

A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of the Challenges Researchers Face in their Relationship with the Supervisors during Academic Research

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Abstract: *This study explores the problems and obstacles researchers face while maintaining a successful relationship with their supervisors during academic research. Symbolic interaction believes that relationships depend on interaction and can be interpreted symbolically. A constructivist paradigm was used for this qualitative study using focused group discussions with postgraduate students from public universities in Punjab, Pakistan. A purposive sampling strategy was used and 10 focused group discussions were conducted with 4-7 participants in each group. After the coding, the data were thematically analyzed. The themes revealed that researchers' own lack of motivation and aptitude are the most prevalent problems. Also, supervisors' lack of expertise, unavailability, lack of commitment and even abandonment, their professional engagements and their attitude cause trouble in the development of a successful relationship. However, positive reinforcements, the role of expectations in shaping the relationship and accountability are some of the suggested ways that can improve the relationship.*

Key Words: Symbolic Interaction, Researchers, Supervisors, Academic Research

Introduction

Since its inception in 2002, Higher Education Pakistan has been a ferocious flag bearer of research in academia. It is because of the untiring efforts of HEC, Pakistan that the number of universities has increased to 195 and 250-degree awarding institutes in the year 2019 since the time of independence in 1947 when only 2 universities were functional in the country (Ali et al., 2019).

There is no denying the fact that a research endeavour, be it a dissertation or a project, is the most significant contribution to the body of knowledge by any student during their academic career. Research is not only a mandatory requirement for the completion of graduation and post-graduation degrees but is

also essential for eligibility in case the student wants to pursue a higher degree. The progress and esteem of an institute and even the departments within an institute depend on the number of the research publication in national and international journals (Haq & Faridi, 2021) and thus, the research, publications and citations have become a number one criterion for the ranking of degree awarding institutes (Qazi et al., 2019). It is due to the complex nature of the task that HEC, Pakistan has initiated the programs to focus on research supervision and to regulate international standards and training (Ali et al., 2021).

Thus, the task of completing the research project becomes crucial for any conscientious student and for this purpose, there emerges a partnership between the student and the

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research supervisor. This relationship entails a journey of innovation, creativity and skill development for not only the researcher but also for the supervisor. Azure (2016) pointed out these skills to be “proposal preparation and defence, methodological choices, documenting and publishing their research, maintaining both supportive and professional relationships, as well as reflecting” for both supervisor and the researcher (p. 163). Due to its complex nature, this journey is not without its challenges and has been rendered as a crucial stage for the researcher that often and frequently results in expected and unexpected concerns. The relationship with the supervisor is not immune to such hurdles that might cause alarm in the smooth progression of the research journey (Rugut, 2019). Symbolic interactionism is an attempt at understanding such dynamics of any relationship that might affect its very nature of it.

Statement of the Problem

The relationship that develops between the researcher and the supervisor during the thesis completion journey is indeed one of the most rewarding ones. However, it is not without its challenges. Symbolic interactionism believes that every relationship has multiple facets and these cannot exist without certain ups and downs that emerge as a result of the interaction between the concerned parties. This research aims at highlighting the issues faced by researchers with reference to their supervisors during their research completion process. This interdisciplinary research focuses on interpreting the hiccups faced by the researchers through the lens of the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism and coming to a plausible explanation for these issues.

Research Objectives

This research is aimed to fulfill the following objectives:

1. to discover major deficiencies in researchers that hinder their research progress

2. to explore the attributes of the supervisors that impact negatively on researchers' research journey
3. to discover ways to rectify these challenges to improve supervisor-researcher relationships?

Research Questions

This study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the major deficiencies in researchers that hinder their research progress?
2. Do certain attributes of the supervisors' impact negatively on researchers' research journey?
3. What could be the ways to rectify these challenges to improve supervisor-researcher relationships?

Literature Review

Research supervision has recently captured the attention of many researchers as a complex process that depends on the interpersonal relationship between the supervisor and the researcher (Rugut, 2019). The supervisory process is defined as “interaction between the supervisor and the supervisee that may be related to the supervisor or students behaviour or to the Programme in which the supervisor and supervisee are employed” (Ali et al., 2021, p. 429). This is a productive relationship that entails a supervisor guiding graduate students towards sound proposal preparation and defence, methodological choices, documenting and publishing their research, maintaining both supportive and professional relationships, as well as reflecting on the research process” (Azure, 2016, p. 163). Thus, it is a matter of great concern for any researcher that his or her supervisor is competent, skilful and qualified enough to lead this journey to successful completion (Siddiqui, 2019). However, the current rise in university enrollment has indeed put a rise in the professional duties of supervisors. Despite the fact that supervisors receive little attention or training in the universities (Ullah, 2016) their role has become

more crucial in preparing students for the practical work they are expected to do once they walk out of the university. Higher Education in Pakistan does not only require mandatory training and workshops for supervisors to be approved but also an extensive number of research publications. It has also set the number of students to a maximum of 12 students (i.e. 05 PhD and 07 MS/M. Phil) at the same time only to ensure quality supervision of a competent mentor to all the researchers (Ali et al., 2019).

