NARRATIVES IN POSTGRADUATE STUDIES:
STORIES OF SIX MASTER'S STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SUPERVISION-RELATED CHALLENGES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English, University of the Western Cape

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Abstract

Postgraduate research throughput and problems associated with appropriate supervision are a key focus area for many higher education institutions around the world (Lessing & Schulze, 2012; Amehoe, 2014; Botha, 2016). Central to this challenge is the supervisory relationship, which by its very nature, is not one-sided. A productive and rewarding supervisory process requires that both student and supervisor(s) are committed to fulfilling clearly-articulated responsibilities relevant to the research project at hand (Eley & Jennings, 2005). Both student-centric and institutional factors have been found to contribute to low student throughput and to the time taken to complete postgraduate studies (Amehoe, 2014; Luescher-Mamashela, 2015).

In South Africa, the higher education landscape is increasingly fraught with varied challenges, including issues of attrition and completion rates as they relate to postgraduate students. Some of the implications of the premature termination of postgraduate research are that various academic fields are deprived of potentially valuable research contributions, and there is a significant cost incurred by the affected students and supervisors (Lovitts, 2001; Lessing & Lessing, 2004), as well as the relevant faculties and institutions, and society at large. Additionally, a number of South African universities are still grappling with inequities resulting from the Apartheid era (Pillay & Karlsson, 2013).

It is against this backdrop that this research, through a narrative research[1] lens involving semi-structured interviews, explores and chronicles the stories of six Master's students who have encountered supervision-related challenges. According to Pearson and Kayrooz (2004), a limited narrative research spotlight has been trained on the issue of postgraduate supervision from the student perspective. The primary objective of this study, therefore, is to facilitate a platform through which the six respondents are able to share the stories of their Master's supervision experience. On a secondary level, the sharing of these student stories has the potential to enhance the postgraduate research experience, as Lovitts (2001) and Lessing and Lessing (2004) point out.

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[1] Please note that the term 'narrative research' as used in this study is intended to denote the use of stories, and the participants' voices, rather than a full methodological approach.

Declaration

I declare that "Narratives in postgraduate studies: Stories of six Master's students who have experienced supervision-related challenges at a South African university" is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Name: Grant Alexander Cyster   Date: 2 June 2019

Signature:

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING THE STUDY

1.1 The context for this study

Postgraduate research is an indispensable component of higher education. It contributes significantly to the research profile of a university, consolidates research partnerships, establishes a training ground for aspiring researchers, and expands the boundaries of knowledge (Malfroy & Webb, 2000). While the National Planning Commission (2011) views skilled research supervision, the adequate support of postgraduate students, and capacity development as 'critical' to the process of sustained knowledge generation, which is vital in the current global context on the one hand (Lovitts, 2001; Dinham & Scott, 1999; Armstrong, 2004), Holtman and Mukwada (2014), on the other hand, consider quality postgraduate supervision 'vital' for the achievement of timely completion rates and/or the publication of research. South Africa's National Development Plan ([NDP] 2013) includes a policy imperative that emphasises the need for an escalation in the number of postgraduate students enrolling and succeeding in the country in order to ultimately produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million per year by 2030. Academics and policy-makers have expressed the need for South Africa to transition from a resource-based economy to one that is knowledge-orientated, as envisaged by the NDP.

In terms of this thinking, innovative research is a vital and effective tool for leading the country towards a future that is sustainably prosperous. An advanced research culture in the tertiary education system is therefore required to enable the affected country to participate competitively on the global stage. Since 1996, Master's enrolments in South Africa are said to have doubled, with corresponding PhD figures showing a threefold increase (Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard 2015). These increases have significant implications for supervision, particularly in a context in which only 39% of South African academics currently hold doctorates themselves – a prerequisite for supervision at senior postgraduate levels, such as MA and PhD. If South Africa were to endeavour to meet the aforementioned 2030 target, this would most likely translate into postgraduate supervisors facing increased pressure to graduate greater numbers of students successfully, within the time limits set by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) (McKenna et al., 2017).

Based on a statistics report released in 2017 by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa, 2015), average South African graduation rates in 2015 ranged between 13% and 43% across universities and levels of postgraduate study. The report indicates that the highest rate of Master's students graduating in

2015 from a South African university was 28%. This indicates a need for research that unpacks these low graduation rates, especially linked to the issue of increased pressure on supervision capacity in the system.

1.2 The wider context

1.2.1 The South African educational context

This section seeks to illuminate the conditions in South Africa, both pre- and post-apartheid, that have impacted the academic and personal journeys of the students who have participated in this study. The discourse of 'efficiency' examined in this portion of the thesis – the discourse that underpins the knowledge economy drive – especially around skills and knowledge, is often at odds with the 'equity' discourse that encompasses calls for more just education that acknowledges and accounts for diversity (Boughey, 2002). I feel it worth noting at this stage that my study does not argue for the knowledge economy, but is rather framed within an equity and social justice perspective. This will become clearer as the thesis progresses.

Education in South Africa, when compared with most other countries around the world, gets a significant portion of the public pie – approximately 20% of the entire state expenditure (Moloi, Mkwanazi & Bojabotseha, 2014). It is the recipient of the largest share of state spending. Despite this, greater allocations of money are always needed to tackle the huge education disparities and backlogs caused by four decades of apartheid education. This system saw white South African children receive well-resourced schooling at virtually no cost, while their black counterparts received 'Bantu education', marked by relative lack. This disparity was a cornerstone of the overarching apartheid structure. In 1982, the apartheid government invested an average of R146 in a black child's education, as opposed to an average of R1,211 in that of a white child (De Waal, 2013). While today's government is working to reverse these imbalances, the apartheid legacy lingers on. Illiteracy numbers stand at about 18% of individuals over 15 years old – approximately 9 million people are not functionally literate – and educators in township schools are insufficiently prepared and trained (Moloi et al., 2014).

Indeed, the crisis of schooling in South Africa is not limited to learners. It also extends to teachers and teaching, as demonstrated by test performances from the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) III, where teachers were examined in language and mathematics. While South African teachers fared relatively well on questions necessitating the simple retrieval of information clearly stated in the text (with an average result of

75.1%), scores decreased drastically when higher cognitive functions of inference (55.2%), interpretation (36.6%), and evaluation (39.7%) became necessary (Vally, 2015). This limited grasp of cognitive functions on the part of educators is inevitably passed on to students, and if left unaddressed undoubtedly hinders these students' ability either to qualify for higher education access entirely, or to thrive in that environment should they manage to access it.

1.2.2 Higher education in South Africa - The historical context

Robus and Macleod (2006) offer a comprehensive history of institutional racism in South African universities from as far back as 1829, with the creation of two institutions for white students, namely, South African College in Cape Town, known today as the University of Cape Town (UCT), and Victoria College (Stellenbosch University). Subsequently, the South African Native College was created for black students, becoming known as the University of Fort Hare. Even though there were eight universities in the country by 1951, only three offered limited access to black students, and there remained only one university for black students – the University of Fort Hare. The passing of the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959 led to the establishment of separate universities for the country's different racial groups, and in the process prohibited liberal open universities from welcoming black students. Following an amendment of this Act in 1960, a limited number of black students could apply for a state permit allowing them to attend white universities (Nicholas, 1994). Subsequently established historically black universities were typically viewed as inferior 'bush' or 'rural' universities, and their graduates as insufficiently trained compared to students from historically white universities (Mamphiswana & Noyoo, 2000).

Following the fall of the apartheid regime and South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, the newly elected government found itself grappling with the impact of generations of institutionalised racism in all spheres of society, including education. Pertaining to South African higher education, Education White Paper 3 of 1997 proposed far-reaching transformation (DoE, 1997), and the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 2001) made suggestions regarding the government's choices relating to higher education change. These policies universally argued that substantive equality was not achievable in the absence of the intentional and decisive political will to favour the victims of disadvantage. Political intentions of equal recognition could not be ignorant of the impact of colonialism and apartheid. Nor could they dismiss the fact that the dawn of democracy in South Africa was not in itself a sufficient context for the eradication of historic and structural injustices in all spheres of social life (Badat & Sayed, 2014).

In light of decades of apartheid injustice suffered by the majority of South Africans citizens, the 1994 democratic elections not only ushered in a new constitution, but also a newly imagined vision for educational transformation in the country – a vision that reflected the values embedded in the highly regarded South African Constitution. Included in the aims of the Higher Education Act (1997) is the restructuring and transformation of programmes and institutions to respond more effectively to the human resource, economic and development needs of the South African people; the provision of optimal opportunities for learning and the production of knowledge; and the redress of past discrimination and the facilitation of equal access to educational resources and opportunities (Seabi, Seedat, Khoza-Shangase & Sullivan, 2014).

However, the policy issue of differentiation has been, and continues to be, a difficult, contentious, and challenging one (Badat, 2010). Despite the growing diversity in the composition of student bodies at higher education institutions, black students remain significantly under-represented, although representing the overwhelming majority of the country's population, according to Seabi et al. (2014). This reality applies to both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study, with postgraduate levels reflecting the disparity more glaringly. This is a reality which directly influences the transformation (or lack thereof) of staff within these institutions of higher learning – postgraduate qualifications are typically a requirement for appointment into academic positions (Seabi et al., 2014). Therefore, what this reality means is that as of the writing of this chapter, there continues to be a relative lack of black students (especially female) who are successfully accessing and navigating the South African higher education landscape, and its postgraduate landscape in particular – students who are then eligible to contribute towards positively transforming the country's education sector from the inside as skilled academics and supervisors themselves. Although the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has recently adopted proactive measures to promote the grooming of black and female academics – among the objectives of its Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF, 2015) – the process of change remains slow, and the sheer volume of change required remains substantial, if not daunting. The aforementioned South African higher education historical context has exerted a disruptive influence on the country's education sector, with lingering repercussions that continue to impact the majority of South African students' academic prospects to this day, as explored in the next sub-section.

1.3 Research significance

Kraak and Koen (2005) highlight the contributing factors for non-completion of Master's study to include institutional issues such as inadequate supervision and a shortage of adequately qualified supervisors. To address the problem, Ganqa (2012) advises that in instances where postgraduate students have a clearly-defined topic of interest, careful and honest consideration is exercised around whether or not the supervisors allocated to those students are the most suitably experienced to supervise in that specific research area. Possibly the most crucial and desired outcome of postgraduate supervision involves the transformation of inexperienced postgraduate students into skilled researchers (Lessing & Lessing, 2004). One worthwhile means of examining the process by which this can be achieved, according to Ganqa (2012), is through focusing on Master's students' research supervision experiences – MEd students being the focal point of Ganqa's study. One point of relevance for Ganqa's focus at Master's level could be Wisker's (2012) finding which indicates that of all research-inclined study levels, strong supervision is most vital for the successful completion of the Master's programme in particular. In line with Ganqa's (2012) recommendation, this study sees potential value in examining first-time research Master's students' experiences of postgraduate supervision across various disciplines and faculties.

Registering his concern over the South African postgraduate student attrition and throughput rates, Mouton (2010) pinpoints the lack of Master's' throughput, in particular, as a problem that stunts the development of potential researchers and PhDs, and views this as adversely affecting national economic development in the long run. This poses a serious problem, because for students to gain access to doctoral studies, they first need to push past this Master's degree 'bottleneck', also evidenced in the abovementioned 2015 statistics report. This bottleneck at the Master's level of study poses a significant threat to South Africa's goals related to growing its number of PhD graduates and consequently enhancing its knowledge economy. In recent years, postgraduate research supervision has been recognised as one of the key components in the successful completion of postgraduate degrees (Petersen, 2007; Halse & Malfoy, 2010). However, Subramanian et al. (2012) have noted that relatively little research has been conducted in the area of Master's and Doctoral research supervision in any field. Furthermore, qualitative research into postgraduate supervision has mainly examined supervision at Doctoral level (e.g. Lee, 2008) and has rarely focused on uncovering experiences from the perspective of students. Limited research has been undertaken on the improvement of supervision using student perceptions and feedback.

Given the aforementioned bottleneck stunting student throughput at the Master's rung of the academic ladder, and both the relatively limited qualitative research undertaken into postgraduate supervision at Master's level, along with the limited research focused on enhancing postgraduate

supervision through student feedback, this study has chosen to focus on student feedback specifically at the Master's rung of postgraduate study. Additionally, it has employed the qualitative method of narrative research to explore student narratives in the context of challenges students have experienced in the postgraduate supervision relationship. The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute new knowledge related to this relative gap in the literature, within the limitations in scope associated with research at Master's level.

1.4 Research questions

Given the two-sidedness of the supervisory relationship it would be ill-advised to lay all supervision-related challenges solely on either side of the said relationship. Rather, there is ample evidence to suggest a strong necessity to adopt measures that enhance the student-supervisor relationship. With the poor throughput rates, as suggested by the statistical evidence provided above, in mind, this study seeks to shed light on the experiences and perceptions of six South African postgraduate students within the context of their supervisory relationship, training the research spotlight on student narratives at Master's level.

This study seeks to explore the stories of six Master's students – relatively typical Master's students – to understand what supervision-related challenges they have faced or are facing, and what underlying issues have affected or are affecting their ability to succeed. To this end, the research questions posed are thus:
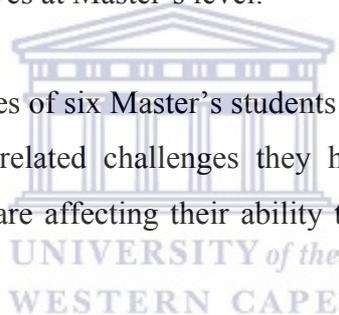
- What sort of supervision-related challenges have Master's students experienced and what impact have these challenges had on these students?
- How have Master's students perceived and navigated these challenges in research supervision?
- What dynamics are evident in the supervisory-relationship that influence attitudes, choices and actions?
- What can we learn from both student successes and struggles that can inform changes in the field of supervision that will benefit other students and supervisors?

