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Navigating Toxic Supervision and Psychological Stress in Single-Supervisor Postgraduate Research

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Pretoria, Gauteng 0183, South Africa**Abstract**

Postgraduate (PG) students frequently experience significant psychological stress, especially when supervisor relationships in PG research are unsupportive or toxic. Cases where PG students have only one supervisor, known as single supervision arrangements (SSA), are critiqued in this study. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of six research students (A, B, C, D, E, F) under SSA. The study generated themes of inadequate guidance, restricted academic exploration, supervisor favouritism, reputational boasting, dishonesty and misleading, and inequitable treatment. Through direct narratives, this manuscript identifies core stressors and discusses their impact on student well-being and academic progress, emphasizing the urgent need for systemic reforms in PG supervision.

Keywords

Abusive Supervision, Favouritism and Inequity, Mental Health, Postgraduate Students, Resilience

INTRODUCTION

Abusive supervision (AS) in any setting is improper practice. In the workplace, AS has been studied to a reasonable extent (Avey et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2021). Avey et al. (2022) also decries that AS has shown to hurt subordinates and disrupt their good performance, and sometimes it leads to subordinates doing extra roles beyond their job descriptions. In simple terms, AS is the bad treatment of those who are under the care or leadership of a more knowledgeable individual. Mackey et al. (2017) describe AS formally as perceptions of subordinates of the scope to which their supervisors sustainably display hostile treatment such as verbal and nonverbal behaviours. Generally, AS does not include physical contact. Bhattacharjee and Sarkar (2024) explain that the victims of abuse in AS at work tend to be denied benefits of leave, performance bonuses, and may be accused of poor performance where the supervisors are at fault, among others. Moreover, during performance appraisals, employers often consider only one side of the accusation by taking the version of supervisors about subordinates as correct. There is usually no monitoring of supervision as supervisors are often granted full power and authority, including supervisors who have no supervisory experience. Fischer et al. (2021) concur with these sentiments, and proposes reviewing the approaches in supervision, and rethinking the *modus operandi* when assigning supervisors. With these detrimental results from AS, there are analogues in student supervision of research that postgraduate (PG) students encounter. The supervisor-PG student relationship is essential in shaping students' academic experiences and psychological health. While supportive supervision can advance resilience and self-efficacy, toxic supervisory practices are strongly linked to heightened stress, anxiety, and even depression among PG students (Beddoe, 2017; Maqbool et al., 2024). It is also added that supervision by an inexperienced supervisor can automatically translate to instant AS, mainly in cases of single PG supervisor. An ideal PG supervision setup, according to Assefa et al. (2023), is where several supervisors are involved, including an experienced supervisor and racially and ethnically aligned relative to the PG student. When these attributes are lacking, according to Ammirati and Kaslow (2017), a toxic PG supervision constitutes AS in academic settings. This study presents qualitative accounts from research students to illustrate the nuanced ways in which negative supervisory behaviours manifest and their consequences.

CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH**Impact of supervision quality on mental health**

Hazell et al. (2024) explains that supervision quality impacts deeply on the mental health of postgraduate (PG) students. They clarify that harmful supervisory experiences such as neglect, controlling behaviour, inconsistent guidance, and lack

of interpersonal closeness are highly associated with heightened symptoms of anxiety, burnout, depression, and even suicidality among doctoral researchers. Berry et al. (2024) concur that large-scale qualitative research explains that the supervisory relationship can either directly initiate or intensify mental health problems, or on the contrary, act as a source of encouragement and inspiration when positive. According to Lewis (2019) and Lewis et al. (2018), PG students repeatedly report increased anxiety prior to meetings with unsupportive supervisors and feelings of disappointment and self-doubt afterward, while constructive supervisory relationships improve self-worth, confidence, and engagement with research tasks. Moreover, extreme workload pressures, blurred/vague expectations, and the inflexibility in supervision arrangements add to burnout and diminished well-being. This emphasizes the need for supervisor training and more coordinated feedback systems to support student mental health.