Research Supervision

Supervision is stated as the “interaction between the supervisor and the supervisee” that is being performed under the guidelines of the department or programme for which they are employed (Ali et al., 2021, p. 429). Usually, the role of the supervisor is to administer the process of a research project through instructions, interaction and channelling the student in the right direction for the completion of the thesis (Rugut, 2019). The supervisory process entails more than providing the guideline for conducting data collection and writing the findings; it involves a comradeship of support, shared vision and a common target between the supervisor and the researcher achieved through the exchange of ideas, instructions and arguments (Ali et al., 2021).

Problems Faced by Students with Supervision during Academic Research

Even though supervisor-researcher relationships are regarded as one of the most productive and effective ones (Rugut, 2019), this partnership is hard without any hiccups and hurdles. The withdrawal rate of research candidates is usually traced to poor and unsatisfactory supervision which has resulted in recent reforms in university policies entailing clarification of job specification of the supervisors and review of expected outcomes (Ali et al., 2021). The problems however are not solely due to a lack of supervision infrastructure. It is a grim reality that most of the students undertaking the research journey do not do so with the intention of training as a

researcher or contributing to the body of knowledge with their work. Their aim is to get done with their degree, manage to get a job in the relevant market or even gain upward social mobility (Azure, 2016).

Ali et al (2021) reported that the most frequent concern forwarded by the researcher is the lack of structure in the supervision guidelines. Rather than following a systemic, planned and gradual step-by-step approach, researchers complain about loads of written work that the supervisors expect them to submit over the weekend which leaves most of the supervisors bewildered and lagging behind on submissions and if somehow they manage to submit it in time, it lacks originality, creative thought or any spark of innovation (Bastalich, 2017).

Another frequent hurdle student researchers face is when they have to work with supervisors lacking expertise in their area of research. This process of proper induction and orientation about research policies and protocols will allow students to not only understand what is expected of them but also know their supervisors better (Masek & Alias, 2020) which lays the foundation for a more pleasant and well-productive relationship.

Among several problems that hinder the smooth progression of students' research work are the personal factors that students carry with them. Some are even employed during their education and some face financial constraints. Some come to the university from outstations and some face issues of anxiety and psychological troubles. In the case of married candidates, they face multiple family issues that directly intervene with their research journey (Azure, 2016).

A major concern that researchers seemed to be juggling with is walking on the tightrope of control held by the supervisor. Tension exists where the question of dependence on supervisors arises. On the other hand, some research scholars seem to be frustrated with the lack of sufficient guidelines by the supervisor, difficulty in accessing the mentor and less than required meetings for the completion of work (Cekiso et al., 2019). The isolation scholars feel

as a result of supervisors' less involvement in their research work leads to anxiety and stress which cause researchers to either submit poor quality work or drop out of the programme (Masek & Alias, 2020).

Rugut (2019) reported that students are often found grumbling about the lack of timely feedback on their research reports by supervisors. Supervisors are often so occupied

in their own research work that they find it hard to do justice to their research mentees.

Departmental conditions and standard operating procedures for research can often be a handful for novice research candidates and can overwhelm them if there is no departmental support and supervisory assistance offered (Masek & Alias, 2020).

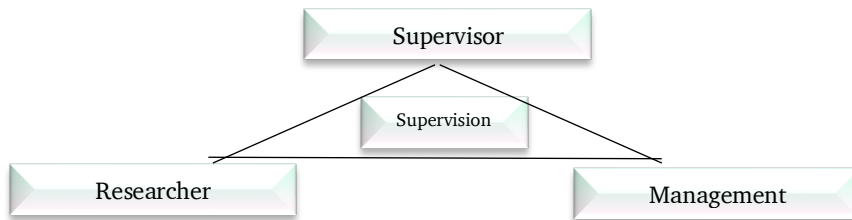


Figure 1: Supervision Triangle: Interactive Factors in a Doctoral Supervision Process (Masek & Alias, 2020)

Mead (1863–1931) was the first who divided the interaction into two large sections symbolic and non-symbolic (Huber & Knights, 2021). He called the latter 'the conversation where an individual gives a response to others without any interpretation. However, when someone 'uses significant symbols like gestures, concepts with multiple meanings and ideas with deep-rooted explanations, they then enter the realm of symbolic interaction. Once formed, these symbols are not static but alive with the constant flux of development and can evolve the interaction and get evolved through the interaction (Nugraheni & Nurhaeni, 2021).

The aspects of social interaction between supervisor and researcher make research a social act that is designed into its existence through social interaction. The foundations of symbolic interactionism are based on three basic concepts or premises. The first premise addresses the fact that human beings act towards different things in their environment on the basis of the meanings that those things have for them. This leads one to question the origin of the meanings that certain objects in the atmosphere hold. It leads to the second premise which states that these meanings of different objects are developed through the interaction that is constantly happening in the environment and that one has with fellow

beings. This interaction is meaningful and actually starts assigning value to different objects which consequently holds meaning for humans. This meaning-making process is constantly happening in the environment as the result of interaction and interpretation. This sets the foundation for the third and last premise which believes that the meaning different things hold is constantly changed and modified as the result of the interpretation that the person does when he deals with the things in the environment (Blumer, 1986).