1.5 The structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 discusses the literature relevant to higher education and postgraduate education in South Africa, examining the relevant historical context and its lingering impact, along with an exploration of the current state of postgraduate education in the country. The issues of socio-economic implications, challenges in postgraduate education and postgraduate supervision development and related challenges will be included in this discussion.

Chapter 3 proposes and discusses a social theory relevant to this study that can help us understand the ways in which both supervisors and students formulate assumptions, expectations and roles in the context of the postgraduate supervisory relationship. This social theory is drawn from the work of French researcher, Pierre Bourdieu, and revolves around his research into and development of the concept of 'field theory' in the sociological context.

Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology adopted in this study, including its aims and objectives, in addition to a description of my data collection method and an explanation of the process by which the data was analysed.

Following on from this, Chapter 5 proceeds with the presentation and analysis of the relevant data. Insight will be sought on the research questions outlined in section 1.4.

Finally, chapter 6 presents the study's findings and recommendations – based on the analysis of the relevant data – including associated implications and key learning takeaways.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study explores problems encountered in postgraduate supervision as articulated through the narratives of postgraduate students who have shared their perceptions, choices, and emotions relevant to their supervision-related experiences. These students are to some degree or another, products of a national, regional, and local education system that continues to grapple with the effects of apartheid policies and structures. This section builds on Chapter 1, but focuses in on postgraduate study, which is the focus of this study.

2.2 The current South African higher education landscape

Around the world, quality higher education is crucial for providing the foundation necessary for the knowledge economy of any country (Cloete, Maassen & Moja, 2013). Academics in developed and developing countries alike emphasise how institutions of higher education are in need of suitably skilled and qualified staff who are highly competent, technologically savvy, and equipped with applied knowledge and the ability to add to and enrich the knowledge economy (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). According to Gbadamosi and de Jager (2009: p.879), "[h]igher education institutions in South Africa have experienced dramatic changes in their structuring, funding and student numbers. As a result of government's policy to transform higher education in South Africa and the challenges brought about by globalisation and internationalisation, tertiary institutions are facing new challenges". For South Africa to achieve greater productivity and competitiveness on the global stage, its higher education institutions need not only to provide the economy with appropriate scarce and vital expertise, but also to contribute towards research and the creation of new technology, and in innovative ways (DoE, 2007).

Numerous countries, developed and developing alike, recognise the benefit of making an investment towards realising the potential of their citizens. Making it possible for graduates to earn postgraduate qualifications within educational structures that constructively facilitate the realisation of their academic potential represents a means to creating a more holistic approach to developing a generation of both skilled and innovative thinkers/researchers, and, consequently, the generation of meaningful new knowledge. Innovative research can play a significant role in addressing a country's socio-economic challenges – tackling food and water scarcity, the identification and implementation of renewable energy sources, and enhanced disease prevention and treatment are but a few examples of areas that skilled researchers can potentially make valuable contributions in.

2.3 Socio-economic issues

Increasing access to, and diversity in, higher education to achieve the aim of generating a wider and more critical body of knowledge is important for the academy. However, not all of the students admitted to university find the transition into higher education smooth. Boughey (2013) explains that entering the higher education landscape is neither a natural progression, nor one that is acquired with ease. This is particularly true of students entering the field of higher education from socio-economic and educational backgrounds and environments steeped in lack, poverty, and associated dysfunctions of various kinds (Letseka and Maile, 2008). It is a transition that sees new students requiring significant support from relevant academic staff, as well as consideration of student support, and development, and what might be needed in those spaces and relationships.

Lecturers, and supervisors, have a key role to play in communicating to students what kinds of knowledge, and which ways of knowing (writing, speaking, and so on) are regarded as legitimate, or recognised. As a 'recontextualising agent' who designs a curriculum and its 'pedagogic discourse', a lecturer in the university context not only selects content to focus on from her area of expertise, but also decides the particular 'gaze' that learners must adopt (Bernstein, 2000). In other words, the lecturer influences the choice of analytical or theoretical lens the student tends to favour adopting, as well as the student's capacity for critical thinking, through, and by which, perspectives and thinking on pertinent issues are formulated and developed. Additionally, the lecturer envisages an 'imaginary ideal student' for whom the curriculum is crafted and intended (Bernstein, 2000). In essence, this means that lecturers and supervisors have an idea of who the 'right' kind of student is in terms of what they know, how they write and speak, how they think and engage with debates and ideas, and so on.

Often, this ideal student is a speaker and writer of English as a first language and is not carrying the baggage of a poorly resourced educational and linguistic background. The 'real' students, however, have varied competence speaking and writing in English, and many have been significantly shaped by poorly literate home and school environments. Furthermore, many, if not the vast majority of academics who measure students against this unrealistic ideal, do so unconsciously and entirely unaware of the harmful and unjust impact of doing so, In a post-colonial university which represents a relatively elite space, it is probable that, as opposed to an 'under-prepared' subject of political society, the ideal student would be envisaged by a lecturer as a 'well-prepared' citizen of civil society – someone who already possesses the required cultural and linguistic capital/resources to acquire a certain 'gaze' (Luckett, 2016). Thus, lecturers and supervisors may – unconsciously – bias their teaching and supervision practices in favour of students who already have knowledge,

learning habits, writing ability and so on, and can use the under- or post-graduate environment to keep learning. This would quite clearly perpetuate the exclusion of students who do not enter university well-prepared.

It is thus vital that notions of 'preparedness' be carefully interrogated, with the actual student population in mind, rather than the ideal student population. This is a key aspect of working from a decolonial, socially-just perspective (Luckett, 2016). This kind of engagement, commitment, and knowledge production is relevant to the field of postgraduate education in particular, including the supervisory relationship explored in this study. Given the characteristics of human nature, the supervision space can never be entirely free of assumptions regarding the existing preparedness and cultural, social and/or economic resources of the student. However, intentionally cultivating a supervision space that aims to be mindful of and challenge such assumptions, and one that is focused on facilitating constructive and respectful collaboration and learning, can only benefit all relevant parties.

Boni and Walker (2013) note how universities might promote equalities, and how they can aide in bringing about a sustainable and democratic society. Making the case that human development takes into consideration a range of conceptions regarding wellbeing and its promotion, they suggest a view of a university that strives towards public, social, and universally beneficial values and ideals, derived from the principles of human development as opposed to a simplistic and limited view of higher education that is solely concerned with maximising economic benefits. Boni and Walker (2013) propose equity, wellbeing, engagement, and sustainability as foundational principles that ought to inform universities grappling with issues around equitable access. While it would be an admirable endeavour for any university to aspire to embrace these values, it is clear that in terms of the practical, day-to-day reality, both students and academics will require a great deal of understanding, empathy, and support – individual, departmental, and institutional – in order to cultivate learning environments (and indeed supervision spaces) that seek to acknowledge and overcome a myriad of educational, economic, social and cultural differences and disparities that impact upon both learners and educators alike.

From a social justice perspective in the South African context, arguably the most critical challenge related to realising concrete advancements is making sufficient state funding available for equity. In the absence of this investment, both social justice and development in, and through, education risk being chronically and significantly compromised by financial constraints. It is more and more evident that current levels of public funding of basic and higher education are inadequate when

measured against the legacy of past injustices and current and emerging needs. As Badat and Sayed (2014: p.141) argue

> [a]t least two areas warrant attention. First, there is a need to increase the block funding allocations to schools and universities; in the case of schools, doing so requires a substantial increase in provincial budgets with a ring-fencing of the educational component. Second, equity interventions work best when they are adequately financed, well targeted, and robustly monitored and evaluated.

In Hart's (2012) estimation, promoting the capacity to dream and aspire in a supportive environment is a focus necessary for helping students to reach their educational goals. Support and encouragement of this nature cultivates potential that reduces their vulnerability (Dubois & Rousseau, 2008). It follows, therefore, that a lack of such support and opportunities leads to the youth, as agents, possessing diminishing levels of power and freedom with which to make informed choices and take the tangible steps required to manifest the positive change they value and desire in their lives (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). It is this phenomenon of diminishing levels of power and freedom that often plays itself out in the South African postgraduate education context – a context explored in the following section – in which many students fail to realise their potential as independent and competent researchers and academics.
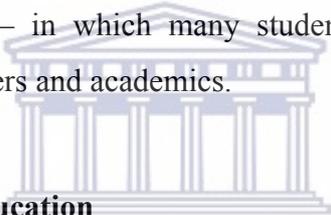
2.4 South African postgraduate education

Postgraduate education, the supervision spaces within it, and the ultimate development and training of the next generation of innovative researchers and knowledge creators, depends significantly on a strong complement of experienced and skilled academics and supervisors. This kind of academic skill and experience is of great value, given the complexities of postgraduate research and the often under-prepared and under-resourced students attempting to navigate it, particularly in the South African context. Breier and Herman (2017) argue that South African universities require more academics with doctoral qualifications, especially those from the historically disadvantaged demographic. Institutions of higher learning, however, face a conundrum. In order for them to benefit from having more staff with PhDs, a greater pool of PhD graduates needs to be produced in South Africa from which these institutions can source the staffing skills they require. However, in order to achieve the production of a greater pool of PhD graduates, universities need more staff with PhD qualifications who are able to provide necessary supervision expertise.

On the global stage, the stature of developing nations, such as South Africa, is commonly measured in terms of their capacity to contribute to the knowledge economy, thereby largely drawing

attention to the quality and provision of doctoral education (Cloete & Mouton, 2015). Based on the National Development Plan ([NDP], 2013), the policy imperative in South Africa emphasises the need for further growth in the number of post-graduate students in order to ultimately produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million per year by 2030. Academics and policy-makers recognise the necessity for South Africa to progress from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, as envisaged by the NDP (2013: p.59). That understanding has resulted in a shift in emphasis in higher education from producing bachelor's degrees en masse to an increase in the production of graduates with post-graduate qualifications (Thaver, Holtman & Julie, 2013). However, grasping the necessity and bringing it to fruition are two different matters.

According to a statistics report released in 2017 by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa, 2015), the average graduation rates in 2015 ranged between 13% and 43% across universities and levels of postgraduate study. The highest average national graduation rate was for degrees below Master's level (43%), and the lowest national graduation rate in 2015 was for Doctoral degrees (13%). Therefore, at best, far less than half of all university students graduated in 2015, and at worst, approximately 1 in 10 students completed their degrees that year. The same report (2015) indicates that the highest rate of Master's graduation in 2015 from a South African university was 28%, matched by the highest rate attained at PhD level for the most successful university in the same year, also at 28%. In highlighting the causes for the low number of black professors in South Africa, Jonathan Jansen is said to have identified one cause as being the small percentage of South African PhDs emerging through the long pipeline from first degrees - in part a reflection of the low outputs in numbers and quality from a still largely dysfunctional school system (Matebeni, 2014). Jansen also points to the lack of an effective strategy for identifying, funding and nurturing young black academics from the stage of the stage of their first degree. These factors contribute towards and exacerbate the Master's degree bottleneck referenced in section 1.2 of this thesis.

2.4.1 Challenges in postgraduate education

One phenomenon hindering the ability of higher education institutions to graduate a desired number of postgraduate students is called the Pile-Up Effect (Nienabar, 2011; Council on Higher Education, 2009). It refers to the process whereby "students remain enrolled for their degree for much longer than expected (or desirable)" (Council on Higher Education, 2009: p.xvi). This increases the burden on universities as they battle to provide adequate resources, particularly as these relate to supervisors and support staff. "The number of postgraduate students has more than doubled over the

past few years, whilst the number of permanent academics has only increased by 40%" (Council on Higher Education, 2009: p.xix). A large number of the studies investigating factors influencing research completion have considered the technical and intellectual issues related to postgraduate research. These include students' level of academic preparedness as it relates to academic writing ability, their knowledge about how to conduct effective research independently (Gascho-Rempel, 2010; Govender, 2011), and the expertise of the supervisor(s) (Lessing, 2011; Peluso, Carleton & Asmundson, 2011). While these are all key factors to bear in mind, the independent research requirement is a hugely intricate process, and as a result of its challenging and personal nature, the human component becomes just as important to research as the academic element (Lin, 2011; Subanthore, 2011). Students and supervisors are not individuals existing in a vacuum as purely 'supervisor' and 'student'. In fact, they are real, complex people, each having their own gender, race, socioeconomic background and status, personal traits, beliefs, expectations, and aspirations (Subanthore, 2011).

Therapeutic competencies and emotional support are continually reported as components of the supervisory relationship which factor significantly in enhancing the experience of the academic journey for the student (Flynn, Sanchez & Harper, 2011; Lee, 2008). Ishmail, Abiddin and Hassan (2011) argue that the research component of postgraduate research in particular is a major problem area, given that the supervisor represents the primary point of contact throughout the research process. Thus, a solid knowledge of relevant research and skills on the part of the supervisor(s) is necessary to empower students to develop research competencies (Deucher, 2008; Brown & Wisker, 2012). Tsong and Goodyear (2014) ponder whether it is impossible to be an effective and competent supervisor if one does not possess the ability to navigate issues of diversity in the supervisory relationship, and of the student's method of conducting research in the postgraduate education context. Knowledge of relevant research and skills are required to assist students in developing research competencies (Deucher, 2008; Brown & Wisker, 2012).

It is clear from the research that postgraduate supervision is a complex task requiring a variety of skills on the part of the supervisor – skills that encompass the provision of academic and emotional and/or personal support in varying degrees. In the same breath, it is important to note that the measure by which the supervisor is able to internalise and employ these skills to the benefit of the student represents but one of a number of factors that impact upon the student's capacity to successfully complete the relevant programme of study and emerge as a competent researcher capable of meaningfully expanding the existing body of knowledge.

2.4.2 Postgraduate supervision development

In recent years, postgraduate research supervision has been the subject of significant attention and has been acknowledged as a key component in the successful completion of postgraduate degrees (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Armitage, 2006; Petersen, 2007; Halse & Malfoy, 2010). Bailey's (2002) observation of the supervisory relationship as one which plays a crucial role in the successful completion of the degree, in practical terms, means that the relationship in question can make or break the student's research experience, with the potential ripple effect thereof being felt on a personal, institutional and societal level. Associated with the increased focus in South Africa on increasing the number of graduates with postgraduate qualifications is the high demand for skilled supervisors (Thaver et al., 2013). The best resourced universities make greater advancements at implementing programmes that develop new supervisors while historically disadvantaged institutions struggle to make the same progress. This entrenches the disparity that was created and left by the legacy of apartheid (Pillay & Kalsson, 2013).