Role of self-efficacy and resilience

Closely interrelated psychological constructs, self-efficacy and resilience play a fundamental role in the way individuals respond to challenges and adversity (Shi et al., 2025). Shi et al. (2025) define self-efficacy as the confidence in one's own ability to complete tasks and achieve positive outcomes. According to Bornemann (2025), self-efficacy models the way people manage difficult situations. According to Shengyao et al. (2014), self-efficacy influences student's motivation, emotional responses, and behaviours. PG students with high self-efficacy consider obstacles as opportunities for growth (Chen et al., 2025). These students are more likely to resist setbacks, and ascribing failures to improvable factors, such as effort or skill, rather than to personal inadequacy. This proactive mindset lays the foundation for resilience, which is the dynamic capacity to adapt, recover, and even thrive despite adversity. Research indicates that self-efficacy acts as an antecedent to resilience (Bornemann, 2025; Shengyao et al., 2024; Shi et al., 2025). This is premised that a strong belief in one's capabilities encourages the confidence and optimism required to cope with stress and recover from difficulties. Concurrently, self-efficacy and resilience are consecutive methods that enhance well-being. They enable individuals to survive and to thrive when encountering life's challenges.

Supervisory feedback and communication

Supervisory feedback and communication in PG research are essential components in nurturing a productive and positive academic milieu, directly influencing researcher performance, motivation, and development (AbuSa'aleek & Alharbi, 2025). According to Ringo (2025), effective supervisory feedback for PG students' research entails clear, timely, and constructive information to support researchers and guide them to understand their strengths and areas for improvement. This can in turn promote research culture and skill enhancement. Open and transparent communication between supervisors and their students builds trust, encourages dialogue, and facilitates the alignment of individual goals with institutional objectives (Laufer et al., 2025). Moreover, when supervisors engage in active listening and demonstrate empathy, they create a supportive atmosphere that empowers their PG students to voice concerns, share ideas, and feel valued. This dynamic exchange improves morale and research satisfaction while enhancing research momentum, cohesion and effectiveness, and eventually pioneering institutional success.

Favouritism and inequitable treatment

Some supervisors may favour lower performing students against even the highest performers and then treat the leading ones relatively poorly. Ammari and Howe-Walsh (2025) insinuate that favouritism and inequitable treatment of research students doing the same thing undermine fairness and trust. In some instances, it leads to negative outcomes for both students and institutions. When research supervisors show preferential treatment to certain individuals based on personal biases rather than merit, it creates a perception of injustice and inequality among researchers. This can result in reduced confidence, declined motivation, and amplified resentment (Wilmot, 2025). This eventually weakens relationship and productivity. Researchers who feel marginalized or unfairly treated can easily experience stress, disengagement, and turnover intentions. This has potential to destroy the entire institutional climate. Addressing favouritism requires visible policies, consistent application of rules, and a commitment to equity to guarantee that every researcher is evaluated and rewarded based on their contributions. This can promote a culture of fairness and respect.

Expectation mismatch and discrepancy

Expectation mismatch and discrepancy occur when there is a disconnect between what researchers anticipate from their roles or institutions and the actual realities they encounter in the institution (Wardiyanto et al., 2025). Such misalignment can stem from unclear research guidelines, insufficient communication, or differing interpretations of responsibilities and priorities. This often causes frustration, disappointment, and diminished researcher satisfaction. For newly recruited researchers and inexperienced supervisors, unmet expectations, specifically regarding rewards, advancement opportunities, or research setting, can cause disengagement, loss of motivation, and even early turnover (Sudiarta et al., 2025). Both researchers and supervisors are affected: supervisors may feel undervalued or unsupported, while researchers may experience decreased productivity and morale. To effectively address expectation mismatches requires open, transparent communication and regular feedback to clarify roles, align perceptions, and promote joint understanding. Soliz (2024) informs that this could minimize negative outcomes and support a more cohesive and productive PG supervisory setting.

Cultural and institutional contexts

Cultural and institutional contexts pointedly mold individual and organizational experiences in the academic setting by influencing values, behaviours, and expectations. Culture embraces shared assumptions, beliefs, and practices within the institution (Liggett, 2025). It therefore affects the way people interact, make decisions, and respond to challenges. These cultural norms are learned and internalized. According to Bertassini et al. (2021), they regularly become invisible but powerful forces guiding day-to-day conduct and define what is regarded as suitable or effective within a specific setting. Institutional contexts, for example, societal structures, educational systems, and regulatory frameworks, further establish the boundaries and rules within which institutions operate, impacting policies, procedures, and the legitimacy of institutional actions. Together, cultural and institutional contexts create both opportunities and constraints (Liggett, 2025). They mold the way individuals navigate their roles, adapt to institutional expectations, and pursue career development. Understanding these contexts, as well as addressing them, is essential for promoting inclusion, reducing conflict, and enabling both individuals and institutions to flourish within their exclusive backgrounds.