Symbolic interaction is not just a theory of interaction and communication but it highlights the delicate design of how human society is formed through social interaction. Human beings are social creatures for whom living in a social world is inevitable (Siljanovska & Stojcevska, 2019). Their actions and communications are directly influenced by their group life. Their social life requires them to engage in multiple activities in daily life that require interaction. Most of the time this interaction is taken for granted and is never considered a powerful tool that creates the social conduct which fabricates the genuine texture of human society (Huber & Knights, 2021).

This current paper is an attempt to discuss

academic research as a social activity where the interaction between a researcher and supervisor is essential to develop their social roles.

Methodology

For this study, constructivism was the chosen paradigm which emphasizes that through their own experiences, people construct their own reality and build their understanding of the world (Adam et al., 2016). Supervisors and researchers maintain their own interactions and reflect on their own relationships to build a professional liaison to conduct academic research. This way, constructivism supports symbolic interactionism as a micro-level theory to explain the nature, interaction and reality of relationships (Carter & Alvarado, 2019). This study was qualitative in nature where non-numerical data was collected and interpreted

to define researchers' experiences, relationships and social identities (Mohajan, 2018)

Selection of Participants

The population of the study was the postgraduate level students from universities in Punjab, Pakistan, with experience in conducting academic research under the mentorship of supervisors as a necessary requirement for their degree. For sampling, purposive sampling was selected because the researchers were expected to have a shared experience that was relevant to the research question (Denny & Wekesser, 2022). For this research only, the researchers from post graduate level with experience in working with supervisors were selected. The supervisors were not a part of this study.

Table 1. Demographics of the Participants

Demographics of the Participants	
Number of the Focussed Group Discussions	10
Participants in each Group	6-12
Total number of the participants	96
Academic level	Post-graduate (16 years of Education and above / Mphil, MS and PhD Level)
Age group	Not restricted
Gender	Both males and females
Institution	Public Sector Universities in Punjab

Tool of Investigation

The selected tool of the investigation was focused group discussions which is often the preferred tool to interview a large number of participants with similar experience in qualitative studies (Adam et al., 2016). Researchers with academic research experience sat with the moderator and answered semi-structured interview questions about their relationships and the problems they faced with their supervisors.

Data Collection

Following Denny and Wekesser (2022), the data was collected through focused group discussion through field notes and audio recordings. The environment in focused group discussions was kept confidential, authentic

and comfortable which impacted the participants in a positive way and they shared their experiences, insights and responses openly and without any hesitation in all the discussions which confirms the 'synergy effect of focused group discussions mentioned by Casey and Crueger (2000). These audio recordings were later transcribed and approval of the participants was taken. During transcription written notes taken by the researcher were also incorporated into the transcription. Copious qualitative data was gathered that required sorting out and coding through a data analysis process.

Data Analysis and Presentation of Data

As the data is collected inductively in a qualitative method, there was a need of

applying logical data analysis strategies (Adam et al., 2016) so that the constructivist findings should begin to emerge. For this purpose, the collected data that was in front of transcription and field notes were thoroughly analyzed and coded into relevant themes through NVivo software. This enabled the researcher to draw out themes to highlight various dimensions of the problems researchers face during their

research with their supervisors. These themes were strategically interpreted and visual representations were drawn through xMindMap software. Finally, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986) was applied to the findings and the phenomenon was explained in the light of the theory which assisted the researcher to come to the findings that answered the research question.

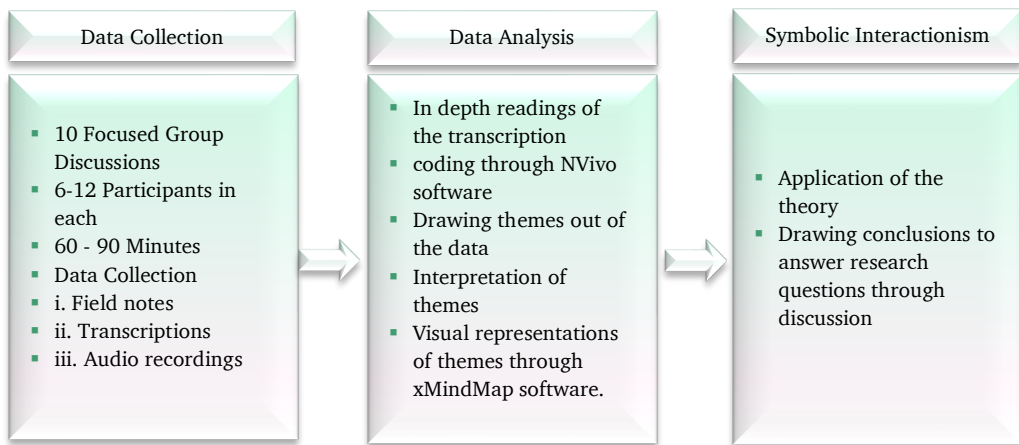


Figure 3: Research Design

Data Analysis

What are the Major Deficiencies in Researchers that Hinder their Research Progress?