Constructive and effective supervision leads to positive experiences associated with the research process (Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007; Wisker, 2012). A relatively small exploratory study conducted by Lee (2010) reveals that Master's students view supervision as a two-way exchange of learning and ideas. The supervisor takes on a gatekeeping role so that the student has the chance to become a member of a professional community. Therefore, the mentoring and support of the student by the supervisor could result in the personal growth of the student who is empowered to become an independent researcher (Lee, 2010). This relationship can be profoundly affected, as indicated earlier, by supervisors' 'ideal' in terms of who they want to supervise or assume they are supervising. Research conducted by Macleod et al. (2018) finds that who supervisors understand their postgraduate students to be is of significant importance due to the fact that they will act towards their students in ways that are shaped by who they perceive or believe these students to be:

> What our research suggests is that, at least in some programmes, students will be receiving conflicting messages about who they are and who they are expected to be. In some cases, postgraduate students appear to be provided with levels of support similar to that offered to [undergraduate] students. This raises the possibility of a vicious cycle in which staff see students as lacking the capacity to work independently at Master's level, providing support to bring students up to standard, students then viewing that level of support as normal, in turn inhibiting their development as independent learners. (Macleod et al., 2018: p.13)

These researchers articulate the dilemma of supervisors wanting postgraduate students to view themselves as independent and competent learners who are critically engaged academic partners, but the supervisors feel unable to treat them in this manner. This ties in to the point referenced

earlier about the 'imaginary ideal student' who may exist in the mind of the supervisor, for whom the academic experience is crafted and intended (Bernstein, 2000). Thus, supervisors may unconsciously and unintentionally bias supervision practices in favour of students who already have the knowledge, disposition and experience required to make a success of postgraduate research, when in reality, many students – certainly in the South African education context – lack this solid foundation.

Supervision training is therefore critical to the supervision process as it relates to equipping supervisors with the expertise required to empower them to be successful in supervising the students under their guidance (Petersen, 2007). Along the same lines, Pearson and Brew (2002) argue that staying up to date with current supervision training opportunities and resources is a vital aspect of postgraduate supervision. Therefore, academic staff development in the form of formal supervisor training is required to support and update supervisors in responding to the changing needs of students, and to the broader faculty and government context.

Research undertaken in New Zealand by McCallin and Nayar (2012) reveals that the country has considered the broader research context and the way in which it has evolved in recent years, with the conclusion that academics need an understanding of how institutional and government forces and processes impact postgraduate research supervision. For instance, the pressure to publish during the thesis writing process has been determined to be stress-inducing, in addition to socio-political responsibilities to the broader community. Shifts in funding arrangements have exerted and continue to exert a significant impact on the nature of university work, on the perceived value/importance of certain research topics over others, on the models of supervision, and on student management and how supervisors steward their supervisory responsibilities (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Therefore, it is of paramount importance that research supervisors get adequate training which addresses the changes to policy and processes, wider university sector requirements, supervision pedagogy and alternative models of supervision, all of which impact and contribute to the quality of research supervision (McCallin & Nayar, 2012).

In the context of this study, a lack of adequately comprehensive and far reaching supervisor training in South Africa, among other factors, can result in a number of problematic issues which potentially contribute to strain and conflict placed on and experienced in the supervisory relationship. If these adverse effects remain unaddressed they risk creating an ever-widening chasm between student and supervisor which may ultimately lead to the irrevocable breakdown of the supervisory relationship. Halse (2011), highlighting the importance of supervisor training and development before the act of

supervision commences, suggests that training in the process of becoming a supervisor be formally provided as supervisor professional development. It is a concept which is slowly gaining traction in the South African higher education context. For instance, the Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision programme funded by the Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education and the DHET, is a formal development initiative in supervision pedagogy which aims to address supervisor learning before the role and responsibilities of full-blown supervision are undertaken (McKenna, Clarence-Fincham, Boughey, Wels & van der Heavel, 2017). A core objective of this programme is to enhance the calibre of postgraduate supervision via a process of self-reflection adopted by the supervisor.

2.4.3 Supervisor feedback

During supervision, supervisors engage in teaching strategies and providing challenging feedback to students (Manathunga, 2009), and the quality of feedback offered by the supervisor has been tied to the overall success of the postgraduate research student, in addition to timely thesis completion (East, Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2012; Mazlina, Balsam & Noraziah, 2014). It is thus important for students to receive regular feedback in constructive and positive forms (Hathorn, Machtmes & Tillman, 2009). Research by Wang and Li (2009) reveals that the manner in which postgraduate feedback is given may potentially prompt or create a different relationship between the student and supervisor. Yet, supervisor and supervisee may potentially have differing definitions of what constitutes effective and efficient feedback. East, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2012) suggest that in order for supervisor's feedback to be of benefit to students, it is important to have previously documented their views concerning what they regard as effective feedback. Wadensango and Machingambi (2011) note that too much critical feedback with little or no focus on positive and encouraging input can lead to great challenges during the thesis writing process. Along similar lines, Brown and Wisker (2012) argue that a student's good work ought to be acknowledged, and that feedback should involve constructive criticism that provides meaningful direction to the student. It is worth noting that an understanding and/or definition of what constitutes effective supervisory feedback, as well as the role of the student and supervisor(s) in constructively facilitating it, may be at risk of being over-simplified. Given the power imbalance inherent in the supervisory relationship and the varying levels and types of agency and resources that both parties bring to the table, arriving at an accurate understanding and definition of supervisory feedback is a more complex and nuanced matter. These issues are articulated in greater depth in the Theoretical Framework section of this study (see Chapter 3).

The impact of feedback on relationships can be complex, both from the point of view of the motivation, intention and veracity of the feedback, as well as the perspective(s) and perception(s) through which feedback is received and interpreted. The supervisory collaboration is no exception, especially given the already complex nature of this relationship. Opportunities for misinterpretation, and clashes in expectations and opinions, abound. For this reason, among others, the supervision space would benefit from clearly defined institutional and departmental structures and guidelines that provide a context within which these dynamics can be more constructively navigated. Structures of this nature can go a long way towards providing the support required to bring the supervisory relationship to a successful conclusion, enhancing student completion rates, and more importantly, producing skilled new researchers and critical thinkers. Additionally, these structures and guidelines can provide support of this nature whilst being mindful of the kinds of relevant contextual affordances and constraints discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, as opposed to attempting to create a 'one size fits all' approach to these nuanced issues.

2.5 Factors influencing thesis completion

The thesis writing undertaking – the academic discipline which this study examines in the context of the supervisory relationship – is so complex that it makes it challenging to pinpoint specific factors which can aide or hinder the process. However, several possibilities have been suggested throughout the research literature, with certain factors being mentioned more frequently than others. One of the issues most often encountered in the literature is perceived isolation (Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007). This represents quite a stark contrast to undergraduate and postgraduate classroom dynamics involving students who are surrounded by peers from whom they can derive social and academic assistance. Therefore, when entering into postgraduate research, some learners may struggle to adapt to the new one-on-one working and learning dynamic (Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007). Furthermore, additional factors affecting student success include challenges related to religion and spirituality (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), culture (Nilsson, 2007), gender (Petersen & Gravett, 2000), and sexual orientation (Long, 1997).

Other factors that are of particular relevance in the South African context include issues of race and ethnicity, and associated factors like student socio-economic disadvantage, which can also not be ignored. The skewed engagement in South African higher education based on race, of students as well as lecturers and other relevant academic staff (Badat, 2010), is linked to an associated skewed graduation and research output, also based on race. Additionally, students may possess varying levels of personal determination and tenacity, or lack thereof, that can directly influence their ability

to overcome obstacles encountered in the course of their studies (Wright, 2003; El-Ghoroury, 2012). Furthermore, insufficient acclimatisation and immersion into the culture of research and the university itself (Hovdhaugen, Frølich & Aamodt, 2013; Lee, 2008) possesses the potential to significantly influence completion rates in a tangible and direct way.

While on the issue of factors affecting students' completion of their studies, it is worth drawing attention to another contributing factor that has emerged from published research which has to do with students and supervisors holding inaccurate or unrealistic expectations of each other (Kiley, 2011; Lessing, 2011; Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007). Wisker, Robbinson and Shacham (2007) determined that problems potentially arise when the student's expectations regarding the supervisory relationship and the general academic experience, and those of the supervisor(s), are at odds. In a similar vein, Kiley (2011) noted that when either supervisor or postgraduate student fails to meet the expectations of the other, that problems and stresses of various kinds can emerge. In the event that either the student or supervisor is unable or unwilling to loosen their grip on these unrealistic expectations and to adapt to the facts of the circumstances at hand, the resultant incongruence can result in a myriad of frustrations and misunderstandings as subsequent weeks, months, and even years potentially go by.

Abiddin, Hassan and Ahmad (2009) state that both on a departmental and individual basis, the supervisor must be diligent about explicitly working with students to establish mutual expectations, responsibilities and benefits for working together. The supervisor should be accessible to the student at appropriate times when the student needs advice on academic (and personal) problems. Agreements should be reached and detailed advice (verbal and written) given on the necessary completion dates of successive stages of the work. It is also important to acknowledge that the provision of constructive postgraduate supervision is an endeavour involving significant emotional and intellectual labour on the part of the relevant academic(s). Carter, Kensington-Miller and Courtney (2017) determined that supervisors require support, and that centrally-provided as opposed to faculty-centric academic development workshops represent an appropriate solution. They observe that the challenges faced by supervisors are identical across the board. Additionally, critical mass in an academic development workshop in which communication is open and safe aides in bringing the core issues to the surface, thereby enabling the provision of necessary and relevant support for academics (Carter, Kensington-Miller & Courtney, 2017).

From the supervisors' perspective, in many instances this is easier said than done for those supervisors who themselves grapple with challenges similar (if not identical) to those experienced

by their students (Halse & Malfoy, 2010; Halse, 2011). Supervision spaces would do well to be cognisant of, and create some kind of room for dealing with, at least some of these issues. Where supervision cannot be expected to do so – supervisors are but one person in a postgraduate student's life – the university must create other support structures that can assist postgraduate students (such as a writing centre, and a postgraduate division that runs workshops and short courses, etc.). Supervisors, similarly, would in turn benefit from support structures dedicated to their own growth and success. Although important to note, the issue of supervisors' struggles as well as the lack of adequate supervision training, they may receive in certain instances, is not the direct focus of this study, which focuses instead on postgraduate students' stories of their supervision experiences. That being said, student stories have the potential to offer commentary on – if not insight into – what would be necessary or at least useful components of supervisor training. Suitably comprehensive supervisor training can greatly diminish the risk of conflict between student and supervisor and lessen the impact of strain on the supervisory relationship.

2.6 The risk of conflict and stress

As with any relationship – whether personal or professional – that requires close collaboration over an extended period of time, the supervisory relationship is prone, even at the best of times, to the possibility of conflict and consequent stress. Conflicts are unavoidable consequences of being in an intimate (if professional) relationship for a lengthy period of time (Lategan, 2008: p.29). They may arise from interpersonal issues, judgement on the approach to work and expectations, ethical standards, moral obligations or technical issues such as disagreements over methods and findings. Included among the documented factors affecting the quality of postgraduate supervision, the inexperience and/or apathy of students have been determined to be a potential cause of strain on the supervisory relationship, over and above inadequate supervision practises or a dysfunctional academic system that does not facilitate a constructive research environment (Mouton, 2010). Wang and Li (2009) point out that postgraduate students experience fears resulting not only from supervisory relationships, but also from within broader cultural and institutional processes. Kloot, Case, and Marshall (2008) reveal how educational development initiatives in South Africa have largely worked within a deficit paradigm that sees students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds as inherently lacking in ability. However, Soudien (2007) cautions against simplistic, sociologically unsubstantiated characterisations of young people in the post-apartheid context. He recommends research which attempts to unearth the ways in which these young people respond to the trials and opportunities they encounter.

2.7 Self-termination

The phenomenon of self-termination - a student choosing to permanently exit the relevant programme of study prior to completion - in postgraduate study is unfortunately not uncommon. While anecdotal evidence exists regarding the reasons some postgraduate students self-terminate and abandon their programme of study, there is insufficient systematic empirical investigation into the factors that contribute towards non-completion (Henfield, Woo & Washington, 2013). The majority of students who self-terminate, leave silently and almost entirely unnoticed. The existence of exit interviews aimed at understanding the reasons behind students' decision to self-terminate can be few and far between (Golde, 2000; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). It would be highly enlightening to gain an understanding into the factors that contribute to a decision of such magnitude, especially given the rigorous selection process most students have to go through to enrol in a postgraduate programme in the first place. The utilisation of maladaptive coping strategies by students when exposed to stress within the academic environment, including habits of avoidance, pessimism, attempts at coping via substance abuse, emotional detachment, and self-blame, all have the potential to sabotage chances of the successful completion of the degree programme (Boyle, 2014; Mahmoud et al., 2012). Additionally, Dickson et al. (2011) note that extreme or excessive self-reliance can lead to problems in the supervisory relationship, because it can devolve into a means of overcompensating for anxiety, making the student unresponsive to feedback.

By contrast, constructively adaptive coping strategies such as optimism, planning and preparation, positive reframing, seeking out appropriate assistance, humour, and spirituality can all facilitate meaningful progress and academic achievement (Boyle, 2014; Kausar, 2010; Mahmoud et al., 2012). It is important to note that the concept of self-termination is potentially misleading, as it conjures the idea that the student's decision to quit the relevant programme of study is entirely voluntary, free of any external pressure or influence. In reality, it is a decision that may also be motivated by factors, as previously articulated, that leave a student feeling – whether justifiably or not – that the termination of the degree programme is the only viable solution left available. It is a decision-making process that student stories in the context of this research have the potential to shed light on.

