publication is certainly by the contribution made to it and no one would want to be in a group and being last co-author all the time. They will try to initiate their own idea for publication and be the lead-author. While this makes the group productive, it also makes everyone belonging to such a group to be on their toes.

The research publications of many authors maybe more attractive to some publishers or journals because it increases the sources of traffic to their site. This is because the various authors market the publication to their various communities. This has in a sense, pushed for more collaborative research which usually stems from postgraduate students during their study period. This again is discipline linked, as some within the humanities can easily publish as individuals but some in the science fields especially linked with laboratory and/or field or experimental processes, usually involve many co-authors from the project community. The researchers in these fields will appreciate companionship along their journey differently as well. This motivates postgraduate students to be involved in other research ideas with peers and/or others like postdoctoral fellows towards co-authored publications than just focusing to earn the degree only. This, however, might be possible when the postgraduate student is fully funded with restrictions from taking employment and having some extra time from their regular degree work. This can be fruitful as the group would initiate other research activities, distribute tasks amongst members under the leadership of the main supervisor to generate other publications as was experienced by the author.

However, it should also be noted that there is the challenge mostly among young scientist still looking for promotions to sometimes go for sole author publications. The single authored publications will generate higher research units required for their promotions. While this has caused or motivated some individuals to work extremely hard, others have resulted to mal practices of publishing work from their postgraduate students without them acting as co-authors. When such circumstances occur, they become a breeding ground for conflicts and the student might feel isolated, whereas a collaborative approach would have meant bringing the students in as co-author(s). This could create a relationship even after the degree is earned for further publications. Because academics do collaborate with former postgraduate students in conducting research projects long after the formal relationship ended.

The fact that the group or collaborative approaches to supervision enhance continuous engagement with the research work for reduced completion time, means there is a low probability of a student losing passion on the research study. Then it becomes clear that for most extended studies that are being supervised on the one-on-one approach, the student and supervisor might end up losing interest in the work and that should be one of the major contributing factors to abandonment or pipeline students (who never complete their degrees or take too long to do so). This category of postgraduate students is not only professionally unacceptable but also financially draining for the universities or institutions. In South Africa, with the national research funding framework and financial compensation to universities when doctoral graduate, has been motivation for these university management to look for ways to increase completion numbers at reduced or given time frames (Mouton et al., 2015). While acknowledging all the other efforts institutions or



universities are employing to make postgraduate journeys are as smooth as possible, the issue of students needing companionship that can be enforced at the level of supervision is seeming very important as proven by empirical research and needs more consideration.

### *Perspective according to some of the author's experiences*

There is also the collaborative approach to postgraduate supervision which has also proven to enhance the development of the students (Fenge, 2011; Thaba-Nkadimene, 2020). In Thaba-Nkadimene's recount of experience, again within the South African context but this time in a previously disadvantaged area, the approach was also more important than the traditional one-on-one supervision approach. The emphasis was on the importance to his students who were coming from communities that have been challenged (socio-politically) and usually lack the confidence to express themselves. The expression of knowledge and skills gained throughout their postgraduate journey were enhanced via the collaborative approach as their contributions were appreciated and encouraged. There are knowledgeable postgraduates who do excellent work in the field or labs but communicating that to an audience apart from writing is such a challenge. The act of public speaking is learnt but again practice makes perfect. Universities in South Africa are beginning to encourage this through competitions where the students are mentored and present their research results. This will help these emerging scientists be able to communicate science to their communities. This author encourages such interventions of having postgraduate students engage in oral meetings than only submitting written work for reviews. In speaking and listening to themselves, they tend to pick up if what they are saying is what is written in their submission. =

In the case of the physical sciences where most of the work is done in labs especially with joint research projects, a collaborative approach is usually adopted (Fenge, 2011). In the labs there is always a sense of a relationship getting to see each other that often and sharing ideas or encouraging one another through the journey (Hutchings, 2017). Whereas in the case with other fields of social or humanities, the case is different and creating other platforms to bring postgraduate students together is extremely important. However, most of these platforms within universities are for generalised student affairs.

Currently, the author also runs such a platform at the level of the department in the form of a mini seminar with not only postgraduates but colleagues presenting research for engagements and possible collaborations. This used to be more engaging with face-to-face sessions than being run virtually during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown regulations, but we are back to hybrid presentations which has expanded our audience. The students attend these virtual sessions but remain silent participants either because they are timid or not comfortable yet enough to engage. This lack of engaging has been experienced with other teaching during the lockdown period even at undergraduate modules.

In the field of Geography, visits to the field for data collection is one important step in the research design which in most cases require more than one person to perform. While we get to hire field assistants at times which are community members, having peers on the field is an added advantage to contribute towards minimising errors that could have not been identified by the community assistants or those not within the same field of study. The author's experience at Masters using field assistants and having to run around reviewing what they do whereas with the PhD, being in the field with other knowledgeable peers and even established researchers the pressure was less. Rather, new insights were borne on the field during the process of scrutinising data collection that materialised into published work. The collaborative or group approach did not override the fact that the author had just a single supervisor. The supervisor sometimes invited these peers and others for our meetings which was very supportive. This did not last throughout the study period with the group dismantled through movement to another institution. The previous collaborative approach was much more appreciated for things were no longer business as usual.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This reflection through the Personal Construct Theory is an eye-opener to the need of flexibility in the various approaches to guidance of postgraduate students. This is because without a formal training, supervisors tend to supervise the way they were supervised or ought to have been supervised. Then some sense of feeling lonely are recycled to a generation that might be different and thereby increasing the challenges that end up bringing in conflicts within supervisor-student relationships. Some scholars have remarked that the process of guiding postgraduate students is beyond training or educating but around forming them into what society needs (Walker et al., 2008). This formation is therefore involving the use of various approaches and models that are being driven by the need of the individual as well as society. While acknowledging that some of the causes of such lack of companionship or feeling lonely might be beyond a lay person's diagnosis, meaning at personal level requiring professionals to handle, most of the empirical studies identified the importance of group approach to supervision as easing the feeling of loneliness identified as a problem in this study. Also, worth noting is the fact that this study does not disregard other approaches to supervision but encourage dynamism depending on projects and students involved. This implies that despite the approach adopted, the supervisor can create a platform for such collaborative gestures to promote companionship to the postgraduate students throughout their journey.

The group or collective or collaborative approaches to postgraduate supervision stand out across the world and even in the South African context, to reiterate the author's observation and fact that postgraduate studies require some form of support to not feel lonely in the journey. Also, the companionship void cannot be expected to be filled entirely by supervisors as individuals but include all stakeholders to reimagine approaches to this journey. The continuous development programmes for these supervisors are commendable but a touch into actual training workshops with practicality involvement can to these efforts.

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