According to the data, researchers face certain problems in their relationship with the supervisors due to their own deficiencies before everything else. In FGD1, R2 (Focused Group Discussion 1, Respondent 3) stated, *'I feel, if we are bringing the right concepts to the research, things will go in a smooth manner.* She meant to say that before barging into the practical fields, the researchers should have a complete grasp of the theory and concept of research without which there will be issues in comprehension. Researchers also pointed out that this need for prior knowledge is not only felt while dealing with the theory of the research but also while formatting and editing the dissertation which is a very significant stage in academic writing. In FGD 10, R1 informed that *'In the beginning, we weren't provided with a format so we had to look*

for it ourselves. Format as in the handbook! Researchers expect their department as well as their supervisor to provide them with complete guidelines about the standard writing style and technical formatting of the work. Another group discussion highlighted that due to the lockdown in universities affected their course work for research preparation badly, as stated by R5, in FGD 9, *'Well, Covid lockdown made us work on learning theory all by ourselves. Our thesis started right after the lockdown and we felt like we were jumping into the sea without knowing how to swim.*

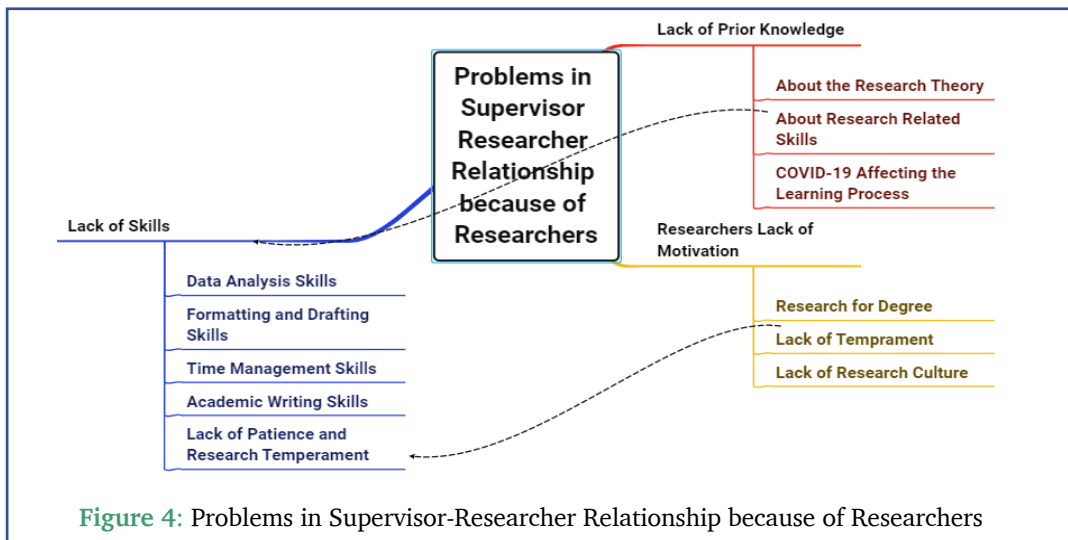
Another prevalent theme regarding the problems in the supervisor-researcher relationship that are caused by researchers' attitudes is that their only motivation is to be done with the thesis and get the degree. They do not commit to this relationship with the intention of becoming a serious researcher. R2, FGD 4 said *'I only wanted a degree because obviously it is a demand and you need a label nowadays.* There were others who developed

this attitude because of the lack of research culture around them as R4 in FGD 6 stated *'Although, just for the sake of graduating and getting a degree we were like let's just do it! Frankly speaking, we didn't do this research because we wanted to contribute or publish it somewhere. Also, we weren't guided this way.'*

Students also faced certain difficulties when they lacked certain skills they were expected to have as researchers. This caused friction between supervisor and researcher as supervisors expected them to be adept at these and researchers hoped that their supervisors will be assisting them in these. R2, in FGD 4 stated *'I think I found that the hardest part was to do SPSS after watching a few YouTube tutorials because I never studied statistics and my supervisor simply gave me 3 days for data analysis. What was I supposed to do?'* Another issue that students faced was their inability to

keep pace with their supervisors. R4 in FGD 6 said, *'Everything was a mess and I had plenty of difficulties. Mostly my supervisor was disappointed at my missing the deadlines. So I do not want to be the same irregular person if I go for research again.'* Another respondent in FGD 10, shared the same views, *'Time management skills are a big problem. I take a lot of time and that is not convenient when every assignment has a deadline.'*

Researchers also reported that their relationship with the supervisor was strained because they were not interested in their work. R1 in FGD 6 stated, *'I could not work on my research as I have a lack of patience. My supervisor told me that I need to be very patient to obtain my objectives. I knew I won't be doing research again because I don't have that temperament.'*



Do Certain Attributes of the Supervisors Impact Negatively on Researchers' Research Journey?