2.8 Useful focus areas

Subramanian et al. (2012) observe that relatively little research has been conducted in the area of Master's and Doctoral research supervision in any field. Therefore, the challenges linked to research supervision require a greater level of attention and continue to be a focus of further

research. The vast majority of these studies were carried out in developed nations such as the U.S.A. and Australia with long-established academic and research-based traditions (e.g. Vygotsky, 2012; Lee, 2008). Research into postgraduate supervision employing qualitative methods have mainly examined supervision at Doctoral level (e.g. Lee, 2008) and have rarely focused on uncovering experiences from the perspective of students. Limited research has been undertaken on the improvement of supervision through the use of student perceptions and feedback. The sense of intimacy inherent in these 'supervisory' contexts, and students' fear of adverse career consequences are highly impactful in a relationship dynamic commonly defined by differences in status and dependence (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004**).** Rajecki (1982) makes the case that perceptions are an important subject to devote research to due to the fact that they influence what people think and feel about certain issues. He states that perceptions, which extend to attitudes, are vital in that they influence people's convictions concerning how things ought to be done. Yet, despite this, sparse research has been devoted to students' perceptions of thesis supervision, writing, and defence.

This gap in the research landscape makes a focus on students' supervisory experiences and perceptions of great value, especially if one bears Mushoriwa and Nyakutse's (2014) findings in mind. The findings in question highlight how the perceptions people have on various issues not only impact the degree to which they are committed to those issues or related tasks, but also how they ultimately interact with and relate to those they engage with while doing those tasks. Based on this argument, it would appear that devoting research to the subject of student narratives in the context of postgraduate supervision could be a worthwhile pursuit. In particular, further research into Master's level supervision, in developing countries, and focusing on student perspectives, represents an important gap in the literature.

2.9 Conclusion

As discussed earlier in this chapter, promoting a student's capacity to dream and aspire in a supportive environment is necessary for helping students to reach their educational goals. A lack of such support leads to the youth possessing diminishing levels of power and freedom with which to make informed choices and take the tangible steps required to transform their lives for the better. Healthy, constructive postgraduate supervision, being one component of the positively transformative power of (higher) education, represents one of a number of factors that contribute to the effective development of this kind of power and freedom, and of skilled researchers and the generation of valuable new knowledge. Inadequate academic preparation, scarce resources, academic overload, the lack of enculturation into the relevant discipline of study, a disconnect

between student expectations and the academic offering, and the eventual student experience of the programme, all represent potential barriers to the successful completion of the student's research degree (Hovdhaugen, Frølich & Aamodt, 2013; Sommer & Dumont, 2011).

From the standpoint of postgraduate supervision specifically, there are instances in supervision at Master's level when inadequate structures exist (or structures are non-existent altogether) that would serve both to prepare the student and supervisor for their respective role, and to hold both parties accountable to each other and to the relevant institution based on agreed upon levels and forms of engagement. This resultant lack of accountability creates a vacuum in the supervisory relationship within which potential breakdown, dysfunction and strain of various kinds have the opportunity to take hold and grow out of control, to the detriment of all involved. Furthermore, given the relatively limited academic discourse with respect to student narratives on supervision practises, the intention behind this research project is to facilitate an environment and opportunity in and through which the student participants can share their stories and shed light on their experiences and perceptions relating to postgraduate supervision.

There are more factors and processes at work, beyond and beneath what is evident, in trying to understand both successes, but especially failures, missteps and injustices, in supervision at Master's level. What is needed is a social theory that can shed light on the ways in which both supervisors and students construct assumptions, expectations and roles in the postgraduate space. This social theory is proposed and explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I propose and discuss a social theory relevant to this study that can illuminate the ways in which both supervisors and students formulate assumptions, expectations, and roles in the context of the postgraduate supervisory relationship. This social theory is drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, chosen as the theoretical lens relevant to this study because of its usefulness in providing insight into power dynamics inherent in social and institutional structures/relationships. It is regarded as a useful tool, for reasons articulated below, in aiming to make sense of the interactions between student and supervisor in the postgraduate supervisory relationship.

3.2 Field Theory

Field theory, based on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, can be viewed as a theoretical lens that sheds light on the struggle for, or the desired maintenance of, power and influence between people or institutions in a particular context within which specific rules and value systems are operational. In these various contexts (fields), different actors strategise and wrestle over the inequitable distribution of (and definitions around) valued resources and what comprises them. Similar to a magnetic field, the impact of social fields on conduct and choices can be far-reaching and not necessarily perceptible to the actors involved. Whether for an individual or an organisation, choices are always made in the context of a broader system that exercises influence over the entity making the choice, and which imposes consequences associated with each choice, whether for good or bad. The efforts of actors in any given context to either improve or maintain their position, and the conflict, tension or interaction that results from these efforts, is a key focus of field theory. Field theory has the potential to help researchers make sense of the choices, behaviours, attitudes and perceptions that actors in a field exhibit. As it relates to this study, the field in question is that of postgraduate supervision, specifically at the Master's level of study.

In this section I review three key concepts – habitus, field, and capital. These related concepts – the core components of field theory – originate from Bourdieu's research; he developed them to examine and explain individual and group interaction within the wider societal context (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989). Bourdieu makes use of field, and the partner concepts of habitus and capital, to comprehend social practice – in particular to unveil the dynamics of power and inequality in certain social spaces (Bathmaker, 2015). Bourdieu's research interest was to comprehend the historical prevalence of power within and between social relations, in addition to understanding how forms of hierarchy contribute towards maintaining inequality (Gopaul, 2015). He used his inter-connected

concepts of habitus, field, and capital to explain individual dispositions and behaviour (habitus), to scrutinise the various resources and power possessed by each person (capital), and to locate both of these concepts within the relevant context (field) within which habitus and capital operate.

What locates individuals (agents) or institutions inside a particular field is the ownership of capital and power that is relevant to the objectives or purposes of that particular field. Consequent positions in the field then manufacture in agents and institutions certain modes of thinking, being, and doing. The relationships that exist between positions in the field are especially significant for Bourdieu in examining the field. However, he also draws specific attention to the importance of the position of a particular field in relation to others. For example, the related positioning of the field of higher education to the field of employment (Bathmaker, 2015), or the positioning of postgraduate supervision as a field within the broader arena of higher education (Prinsloo, 2016).

Researchers have utilised the analytical rigour of field theory to delve into issues of inequality in various areas of study, including fashion, research methods, nutrition and gender issues (Gopaul, 2015). In a similar vein, this study will aim to utilise field theory to illuminate how Master's students consciously or unconsciously leverage the habitus and capital at their disposal to navigate (problematic) relational and power dynamics in their supervisory relationship. It seeks to use student narratives, viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's concepts, to shed light on the ways in which these students strive either to maintain or transform their position within the supervisory structure, and how they are impacted by the habitus and/or capital of their supervisor(s), as well as the dynamics at play within the field of postgraduate supervision.

3.3 Habitus

Habitus is the concept Bourdieu uses to attempt to explain individual and social conduct, and the connection between structure (the rules and limiting or empowering factors operating within the field), and agency (the individual's or institution's capacity to leverage their/its capital effectively within the field). Habitus moulds each individual's behaviours, thoughts, and emotions, but it represents more than a mere acting out of roles. Habitus provides us with a "perceptual lens", predisposes agents to behave in certain ways, and is, "inscribed like a watermark" upon an agent's actions (Bourdieu, 2000: p.143). Bourdieu (1990: p.56) defines "'habitus' as the embodiment of history, 'internalized as a second nature' ... the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product". An agent in a particular field may in some instances be consciously aware, at least partially, of the impact of habitus on their behaviour and perceptions, while in other instances (more

often than not) may be completely oblivious to the impact it has on their conduct and attitudes in the field. Because habitus is only partially consciously formed, agents cannot always be fully conscious of all of its impacts and facets. Agents can make specific choices and at times understand or see to some degree how those choices change them, but often who they are and how they act is influenced by a thousand tiny unconscious attitudes, behaviours and choices. Hodkinson (1998: pp.159-60) observes that

> [d]ecisions made through the dispositions in habitus are partly intuitive, partly discursive, partly rational and, above all, they are pragmatic, making use of information, advice and opportunities that are perceived to be available and relevant at the time. ... They are centred upon the person's standpoint – the social, cultural and geographical position from which they view the world.

Habitus makes reference to a practical mode of learning that is neither conscious nor deliberate. It is learning that is acquired via the "embodiment of the practices, visions and values of the social space in which subjects operate" (Dromundo, 2007: p.8). This point is forgotten at times, which has consequently led to the association of habitus with something innate. However, in reality, "it refers to something whose incorporation was involuntary, through the process of socialization" (Dromundo, 2007: p.8). As it relates to the agency of postgraduate students, for instance, habitus is unique to each individual, the result of a distinct and specific set of socio-economic, cultural, and learning experiences – to name but a few potential influencing factors. This means that postgraduate students exercise agency in traversing the terrain of the higher education field (postgraduate research in the context of this study, specifically) in a range of different ways. Additionally, there are broader forms of socialisation into higher education studies that mean researchers can draw different individual stories of students together, against the backdrop of this broadly accepted set of socialisation practices, into what it means to be a postgraduate (Master's) student, and in so doing understand something about these experiences that transcends the individuals and tells us something about gaps, problems, and challenges within the larger system.

With reference to the point about how students exercise agency in traversing the terrain of postgraduate research in a range of different ways, there may be two Master's students, for instance, enrolled in the same course, who share the same supervisor. One student may be from a middle-class background and the beneficiary of exposure to a historically and currently well-resourced and constructive school environment. The other is perhaps from a township and intimately familiar with the limitations of resources and opportunities associated with a township school setting. The habitus that these two postgraduate students are influenced and driven by will most likely be vastly different, and although they are enrolled in the same postgraduate programme, their propensity to

excel in it will be significantly disproportionate. In this scenario, factors such as race, class, and prior education will have a profound impact on each student's ability to thrive, both academically and socially. These concepts will be explored further in chapter five of this thesis, dealing with the analysis of the relevant interview data.

This manner in which varying habitus impacts the agency of students in differing ways was explored in the United Kingdom by Reay, Ball, and David (2005) who found that working-class students, when compared to students from more affluent backgrounds, contended with greater challenges when transitioning to higher education. Crozier et al. (2008) contend that students from more affluent backgrounds have learned dispositions that more seamlessly engage with the university context and which produce further habitus through social interactions. Working class students also have the potential do so, but on average benefit from fewer such opportunities. This may be because their significant economic challenges create tangible obstacles to accessing resources and opportunities. For example, a student struggling to absorb commuting costs to and from campus, and who relies on erratic public transport, may not be able to benefit from tutoring or learning resources offered after hours or on weekends. Additionally, as another example of how varying habitus results in differing attitudes to an identical issue, Metcalf (1997: p.11) proposes that young people who come from more affluent backgrounds and environments are more inclined to think of participation in higher education in economic terms, as "vital for securing better job prospects". In contrast, those from less affluent backgrounds and environments may see higher education as largely irrelevant to their future career prospects. This may be because for the latter group, access to higher education is a notion that is thought to be so elusive so as to be practically impossible, in light of the lack of resources and opportunities that they grapple with as a normal part of their lives. For young people from affluent backgrounds who desire to tackle tertiary education, amongst all the factors that could result in the non-completion of their degree, financial limitation does not rank as one of them. It seems reasonable (if not commonsensical) to suggest that habitus has a profound impact on both the prospective student's inclination and ability to enter the field of higher education, as well as the existing student's ability to thrive in this context, and ultimately to complete their programme of study, and complete it well.

However, while there exists an array of different accumulations of habitus among any given postgraduate student population, certain socio-economic factors can create trends in habitus or behaviour. Agents with similar habitus and limited capital may group together and battle for control with people who have different habitus and access to greater reservoirs of capital. They may create these groupings strategically, necessarily overlooking crucial differences between them, so as to

achieve a goal. However, these groupings can also arise more organically, as agents recognise in one another something familiar. For example, in a study examining how middle- and working-class student experiences compare across four different types of higher education institutions, Crozier et al. (2008) observed how, whilst the demands of their course are ever present for a group of South Asian students, there seem to be less social and cultural pressures and demands. The students in question live and study with others 'like them', associating almost entirely with other South Asian peers. This seems to suggest (at least the possibility) that habitus is not just an individualised phenomenon, but that it can lead people into different forms of social or communal agency in order to create success, or connection, where they deem themselves unable to achieve this alone.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus' is specifically isolated by Walpole (2003: p.49) as an important key to shedding light on how students navigate their educational experience, defining habitus as "a web of perceptions about opportunities and the possible and appropriate responses in any situation". Issues of class and/or social standing represent one aspect of the multi-faceted nature of habitus that influences students' behaviours and perceptions. When habitus comes across a field that it is unfamiliar with, the consequent disconnection can generate not only change and transformation, but also anxiety, ambivalence, insecurities and uncertainty (Reay, 2005). Working-class habitus at work in an elite higher education setting is a good example of the latter. Sani (2008) makes the case that the mismatch between the relative high-status university and a low-status social background gives rise to a scarcity of opportunities for self-affirmation during the tertiary learning experience, causing tension and unease. Given the prevalence of historical disadvantage in the South African context, it is clear that the mismatch between the kinds of habitus accumulations often found in esteemed and affluent institutions of higher learning, and the habitus of students entering these environments from relatively poverty-stricken backgrounds, is not uncommon. It is likely accurate to say that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will find the transition to higher education challenging, regardless of the institution.