Proposed systemic reforms

Proposed systemic reforms in student rights and academic practices are wide-ranging. They include structural issues to support fairness, transparency, and student empowerment (Michaud & Gurney, 2025). Significant reforms include granting PG students reinforced rights from the first day, such as flexible operations, protection against unfair treatment, access to institutional resources, and expanding protections against exploitative practices such as withdrawing supervision role. Enhancing grievance and disciplinary procedures can be made mandatory to ensure transparency and fairness, while academic heads of departments experience a proactive duty to prevent supervisor harassment, including from third parties (Michaud & Gurney, 2025).

Power dynamics and autonomy

Power dynamics and autonomy are intensely entangled in the supervision setting, as the distribution and exercise of power directly influence employees' sense of control, participation, and psychological safety. According to Biegelbauer et al. (2025), power dynamics refer to the way authority and influence are dispersed and experienced among individuals or groups. They structure communication patterns, collaboration, and organizational culture. Battilana et al. (2022) counsel that when power is concentrated at the top and not shared, employees may feel disempowered. They can hesitate to express ideas, and less engaged. Eventually, this can suffocate innovation and morale. On the other hand, environments that promote autonomy by distributing power more equitably using practices such as delegation, inclusive decision-making, and open communication can empower individuals to contribute meaningfully. Biegelbauer et al. (2025) regard them as having potential to encourage trust, motivation, and a sense of ownership over their work. Achieving a healthy balance between power and autonomy is essential for creating a positive workplace culture where employees feel valued, respected, and motivated to perform at their best (Battilana et al., 2022).

Integration strategy

The strategy for addressing PG student favouritism and resilience involves blending theoretical frameworks, policy reforms, and mixed-method insights to design holistic solutions. Cross-referencing favouritism literature with resilience frameworks reveals that PG students experiencing inequitable treatment habitually depend on resilience-building coping mechanisms, such as support-seeking and problem-focused strategies, to mitigate psychological distress and maintain performance (Fullerton et al., 2025). These encounters emphasize the need for systemic policy interventions, including mandatory supervisor training programs that highlight equitable leadership practices and mental health safeguards, as advocated in organizational psychology research to reduce abusive supervision and promote psychological capital (Njaramba et al., 2023). Methodologically, aligning qualitative narratives (such as PG students' experiences of restricted initiatives, career denial due to favouritism) can confirm patterns showing how power imbalances directly correlate with reduced student satisfaction and increased somatic symptoms (Ghasemi, 2025; Sperling et al., 2023). This multidimensional approach bridges individual resilience strategies with institutional reforms. It highlights transparency in grievance procedures and advances environments where equitable treatment enhances both well-being and organizational cohesion (Njaramba et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, narrative-based methodology was employed for this study to understand the plight of victims of toxic PG student supervision in HEIs at the hands of their supervisors. It drew on the experiences of six PG research students (A, B, . . . , F) from various disciplines and HEIs across South Africa, particularly from the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and Limpopo provinces. These students, who sought additional guidance from a Gauteng-based statistics and research consultant outside their own HEIs, voluntarily shared their stories with the explicit hope that their challenges could inform and improve future PG supervision. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diverse representation and were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, with full disclosure provided regarding the study's intent. The formal interviews took place during the week of Monday 14 to Friday 18 April 2025. The students contributed anonymized narratives detailing their supervision experiences, which were then subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and central themes.

FINDINGS

Student Narratives

Interviews with the selected participants were transcribed until the point where they fully detailed the toxic aspects of their supervision experiences, disregarding what shows to be of no value to this paper. These participants indicated that their supervisors were highly qualified, none with more than five publications, none with over two complete supervisions at master's or doctoral degrees, including first-time supervisors and all these participants were in single supervisory settings. They are listed as follows:

Student A

A was a 39-year-old female master's degree student of psychology attending at an Eastern Cape province's HEI, who remarked:

"My supervisor rarely provides feedback. When I ask for guidance, I'm told to 'figure it out myself'-but when I do, I'm criticized for not following the right path without being corrected. It feels like a constant set-up for failure."