One of the foremost issues the researchers faced was the random selection of the supervisor for their line of work by the department. This did not only result in substandard work by the researchers but also caused a rift in their relationships with their

supervisors. In FGD 4, R2 shared her expectations from supervisors as *'to develop critical thinking in me and her knowledge and expertise should be relevant to the topic I want to work on. Otherwise, it is all pointless and random work.'* In matters of supervision, reputation precedes the relationship in universities. Researchers reported selecting supervisors, when allowed, based on their

reputation and expertise in the subject. R5 in FGD 6 stated *'As we heard from our seniors they guided us to select quantitative research in the ABC field since the supervisor is very cooperative and gives good grades as well as helps out a lot. On the other hand, in various institutes, students are never allowed to choose their supervisor themselves which causes a conflict of interest as was reported by R2 in FGD 6 'We were a class of 53 students, we had one supervisor and were not given a choice to choose our own supervisor. Random selection of the supervisors by the department also caused another issue that was highlighted by R2 in FGD7 'In the very start we had been told that once a supervisor is allotted to you then there is no power that could undo it. I think that also added to the confidence of the supervisor because they know that whatever they do we cannot replace them and we cannot complain about them. They are not answerable to anyone. So the researchers believed that it takes away accountability when the supervisors are chosen by the departments.*

One problem that students reported frequently was the lack of organized guidance. R3 in FGD 10 reported *'What really annoyed me was my supervisor making changes in his own instructions every time I submitted my work. For him, it was easy to say and I had to redo everything over and over again. It was really discouraging and wasted a lot of my time. R3 in FGD 5 said 'My supervisor was very forgetful. She always forgot what she told me and in the next meeting she would change the whole plan and I was left to redo everything from scratch. In FGD 6, R4 also suggested a solution 'My last supervisor was very organised. She had a step-by-step calendar-type plan and she would write important points in there. This way I learned to be independent of my last supervisor. Next, I hope that my future supervisor will take me to step by step as well. While some students complained about disorganized guidance, others were upset about no guidance at all as R1 from FGD 10 told, *'When I asked her about the research gap she looked at me and said "you guys should already know about this" ...this was her usual response to everything I asked. Her main instruction in every meeting was that there is**

everything on google...you want proposals, search on google... If you want anything, search on google but don't come to me...this was her attitude! There were others who felt deserted by their supervisors. R2 In FGD3 reported to her supervisor that *'She did conduct a couple of meetings with us but then she went abroad, due to which our project was delayed.*

Another complaint that was noted down was supervisors abandoning the scholar mid-way through their academic research. They were either not committed to this relationship or were simply gone from the scene. R2 from FGD 7 stated *'The thing is that I did my research on my own because my supervisor wasn't available at all and during that time she was expecting. She went on maternity leave and I remember that I used to be just after her by just requesting to have a look at my work. She just used to say that I don't have time and then finally just to put the burden off her shoulders she said your work is fine. R3 from FGD 9 expressed the same concerns, though due for a different reason, 'she allowed me to do whatever I wanted to do while she was pursuing her own post-doc and I think this raised a very important problem because there is a difference between giving independence and leaving the student entirely on their own.*

Even more than the quality of guidance provided, researchers were interested in the outlook and attitude the supervisors emit. Researchers reported that their supervisor's attitudes had a direct impact on their emotions and motivation. R2 in FGD 1 said, *'So my supervisor had refused to work with me saying I was incompetent, which made me feel really bad. I really cried on my campus for such behaviour. Some researchers felt intimidated due to the solemn personality of the supervisors and felt it to be a cause of communication gap between them. In FGD 1, R4 said, *'I felt frightened of her. Whenever I used to go to her, she always responded that it was a copy-paste. So it was something very rude. She didn't trust my abilities. Another researcher, R5, in the same group even felt worse due to the supervisor's attitude, 'she always said to solve your problem by yourself. Google it. So we felt really threatened. A**

researcher R3, from FGD 7 also expressed similar sentiments saying, 'I got disturbed because she demotivated me and I cried a lot at that time. R3 from FGD 6 reported that 'my supervisor used to give me rude expressions so I got the idea from her facial expressions that what she is going to say. She said, "to whom you have given money for this research"? That was very humiliating for me.

Along the same line, researchers talked about how their supervisors were not always available for them. R6 in FGD2 reported 'my last supervisor had knowledge but no time to guide me. I needed her time...Even 10 mins every week would have been sufficient. R4 in FGD 6 stated, 'we were a class of 53 students and we had one supervisor. And we never had enough time with each other. R2 in FGD 7 stated 'my relationship with my supervisor, that wasn't friendly at all, came to know from other students as well that she has that impression that she isn't

available. Whoever worked with her was supposed to do the work themselves. She was never available for any of her supervisees.

Last but not the least, researchers expressed their dissatisfaction because they believed that the supervisors were not qualified enough to be the expert of the field and hence, the quality of the research work was affected. R2 in FGD 8 stated 'My supervisor was not familiar with the statistical analysis tools and she asked me to make graphs for the results of my experimental design. Later, she came to find out her mistake and asked me to do a t-test analysis. It wasted so much of my time and effort. R5 in FGD 6 said, 'my supervisor herself didn't have such a grip that most have... that I think everyone should have. I think my supervisor was lacking in that area. R4 from FGD 10 said 'So, I didn't feel like she added something to my knowledge. It was not MS-level research work.

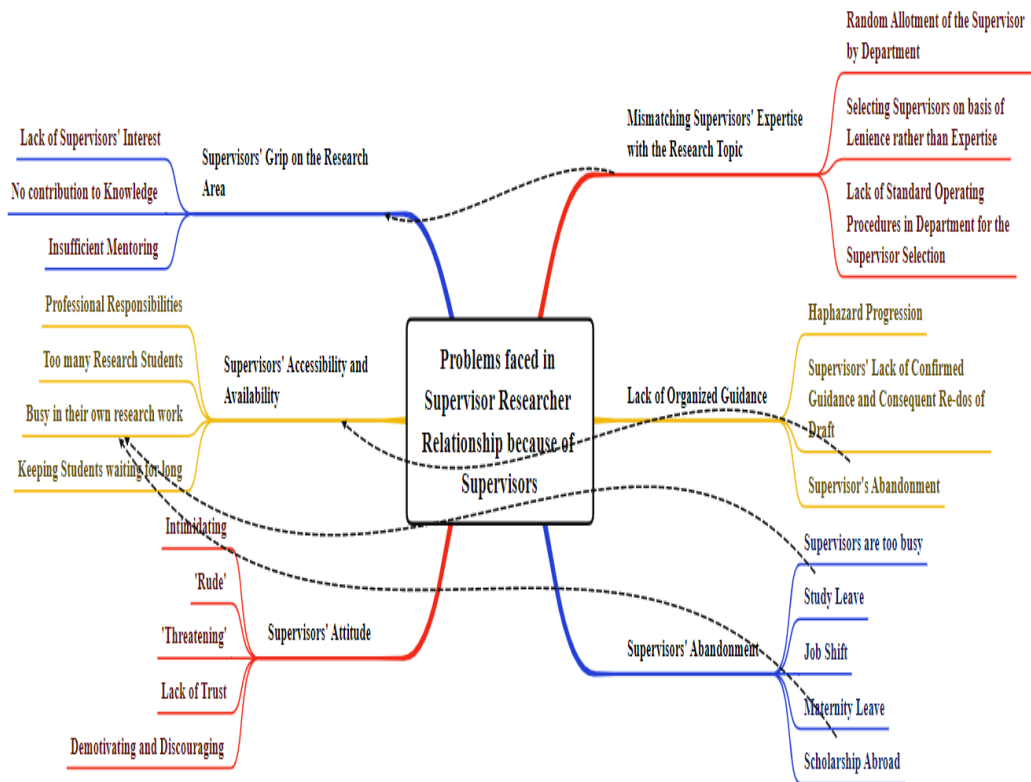


Figure 5: Problems faced in Supervisor Researcher Relationships because of Supervisors

What Could be the Ways to Rectify these Challenges to Improve Supervisor Researcher Relationships?

During the focused group discussion, researchers pointed out various aspects of their relationship with the supervisors that needed to be improved to have a successful, harmonious liaison with their supervisors. R3 in FGD 2 mentioned, *‘The best quality was that she has guided me stage-wise, once we cleared one stage then we went to the next. So for the next, I hope that time management and step-by-step guidance should be present.* So the researchers appreciated organized and sequenced guidelines from their supervisors. Almost all the participants reported the need for a mentor who was not just guiding them in the research work but was also emotionally uplifting and motivating. R3 in FGD 3 stated the need for a supervisor who is *‘supportive, positive and active in guiding me* for his future research endeavours. R4 in FGD 6 expressed *‘I learned to be independent of my last supervisor, she used to give me just hints. So I felt very confident. Next, I hope that my future supervisor will take me to step by step as well.* This clarifies that researchers appreciate organized guidance and the appropriate nudges in the right direction by the supervisors.

R 6 in FGD 9 especially applauded her supervisor for motivating her *‘he said that if you do a good job in this research maybe we can take*

this further to publication. I really liked that about him, that if a supervisor is willing to encourage you and support you, then you feel like it's going to be an easy journey and you have that rush to research more.

One major complaint can be removed by making sure that supervisors give proper time to the researchers and are accessible to them when they need it. R4 in FGD 2 stated *‘So for the future, I want a supervisor who can give me proper time along with proper guidance.* R4 in FGD 6 also appreciated this quality in her supervisor *‘So, she used to allot time to each individual and we were supposed to ask questions during that time. she was available on time and she was very easily accessible.* Another valuable suggestion came from R5 in FGD 5 *‘I think supervisors should be trained so they know how to develop an interest in students and the capabilities required to research.*

It was noted that researchers particularly appreciate and constantly desire to have a supervisor who would provide them with detailed, written and constructive feedback. R5 in FGD 6 stated, *‘I was lucky in the aspect that my supervisor worked with a colour-coded feedback system. All mistakes are in red, correct points in blue and feedback in green. That was really helpful.* R2 in FGD 7 expressed, *‘I hope, for my next research project, I get a supervisor who would actually tell me what is wrong with my work, rather than simply rejecting all of it again and again without guiding me.*

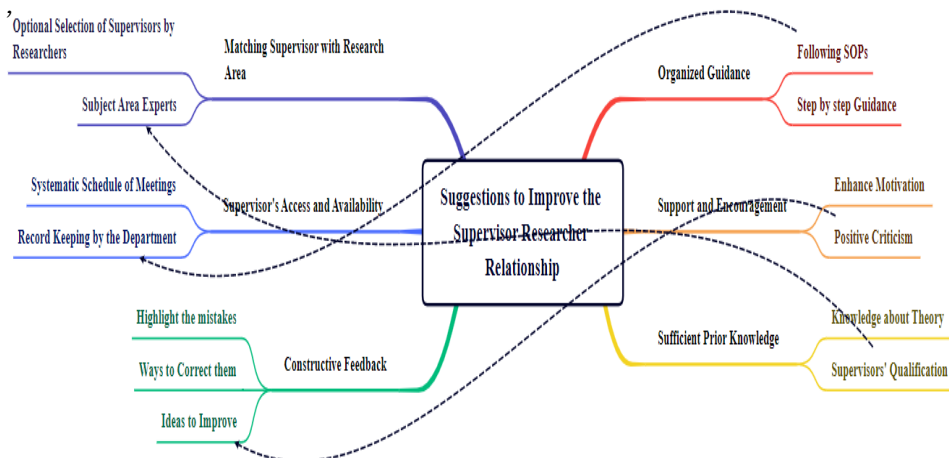


Figure 6: Suggestions to Improve the Supervisor-Researcher Relationship

Discussion

Symbolic interactionism believes that the root of any relationship between two or more individuals depends on their interaction and the meaning they derive from their interaction. Through this, each individual develops his social personality (Linh, 2019). The relationship between a supervisor and researcher develops through their interaction and finding meaning in it. In light of Blumer's observations (1986), the dynamics involved in academic research directly affect the meaning-making process of this relationship and here, the researchers' feelings, memories, motives and ideas associated with a thing contribute to the meaning-making process Blumer, 1986, p. 4). Thus, when a researcher goes through this propinquity with his supervisor, it can be safely assumed that he will develop his own understanding of the challenges that he will encounter and the hurdles he will face during academic research.

Supervisor researcher relationship is not only influenced by the verbal communication of both the agents of this relationship but also by what Blumer (1986) called *Symbolic Interaction*. It is the gestures, expressions of emotions, a nod or a toss, a smile or a frown, in other words, the symbols of communication, that communicate the real meaning in a social setting. The partnership between a supervisor and researcher is highly impacted by what meanings they assign to their work, their attitudes and their roles (Shinta & Darmawati, 2021). If research is just a necessary evil for the researcher to get the degree, their work consequently will be representative of their lack of dedication and motivation. On the other hand, those researchers who pursue research as a medium for their contribution to academic knowledge, move on to get their work published in prestigious journals. Thus, research is a symbol in itself which carries subjective meanings for every supervisor and researcher. This meaning-making process consequently affects the roles and identities they develop during this partnership. It is also significant to note that these meanings that are assigned to research and to their identities and

roles as symbols are not static or inorganic. They keep developing through environmental factors like the culture of the department and subjective dynamics like academic growth or personal hindrances that are unique for each researcher. These symbols are directly connected with the interaction between supervisors and researchers and their meaning can be built, shifted and modified through their interaction (Nugraheni & Nurhaeni, 2021).

According to the data collected, when researchers claimed that their supervisors lack interest in their work and in some cases complete abandonment of the project, it damages the foundation of their interaction as Blumer (1986) states meaningful relations can only develop through the constant 'interaction between people.

Academic research is a *social act* where individuals not only develop an understanding of their relationship with the help of their environment but their environment also develops as a result of their interaction (Blumer, 1986). The environment is the result of this cyclical process of meaning-making (Husoin et al., 2021) which guides the fundamentals of the relationship between supervisors and researchers. The roles assigned to researchers and supervisors in their academic standard operating procedures guide them to ease into *social conduct* that is expected of them for a smooth research journey. When this interaction and the expected conduct are denied by either party involved, the meaning-making process of the relationship faces glitches and no substantial product is achieved. In other words, the lack of interaction between supervisor and researcher results in poor quality thesis and in some cases, dropouts or 'research orphans (Schmidt & Hansson, 2021). Thus a successful and complete dissertation is a 'social product conceived and brought to the light of day through social interaction (Blumer, 1986).

Several research scholars explained that the reason behind an unsteady relationship was that even when their supervisor was available, they were not ready to listen to them. They were either too busy dealing with multiple

supervisees or expected not to engage in any discussion. This clearly violates the 2 step process of interaction highlighted by Blumer (1986). From the time the topic of the research is decided, *the process of indication* begins where the research initiates an internal dialogue as a result of which s/he proposes a research design including tools and population of the study. In the 2nd level, this is referred to as *interpretation* by Blumer (1986), the researcher starts developing a professional partnership with his supervisor where both of them begin to explore the objective of the study to find answers to the research questions. It is evident that in absence of a continuous chain of interaction between the supervisor and supervisor, these processes of indication and interpretation will not only face hurdles but will also come to no conclusion.

During the analysis of the data, researchers confessed that the behaviour and the attitude of the supervisor was major motivating or demotivating factor for them during their research work. Blumer (1986) strongly believed that positive anticipation on part of an agent in a relationship plays a significant role in the success of the interaction and eventually of the relationship. *Expectations* from the supervisor, whether positive or negative, allow the researchers to shape or alter their behaviour, affect their academic research performance and enable them the successful completion of the project. Positive attitude and encouragement from the supervisors were discussed as the most significant desirable qualities in the supervisors. On the other hand, negative responses or demotivating expressions discourage researchers from pursuing their work to its full potential. It is confirmed by Nugraheni & Nurhaeni (2021) in a study about academic expectations that students were targeted as 'stereotypes and were not motivated by positive expectations, eventually ending up feeling emotionally deprived. Their work showed less progress, they felt introverted and avoided open interaction with teachers and their peers. Verbalising lesser expectations from students even caused speech

impediments and a lack of confidence among students as well (Nugraheni & Nurhaeni, 2021).

Moreover, expectations play a significant role in the supervisor-researcher relationship. It allows the researchers to think about what they are expected to do next and decide their course of action. Even the supervisors can understand the standpoint of the research only if they are able to gauge what the researchers expect in the joint action of academic research. According to Cooley's concept of 'Looking Glass Self'(1902), researchers and supervisors are in a position where they can develop a long-term understanding of each other's ideas about their roles, identities and aspirations and shape their interaction accordingly (Siljanovska & Stojcevska, 2019). Expectations are such a powerful tool of interaction that after a certain period of time, they have the potential of turning into a symbolic message in themselves upon which the health of the social act of symbolic interaction depends (Masek, 2017).

Finally, the roles played by the department in establishing the research culture in an attempt to provide the desired environment, communicating the standard operating procedures for the researchers and supervisors along with offering assistance for the researchers in form of financial aid, resources or counselling can directly help with researchers problems that they face during their duration of the study. Nugraheni (2021) called social groups 'representation of symbolic conversations. Thus, the atmosphere in the department or a social group, which Blumer (1986) called 'a world or worlds in itself, can directly influence the flux of interaction between supervisors and researchers. The more regulated and accountable the agents of the research i.e. the supervisor and the researcher are to the departmental regulations, the more successful this liaison will be. In light of the above discussion, the academic research diagram (Fig 1) can be revised as follows:

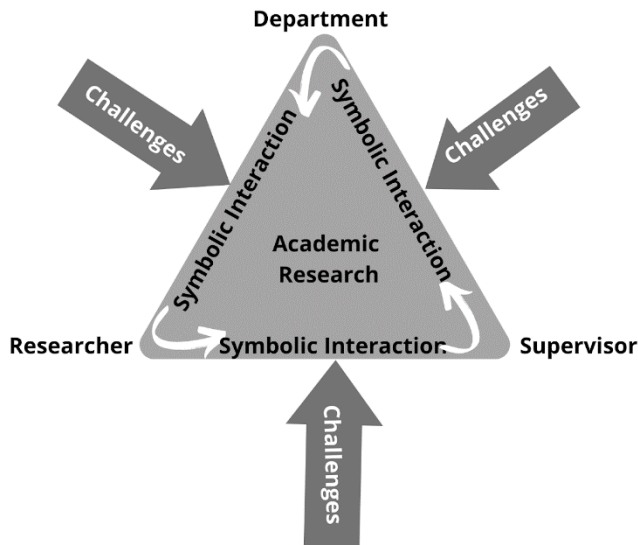


Figure 7: Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Supervisors' Researchers' Relationship and the Challenges

This diagram continues to adhere to the holy trinity of academic research with supervisors, researchers and management or department in the three corners of the diagram actively engaged in the meaning-making and role-defining processes.

Conclusion

The in-depth analysis through the lens of symbolic interaction sheds light on the professional liaison that develops between a researcher and a supervisor during academic research. The intensive scanning of the data collected highlighted various facets of research as a social act and how it shapes and reshapes the connection between the agents of research through symbolic interaction. Among the various challenges, the researchers' face includes several deficits within themselves. Lack of interest only desires to get the degree and several personal reasons to name a few. Another plethora of challenges are faced while maintaining a healthy, progressive and successful relationship with the supervisor throughout the journey of academic research. Symbolic interaction attempts to explain why the lack of availability of supervisors, their lack of commitment, and too much work imbalance

are a few causes break interaction and consequently, cause the academic partnership to fail. It also highlights the positive and negative role played by expectations as a determining factor of roles and identity in supervisor-researcher relationships. Thus, Symbolic interaction is a tool of value supervisor-researcher relationships and to study their impact on the successful completion of the research projects.

Recommendations

Symbolic interactionist analysis of the challenges faced by researchers in maintaining relationships with their supervisors also drew attention to some of the ways these issues can be sorted out. The most important suggestion received included the drafting of standard operating procedures on the departmental level and implementing them with frequent checks and accountability. It was also suggested that supervisors should be trained so that they can ease into the roles of supervision and make it convenient for the researchers as well. Surprisingly, researchers preferred a mentor who was motivating and encouraging more than the ones that were highly qualified as they believed that academic research is a process of

learning for not only the researcher but also for the supervisor. Thus, the need for approval, motivation with encouragement and

expectations of efficient work should be implemented to avoid hiccups and ensure the successful completion of the research project.

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