However, the mismatch is also most likely more prevalent and more severe at historically advantaged universities attended by a majority of white students raised in a context of economic abundance. Historically disadvantaged students have to grapple with financial, emotional and psychological challenges of various kinds as they attempt to assert their position in a field which they experience as potentially intimidating, and within which they are exposed to expressions of habitus and capital that they are at times deeply unfamiliar with. For instance, research into the experiences of students as it relates to transformation in South Africa, conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand, revealed that while many previously disadvantaged black students have

succeeded in accessing higher education through bursaries and financial assistance, this is often insufficient in comprehensively addressing the needs of students (Seabi et al., 2014). To cite one example, the matter of transportation continues to represent a major challenge to fully engaging with their programme of study. These students do not own their own vehicles or have access to private transport, and are forced to rely on lifts from classmates or to use often erratic and unreliable public transport (Seabi et al., 2014), affecting their ability to be fully present in all valuable aspects of campus life – for example, in all classes and at after-hours tutorials and/or workshops, etc.

Reay, Ball, and David (2005: p.96) observed that working-class students, in contrast to their middle class counter-parts, face not one but (at least) two transitional stages in their move to higher education; the second and pertinent one being from one social class to another. Upon entering the university experience, working class students need to navigate and/or confront middle class worlds – a social environment with which they are or tend to be unfamiliar, and need to identify or develop methods of engaging with or at least coping in. Further to potential tangible obstacles, the aforementioned mismatch between working class habitus and a relatively affluent university context may also result in deficiencies in psychological and/or emotional confidence (part of social capital) that cause these students to disqualify themselves from leveraging available resources to their advantage.

Bourdieu further describes the *habitus* in two ways. In one sense, it emerges out of an accumulation of expertise from working in a specific field. It is simultaneously a 'craft', a set of techniques, references, and a collection of 'beliefs' that are obtained from the history of the discipline and its position relative to the hierarchy of disciplines (Bourdieu, 1993). In another sense, habitus represents more than just 'experience'. It also makes available the basis for developing the strategies that determine the choices and actions of agents in the field. The habitus is thus an inclination, a disposition, to behave and perceive in specific ways. It is a background matrix that moulds what is comprehended to be logical, or to be right and wrong. It also influences and determines views on art, literature, or politics. Finally, the habitus shapes the body and body language by moulding how people manage their health and appearance, in addition to their understanding of gender, race, or sexuality (Leander, 2010).

As a concept that shapes and influences all practices, then, the habitus is central to social hierarchies and power relations. It illuminates the puzzling fact that those on the receiving end of social hierarchies at times conduct themselves in ways that cause them social and even physical harm. Leander (2010) argues that it explains why these individuals become complicit in the "*symbolic*

violence" of processes disadvantaging them. A habitus moulded by the experience of being dominated – not having the symbolic, bodily, economic, and social capital to resist dominance – will lean towards expressing itself in modes of operation that are ineffective at breaking domination and the physical appearance that makes dominance more prominent. In the realm of academic learning, students at times experience situations that challenge and threaten their self-confidence. These challenges often originate from a fear of failing in an upcoming academic pursuit such as a critical examination or assignment.

A commonly encountered strategy for regulating this type of risk to self-esteem is self-handicapping, a concept defined as manufacturing obstacles to performance in order to protect or reinforce one's perceived competence (Schwinger et al., 2014). Academic self-handicapping may take a variety of forms, including procrastinating, effort or enthusiasm withdrawal, and claims around test anxiety or illness. Self-handicapping occurs in two forms – claimed and behavioural. In the academic context, claimed self-handicapping manifests when a student provides, whether honestly or not, excuses for sub-par performance. In this case, the student will claim extenuating conditions that account for poor academic achievement. On the other hand, behavioural self-handicapping involves a student actively manufacturing an obstacle or embracing conduct that is likely to impede performance (Snyder et al., 2014). The self-handicapping phenomenon may account for the perplexing behaviour that lecturers, tutors and supervisors encounter among certain students who, as a result of habitus that is operating counter-productively and against these students' own best interests, seem unable or unwilling to invest the effort required to succeed academically, or to embrace strategies that would facilitate a pathway towards positive achievement. For example, in the context of the supervisory relationship, students going silent and not asking the supervisor for help, not submitting any writing for feedback, or avoiding supervision meetings.

This explanation of habitus contributes to an understanding of why some postgraduate students seem to lack the strategies and/or the disposition to effectively navigate or confront problematic issues in the supervisory relationship – a relationship characterised by, among other things, an imbalance of capital and power.

3.4 Capital

Perhaps the most recognised and widely used of all Bourdieu's concepts is that of *capital*. Capital can be viewed as the resources that individuals possess that give them power within a particular

field (Ronnie, 2008). Individuals are spread out in the overall social space, on one level, based on the total of capital they possess and, on another level, based on the structure of their capital. The latter, in other words, referring to the relative value or prestige associated with the different forms of capital that form part of the entire volume of assets available to individuals (Bourdieu, 1989).

Only pertinent, field-specific capital serves as a resource, and can be utilised to wield power in the context of a particular field. As Mohr (2000: p.6) explains:

> [e]very field is a site within which some type of capital operates and, thus, each field includes a fundamental metric according to which any given individual (or group or profession, or class fraction) can be assessed vis-à-vis others according to their relative possession of field specific capital. It is this which determines their likelihood of having power and success within that sphere.

Bourdieu identifies four types of capital: economic (financial wealth), social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Social capital makes reference to the "network of lasting social relations" (Grenfell & James, 1998: p.21) that agents have created and continue to develop. Social capital is manufactured through social processes and is expressed as social relations and networks (contacts and group memberships, for example). In Bourdieu's view, these relationships and memberships amount to potential and existing resources that individuals can leverage to their advantage (Grenfell & James, 1998).

According to Halpern (2005), it is the struggle for distinction that informs social capital's characteristics. It represents a valuable emotional resource for individuals in their social connections, and thus includes particular norms, values and expectations that are held in common amongst group members, and that are maintained via rewards and punishments. Primary features of social capital, according to Bourdieu, are that it interacts with other forms of capital and is symbolic. It strengthens other types of capital and has the effect of an accelerator (Grenfell, 2009). Symbolic capital includes "culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status and authority" (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes, 1990: p.13). Symbolic capital that takes the form of enviable academic reputation is greatly valued in academic circles (Becher, 1989). Cultural capital is amassed through the journey of education, and is "connected to individuals in their general educated character ... ; connected to objects – books, qualifications... ; and connected to institutions" (Grenfell & James, 1998: p.21). The allocation and accumulation of capital yields powerful implications for the structuring of social worlds. Moore (2008: p.105) makes the suggestion that, "capital can be understood as the energy that drives the development of field through time. Capital in action is the enactment of the principle of field ... the realization in specific forms of power". Articulating it

more specifically, Lareau (2001: p.82) notes that, "[i]t is not possible to understand truly what is given currency, what is highly valued and what is not highly valued unless you understand field. Capital only has meaning in light of field".

Due to the fact that capital is symbolic and draws its power from the attribution of recognition, it determines limits – what is and is not practically possible and thinkable in terms of what is (and is not) recognised and rewarded. Its mode of operation is therefore to differentiate in a random way according to the logic of the field. "Capital belongs to the field and it is the field that sets its value, but it is individuals who possess it. Although open to all, its distribution is by definition unequal – it would not perform its functional logic if it were not" (Grenfell, 2009: p.20). Consequently, the social world reveals itself as a universe of possibilities which are unequally accessible to the agents within it – jobs to be occupied, paths to be taken, markets to be conquered, goods to be enjoyed, properties to be benefited from. It exists as a signposted universe, littered with restrictive warnings and prohibitions, signs of provision and exclusion, and obligatory courses of action or impassable barriers (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of this study, if students possess the right mark, and the money, they are generally granted access into a Master's programme. However, they often then face a surprising, challenging reality once they enter the field of postgraduate supervision, arriving with different sets of symbolic capital and varying potential for agentic choices influenced by their habitus. What most likely happens, all things being equal, is that the Master's programme, designed for the 'right' students referenced in Chapter 2, tends to yield a rewarding and satisfying experience for those students, yet proves to be less enabling for other students lacking the 'right' kinds of capital and habitus. Bourdieu's field theory offers the researcher a means of illuminating and examining the complex and nuanced dynamics that spell success for some students, and disenfranchisement for others. There is one additional important identifying feature of capitals: they are interchangeable. One type of capital can be transformed into another. Perhaps the most obvious example of this concept is the manner in which certain educational attributes (cultural) 'purchase' financially rewarding careers (economic) (Grenfell, 2009).

In the context of postgraduate research, students enter this field with varying forms and degrees of capital at their disposal. It is clear that there exists great disparity relating to the volume of economic capital that postgraduate students possess and have access to when entering and navigating the higher education landscape. Similarly, levels and types of social capital vary, dependent on numerous factors including the cohesiveness of the family unit students benefit from, or lack thereof, and their integration into a supportive peer network on and off campus, or lack thereof (see Reay et al., 2005). Other forms of social capital might include constructive

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relationships with mentors, coaches, and of course, supervisors. Given the aforementioned interchangeable nature of capital, it can be understood how varying levels of economic and social capital significantly influence the level of cultural and symbolic capital a student has access to. Factors such as socio-economic class, the perceived or real esteem associated with certain schooling backgrounds over others, and potential limiting or empowering aspects related to race and gender (to name but a few examples), all impact upon the depth of cultural and symbolic capital available to students as they compete in the postgraduate research field (see Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2005).

3.5 Field

A discussion about the concept of field is best prefaced by Bourdieu's views regarding the social world, which he articulates as a field of power. He argues that, "the social world can be represented as a space (with several dimensions)" (Bourdieu, 1985: p.723). Bourdieu contends that the social space, "is a multi-dimensional space, an open set of fields that are relatively autonomous, i.e. more or less strongly and directly subordinated, in their functioning and their transformations, to the field of economic production" (Bourdieu, 1985: p.736). Additionally, "the social space of an individual is connected through time (life trajectories) to a series of fields" (Harker et al., 1990: p.24). In the higher education setting, for instance, a postgraduate student's "space" might be comprised of various intersecting fields of family life, peer networks, friendship circles (on and off campus), the supervisory relationship, romance and/or sexuality, learning and research, etc.

Bourdieu offers to us then a conception of the social world made up of numerous fields with contrasting levels of autonomy in relation to each other. While there are clearly things included and excluded within their boundaries, the reach and dimensions of fields are not clearly delineated because "it is the state of the relations of force between players that defines the structure of the field" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.99). The concept of field is pivotal to Bourdieu's work. "A field is comprised of a set of objective, historical relations between positions rooted in certain forms of power (or capital) …, a relational configuration … which the field imposes on all the objects and agents which enter in it" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.16-17). Additionally, accompanying the existence of certain forms of capital are varying forms of habitus, as previously discussed. This relationality is key to understanding the interplay between field, capital and agents' habitus. Fields may contain smaller subfields. As it relates to this study, the field of education has higher education as one of its subfields, and postgraduate education is in turn a subfield of higher education. Each

field will have its "own way of doing things, rules, assumptions and beliefs" (Grenfell & James, 1998: p.20).

Based on Bourdieu's approach, existing research into higher education commonly tend towards internalism or externalism. The former views higher education as a distinct and separate realm through focusing on constituent components of the field (specific organisations, actors and methodologies, for instance). Externalism, on the other hand, views higher education as a reflection of these broader areas of interest, examining its external relations to the country, economy or dominant social context or structure. In addition, Bourdieu's approach reveals a blind spot in both concepts, in that they both fall short of conceptualising higher education as an object of study itself – a social structure which cannot be reduced to its constituent components, nor to other fields of practice. The concepts of internalism and externalism also fail to acknowledge higher education as a social structure that possesses its own unique characteristics and powers. Both internalism and externalism fail to see higher education as a field (Maton, 2005). The primary benefit of Bourdieu's theoretical framework is that it facilitates higher education being acknowledged as an object of study, and by extension, the sub-fields of postgraduate research and postgraduate supervision within it.

A field, Bourdieu explains further, is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains individuals who dominate, and those who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality are at work inside this space, which simultaneously becomes a space within which the various actors wrestle for either the transformation or preservation of the field. Each agent in this universe brings to the contest all the (relative) capital/power at his/her disposal. It is this capital or power that defines an agent's position in the field and, consequently, their strategies (Bourdieu, 1998). It is worth noting that, while these struggles for position are sometimes overt, the actors are often unaware of what they are struggling for, or even lack an awareness of the existence of the 'game'. A struggle between supervisors and students for how the relationship should be can be understood as a micro-version of a larger contest. This is especially applicable to those students and supervisors who are positioned lower in a hierarchy, both falling under the governance of policies, key performance areas, systems of management, and so on. Both parties are subject to the logics of a larger system that they are unable to change on their own, and which is often not immediately visible as they go about their daily work.

Bourdieu also views the social space as a field of struggles within which agents confront one another based on their position in the structure of the field of forces, thereby contributing towards

either conserving or transforming its structure (Bourdieu, 1998). Using the concept of fields to examine the social world is to recognise that social life is highly differentiated. Every field manufactures its own unique logic which is crucial for understanding that particular component of social life. Field can be highly diverse in scope and scale. A family, a town, a market, a company or institution (such as a firm, the United Nations, or Amnesty International), or a category of expertise (such as architects, diplomats, or accountants) may be conceptualised as a field, as long as it develops its own structuring logic around a stake at stake (Leander, 2010). In the field of postgraduate education/research, an example of a stake at stake might be a sought-after advanced degree that opens up a new range of desirable vocational and economic opportunities. Fields are comprised of manufacturers, consumers, distributors of goods and authorising and regulatory bodies, whose traits, regulations, and conformation differ based on their history and relation to the field of power. Consequently, Dromundo (2007: p.6) argues that the academic field can be understood as an intricate space "composed of producers (researchers and academics), distributors (professors and disseminating bodies), consumers (students, researchers and scholars), legitimating entities and distributors of goods (universities and research institutes)".

In this manner, higher education can be conceptualised as a field, with postgraduate research existing as a sub-field within it. Postgraduate research can in turn contain various smaller sub-fields, of which the supervisory relationship is but one example. Field, for Bourdieu, is an arena of contestation, characterised by struggle or tension (Martin, 2003; Wacquant, 2007). 'Market' and 'game' are commonly used as analogies by Bourdieu and by researchers referencing his work to articulate how fields function. The idea of the 'market' draws attention to the centrality of capital exchanges. Each customer possesses varying degrees of purchasing power and varying forms of capital (social, cultural and economic) available to them. There exists inequality, but simultaneously also a level of mutual dependency (Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2007). The idea of 'game' implies that the field is governed by rules, and that individuals or groups/institutions are contestants in competition for the acquisition or protection of capital. 'Game' also points to the relevance of strategy (how to play the game so as to secure a win) (Dromundo, 2007).