Student B

B was a 34-year-old female doctoral degree student of Biology attending at a Gauteng province's HEI, who stated:

"Whenever I propose a new idea, my supervisor shuts it down, saying it's not worth pursuing. I feel trapped and unable to explore my interests, which is what drew me to research in the first place."

Student C

C was a 55-year-old female doctoral degree student of economics attending at a Limpopo province's HEI, who said,

"My supervisor constantly talks about their reputation and achievements, making it clear that I should be grateful to work with them. It's demoralizing and makes me feel like my work will never measure up."

Student D

D was a 28-year-old male doctoral student of Statistics enrolled at a Gauteng HEI, who narrated,

"I've caught my supervisor giving misleading information about deadlines and requirements. When I confront them, they deny it or blame me for misunderstanding. It's exhausting and erodes my trust."

Student E

E was a 36-year-old male master's student of Chemistry Education enrolled at an Gauteng HEI, who narrated,

"There's obvious favouritism. Another student that I know, who barely submits work, gets all the praise and opportunities. Meanwhile, my efforts go unnoticed. It's hard not to feel invisible."

Student F

F was a 41-year-old female doctoral student of Human Resources enrolled at a Gauteng HEI, who narrated,

"I'm constantly compared to other students, and my supervisor makes it clear who they prefer. Even when I perform well, it's never enough. The stress is overwhelming, and I've considered quitting."

Emerging Themes

Table 1 Themes, their descriptions and their narrators

Theme	Description	Example narratives
Lack of guidance	Supervisors fail to provide constructive feedback or direction	A, D
Restriction of exploration	Students are discouraged or blocked from pursuing independent research interests.	B
Supervisor boasting	Supervisors emphasize their own status, diminishing students' sense of value.	C
Dishonesty	Supervisors provide misleading or false information, undermining trust.	D
Favouritism	Unequal treatment and allocation of opportunities, regardless of merit.	E, F
Psychological stress	All students report significant anxiety, demotivation, and impacts on well-being.	A–F

Table 1 exposes some problematic supervisory practices that affect PG students' academic experiences and well-being. Many students report a lack of guidance, with supervisors failing to offer constructive feedback or direction (A, D), while others experience restriction of exploration, being discouraged from pursuing independent research interests (B). Some supervisors undermine students' sense of value by boasting about their own status (C), and instances of dishonesty-where supervisors provide misleading or false information-further erode trust (D). Favouritism is also evident, with unequal treatment and allocation of opportunities regardless of merit (E, F). As a collective, these issues contribute to significant psychological stress, as all students describe heightened anxiety, demotivation, and negative impacts on their overall well-being (A–F).

DISCUSSION

The study findings from the narratives emphasize diverse toxic supervisory practices within South African PG education. They confirm broader concerns identified in recent scholarship that there are supervisors who break their research students (Samuel, 2025). According to Liu et al. (2024), these narratives verify findings that negative supervisor-PG relations are correlated with increased psychological stress, reduced self-efficacy, and poor academic outcomes.

The participants, all supervised by relatively inexperienced academics, none with more than five publications or over two completed supervisions, described experiences branded by a lack of constructive guidance, restriction of academic exploration, supervisor self-glorification, dishonesty, and favouritism. Mokoena and Seeletse (2024) concur that due to inexperience, supervisors deliver inadequate supervision. These participants reported supervisors who failed to provide meaningful feedback or direction, leading to feelings of being set up for failure. Kutsyuruba (2021) explains that this conduct breaks trust of research students on their supervisors.

The PG students experienced an inhibition of independent research interests and reported how supervisors' focus on their own status weakened students' sense of worth. They described that dishonesty further eroded trust and decorated the distressing effects of favouritism and persistent comparison. These patterns are consistent with the literature (Al Makhamreh et al., 2020; Sabeen et al., 2025; Singh, 2024). This literature reports the way toxic academic practices such as meagre supervisory support, inequitable treatment, and institutional cultures embracing such behaviours harmfully impact the mental health, motivation, and academic progress of emerging and PG researchers.

