Trust Me! Building and breaking professional trust in doctoral student-supervisor relationships. (0279)

Kay Guccione
University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract

Emotionally competent leadership, as well as technical and intellectual mentorship is expected of supervisors, and the need for 'high-quality relationships emphasised. This study provides insight into perceptions of quality, using a framework of trust. It uses a qualitative approach to examine how 54 doctoral students (across disciplines) in five UK universities experienced supervisory relationship building and maintenance. All noted a role for trust in supervisory relationships, and began the PhD with an implicit trust in the supervisor. This implicit trust could be converted into a shared professional trust, eroded, or broken, in response to specific behaviours. Trust development happened longitudinally, was most likely to be related to uncertainty and predictability, and impacted on students' development towards independence. This study evidences a role for trust-building in creating good quality supervision relationships and demonstrates that building trust is a fluid process of renegotiation, highlighting critical relational aspects of doctoral development.

Context

Doctoral development is a process of continual identity reappraisal in response to new learning, changing priorities, and working relationships (Gardner, 2008). Rapid identity shift creates feelings of confusion, conflict, and evokes an emotional response (Eraut, 2004). Doctoral transition difficulties that go unresolved, are sustained and mediated by the relationship with the supervisor (McAlpine *et al*, 2012) whereas making sense of developmental experiences can be supported by good professional relationships (Clegg, 2008). It is no surprise then that emotionally competent leadership, as well as technical and intellectual mentorship is required of academic leaders, and the need to establish good rapport and 'high-quality' student-supervisor relationships emphasised (Jairam and Kahl, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

Trust as a workplace phenomenon can be defined as '*willingness to accept uncertainly and make oneself vulnerable in the face of insecurity*' (Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2012) and is a requirement of effective workplace learning (Hughes, 2004). This study examines the idea that trust may be an important marker of 'high-quality' in supervision relationships, i.e. relationships which are characterised by intense uncertainty: the processes of original research and discovery, and by the role and power shifts of identity development. For professional trust to develop, 'trust behaviours' must be demonstrated (Hope-Hailey *et al.,* 2012).

Trust behaviours have been grouped under four top-level domains: Competence, Integrity, Benevolence, and Predictability (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006) and these concepts can be used a framework to examine how students perceive and make sense of their working relationships.

Research Questions

(1) What specific behaviours develop or erode trust in the supervision relationship?

(2) How does the presence of absence of trust impact on doctoral development and progression?

Methodology, Participants, and Data

Methodology: In order to identify examples of specific behaviours that built or broke professional trust, a Critical Appreciative Inquiry approach (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012) was developed to facilitate discussion of common experiences of enablers and disablers of doctoral progression though a social/relational lens.

Data: Data collection began with five in-depth minimally-structured interviews with doctoral supervisors who also had an administrative role related to doctoral affairs. From these interviews, a preliminary framework for discussing and understanding vulnerability and trust in doctoral supervision was created and used to structure student discussion groups. Structured discussions were facilitated with groups of 3rd year (or PT equivalent) students (54 individuals) across five universities (all discipline areas, all doctorate types). Thematic analyses were utilised to compare the data across groups and institutions.

Findings

(RQ1) What specific behaviours develop or erode trust in the supervision relationship?

Implicit trust. Individuals all indicated that they had entered into the doctorate with a willingness to place their trust in the supervisor, due to their assumed 'trustworthiness' which derived from the supervisor's institutional affiliation, research status, or prior experience (e.g. as Masters Degree supervisor) This concept has been previously described as secondary or implicit trust (Frowe, 2005).

Building. Trust building was described by participants as an 'ongoing process over time' and common supervisor trust building behaviours were based in occurrences within and beyond formal supervision meetings. Behaviours spanned all 4 domains of trust: knowledge and guidance, disclosure and finding common ground; having the student's best interests at heart; inclusion

and giving credit where due; socialising, and professional integrity. It was also predominantly reported that trust in the supervisor was more likely to build if the doctoral student themselves had been entrusted with important pieces of work. Being trusted raises self-esteem, personal worthiness, and job satisfaction (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2012).