In the South African context, as actors in a country tasked with producing more and skilled knowledge workers with postgraduate degrees, universities are part of a neo-liberal logic that tends to reduce postgraduate study to a means of equipping students with knowledge and skills. However, as has been pointed out in Chapter 2, there is more to postgraduate study than this – there is also a 'being' that students need to develop that can facilitate their transition to becoming independent and capable researchers. It is a 'being' – a sense of knowing and being known – that goes beyond just

knowledge and skills and can only be learned in postgraduate environments that view supervision as pedagogy, supervisors as teachers and mentors, and universities as having a responsibility to provide students and supervisors with supportive and developmental environments in which to grow as researchers and teachers.

Not every agent or player has equal awareness and understanding of the rules of the game. Some possess 'trump cards' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and different volumes and calibre of capital with which to compete. They also possess varying complexities of habitus through which they operationalise their capital, to lesser or greater effect. Therefore, there exists power dynamics and contestation within all fields (Crozier et al., 2008). Some agents – such as postgraduate students from relatively affluent backgrounds, for example – already benefit from quantities of relevant capital afforded to them in the process of habitus formation, making them more effective players than others in certain fields. Conversely, some agents – such as those from a more economically disadvantaged context – compete at a disadvantage (Grenfell & James, 1998).

Bourdieu acknowledges that "capital is field specific and does not necessarily allow advantage to be translated into other fields" (Savage, Warde & Devine, 2005: p.39). Bourdieu's notions of fields and capital shed light on the complexities of the underlying, often hidden factors that influence a student's ability to navigate the university system. They also highlight to what degree, if any, the student has autonomy to determine his/her own fate in the context of the system.
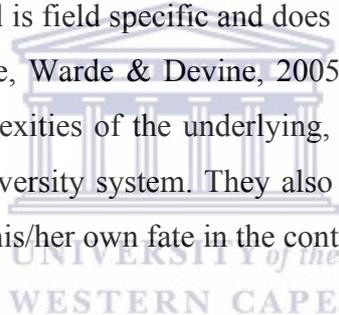
3.6 Conclusion

It should be pointed out that habitus and the level of cultural capital are not a question of fate; they can be acquired, provided that there is interest and effort on the part of the agent, adaptation to the manner of inculcation, and support from someone with interest in educating the individual. The problem with a belated acquisition of habitus is that this will result in slower trajectories and, sometimes, lower levels of competence than those who acquired the habitus from childhood (Dromundo, 2007). While some will seek to preserve the status quo, others will strive to challenge and transform existing hierarchies. However, due recognition must be given to the constraints of the structure in which we are placed and the positions we occupy within that structure as largely determining what we can or cannot do (Bourdieu, 1998).

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter proposed and explored the use of field theory, based on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, as a theoretical lens that illuminates the struggle for or the desired maintenance of power and influence between people or institutions in a particular context. The relevant context as it relates to this study is that of the postgraduate supervision space and the student-supervisor relationship with its complexities and dynamics. In this chapter, I present the research methodology for this study, including its aims and objectives, in addition to a description of the data collection technique and an explanation of the process by which the data was presented and analysed.

4.2 Research aim

This study sought to provide six Master's students at a South African university[2] with an opportunity to share their stories about challenges they have experienced in their postgraduate supervisory relationship. It aimed to shed light on some of the reasons why a number of current Master's and former Master's students at a South African university have encountered supervision-related problems that had effects ranging from delaying completion, struggling to learn effectively about research from the process, or leaving their programme of study altogether. It is not uncommon for postgraduate supervisory relationships to come under intense strain. However, as relevant as student perspectives are in relation to the issue, these remain a relatively underexplored focus of research. Via a qualitative, narrative research process, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six current or former Master's students at a South African university who have navigated supervision-related challenges to various degrees of success – challenges related to the completion of a full or mini research thesis. Through the interviews, feedback was sought on issues relating to:

1. Identifying the factors – real and/or perceived - that led to the strain in the supervision relationship;
2. Examining the impact that the strain had on the wellbeing and academic progress of the participating students;
3. Identifying potential areas in which the students needed to take responsibility;

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[2] In support of the intention of my study to protect the anonymity of the participating students, the relevant university is not mentioned by name in this thesis.

4. Identifying strategies these students adopted to navigate and cope with the challenges; and,

5. Possible measures, in the students' opinions and based on their experiences, which could be implemented by institutions of higher learning to minimise the risk of similar supervision-related problems recurring, thereby promoting a conducive research culture with positive spin-offs for all concerned.

4.3 Qualitative research

As the aim of this study was to explore the experiences, through stories or narratives, of students who have encountered supervision-related challenges at the Master's level of postgraduate study, I chose a qualitative research design. Qualitative research seeks to provide an in-depth articulation and comprehension of the meaning individuals offer for their behaviour, within a specific context and from the individual's perspective. Creswell (2007: p.18) argues that in qualitative research, "claims of knowledge are based upon constructed perspectives from multiple social and historical meanings of individual experiences". Qualitative methodology represents an effective tool for the detailed analysis of a small group of respondents (Stake, 1994) and ascribes value to the description of the perceived reality of a selected group of individuals (Asher & Asher, 1999). These characteristics were deemed useful in the context of this study, in that perceptions related to individual experiences are at the heart of this research project. The strength of qualitative research is rooted in its capacity to access subjectivity and consequently convey a sense of individual experience, while simultaneously shedding light on social, political and cultural contexts (Parker, 1994). Grant (2008) asserts that qualitative research plays a key role in shedding light on the meaning of lived experiences.

Researchers have articulated distinct traits that are manifest in qualitative research. These include that data is acquired from people's words (Babbie & Mouton, 2008), that the research method is subjective (Schram, 2003), and that a relatively small number of respondents are involved, with an emphasis placed on individual perceptions, thoughts and feelings (Babbie, 2006). Additionally, the process of data collection is less structured – oftentimes interviews or observations are utilised (Strauss, 2005) – and the results of the research are typically not generalisable in the same way that quantitative findings can be (Thomas & Harden, 2008), usually because of the small scale on which qualitative studies are done. Qualitative research does not employ a controlled environment. Instead, the focus is on the description and interpretation of human behaviour (Louw & Louw, 2007). A further seven key qualities of qualitative research were highlighted by Babbie and Mouton (2008). These qualities are as follows: 1) the research is conducted in a natural setting, 2) qualitative

research focuses on the process as opposed to the outcome, 3) the participant's perspective is vital to the research, 4) the core focus is on acquiring an in-depth understanding and explanation of the participant's experience, 5) the primary aim is to comprehend the relevant social action based on its specific context, 6) the research process commonly leads to the generation of fresh and original hypotheses and theories, and 7) the researcher is viewed as the primary instrument. Sub-sections later in this chapter on the semi-structured interviews will provide insight into how the above-mentioned qualities were practically represented in this study.

Qualitative data analysis is mainly an inductive method of arranging data into categories and detailing patterns and relationships between and among them. As this process unfolds, general themes arise from the data, as opposed to being imposed prior to the process of data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). For example, in the context of this study, certain themes may become evident relating to field, habitus, and capital, which can be arranged into categories based on Bourdieu's field theory.

For this study I collected narratives in the sense of stories – through semi-structured interviews with six current or former Master's students – and these stories were analysed using the theoretical tools provided by Field Theory, explained in Chapter 3 of this thesis.
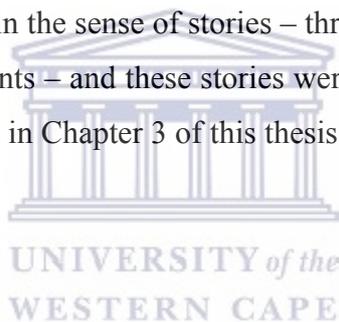
4.4 Research design

On the strength of arguments for the practise of documenting stories, this study used a narrative approach involving face-to-face interviews with six current or former Master's students at a South African university. The relevant students were initially invited to participate in this research via a notice and flyers which were displayed in the reception area of the student counselling centre at the university in question. Furthermore, additional respondents were identified via word of mouth originating from individuals who had learned of the research project. Interested students were asked to contact the principal researcher of this study and were subsequently provided with a detailed information sheet (see Appendix A) explaining the nature of the project and their involvement in it. The students were interviewed individually, based on strategically crafted questions (see Appendix B) designed to shed light on the underlying factors and experiences that have contributed to their academic challenges and the reasons they have encountered supervision-related problems severe enough to warrant them either considering or seeking out professional counselling services, or dropping out or considering dropping out of their study programme altogether.

4.4.1 Sampling

As mentioned in section 1.2, for one to qualify for doctoral studies, one first needs to push past the well-documented Master's degree bottleneck as evidenced, for example, in the 2015 statistics report referenced in Chapter 2, released by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training, i.e. the Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa, 2017. Concerns related to this Master's bottleneck are also expressed by Mouton (2010). Over and above this the transition to Master's full-thesis research from Honours-level study has been found to be particularly challenging and success is dependent on effective supervision. Therefore, this study directed attention specifically at the Master's rung on the academic ladder.

Sampling refers to the process of selecting who will participate in a study and from whom the information is obtained. Samples allow for in-depth understanding and more accurate/targeted data. There are no set rules about the sample size in qualitative research. It is mainly a judgment call at the researcher's complete discretion which should aim to meet the goals of the research study (Lichtman, 2013). The sample size here was limited in favour of extracting data that would be detailed and comprehensive in nature. The interviewees did not intentionally represent or favour any specific demographic group(s), nor did they represent any specific faculty, in that while research dynamics differ from faculty to faculty, the supervision requirements in terms of conducting thesis research and writing were expected to be comparable. Additionally, the participating students could be at any stage of their research programme beyond the initial 6-month mark. This was to allow for a significant enough period of time to have passed during which supervision dynamics could have been observed and experienced. Also eligible to participate in this study were former Master's students who failed to complete the specific academic programme associated with their interview and narrative, but who were also enrolled in the relevant degree programme for at least six months prior to exiting it and/or transferring to a different programme.

The focus on students who have either sought out counselling support (or considered doing so), or who have abandoned their programme of study (or have considered doing so) was intentional, for two reasons. Firstly, the fact that certain students had resorted to or considered counselling or the abandonment of their academic journey in light of the supervision-related challenges they had encountered highlights how seriously they perceived and/or were affected by these breakdowns in the supervisory relationship. Secondly, it provided the research project the opportunity to gain a better understanding of an otherwise sensitive topic without necessarily exposing the affected respondents to any unmitigated risk associated with the interview process, as the students in question had already had access to professional counselling services where needed, and quite

possibly elected to participate to be given an opportunity to tell their story to someone who was sympathetic.

4.4.2 Recruitment

The research thus employed non-probability, purposive sampling, enlisting a total of six interviewees who experienced supervision-related challenges at the Master's level of their academic journey. Given the purposive sampling method, the respondents were identified and recruited based on the following selection criteria:

- They must have been Master's-level students of the relevant South African university.
- They must have experienced at least six months of their Master's academic journey.
- They must have encountered supervision-related challenges associated with the thesis component of their programme, whether their course was full-thesis or structured in nature.

The participants in this study were identified and recruited directly through advertisements of the study that were displayed on the electronic notice board in the reception area of the relevant South African university's student counselling centre. Additionally, participants were identified and suggested by means of word of mouth on the part of individuals who had become aware of the research project, and who felt comfortable informing others about it. This 'snowballing' phenomenon aided in the approach and recruitment of student participants who could provide the relevant insight related to this study's research questions.

4.4.3 Research site

Four of the six interviews in this study took place on the campus of the relevant South African University, one was conducted at the interviewee's home based on preference/comfort, and one was conducted digitally via Skype, given the physical unavailability of the interviewee in question. Data was collected during the course of August-September 2018.

4.5 Data collection

Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014: p.60) correctly note that data is "not something that is collected but something that is *given* [by participants]". Consequently, data – and particularly data that could be viewed as being of a potentially sensitive nature – should be handled with great care, competence, and integrity. Bearing this in mind, in this section I describe all the procedures that

enabled me to complete this research project, with reference to the sampling methods, selection criteria, and the recruitment of student participants. Qualitative face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were identified as a methodology for the "analysis of the habitus of agents" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

4.5.1 The semi-structured interview

There are practical considerations to remain mindful of in the process of conducting semi-structured interviews. An interview guide or schedule is required, along with a consent form, that together contain the date, interviewee name (or pseudonym), research questions, and interviewer's notes (as and when needed). Informed and signed consent must be obtained from each research participant. Additionally, audio-recording the interviews requires participants' agreement, who must be assured of confidentiality and anonymity. This also enables the accurate recollection of this large amount of information, and the transcription of it for subsequent analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured interview typically specifies pre-determined questions, but the interviewer has the freedom to probe issues beyond the answers provided (May, 1997). The semi-structured interview format allowed me to ask questions that illuminated the social and academic background of the student participants. It also enabled the students to comfortably share beyond the 'structured' questions, in instances where they felt the need to do so. The semi-structured interview is of particular value because it allows the researcher room to seek clarification and elaboration while the interview is underway. It enables a narrative of the student's choosing that simultaneously falls in line with the objectives of the study, allowing for student stories that illuminate the researcher's particular interests.

4.5.2 Putting the semi-structured interview into practice

The general consensus held amongst qualitative researchers is that interview questions need to be open-ended and presented using everyday language (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2015). In keeping with recommendations from narrative researchers (Elliot, 2005), I made a conscious effort as much as possible not to interrupt interviewees, thereby facilitating the natural emergence of the narratives from conversations. With the consent of each participant secured, all interviews were audio-recorded. The length of each interview differed based on the uniqueness and varied complexity of each story. Interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length and took place in a relaxed and casual environment. The students were given all the time and space necessary to tell their stories in a manner that was comfortable to them. I took great care to make a priority of conducting the interviews at a time and location that was convenient for each student.

In an attempt to avoid kindling the 'suspicions' of the participants in interviews, I was mindful of Bourdieu's advice on limiting the impact of the 'intrusion effect'', which he argues commonly accompanies the semi-structured interview process. Bourdieu explains that due to the fact that it is the researcher who puts in place the rules of the interview and assigns its aims and functions, he or she may potentially be guilty of imposing on the social space of the research participant, which can lead to a negative response. In Bourdieu's view, researchers can steer clear of the intrusion effect by assessing the interview relationship as it unfolds, as a "reflex reflexivity" predicated on a "sociological feel" or "eye" (Bourdieu & Accardo, 1999: pp.608-610). With this in mind, the researcher must therefore learn to cultivate an intuitive sense for impositions or intrusions which may influence the research participant and compromise the data being gathered.

Most of the students were very open and comfortably shared their stories and experiences at length. However, two participants did not articulate as much, perhaps the result of a combination of more reserved personalities and slight nerves around the nature of the research topic. In these instances, the students found it helpful when they were presented with more specific questions which helped them focus and gave them direction in articulating their experiences. However, I was conscious at all times not to dominate the discussions and offered participants as much freedom as they desired to explore the relevant issues in an unhurried manner, and without interference. I also ensured that each student was aware of their right to opt out of answering any question of their choosing, or alternatively, of their freedom to add any information that they felt the interview questions did not facilitate the sharing of. The combination of the participants being able to voice their experiences freely, while I asked specific questions as needed or relevant, allowed some measure of control and focus related to the data that was received (Creswell, 2007), while reflecting and embracing the principles of narrative research. I concluded the interviews by thanking the students for their time and willingness to participate and by again assuring them of the confidentiality of their responses and the fact that the results of the research – by way of a copy of the chapter of this thesis discussing the findings of the study – would be shared with them via email.

Appendix A, found towards the end of this thesis, presents a copy of the interview sheet and questions that were used during the interview process.

4.5.3 Establishing trust and rapport

One of the key elements of data collection during an in-depth interview on a sensitive subject is the ability of the researcher to cultivate a rapport with the respondents (Karnieli-Miller, Strier &

Pessach, 2009). Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) suggest that building rapport with participants in qualitative interviews enhances the researcher's access to their lives. As highlighted by Saunders (2011: p.110), "[t]rust research invariably asks questions about sensitive issues, highlighting the need to build rapport and trust between the researcher and participant". Based on this observation, I approached my field of research, i.e. the relevant South African university and the respondents to this study, in such a way that facilitated the establishment of trust, by being transparent and making my research topic entirely clear to the institution and the relevant students. I assured all relevant parties of anonymity and privacy, explaining the aim of the research and the process of data collection upfront. The process of building rapport with research participants was further advanced through communication via email and cell phone prior to the interview taking place. During this process, I was able to answer any questions or concerns the students had prior to their agreement to participate in the study. Subsequent to some first-hand impressions being formed and as I had the sense that some rapport had been established, I scheduled the interviews with the students, deciding on suitable time slots, days, and interview settings that were convenient for them.

Given the potentially emotionally-charged nature of the subject being researched, the students were asked to choose a place and time where/when they were most comfortable participating in an interview, ensuring a private environment in the process, to reduce their sense of vulnerability and avoid any disturbances or interruptions that might have hindered the students' natural telling of their stories. The following is a photograph of the meeting space in which the majority of the interviews were conducted.
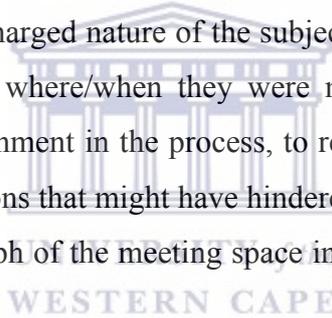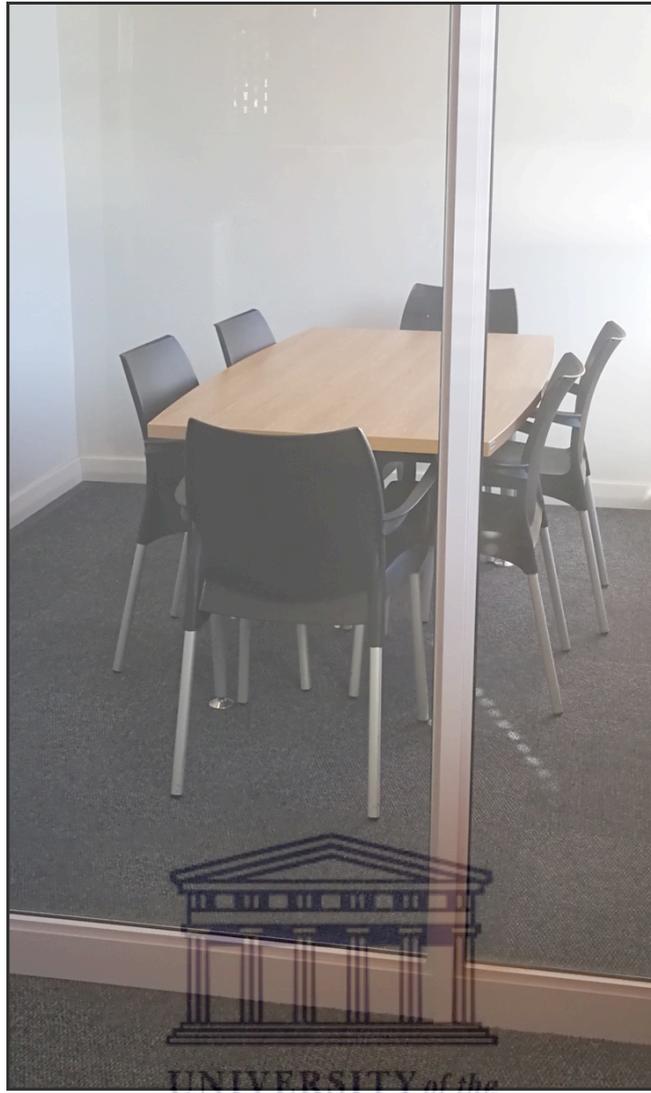
Figure 4.1: The room in which 4 of the 6 students were interviewed

I was ready at all times to suspend or terminate an interview in the event that a participant felt distressed or emotional and in need of a break (Elmir et al., 2011). The audio from the interviews was recorded with an electronic recording device. The recorded audio was then transcribed using appropriate computer equipment.

4.6 Data analysis

4.6.1 Narrative methods of understanding habitus

Reay (2004: p.440) observes that what has been problematic about a substantial portion of the research which claims to employ habitus as a central concept is the fact that it is introduced too early in the process, and as a result, as opposed to employing the concept in an interrogative way, "habitus becomes an explanation of the data rather than a way of working with it". Building on this same point, Maton (2008: p.61) emphasises that it is important to maintain "a relational mode of

thought" when making use of habitus in empirical research. Grenfell (2008: pp.223-224) argues that this can be accomplished in conducting a study from which biographical accounts are expected to emerge only in instances when these accounts are "...analysed with respect to field positions, structures and their underlying logic of practice; and, most importantly, the relationship between field and habitus – not just one and/or the other". Hardy (2012: p.230) notes how individuals, having amassed varying levels and kinds of capital, will each possess "a range of positions available to them that are delimited by the capital they possess and by the choices they make about the desirability of any particular position".

In the growing body of research on student experience, a number of researchers have utilised a variety of metaphors to articulate the different ways in which students experience higher education. For instance, studying the transition into higher education, Watson et al. (2009) draw attention to the varying levels of harmony between students' existing habitus and the demands of the new field as 'Fitting In', 'Adapting', 'Resisting' and 'Excluded'. Gale and Parker (2014) also explore the issue of student transition and suggest three conceptions of transition as 'induction', 'development', and 'becoming'. Lehmann (2012) proposes an understanding of students' engagement with higher education as 'commitment' or 'alienation' or a state of transition towards either of these. Researching how working-class students identify with higher education, Kupfer (2012) stipulates three categories of student: 'the self-confident student', 'the self-affirmative student', and 'the future family breadwinner student'. Furthermore, Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) utilise the concepts of 'belonging' and 'isolation' to describe how academic culture is perceived and experienced by non-traditional students.

The student postgraduate research experience is a constantly evolving journey – a fluid transition along the continuum towards either success or failure. With the above-mentioned metaphors in mind, the data analysis process of this study – the findings of which are presented in chapter 5 of this thesis – sought to ascertain to which degree various dynamics, perceptions and resultant behaviours in the postgraduate supervision space either aided in enabling a sense of student belonging or contributed to a sense of student disengagement. The interview data was examined with a view to determine both the impact of the supervisory relationship on the students' existing and evolving types and levels of capital, as well as how their choices and strategies in navigating supervision dynamics were influenced by the inherent and unique habitus with which each student entered the field of postgraduate research.

Bourdieu's core concepts of 'field', 'habitus', and 'capital' were employed as the main tools for data analysis. When finalising and preparing all the collected data for analysis, I made use of the qualitative tool of 'coding' for the purpose of establishing themes and patterns. This entailed attaching labels and/or keywords to the interview transcripts based on the theoretical framework that forms the foundation of the study, along with the consideration of previously referenced studies as potential guides into the coding process. I used coding as a data-management device to aide with the task of analysing the data. For instance, I used Bourdieu's core concepts as codes or data-labels to uncover connections between habitus and field. This method of coding aided the study in coherently arranging the interview data for analysis.

Bourdieu's field theory as a theoretical framework was highly impactful and instrumental to the both the design and the execution of this study. In light of this, subsequent to completing the fieldwork and faced with the task of analysing and understanding the data, I was aware of the need to circumvent the trap that Gorard (2004) notes those adopting a certain theoretical approach may fall victim to. The trap is that of allowing the chosen theory to pre-determine the results of the study. Due to narrative inquiry being the methodology I employed in framing the interviews, it is important at this stage to explain the process by which I developed an analytical framework that married Bourdieu's concepts with narrative research for the purpose of making sense of the data.

4.6.2 Data analysis process flow

During the process of data analysis and reporting of the results of the study, I applied the following six steps of thematic analysis, based on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006):

1	• **Familiarising yourself with your data:** • Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2	• **Generating initial codes:** • Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set • Collating data relevant to each code
3	• **Searching for themes** • Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	• **Reviewing themes** • Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set • Generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5	• **Defining and naming themes** • Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells • Generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	• **Producing the report** • The final stage for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature • Producing a scholarly report of the analysis

Figure 4.2: Image from the reference source, Braun and Clarke (2006)

1. *I familiarised myself with the data*: I read through all the interview transcripts several times in order to develop familiarity with the data – this was in addition to listening to the relevant audio-recorded interviews during transcription. I made notes in the margins of the digital transcripts to secure initial impressions and comprehension of what each interviewee shared. This process of reading interview transcripts and listening to the interviews was applied to each interviewee's data set.

2. *Generating initial codes*: I established a list of initial codes which corresponded to emerging areas of interest in the data.

3. *Identifying themes*: The initial codes were then classified and categorised by themes and related sub-themes. A matrix table of themes and sub-themes – including corresponding codes – was created and then discussed with my supervisor for advice and feedback. Excerpts across the six interview transcripts that correlated to the themes and sub-themes were identified and organised under each theme and sub-theme using an Excel spreadsheet. Attention was given to searching for both similar and different patterns amongst the six sets of data.

4. *Examining themes*: Following the creation of a table of themes and sub-themes, I reviewed the codes to determine if they addressed each sub-theme and theme.

5. *Defining and naming themes*: I undertook an initial analysis of the established themes to ascertain if they corresponded with the research questions, and to establish if they were relevant and how they serve to answer the research questions set out in this study. I decided on a title for each theme and a name of each sub-theme, in addition to writing a short description of each theme. This decision-making process was informed primarily by the issues that emerged from the data, and to a lesser extent the theoretical lens employed in this study. This component of the process involved determining the 'essence' of what each theme was about (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final part of this step involved the development of clear organisation as it related to which themes and sub-themes were associated and relevant to which research question or part thereof.

6. *Reporting the research findings:* This step involved a high degree of engagement with the initial drafting and subsequent discussion of this draft with my supervisor who provided feedback. At this stage of the data analysis process, I explored and employed Bourdieu's theoretical concepts that were adopted in this research project, including habitus, capital and field, in an effort to understand and interpret the identified themes. Bearing in mind the feedback received from my supervisor and my own further reflection on the initial draft findings, I revised this section of the thesis accordingly. An aspect of the writing process itself was the further understanding, polishing, and interpretation of the relevant themes and sub-themes. In this way, the final report of the research findings presented in this study is the consequence of the clinical process of writing, revising, learning and refining.

4.6.3 A further note on data themes and associated codes

The word-for-word transcribed interviews were coded into main themes and sub-themes (Mkandawire-Valhmu & Stevens, 2010). The emerging elements that were coded included activities and/or behaviours, events, relationships and associated interactions, and contextual factors, among others (Gibbs, 2007). The data analysis process also involved the integration and interpretation of the emergent themes, providing explanations that sought to make sense of the data for other readers. Themes and associated codes emerging from the interviews in this study included, but were not necessarily limited to:

- Pairing process (documenting the process by which students were paired with their supervisors),

- Field structure (the rules governing the supervisory-relationships and how they came to be),

- Field readiness (students' orientation to and preparedness for the field of postgraduate supervision at Master's level),

- Challenges encountered (Supervision problems students experienced related to communication, research structure, feedback and sustained motivation),

- Impact on capital (how supervision-related challenges have impacted students' social, economic, cultural and/or symbolic capital),

- Power imbalance (how differences in and the influence of student and supervisor capital were manifest),

- Habitus played out (examples of habitus influencing how students navigated supervision-related challenges), and

- Supervisor training (suggested supervisor training and the impact of the lack thereof).

