

**Coffee as a Supervisory Technique:  
Power, Formality and the Personal in Supervision**

**Dr Susan R. Hemer**

**Discipline of Anthropology, University of Adelaide**

**Exploring Supervision Program**

Can coffee be considered to be a technique of supervision? This relatively simple question is not easily answered from the available literature on the supervision of higher degree candidates. A great deal of literature in recent years has focused on aspects of the supervisory

‘guiding’ rather than ‘controlling’ is portrayed in the literature as being ideal, and as the most likely form of supervision to encourage independence and initiative (Murphy et al 2007:216-8; 229).

Dixon is one of a few authors who specifically mention the value of supervision conducted over coffee. For him, coffee provides “a neutral location” and the ability to “create the relaxed and friendly atmosphere into which I hope our relationship will develop” (Dixon n.d.:3). Supervisory meetings over coffee, then, appear to encourage more informal and collegial models of supervisory practice to come to the fore: coffee seems incompatible with more authoritative and formal models of supervision. For me, supervisory meetings over coffee indicate early in the supervisory process the nature of my expectations for my role as a supervisor; as a colleague, mentor and advisor rather than as a master or expert. This doesn’t mean that there are no power relations at work in the supervisory relationship. As Manathunga notes, operations of power are inherent in supervision, and mentoring is a site of ‘governmentality’ (c.f. Foucault; see Manathunga 2007:208). However it is difficult to

## **The risks of coffee**

While authors consistently recognise the multifaceted nature of supervision as encompassing the personal as well as intellectual aspects of candidates, many authors raise concerns over the 'boundaries' that need to be maintained by supervisors. For Hockey (1994; 1995), these boundaries relate to the need to supervise and assist candidates with their intellectual work, yet also allow them to make an autonomous and original contribution to the literature. Hockey (1995) argues that social activities in the supervisory relationship (such as going to the pub) are often seen as a necessary part of the supervisory relationship, yet can lead to emotional over-involvement which can impair the supervisor's judgement of the quality of the candidate's work. Hockey contends that any personal or counselling facets of supervision need to be kept on a professional basis so as to maintain some distance and be able to adhere to official guidelines on the amount of intellectual aid proffered to students (1995). It appears that Hockey (1994; 1995) wouldn't oppose the idea of meetings over coffee *per se*, but would caution as to how emotionally involved a supervisor was becoming.

Such concern over boundaries may be particularly important in relation to relationships between certain candidates and supervisors. Older male supervisors, for example, who continually take younger female students for coffee in intimate settings may find they are the subject of innuendo or accusation. Yet for many supervisory relationships, coffee is casual and public enough not to raise too many concerns.

On quite a different note, Johnson et al (2000) caution against moving too far from models of supervision as master-disciple. They argue that newer models of supervision as mentoring which particularly portray women as infinitely patient, an intellectual role model and able to assist with personal issues, can leave women exhausted and burned out (Johnson et al 2000:144). Supervision over coffee should not, following from this idea, be an open invitation to candidates to expect supervisors to meet all of their intellectual and personal needs.

## **Conclusion**

This brief critical review of the literature suggests that coffee can be w00000 70.80005 349.2

the lack of research about the content and quality of supervisory meetings themselves; an area which is deserving of attention.

## References

- Bartlett, A. & Mercer, G. 2000 Reconceptualising discourses of power in postgraduate Pedagogies. *Teaching in Higher Education* 5(2):195-204.
- Dixon, R. n.d. *From 'Grey-Beard expert' to Advisor/Mentor*. Development Program for Research Higher Degree Supervision, University of Sydney. Available at: