



**OVER MOUNTAIN TOPS AND THROUGH THE VALLEYS
OF POSTGRADUATE STUDY AND RESEARCH:
A TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE FROM
TWO SUPERVISEES' PERSPECTIVES**

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the learning that happens in assuming a supervisee's role during the postgraduate study.
Background	The facilitators and barriers students encountered while pursuing postgraduate studies, strategies to achieve success in postgraduate studies, and how to decrease attrition rates of students, have been sufficiently explored in literature. However, there is little written about the personal and professional impact on students when they are being supervised to complete their postgraduate studies.
Methodology	Autoethnographic method of deep reflection was used to examine the learning that transpired from the supervisee's perspective. Two lecturers (a Senior Lecturer in Nursing and an Aboriginal Tutor) focused on their postgraduate journeys as supervisees, respectively, with over 30 years of study experience between them, in Australia and abroad.
Contribution	Future postgraduate students, researchers, would-be supervisors and experienced supervisors could learn from the reflections of the authors' postgraduate experiences.
Findings	Four themes surfaced, and these were <i>Eureka moments</i> , <i>Critical friend(s)</i> , <i>Supervisory relationship</i> , and <i>Transformative learning</i> . The authors highlighted the significance of a supervisory relationship which is key to negotiating the journey with the supervisor. Essential for these students also were insights on finding the path

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as well as the destination and the transformative aspects that happened as a necessary part of the journey.

Conclusion. The postgraduate journey has taught them many lessons, the most profound of which was the change in perspective and attitude in the process of being and becoming. Personal and professional transformative learning did occur. At its deepest level, the authors' reflections resulted in self-actualization and a rediscovery of their more authentic selves.

Recommendations for Practitioners	This article highlights the importance of the supervisory relationship that must be negotiated to ensure the success of the candidate. Reflections of the transformation are recommended to support the students further.
Recommendations for Researchers	Quality supervision can make a significant influence on the progress of students. Further research on the supervisory relationship is recommended.
Impact on Society	The support in terms of supervision to ensure postgraduate students' success is essential. Postgraduate students contribute to the human, social, professional, intellectual, and economic capital of universities and nations globally.
Future Research	Further reflections of the transformative learning will advance the understanding of the personal and professional changes that occur with postgraduate supervision.
Keywords	postgraduate study, supervisee, autoethnographic reflection, supervisory relationship, transformation

INTRODUCTION

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less travelled by.
And that has made all the difference*

Robert Frost 'The Road Not Taken'

Higher education improves people's lives (Baum et al., 2010). The median reported salary for postgraduates was \$80,000, according to the 2014 Graduate Careers Australia Postgraduate Destinations report, with MBA graduates from La Trobe earning among the highest in the world (La Trobe, 2019). Higher education offers many benefits, such as finding employment, boosting career options, building and expanding professional networks, opening new opportunities, and gaining industry relevance (La Trobe, 2019; University of Sydney, 2016). More important for some candidates is personal fulfilment. Students pursue postgraduate study because they desire to make a difference, prepare for the future, and contribute to solving global problems.

The strategies for success in postgraduate studies have also been examined. Bain et al. (2010) surveyed graduate students (N=108) in the Educational Leadership & Counseling Department at Texas A&M University who had maintained a 3.25-grade point average or higher. Participant profile and personal factors were identified as crucial in the overall success of the graduate students. In addition, it was essential to consider creating and maintaining a community of connectedness for students, as well as the advising role of the professors in the postgraduate experience. Thus, guidelines have been outlined detailing these successful strategies, for example, networking, getting support, and having a productive relationship with the supervisor(s) (University of Otago, n.d.).

Moreover, there are costs involved in pursuing postgraduate studies. For one, postgraduate work can impact on family and lifestyle. There are also financial costs as it is expensive to undertake postgrad-

uate studies, especially if one decides to study full time with no government or private assistance. Financial support may be available, but it is very limited. Thus, many postgraduate students drop out of their studies or at least re-think their educational aspirations. The term is attrition, defined as the number of individuals who leave the field of study before completing it (Advance HE, 2018). However, the factors causing drop-out rates are complex and interrelated. Stress, life/work/study balance, workload difficulties, and preference of employment over a study have been identified. The consequences of attrition are a waste of resources and reduced socioeconomic and other opportunities (Strawinski, 2011).

It is therefore imperative for academics to consider the facilitators and barriers postgraduate degree students encounter to ensure they get the best opportunities to complete their degrees for individual and institutional advantages. Kiley et al. (2009) and Kiley (2009, 2017) have written extensively about how Australian universities are adapting to changing higher degree candidate cohorts and the support strategies necessary to ensure successful outcomes (Green & Bowden, 2010, p. 136).

Current resources written for foreign research degrees focus on general directions for first-time researchers on how to achieve success or provide specific guidelines on the research process, such as ethics and research methods. Little is known about the learning that occurs in the process of being supervised – the point of this paper. One way of gaining an understanding of how attrition may be reduced and success ensured for postgraduate students is by examining the perspectives of individuals who have extensive experience in being supervised by several academics from several institutions while obtaining their postgraduate degrees. The Kemp and Norton report (2016) and the Australian Council of Learned Academies review (ACOLA; McGagh et al., 2016) addressed supervision issues, learning outcomes, completion times and completion rates, industry-related research links and research utility (Kiley, 2017, p. 81). Furthermore, both reports recommended that universities develop more formal training frameworks for candidates and supervisors to address the changing demographics of candidates and the multiple entry pathways to doctoral research degrees (Kiley, 2017, p. 82). In response, individual universities developed strategies to increased research training workshops and formal training courses for candidates and professional development and reward programs for supervisors (Kiley, 2017).

Using autoethnographic methods of deep reflection as the theoretical framework for inquiry, these two academics, with over 30 years of study behind them, and very much in touch with the postgraduate environment, examined their inner thoughts, experiences, and actions on what worked for them; the highs and lows of their research journey while completing their PhDs, and the various learnings that emerged in the successful completion of postgraduate degrees.

BACKGROUND

This paper uses an autoethnographic approach to research, where both authors drew upon their years of experience being supervised during their graduate studies. Hence, it is important to describe the authors' backgrounds at the outset to understand the context.

Dr Joy Penman holds two Bachelor's and two Master's degrees (Nursing and Pharmacy) and a PhD in Nursing. Postgraduate studies extended over 16 years; the Pharmacy degrees were obtained abroad, while the Nursing degrees were from Australia. Postgraduate studies were undertaken part-time on campus while lecturing in the Bachelor's and Master's Pharmacy and Nursing programs. Her studies were fully supported by her employer universities. However, there was the expectation that, in addition to her teaching role, she had to undertake research and engage with the broader community. Joy continued to seek research grants and collaborate with other academics throughout her studies.

Joy had a total of six supervisors with varying past experiences with other students; some had impressive records in terms of student completions. Three supervised her Master of Nursing, one her Master of Pharmacy, and two her doctoral study. Of the six, four were females, and two were males.

She experienced both single and joint supervision and had access to technology-assisted learning resources for most of her postgraduate days. Joy pursued most of her nursing degrees while studying from a small region with about 22,000 people and was about four to five hours away from the city in South Australia. Relationships with supervisors were always cordial and professional. Her primary supervisors focused mostly on the content, while the secondary supervisors were generally experts in research methodology. Her connection tended to be stronger with the former. Also, she gathered valuable knowledge and information from like-minded colleagues, who shared with her their strategies for success. However, these like-minded colleagues were very few in regional and rural areas.

Dr Glenna Lear comes from a non-traditional background and previously identified as a farming wife/business partner living in a remote regional area of South Australia. Distance education brought the university to her, and, after a break of 20 years, she returned to the paid workforce to teach adult learners and began a Bachelor of Adult and Vocational Education. However, that journey was much longer, more rewarding and exhilarating than she ever anticipated, especially for a rural woman out of the paid workforce for many years. Glenna discovered a passion for learning; she loved distance study and did not hesitate to accept an offer of further study to complete an Honors year, which opened the door for her to apply to do a PhD. She had a talent for research, and doing a PhD became her goal. She worked with three supervisors; their relationships were always cordial and supportive. She was awarded her PhD in 2011.

Thus, the two authors have different experiences of being supervised in both internal and external modes, over several decades in Australia and abroad. Additionally, both were mature-aged, highly motivated, and from regional/rural backgrounds. The pressure to pursue further studies to ensure employment was the driving force for Joy. Glenna's aspirations to achieve a doctoral degree came from her passion and love for learning. The two academics reflected on their postgraduate experiences and stories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION

As mentioned in the Introduction, postgraduate study is a ticket for employment, increasing opportunities and chances in a highly competitive market. About 20% of students pursue university immediately after high school graduation (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016). Others follow later after examining their career paths or in retirement (Stehlik, 2011). Individuals are motivated to pursue postgraduate studies for various reasons, such as boosting salary or employment prospects, upskilling and upgrading knowledge, progressing career, and promoting profile (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016). Other motivations include learning, personal development, and personal goals (Holbrook et al., 2014).

The chance to pursue a university degree, however, is neither equal nor equitable. Many factors facilitate or hinder participation in postgraduate study. Students' access and participation in higher education are influenced by economic, sociocultural, and educational factors (Ashby & Schoon, 2010). Moreover, family income (Maani, 2006), social background (Maaz & Watermann, 2007), geographic location (Wilks & Wilson, 2012), family structure, and gender differences (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008) impact on students' perceptions and decisions about university.

In 2006, 11.5% of the 63,484 postgraduate coursework Australian students (both international and local) dropped out from their university studies. This attrition is severe, considering the modest number of Australians with a postgraduate qualification at the time. Only about 27% of students were in some form of postgraduate study, and individuals with postgraduate qualifications were few, approximately 6.3 % nationwide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). However, Australia's PhD numbers are increasing with about 1,360 awarded in 1990, and now more than 6,000 are awarded each year, but with thousands enrolling, dropping out also occurs (Clowns, 2015). Around 18% of

men and 21% of women aged 15-64 years were enrolled in the postgraduate study in 2019; and around 1.4 million people were studying at higher education institutions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

More recent statistics indicate a more diverse demographic trend with increasing numbers of part-time students, equal female to male ratios, and increasing numbers of international students (Kiley, 2017). Also, the average age of PhD candidates has increased with more people returning to study in later life either as they approach retirement or after (Kiley, 2017; McGagh et al., 2016, p. 82). According to Stehlik (2011) and Kiley (2017), many of the more mature candidates experience a personal transformation by reflecting on their life experiences that enable them to give back to society and contribute to academia. However, increasing attrition rates continue to be a concern (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015). The focus of the PhD qualification has changed to developing generic skills for future employment rather than intellectual scholarship (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015; McGagh et al., 2016) despite increasing enrolments of mature aged people with years of professional experience (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015; Kiley, 2017).

THE ART OF SUPERVISION

Historically, the supervisor of postgraduate students has three functions (administration, education, and support), but these have expanded (Johns, 1993). The scope of practice includes monitoring caseload issues and work issues, learning and discussion, professional development needs, providing staff care, and support. The tasks involve creating a learning relationship, teaching/educating, monitoring administrative aspects and professional ethical issues, counselling, consulting, and providing a safe and supportive learning environment. The supervisor's role has broadened to include advisory, quality control, supporting, and guiding roles (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). They are expected to coach, mentor students, teach, guide, and advise the researcher-in-training for several years; that is intellectually and emotionally demanding (McCallin & Nayar, 2012).

Supervisors are both teachers of research and responsible for the pastoral management of students who have multiple responsibilities externally. Developing a supervision pedagogy improves supervision efficacy, which is "a sophisticated high-level teaching process" in which learning and knowledge generation are central for both the supervisor and the student (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Halse (2011) describes this supervision pedagogy as a learning relationship that merges context and pedagogy seamlessly. Learning is reciprocal professionally and personally with all parties benefiting as each learns more about themselves and the world in the process of being and becoming.

The usefulness and success of the supervisory experience depend upon the agenda, and a combined skill set of the supervisor and supervisee relationship (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). The ACOLA Report (McGagh et al., 2016) identified the quality and effectiveness of PhD supervision as fundamental to HDR candidates' success or failure. Consequently, each party must consider the skills they bring to the relationship, their personalities, learning and communication styles, interests, and values. These qualities are fundamental to building a trusting and supportive environment for the candidate to take risks in developing original research and enabling them to cope with the busyness and stressfulness of a PhD. Conversely, unrealistic or unclear expectations, and differing agendas or research interests can inhibit a supervisory relationship, resulting in resentment, attrition, or failure at a time when the supervisee is most vulnerable. They are aware of how little they know and understand as many of their former beliefs and worldviews fall by the wayside. The supervisors' feedback, good access, academic advising, and personal touch are critical for student satisfaction (McCallin & Nayar, 2012).

FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS IN POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

In recent years, more formalized supervisory training, professional development programs, reporting, and reviewing systems have increased the effectiveness of the supervisor-supervisee relationship (Kiley, 2017). McCallin and Nayar (2012) believed that, over time, the formal training programs for su-

pervisors might alleviate the loneliness, isolation, confidence, and competence issues that supervisors and supervisees experience. However, universities continue to underestimate the amount of time the supervisor role requires, particularly with the increasing diversity of candidates, their different ages, experiences, learning competencies, diverse backgrounds, and multiple entry points (Eckersley et al., 2016). Also, the increased casualization of the workforce and academic transience impacts on student outcomes. The ACOLA Report (McGagh et al., 2016) contended that universities that offered well-resourced ongoing training, clear promotion criteria, and recognized performance measures, while acknowledging academic workloads, increased the retention and completion rates of more diverse cohorts of HDR students.

Literature alluding to strategies for success is readily available (Kearns & Finn, 2017). Initially, candidates are recommended to meet with their supervisors to discuss the parameters for their ongoing mutual relationship, as unrealistic or unclear expectations can inhibit a supervisory relationship. Each needs to determine their expectations, set goals, assess the compatibility of their learning and communication styles, and availability (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Critically, they need to consider how they will maintain a constructive relationship or if it is time to part. To do this, they need to be flexible to align their research objectives and accommodate their different values and philosophies. The mundane things to manage the study have been identified, including what to do with interruptions like phone calls, pager, meetings, how to record supervision, setting of goals and expectations, possible incompatibilities, and managing conflict and disagreements.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper draws on autoethnographic methods of deep reflection on profoundly significant personal experiences, autobiographical narratives, and collaboration between research participants to illuminate their experiences and the supervisory relationship during the PhD journey. Stahlke Wall (2016) contends that the power of autoethnography is in its potential to build sociological knowledge by illuminating the gaps in understanding the personal experience. Thus, autoethnographic methods can facilitate a more nuanced understanding of personal transformation. According to Ellis et al. (2011), transformative epiphanies continue to shape how the individual remembers and recollects pivotal moments long after they occur, and their impact continues to change the way they live in the world.

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) define autoethnography as an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal with the cultural.” It places the self of the researcher within social research that is both autobiographical and ethnographical by acknowledging the researcher’s subjectivity and emotionality within the research context. Autoethnography enables the researcher to explore the inner aspects of the self, their motivations, feelings, emotions, and challenges when they undertake a journey along a path less travelled (Pitard, 2017). It is a method of collective self-interrogation of shared first-person narratives and reflexivity of cultural and autobiographical aspects of the experience that allows readers to think and feel with the story rather than about it (Blalock & Akehi, 2017). The reader verifies the truth and validity of autoethnographic narratives by the verisimilitude of their lifelike, authentic, and believable stories that connect readers and others (Ellis et al., 2011). The rigor of the research is strengthened when two or more researchers collaborate in researching their personal experiences of a phenomenon.

Accordingly, the personal experiences of the researchers provide a unique and valid perspective for understanding the research phenomena. Furthermore, these perceptive personal narratives illuminate the contextual culture that allows readers to glimpse the experience of being a PhD candidate in the university setting vicariously.

DATA COLLECTION – CRITICAL REFLECTION

The two teachers deliberated on common areas of interest regarding their individual experiences in being supervised. They used the following questions to trigger critical reflection about supervision: (1) What were the highs and lows of being supervised? (2) How was the journey negotiated to achieve success? and (3) What learning transpired during the process of supervision?

Critical reflection is applied to make meaning of an experience (ThinkAchieve: Creating Connections, n.d.). It is descriptive and analytical, adding depth and breadth to the learning experience (Bart, 2011). This reasoning process is more than summarizing; instead, it is carefully examining, analyzing, and documenting the learning that has transpired during the experience. The steps in critical reflection are as follows: (1) identify what could be gained from experience, (2) design the reflection activities, (3) engage in critical reflection, and (4) evaluate the learning that occurred.

DATA ANALYSIS – THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A theme refers to an element which frequently occurs in the text (van Manen, 1997). It is the message that a creative study attempts to integrate. It is also referred to as meaning units. Thematic analysis refers to the process of recovering the central idea that embodies the meanings and imagery of the reflections of the researchers.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was used to identify the themes. This approach is widely used to identify themes or patterns in reflections that are relevant, interesting, and representing the reality being examined. It allows the interpretation and meaning-making of the experiences and goes beyond summarizing and organizing (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The analysis used the semantic and latent levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), where semantic referred to looking within the surface meanings and focusing on interpreting and explaining the meanings, while latent looked beyond what has been said and interrogated the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics approval was not sought as the study is a reflection of the personal experience of the researchers.

FINDINGS

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF BEING SUPERVISED

Joy's reflection

The postgraduate study has been likened to a rollercoaster ride or climbing mountain tops and valley experience, and it proved so for me. One writer likened it to "giving birth"! Many lives are turned upside down in the process. Knowledge is acquired through diligent research and mental effort. There are distinct periods in the journey – a time for wondering and questioning, a time for learning, a time for doing, a time for doubting, and a time for achieving. It may be that at one point in time, one believes in the bright and promising topic, followed by another point when one is cynical as to the direction of the study. It is like discovering treasures beneath the surfaces of other individuals' work and stories. Gaining a piece of the puzzle, one brick at a time, one helpful thought after the other, that is how knowledge is built. One may also become consumed and absorbed in the study and lose sight of the big picture, which is purpose and satisfaction in pursuing knowledge.

Supervisors, who provided a supportive environment and showed a keen interest in my personal and academic development and who were inspiring role models, were the 'highs' for

me. They were my critical friends. A *critical friend* is one who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides helpful and honest feedback. In short, someone who speaks truthfully, but always constructively. Other memorable moments included understanding the research method, finishing the chapters, and getting approval from the supervisors. Specific *eu-reka moments*, defined as moments of sudden, triumphant discovery, inspiration, or insight, included my triumphant discovery of a potential medicinal drug, understanding the significant/non-significant factors associated with compliance with medications, and formulating my spirituality and spiritual engagement model.

Lows were times when findings were no different from what is known or when they were too controversial or strange, and some supervisors had their interpretation of things. Others included missing deadlines, doing drafts for the nth time, and needing to be critical but not sure how. Difficulties also consisted of supervisors relocating to another state, or not being provided with explicit instructions on how to improve or how to get it “right.” Some supervisors were not generous with their feedback, commenting only that a finding was interesting, or the chapter was not up to standard. Scholarly writing was a significant challenge for me.

Glenna’s reflection

My experiences of higher degree research may differ from many others due to my age, location, and background, and I believe that I am very privileged to have had the opportunity to study at this level. My PhD years were a joy and some of my most rewarding from the moment I received notification that my application had been accepted. They were intellectually demanding, and I occasionally wondered why I was pushing myself so intensely, although those moments were rare and fleeting. My supervisors were an integral part of the journey. They provided a safety net, were often unobtrusive but always available when needed in times of professional or personal uncertainty or difficulty.

I never doubted that I would finish once I was awarded a Commonwealth Government research degree scholarship as it demonstrated that I was capable, and my project was worthwhile. In addition to no university fees, the scholarship paid a living allowance to do something I loved and enabled me to fly to Adelaide several times a year to meet my supervisors, to participate in training workshops, research school events and to socialize.

Initially, I was very reluctant to go on campus until my supervisor enlisted the help of another PhD student to persuade me to visit the School of Education and meet the staff and my fellow research students. The collegiality was one of the highlights, and I felt at home. People were interested in who I was, what I hoped to achieve, and my different world views were accepted and even welcomed by some academics. Until then, I had little knowledge of the university culture, system, or staff, which I believe, can limit the benefits of university education and particularly for higher degree external students. The support of supervisors and colleagues increased my confidence and about my social skills after years of isolation on a farm (Alston, 1998) in an all-male household. Consequently, loneliness was never a problem, as those years had made me resilient, resourceful, independent, and self-sufficient, the very skills I needed to succeed.

I chose to continue working with my Honors supervisor as I felt we had the potential to develop a rewarding relationship; he had some understanding of my topic of third age learning and of the constraints and issues of being an external student in a remote region. He managed the administrative and ethical aspects and was my go-to person for personal or professional support as well as helping with the final draft. My initial associate supervisor was a retired adjunct who was familiar with my region, but communication was difficult as he was elderly, did not use a computer, and had limited access to university resources.

In my second year, a third person asked to become a co-supervisor, and he helped me focus on the appropriate methodology and suggested the theory to explain women's third age learning as an outcome of their community engagement.

Although I did not intend to focus on women initially, I found it ironical that I was researching women's third age learning under male supervision. However, I had lived in a male-dominated society for many years, and my supervisors were always supportive and encouraged me to follow my intuition and to use my knowledge of being a farming partner, a long-term resident of the region, and a third age learner. They gave me the freedom and independence to develop my ideas and to explore research areas and philosophies. We met for an hour, four times a year, on my visits on campus to discuss what I had been doing and where my research was taking me. They were intense sessions which I enjoyed for the intellectual effort and my supervisors' subtle guidance. Sometimes, a word was sufficient to open new paths of inquiry. In between, I contacted them by email only when necessary, but mostly they left me to my own devices, which suited me. Furthermore, my critical friend was happy to discuss readings and interpretations, thus reducing their workload.

I realized early in the relationship that learning was a two-way process; it was rewarding to hear how my topic influenced their areas of interest. Also, they encouraged me to develop a mutual support system with two older candidates who joined the program a few years after me.

A momentous occasion occurred while delivering a paper on the context of my project to the university's Education research members. The silence in the room was finally broken by my supervisor, who was surprised at the quality of my writing which my other supervisor had mentioned previously. I attributed my writing development to the critique and support of my critical friend, who encouraged me to allow my voice to come to the fore. Additionally, her assistance reduced my demands on my supervisors' time.

My low moments were minor and associated with health concerns as I adapted to the sedentary intellectual lifestyle, which I discussed with my supervisor if my studies were disrupted.

NEGOTIATING THE JOURNEY TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS

Joy's reflection

Success in postgraduate studies demands not only a definite aim but also a steadfast view and course. The purpose must be clear, and the approach sustained and connected. One must be prepared to grow and change their ideas, schemes, and structures as necessary. There may also be a need to dig deeper and to aim higher than one's limited vision and understanding, to be realistic and accept that one could not possibly know all things, and so, must be willing to work hard and continue learning.

A supervisor said, "Joy, the secret is efficiency and focus." One may not have the same efficiency as others, but there should be a fundamental belief on one's capabilities and clear focus. One needs to put all one's power, energy, heart, and mind to the work to achieve the desired outcomes and, most importantly, not be distracted. Another supervisor said in almost every communication, "Keep on keeping on" or "Keep doing your best", indicating to me to be patient, persistent and persevering. Other approaches I found useful from my supervisors were thinking with me as the student, providing me structure, inspiring hope, "You can do this, you will get there!", and exploring possibilities with me in explaining my findings. For instance, I thoroughly enjoyed working very closely with my PhD supervisor who was helping me create a conceptual model for my study.

In order to gain a positive outcome, I realized that the supervisor-supervisee roles needed to be established early on so that both could grow and benefit from the relationship. I also learned the importance of asking the right questions such as, “What is it that I am doing right?” and “What am I doing that is not working?” These deliberations cleared a way for new and fresh thoughts to develop. I learned to prepare for the meetings so that I could maximize the assistance being extended to me. More critical was the clear connection and smooth flow of conversation between us. After the meetings, I had to address their questions and/or concerns directly and submit these to them for discussion on the following meeting.

I found that those supervisors who provided a more structured form of supervision and very concrete suggestions were far more effective in helping me realize my goals. Additionally, I found that the supervisors with research track records and those who developed a personal belief on the topic and provided a balance of structure, while enabling me to bear responsibility and power to think, brought about the most favorable result. Genuine concern was most appreciated. One supervisor always provided me positive, bright, and apt advice. Her very hands-on approach was encouraging, providing attention to life balance also, to the extent of encouraging me to try the gym and discover the wonders of regular exercise.

Glenna’s reflection:

At School events, I marveled at the confidence of much younger less qualified people as they assumed group leadership readily while older HDR candidates like myself stood back hesitantly, very conscious of how much we did not know despite our considerable life and work experiences. Uncertainty is a fundamental part of doing a PhD, but this diminishes over time with the support of supervisors and increased competence.

Throughout my journey, ethics was a primary concern because I was researching people in my home community that is relatively small, closely connected, and inter-related. My supervisor and the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee were very supportive and understood the peculiarities of researching such a community where anonymity is difficult to achieve.

LEARNING THAT TRANSPIRED IN THE PROCESS OF SUPERVISION

Joy’s reflection:

The purpose of postgraduate education takes a narrow and truncated view these days. A broader and higher aim is warranted because postgraduate education is more than the pursuit of answers to research questions. Using critical reflection, I gained a better understanding of myself as I journeyed through my quest for knowledge and as I negotiated my path with my supervisors. It is, in fact, character building and preparation for life. It is transformative!

The professional transformation has occurred in the process of expanding disciplinary knowledge during my studies. However, more than this are changes in my perception and attitude towards the research process itself, through developing the required research skills, in changing foci, in becoming aware of a broader range of sources of knowledge and ways of accessing knowledge, in appreciating the value that the research can have beyond the postgraduate project, and in the opportunities for creativity in research design and writing. Establishing and maintaining the supervisory relationship is paramount. I learned about this relationship well – the importance of being available, providing safe and high-quality supervision, and reflecting on the effectiveness of the supervisory relationship. These experiences could enhance my future supervisory skills.

The personal transformation that transpired was the development of the mind, referring to the habit of attention and connected thought, the power to be an independent thinker and not a mere consumer of other people's research, in short, to think for oneself and to think of one's thinking. Most of my supervisors taught me to trust on my understanding, not to be scared to think outside the box, to be honest with myself, and speak directly to the core of the problem. A case in point was accepting that a negative result was just as good as a positive one. Another case was the realization of the differences in people's many beliefs about spirituality and my understanding and heartfelt inner convictions. I learned to separate these differences from the individual, acknowledge my beliefs and set them aside. I realized that freedom to have one's own opinions and convictions needed to be respected for all, and this freedom is a critical element when dealing with personal topics as spirituality, that has more profound attachment than a mere educational understanding. Many factors come into play, such as culture, religion, education, immigration, and life experiences. The emphasis on these intersectionalities became more pronounced in my later research endeavors focusing on feminist analyses of at-risk groups.

Transformation happens when one is not satisfied with second-rate work but is inspired to pursue further challenges, maximize one's potential, and be guided by the principles of truth and integrity. Transformation happens when one is willing to be vulnerable, mentored, encouraged and assisted to learn the ropes, and accomplish the task, while giving back by making the same gestures for other students. Transformation happens when one achieves greater self-awareness, courage, and authenticity. My supervisors were pivotal in causing this change as they dared me to be innovative, creative, and different. They did prepare me to be a life-long learner.

Glenna's reflection:

I entered the program with an open mind, wanting to learn and prepare for new opportunities, to do something different, think differently, and to make the most of what was on offer. No matter what happened, I knew my life would never be the same. At last, I had found my passion, and I began to discover who I was. My supervisors' consistent care and support contributed to this self-discovery also.

I no longer felt a misfit, but I realized that, no matter how much I read, I would never catch up. However, I had instinctive confidence in my ability to complete a PhD which continues to amaze me.

My journey was very intuitive, and each stage smoothly transitioned into the next as if it was all meant to be. It was an amazing time when everything I wanted, needed, or applied for came to me. I was awarded the scholarship I needed to continue, and I successfully applied for an Ageing Research Masterclass interstate which did wonders for my confidence. I attended conferences and began to enjoy public speaking.

The scholarship enabled me to fly to Adelaide to attend research workshops, participate in university life, and learn the culture of being an academic. By the time I finished, I had realized that those 3 or 4 visits a year were critical in my personal and professional transformation. The importance of socializing with other candidates, supervisors, and academics are rarely recognized, but for an outsider like me, the acceptance, recognition, and support were fundamental to my success in higher education.

Early in my candidature, I wrote a brief biography of my learning journey as an external student which I described as a late-blooming for a proposed book on the experiences of mature age higher education students (Lear, 2004). I wrote another biography for my thesis using my research methodology to question rigorously everything that had shaped my life, why I believed that and who else was involved as I searched for alternative interpretations of piv-

otal moments in my life. My new perspectives were a fundamental part of my transformation and personal growth.

One consequence of living in a small regional community is that, for me, academic language is written and rarely verbal. An unexpected benefit of doing a PhD is that I have developed the freedom and creativity of thought for problem-solving and meaning-making that is itself transformative.

I realized that my journey was going to be physically as well as mentally demanding as I transitioned from physically active life to one that was more sedentary and intellectual. Consequently, care of self, including my health, became a priority that changed my lifestyle. I changed from physically active life to a more sedentary intellectual, my mind and heart took the lead, and my body followed. I needed to care for myself.

DISCUSSION

Postgraduate students, doctoral candidates, in particular, contribute to the intellectual and economic capital (Owens et al., 2019) of universities and nations globally. This contribution is in addition to the human, social, and professional capital they provide. The support in terms of supervision to ensure these students' success is essential; however, identifying the support measures comes after understanding the personal and professional impact on students when they are being supervised to complete their postgraduate studies.

Reflecting on the themes meant undertaking a true reflection of the experience thoughtfully and reflectively in order to grasp some insight of what is it that constitutes the nature of the supervisor-supervisee experience. Next was describing the experience by responding to the focused questions concerning the mountain top and valley experiences, the postgraduate journey, relationships, and the learning that transpired. This approach, when done thoughtfully and sensitively, allowed the data to emerge and speak for themselves. Four themes were identified: *Eureka moments*, *Critical friend(s)*, *Supervisory relationship*, and *Transformative learning*; these will now be explicated.

THEME 1: EUREKA MOMENTS

The first theme identifies a high of being supervised. Joy stressed her eureka moments describing them as “discovering treasures”, referring to the findings of her research studies, guided carefully by her supervisors. Whether it be a thesis or a dissertation (master’s or doctoral study), it is more than a “rite of passage”; it signifies the process and product of learning (Isaac et al., 1992). These pieces of work allowed the evaluation of the authors’ research skills, development of those skills, and their contribution to nursing, pharmacy knowledge, and adult learning. Following many years of becoming a scholar and understanding what it means to write a thesis and/or dissertation, these articles were a testament of hard work and emotionally daunting experience (Azano, 2014). Writing the thesis was challenging and exhilarating; each chapter was a milestone marking personal and professional growth. Furthermore, developing unique theoretical elucidation of the research data is invigorating and a relief that it was easier than anticipated.

Glenna had many eureka moments also; realizing others were interested in her research topic and they regarded it as worthwhile and with the support of her supervisor, she argued in defence of her research proposal to the proposal review panel. Another was when she became aware that her supervisors were learning from her topic to broaden their fields of interest.

Both Joy and Glenna stressed the role of their supervisors in giving them the freedom and independence to develop their philosophies. Both also concluded that their situations and circumstances contributed to these eureka moments. They considered their gender (female), cultural background (culturally and linguistically diverse), marital status (married), age (mature-aged), geographic location (re-

gional/rural), and family role (motherhood) to be essential factors in facilitating and/or hindering their postgraduate aspirations.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) report the impact of these demographic factors – age, gender, the field of study, and remoteness on the pursuit of higher education. It has been observed that the proportion of young people fully engaged in work and/or study has been consistently higher in major cities than in regional and remote Australia. 83% of young people in major cities were fully engaged, but this dropped to 74% in inner regional areas and 72% in outer regional and remote areas. For Australians, aged 15-64 years, it was more common for men to be fully engaged in work and/or study than women.

THEME 2: CRITICAL FRIEND(S)

While persistence and resilience are essential ingredients in postgraduate study success, supportive relationships played a crucial role in both supervisees. Joy's critical friends were her supervisors, who provided feedback that was both positive and negative. She was encouraged by the thought that she was progressing well and that the data she collected have tremendous power and relevance. However, she struggled to persevere with disinterested feedback. Providing negative feedback could be counter-productive when there were no positive ones to balance the direct negative feedback, and this could be related to culture, personality, and/or attitude (Meyer, 2014).

Feedback is one of the main outcomes of the supervisory relationship. Feedback is based on the accuracy of facts and performance, but sometimes misunderstandings may arise, and the supervisee may feel offended. This conflict can escalate so that the supervisee might feel helpless and “victimized”. Thus, the difference in power and status may threaten the relationship and compromise the progress of the study (Garelick & Fagin, 2004).

Glenna's critical friend, who provided constructive feedback and encouragement to allow her voice to the surface and raised the standard of her writing, was pivotal in her academic success. Additionally, a critical friend reduces a supervisee's dependence on supervisors, who are under increasing teaching, research and administrative pressures and have less time to encourage more extensive reading and more in-depth exploration of interpretations (Halse, 2011). Collegial relationships with other postgraduate students provided invaluable support and enhanced motivation to stay on track and complete the endeavor. Glenna emphasized the value of socializing with like-minded individuals was imperative for success. West et al. (2013) found that recognition as a competent agent by significant others enhances self-confidence, increases self-respect and self-esteem.

THEME 3: SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP

Both supervisees emphasized the significance of the supervisor–supervisee relationship in the pursuit of postgraduate studies. This relationship was a source of a high and low in the course of supervision. McGagh et al. (2016) identified lack of supervisor support and trust as one reason for the failure of the supervisory relationship. A rewarding relationship with the supervisor(s) was crucial in negotiating the path to achieve success (Kearns & Finn, 2017).

In the supervisory relationship, clarity of communication, expectations, and areas of responsibility are crucial. Also, both the supervisor and supervisee must consider the skills they bring to the relationship. Their personalities, culture, ethnicity, religious backgrounds, learning and communication styles, and interests and values are all essential to consider in building and sustaining the relationship to ensure a trusting and supportive environment (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Glenna described herself as a late bloomer (Lear, 2007). These innate characteristics determine the ability to cope with the demands of study.

As was pointed out earlier, unclear instructions and expectations and differing agendas or research interests can impact on the relationship. According to Joy, supervisors who provided a more struc-

tured form of supervision and concrete suggestions were more helpful. Moreover, McCallin and Nayar (2012) argued that supervisee satisfaction was higher with constructive supervisor's feedback, good access, academic advising, and personal touch. Glenna cited the role her supervisor played in helping her choose the appropriate methodology and theory for her research (Lear, 2011). That personal connection resonated well for both Joy and Glenna. The student had a significant role to play, as well. Supervisors need to be learning from the study and also challenged (Halse, 2011). Glenna spoke about this reciprocal and mutually benefitting learning they experienced.

The supervisory relationship was facilitated by the university administrative procedures and postgraduate research education programs. The formalized supervisory training, professional development programs, and reporting and reviewing systems have contributed to the effectiveness of the supervisor-supervisee relationship (Kiley, 2017) and, consequently, to their satisfactory evaluation of their supervision experiences. A holistic, integrated, and career-focused relationship could not be overemphasized to meet the demands of diverse postgraduate students (Owens et al., 2019).

THEME 4: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

This theme encapsulates the learning that transpired during the process of supervision, where Joy and Glenna confirmed the impact of postgraduate supervision. The most critical finding of this autoethnographic study is the transformative learning that happened following the supervision experience (Mezirow, 1991). Joy said, "It is, in fact, character building and preparation for life." She identified the impact of supervision on her personal and professional life.

On the one hand, she focused on the transferable skills she developed, together with the disciplinary knowledge she gained. These transferable skills were transformative, and these included critical thinking, problem-solving, data analysis, communication skills, scholarly writing, time management, and several others (Davies et al. 2019). Glenna, on the other hand, became more critical, questioning everything rigorously, and searching for alternative explanations; gaining a new perspective was part of the transformation and personal growth. Further, she developed the freedom and creativity of thought for problem-solving and meaning-making. Mature postgraduate students experience a personal transformation by reflecting on their life experiences (Kiley, 2017; Stehlik, 2011), and giving back to the community as Joy mentioned. Both authors' reflections resulted in Maslow's self-actualization, which is the realization or fulfilment of their talents and maximum potential (Reeve, 2001).

The increased understandings, skills, and outlook that stimulated independent thinking that changes conceptual perspectives and frames of reference explain the phenomenon of transformative learning. This transformation is also the different ways of knowing and meaning-making, transforming the doctoral candidates' epistemology to one that is more socially responsible and autonomous (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Autonomy, according to Edwards and Cranton (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), is a movement towards greater understanding and a different way of being. Thus, the autonomous person experiences a transformation through critical reflection on their assumptions to become more aware of the context of their interpretations and beliefs (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 91). However, a much more profound transformation of the self occurs when the individual embarks on a journey of self-discovery and self-understanding via deeper self-exploration via inner reflection, which is an integral part of doing a PhD. Dirkx (2012) argues that the inner reflections allow individuals to access their unconscious; they experience a shift in consciousness that redefines their sense of self and being in the world. They become more authentic and experience a more profound transformation of the self that changes their identity and being in the world.

In her phenomenological dissertation on the pivotal lived experience of the doctoral journey, Schell (2017) determined that candidates experience a profound shift in self-identity, autonomy, and independence via self-reflection. Fundamentally, when they enter the program, students need to be open to continual change and personal transformation by questioning their assumptions, old patterns of

living, behaving, and thinking to develop new life strategies for living and being. Their emerging self-awareness initiates a disconnect between the self and others, past and present, that creates space for identity development, autonomy, and individuality. Schell identified emotional engagement in a trusting and respectful relationship as a key to a more profound change in an emotional rebirth of the self and the emergence of new life strategies that are critical to successful completion. It is an in-depth, embodied process of psychological change from self-discovery and increased self-understanding that is personally rewarding and fulfilling.

The clarity of the insights of the essence of the phenomenon determines the truth and validity of the autoethnographic narratives (Ellis et al., 2011). When the essence is communicated well, readers will recognize the statements concerning the findings as accurate. The merging of interpretation elicits the so-called phenomenological nod, according to van Manen (1997). The nod represents an acknowledgement and agreement of the findings presented. The rigor of the reflection is strengthened when two or more researchers collaborate in analyzing their personal experiences as Joy and Glenna have undertaken.

LIMITATIONS

The small number of participants limits the data. However, saturation may be reached even with small numbers (Guest et al., 2006). Current psychosocial studies seek legitimacy through attempts to measure, quantify, and support the notion that only what is observable is real and superior (Neuman, 2003). Nevertheless, the elucidation of some of the more complex characteristics of human beings requires a methodology that seeks to uncover abstract concepts and information that goes beyond numbers. The aim here is not to generalize, but discover ideas, meanings, and behaviors, and expand the understanding of human experience (Creswell, 2003). Joy and Glenna wanted to voice their first-hand experiences, believing that the content of their consciousness was a valid source of data that is worthy of investigation (Stewart & Mickunas, 1974).

In addressing the question about validity and reliability in qualitative research, the authors employed several of these strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of their work. Credibility, the criterion against which the truth value of qualitative research is evaluated (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), was met by matching their constructed reality with those reported in the literature, conducting a comprehensive literature review, and referring to other experienced researchers. Auditability, the measure of consistency in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), was addressed by providing a clear and logical research procedure and decision trail in the research process. Moreover, confirmability and dependability were achieved by ensuring accurate data management.

CONCLUSION

Current literature revealed the many reasons for pursuing higher education, the most common of which pertained to job-related reasons. The numbers and successful completions of post-doctoral degrees have been increasing worldwide, and the factors which might influence participation in higher education have been well identified. Much was also reported about the facilitators and barriers in postgraduate studies, depicting the many challenges postgraduate students experienced in the process. Some empirical studies addressing how to support postgraduate students and the strategies for successful completions have highlighted the productive relationship with the supervisor. However, there remained several areas that need addressing, including, the manner this supervisor-supervisee relationship was negotiated, the impact of the increasing diversity of candidates in terms of their ages, experiences, learning competencies, diverse backgrounds, and geographic locations on the relationship, as well as the impact of the relationship on students' personal and professional development.

This article examined the experiences of two academics from diverse backgrounds and post-doctoral career pathways who reflected on the learning that happened during their postgraduate study. Using

the autoethnographic method of deep reflection, four themes, Eureka moments, Critical friend(s), Supervisory relationship, and Transformative learning, were described and analyzed.

The literary style narratives of autobiography and heuristic inquiry were used to establish and support the coherence of the experience. The aesthetic qualities of vividness, vitality, and elegance of the descriptions and portrayals of Joy and Glenna and their experiences and the structural integrity, contributed to the research's credibility and believability, and hence its validity. The strength of the resonating response was confirmed, indicating the comprehensiveness and fidelity of the text. Authentic writing turned the authors' thinking to focus on the essence and changed them because it enabled them to see, feel and imagine things outside their personal experience and in different ways.

This article considered the focused questions (1) What were the highs and lows of being supervised? (2) How was the journey negotiated to achieve success? and (3) What learning transpired during the process of supervision? From this reflection, various learnings emerge. Supervision facilitated the broader achievement of disciplinary knowledge and addressed the particular challenges faced in answering a research question. It also identified the inherent need for socio-emotional support in the pursuit of higher degrees and the transferable skills that could be gained in the process. The discussion highlighted the significance of the supervisory relationship, linking it to specific strategies that might facilitate and challenges that might inhibit the progress of the graduate study. The most important learning was the supervisory relationship that needed to be established and sustained in order to negotiate the journey to success. The authors highlighted the transformative aspects that were a necessary part of these journeys and fostered by them. The transformation has occurred from the supervisee's point of view; examples of transformations in perceptions and attitudes towards research and problem solving, identity, belief in the self, and changes in relationships and behaviors were highlighted. At its deepest level, the authors' reflections resulted in self-actualization and a rediscovery of their more authentic selves.

For future research directions, the authors plan to probe further to understand how the relationship between supervisor and supervisee could be enhanced in order to lower the attrition rate of doctoral study, increase sampling size to cover the personal accounts of individuals who dropped out from postgraduate programs and did not return to the pursuit of their study, and individuals who first dropped out from postgraduate programs and then re-entered and finally completed their study. An increased sampling size would help them highlight how transformative learning experience fosters successful postgraduate study.

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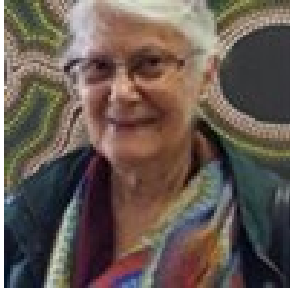
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BIOGRAPHIES



Dr Joy Penman graduated in nursing from the University of South Australia in 1993. She has since obtained her Masters and Doctoral degrees from the same university. She practiced as a nurse in the local hospital and clinics, but quickly moved to university teaching and research. She has lectured in both undergraduate and postgraduate nursing programs for over 25 years. Joy was also a pharmacist before pursuing nursing. Recently, she served as Stream Lead for the Australian Nursing Studies program at the Monash University, where she is a Senior Lecturer. She has worked to provide professional and clinical education for internationally qualified nurses wishing to join the Australian workforce. She has earned over AUD 400K in internal and external research funding for various collaborative projects. She is well published in peer-reviewed journals and books and has presented her work in national and international conferences.



Dr Glenna Lear began her third age university career in 1997. The University of South Australia awarded her PhD in 2011 for research on rural women's third age learning. Her lifelong passion is learning and she tutors Indigenous students at the University of South Australia's regional study hub in her local community which is classified as remote.