Erosion. Trust erosion also happened over time and erosion behaviours were most rooted in the domain of predictability, for example where expectations for the doctorate or for the supervisory relationship did not become a reality (e.g. unavailability of supervisor, lack of specialist expertise); insecurity about progress, standards and achievements. Benevolence and integrity were also important, trust was reduced where students felt blamed (e.g. for failed experiments); experienced unfairness compared to peers (favouring students on 'productive' projects); or endured 'checking/snooping' activities. Calculative methods of accountability employed with a possibility of sanctions or penalties increases mis-trust (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002).

Breaking. Trust breaking was likely to be a result of consulting a third party opinion on matters of trust erosion, or occasionally a result of acute incidents often related to the 'competitive' nature of research or the 'high expectations' on research careers. Examples were centred on research integrity issues often related to publication, public criticism, or appropriate credit for intellectual contribution to grants. It was therefore a situation more likely to be experienced in STEM subject areas.

 (RQ2) How does the presence of absence of trust impact on doctoral development and progression?

Predictability (clear expectations, boundaries, and responsibilities for the degree and for the relative roles of students and supervisor) was lacking for many participants, and had provoked embarrassment and anger. Indeed, feelings of hurt, betrayal or embarrassment can arise for both parties where trust broken or withdrawn (Walker, Kutsyuruba & Noonan, 2011). Vulnerability exists in many forms for doctoral students and is inherent in the processes of research e.g. asking for help, producing writing for feedback, presenting research, or communicating progress or lack thereof.

Where trust is not present, a student is more likely to isolate themselves and this is likely to lead to delay in doctoral progression (Gardner, 2008). Students experiencing broken trust isolated themselves, avoiding the people and activities that increased vulnerability. They therefore struggle to make sense of their experiences (and their data), and their development is delayed.

Conclusions

This study adds to our understanding of trust as a component of a 'good quality' student-supervisor relationship. Specifically, this work demonstrates that building trust is a fluid process of continuous reappraisal and negotiation,

and illuminates behaviours that erode or break trust, highlighting critical relational aspects of doctoral development. The impact of a low trust relationship on doctoral students is higher stress and anxiety, and lower feelings of confidence and independence, often leading to delay in the doctoral degree.

References

- Clegg, S. (2008). Academic identities under threat? *British Educational Research Journal*, *34*(3), 329–345.
- Cockell, J and McArthur-Blair, J (2012). *Appreciative inquiry in higher education: A transformative force.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dietz, G., & Hartog, D. N. D. (2006). Measuring trust inside organisations. *Personnel Review*, *35*(5), 557–588.
- Eraut, M. (2004). Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *26*(2), 247–273.
- Frowe, I. (2005). Professional trust. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *53*(1), 34–53.
- Gardner, S. K. (2008). Fitting the Mold of Graduate School: A Qualitative Study of Socialization in Doctoral Education. *Innovative Higher Education*, *33*(2), 125–138.
- Groundwater-Smith, S., & Sachs, J. (2002). The activist professional and the reinstatement of trust. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *32*(3), 341–358.
- Hope-Hailey, P. V., Searle, D. R., & Dietz, D. G. (2012). *Where has all the trust gone?* (pp. 1–99). CIPD.
- Hughes, C. (2004). The supervisor's influence on workplace learning. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *26*(2), 275–287.
- Jairam, D., & Kahl, D. H., Jr. (2012). Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*.
- Maele, V. D., & Houtte, M. V. (2012). The role of teacher and faculty trust in forming teachers' job satisfaction: Do years of experience make a difference? *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 28, 879-889.
- McAlpine, L., Paulson, J., Gonsalves, A., & Jazvac-Martek, M. (2012). "Untold" doctoral stories: can we move beyond cultural narratives of neglect? *Higher Education Research & Development*, *31*(4), 511–523.
- Walker, K., Kutsyuruba, B., Noonan, B. (2011) "The fragility of trust in the world of school principals", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 49 Iss: 5, pp.471 - 494