Singh (2024) notes that these toxic supervision practices are prolonged by neoliberal policy mechanisms, marketisation, and techno-rational approaches within universities, which often prioritize outputs over student well-being. The consequential psychological stress, as reported by all participants, manifests as anxiety, demotivation, and a diminished sense of academic and personal value. According to Karwanto et al. (2025), these warrant the urgent need for fully supportive, caring and progressive supervision models in South African higher education.

The generated themes: specifically lack of guidance, favouritism, and dishonesty, reflect systemic issues that can undermine student well-being and contribute to attrition and mental health crises. Favouritism causes inequity (Ammari & Howe-Walsh, 2025). Power dynamics and autonomy in the case of single supervision, led to abuse and poor supervision quality usually emerges (Hazell et al., 2024). According to AbuSa'aleek and Alharbi (2025), feedback and communication could transpire due to PG supervision inexperience. According to Wardiyanto et al., (2025), this may be mismatch and discrepancy between supervisor and PG student under supervision. Additional outcomes may be diminished self-efficacy and lack of resilience (Shi et al., 2025). A supportive supervisory relationship is critical for PG success. Hence, systemic reforms are necessary (Michaud & Gurney, 2025). When PG support is absent, students could become vulnerable to anxiety, isolation, and diminished academic performance. Institutional mechanisms for addressing supervisory misconduct, clearer codes of conduct, and proactive mental health support are urgently needed. Fullerton et al. (2025) propose an integration for enhancing successful supervision. Some useful components of empowerment for PG success may be multiple supervision where emerging supervisors are paired with experienced ones, improvement of communication and feedback to PG students' submission, reduce autonomy and power from supervisors, and empower PG students for more independence, autonomy, innovativeness, and increased self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

The narratives on the lived experiences of the six postgraduate students in this study emphasize the pervasive and damaging effects of toxic supervision within South African higher education. Their accounts reveal how inexperienced supervisors, lack of constructive feedback, restriction of academic exploration, self-glorification, dishonesty, and favouritism collectively erode trust, diminish self-worth, and generate significant psychological distress. They also highlight the profound impact of toxic supervision on psychological health and academic progress. These findings align with broader research that links negative supervisory practices to increased anxiety, demotivation, reduced self-efficacy, and poor academic outcomes. The persistence of such practices, often exacerbated by institutional cultures that prioritize outputs over student well-being, highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reforms. Without meaningful intervention, the academic and personal development of PG students remains at risk, with potential long-term consequences for research capacity and innovation in the sector. Thus, the system requires both cultural change and structural reforms within academic institutions to ensure that all postgraduate students receive the guidance, respect, and support they need to thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a coordination system for monitoring and evaluation of PG supervision progress, which can also support and intervene when necessary.
- Implement where possible, co-supervision instead of single supervision.
- Develop and enforce clear and robust codes of conduct for supervisors, clearly outlining expectations for ethical and supportive supervision.
- Establish independent, confidential mechanisms for PG students to report supervisory misconduct and seek resolution without fear of reprisal.
- Implement mandatory training programs for supervisors, focusing on mentorship skills, effective communication, feedback delivery, and mental health awareness.

- Encourage multiple-supervisor models, pairing less experienced supervisors with seasoned mentors to improve supervision quality and accountability.
- Promote peer-support networks and communities of practice among postgraduate students to reduce isolation, foster resilience, and provide informal avenues for advice and support.
- Regularly review and update institutional policies to ensure they address power imbalances, promote equity, and prioritize student well-being alongside academic outputs.
- Establish a mechanism of dialogue between supervisors and their PG students that is easily visible to the head of department and PG research coordinator.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term academic, psychological, and career impacts of toxic supervision on postgraduate students across diverse disciplines and institutions.
- Investigate the effectiveness of multiple-supervisor models and other innovative supervision structures in mitigating supervisory misconduct and enhancing student outcomes.
- Explore the intersection of supervisor experience, institutional culture, and postgraduate student demographics to identify risk factors and protective mechanisms for toxic supervision.
- Examine the role of institutional leadership and policy in shaping supervisory practices, with a focus on strategies for fostering more supportive, equitable, and accountable academic environments.
- Evaluate the impact of targeted interventions, such as supervisor training and peer-support initiatives, on the quality of the PG research experience and student well-being.

FUNDING

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks the participating PG students for their courage and candor in sharing their experiences, as well as the stat consultant.

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