The table (Appendix B) shows the codes that emerged from the first stage of the coding process. These codes were subsequently revised and refined to most effectively support the analysis of the data.
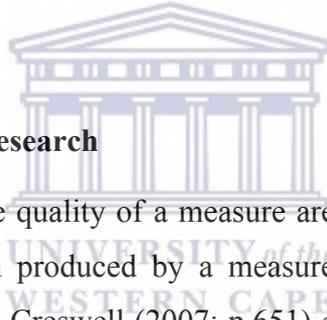
4.7 Validity and reliability of the research

The two key criteria for gauging the quality of a measure are validity and reliability. Validity and reliability speak of the information produced by a measurement instrument, as opposed to the instrument itself (Golafshani, 2003). Creswell (2007: p.651) explains the concept of validity as the ability of the researcher to extract meaningful and defensible inferences from data about the sample or population. Golafshani (2003: p.602) notes, "[v]alidity is the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomenon to which it refers". Credibility in qualitative study is involved in establishing that the findings of the research are believable (Golafshani, 2003). This was ensured through sufficient engagement in semi-structured interviewing, the utilisation of well-established research methods, and the establishment and extension of rapport and empathy with and towards the participants.

Silverman (2005: p.255) articulates external validity as "the ability to generalize experimental findings to events and settings outside the experiment itself". Internal validity, on the other hand, refers to credibility in the context of qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Neuman (2003) explains that researchers utilising qualitative methods of research highlight validity by providing a truthful, balanced and objective societal report from the research participants who live and

experience such life daily. A variety of methods, including interviews and participation, are employed to chronicle the findings of qualitative researchers in a comprehensive and reliable way. Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that it is vital to confirm the authenticity and accuracy of the research results from both the respondents' and researchers' points of view, contending that this is the meaning of credibility. Put another way, the researcher must accurately uncover the respondent's point of view and experiences (Creswell, 2003). In qualitative research, the conclusion of the research is achieved through purposive sampling and the securing of sufficient data (Babbie, 2001). In addressing the issue of the reliability of this study, I have provided earlier in this chapter a detailed description of all the research practices that I followed.

4.8 Reflexivity

Embracing a stance of reflexivity – the process of becoming self-aware – plays an important role in the researcher's elimination of his or her own bias and inaccuracies rooted in the views of the research participants. Researchers are consequently ultimately responsible for validity and reliability as it relates to their work.

4.8.1 Researcher reflexivity: participant objectification

In the context of Bourdieusian sociology, reflexivity is regarded as a process by which social science turns its arsenal of objectification on itself. The "sociology of sociology", as Bourdieu explains, creates "cross controls" that increase the probability of eliminating biased research (Bourdieu, 2004: p.89). Wacquant notes that the restriction of the impact of bias in social science via the practice of reflexivity represents a 'signature obsession' that makes Bourdieu's concepts relatively distinct in the realm of contemporary social theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.36). Now, researcher reflexivity is standard practice in the social sciences, to the point of it being considered grossly negligent to not be reflexive (Maton, 2003). Maton (2003) makes the case, however, that Bourdieu's version of epistemic reflexivity stands alone due to its opposition to sociologically overly simplistic, individualistic, and narcissistic types of reflexivity that primarily aim to bolster the researcher's own symbolic capital in his/her intellectual or academic field.

Wacquant (in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.36) highlights three specific principles rooted in Bourdieu's view of reflexivity, with the final one being significantly distinct from that of other sociological approaches. To begin with, it does not focus on the individual analyst but instead on the "social and intellectual unconscious embedded in analytic tools and operations". Next, it is not the exclusive responsibility of individual researchers, but must rather be applied by the entire

community of social scientists. Finally, the objectification of the strategies of the sociologist should not be damaging but should instead be viewed as a source for managing the biases originating from the knowledge claims of sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Consequently, Bourdieu did not view reflexivity as something of a "speciality among others"', but instead made the case that it was a prerequisite for any thorough and comprehensive social scientific practice (Wacquant, 1989).

Keeping the importance of reflexivity in mind, I made a conscious effort as far as possible to keep the collection and analysis of the data for this study untainted by my preconceived notions both of what findings I expected the data to reveal, and what findings I felt the data ought to reveal. To this end, I let the research questions serve their purpose without interference and gave each student participant all the space and freedom they needed to tell their stories in a way they felt yielded an accurate representation of their experiences. Similarly, regarding the process of analysis, I let the data serve its purpose, taking care – with the guidance of my supervisor – not to infer meanings from the data that were tenuous in nature. The rigid focus on the data itself, outside of any personal opinion and/or agenda, aided in yielding observations and analysis that are objectively sound.

A further way in which I endeavoured to be reflexive was by reminding myself that my data is connected to prior research, which allowed me to 'check' my assumptions against the reading I have done and the kinds of issues other researchers doing similar work have encountered. Additionally, through considering theory, if I could 'hear' aspects of my theoretical framing coming through, I knew I was collecting useful data. I could then be mindful to both ensure that I could 'hear' the theory, while also not being too quick in its analysis to 'apply' the theory simplistically to the data. I could then engage in a 'dialectical', back and forth process of having the data speak to the theory and vice versa. These measures provided me with further means of ensuring that my data is valid, reliably representing the problems and issues that my study seeks to address.

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented and argued for the research methodology for this study, including its aims and objectives, the chosen data collection technique and the process of data analysis. I have made this case in line with the theoretical framework which I have adopted. In Chapter 5, I proceed with the analysis of the collected data, following, the thematic structure which I have outlined in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I shared and argued for the research methodology for this study, including its aims and objectives, the relevant data collection method, and the process of data analysis. In this chapter, I proceed with the presentation and analysis of the collected data in line with the thematic structure that I outlined in this previous chapter. Insight will be sought on the following key questions:

- What sort of supervision-related challenges have Master's students experienced and what impact have these challenges had on these students?
- How have Master's students navigated these challenges in research supervision?
- What dynamics are evident in the supervisory-relationship that influence attitudes, choices and actions?
- What can we learn from both student successes and struggles that can inform changes in the field of supervision that will benefit other students and supervisors?

5.1.1 Bourdieu's field theory (A reminder)

The data collected for this study will be analysed using the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's field theory concepts of field, habitus and capital, discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis. As a reminder, the following are a few key points relevant to each concept.

Field:

- Bourdieu explains that field is a structured and structuring social space – a field of forces containing individuals who dominate, and those who are dominated.
- Each field will have its "own way of doing things, rules, assumptions and beliefs" (Grenfell & James, 1998: p.20).

Habitus:

- The concept Bourdieu uses to attempt to explain individual and social conduct, and the connection between structure (the rules governing the field), and agency (the individual's or institution's capacity to leverage their/its capital effectively within the field).

- Bourdieu (1990: p.56) defines "'habitus' as the embodiment of history, 'internalized as a second nature'".

Capital:
- Capital can be viewed as the resources individuals possess that give them power within a particular field (Ronnie, 2008).
- Only pertinent, field-specific capital serves as a resource, and can be utilised to wield power in the context of a particular field.

5.1.2 Structuring the chapter

The presentation of the data collected during the course of this study will be informed by the organisational codes that emerged and were identified during the data analysis process. The codes and associated data will be presented and analysed in the following sequence:

- *Student expectations* – setting the scene of what the students anticipated during their Master's research journey,
- *Facilitating supervisor-student engagement* – examining the field structure, the students' field readiness, and the process by which students were paired with their supervisor,
- *Challenges encountered* – the supervision-related problems the students experienced,
- *Impact on capital* – the varying toll taken on the students by the challenges they experienced,
- *Habitus manifested* – how the students' habitus influenced their responses to the various supervision-related challenges, and
- *Student insights/suggestions* – students' thoughts around how the field of postgraduate supervision can be enhanced and more constructively navigated.

In keeping with the principle of anonymity articulated in sub-sections 4.5.1 and 4.5.3 of this thesis, pseudonyms have been assigned to the six student participants in order to protect their identity. The interviewees will be referred to in this study as Allan, Nina, Mark, Nigel, Clayton, and Kevin - pseudonyms which I selected for them. Furthermore, with reference to sub-section 4.4.2 of this thesis on the subject of recruitment, what all the participants have in common is their experience with supervision-related challenges in the context of thesis research and writing at Master's level at the South African university in question.

5.2 Student Expectations

Research has shown that problems may arise in the supervisory relationship when the student and supervisor have unrealistic or misguided expectations of each other (Kiley, 2011; Lessing, 2011; Wisker et al., 2007). The six students in this study had varying expectations of the supervisory relationship, both in terms of the type and regularity of contact they would have with their supervisor. These expectations were informed by a number of different factors.

In Clayton's case, a sense of agency was initially derived from an official University source that created expectations in his mind around the nature and scope of support that a postgraduate research student might receive.

> *Clayton: In the weeks leading up to the official start of my programme I took it upon myself just to familiarise myself with some of the documentation on the university website around academic guides, programme guides, one of which included a guide that was published actually to supervisors but that was in a public domain for all to see. Based on the information on that guide it was recommended that supervisors at least for the first year or so, aim to have weekly, albeit brief, sessions in person with their students just to make sure that in the initial stages of their research that they were on the right track, that they were not wasting time going down rabbit holes, that they remain motivated and encouraged during what can sometimes be an isolating journey. So, I was aware that that was the guide officially based from the document on the university website. So, on average the student would expect to see the supervisor or, at least, have meaningful contact with the supervisor around about 30 times a year according to the guide. So, in my mind that would have been fantastic but at the same time if I had ... I actually recall thinking to myself that if I had even just one meaningful contact a month, some email contact in-between as and when needed, based on the workflow and submission and revision of work, that would have been perfectly fine for me.*

Nigel spoke of his initial expectations not being accurate, and also of the benefit to the student and supervisor of a formalised agreement that brings greater clarity to the working relationship.

> *Nigel: Well, if it comes to a question of regularity, I expected a check in that I would have to send something through like once every fortnight and I would receive feedback within a week, but that's what I was kind of used to expecting. That wasn't the case, I didn't have to submit at any particular time and when I did submit then he didn't have to respond at any particular time, so it was much, much less regular. I would say send something in once a month and he*

would respond in a month or two ... I don't like the term MOU because it sounds so high level, but yes, that kind of thing would definitely be helpful to pretty much everybody doing their thesis.

Allan anticipated a loose, organic arrangement, although he welcomed mechanisms that would serve to provide accountability and fairness in the supervisory relationship.

Allan: I thought I took it like: I do my work, I send it to the supervisor. If I can't understand something or if I'm confused, I will go to my supervisor and we will discuss then and he or she guides me accordingly ... If a structure says to the supervisor, you have to give feedback on what you have done so far, what you have covered with the students, give a report ... Also, I think the students should be given a chance to have somewhere to sign or to find out what the supervisors have said ... It's a relationship they have together, so it will be very unfair if the student doesn't have the chance to comment on or sign to say: OK, I confirm what the supervisor is saying ...

Mark had heard stories from fellow students relating to supervisor unavailability.

Mark: I heard about problems around supervisor availability and engagement. I hoped for engagement perhaps once a month, with online interaction in between as needed.

Referring to the split of focus between the project he was working on, and the writing of his thesis, Kevin talked about expecting a balanced spread of supervisory attention between the two tasks.

Kevin: So in terms of expectations, I was hoping that we would work on both the project and our Master's thesis because this was for capacity building as well.

Nina spoke about the kind of arrangement she was hoping for in the interests of facilitating clear working terms with her supervisor, and adequate accountability for both parties.

Nina: There has to be some kind of MOU system in place and a higher checking point ... At undergraduate level you have course evaluations. Something like that needs to be implemented at postgrad level where you say, this is what your relationship and your experience has been like with your supervisor, and someone has to tally that and respond if

there are issues ... There needs be some kind of rating of postgraduate supervision and an MOU that needs to be agreed upon, either each year, or each semester ... .

While their expectations of the field of postgraduate supervision varied significantly, most of the students did anticipate some form of structure providing guidelines and clarity in terms of how their working relationship with their supervisor was to be managed. One could ask why students expected some kind of formalised structure in their supervisory relationship, and what they anticipated the impact of this structure would be. It is likely that these students acknowledged their need of support not only from their supervisor, but also from broader institutional mechanisms that would serve as a source of guidance and support. The next section explores the field structure the students encountered, their readiness for what they experienced, and the processes by which their relationship with their supervisor was established.

5.3 Facilitating supervisor-student engagement

5.3.1 Field structure

This organisational code explores the rules and structure governing the supervisory-relationships (or lack thereof), how they came to be, and whether or not they proved effective in those instances when they were present. It also examines expectations students had of the supervision relationship, and what these expectations were based on.
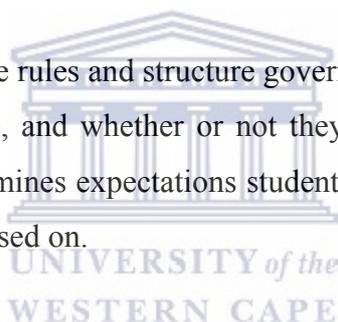
5.3.1.1 MoU in place

In the context of the supervisory relationship, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) refers to a formal document, signed by the student and supervisor, that specifies the arrangements of their working relationship with regard to frequency of meetings and/or other forms of contact, and turnaround times for the submission and review of work. An MoU aims to provide structure and guidelines relating to the provision and response to feedback on work submitted by the student – feedback which, as previously indicated, researchers acknowledge plays an important role in a postgraduate student's research success (East et al., 2012; Mazlina et al., 2014).

A MoU was present in only one of the six supervisory relationships explored in this study.

Kevin: I think that at some point at the department I was in, there was a bit of a structure actually. So, my supervisor for the Master's, my first/former supervisor, she was in the

department and in that department, they do have a structure. We even signed an MOU ... I think it was the protocol of the department. When you signed the contract and everything, we then signed that MOU.

5.3.1.2 No MoU in place

The remaining students' supervisory relationship was not governed by any formal MoU, which resulted in some confusion for students around the structure of their supervisory relationship or an understanding of roles and responsibilities. For example:

Nina: There was no structure. I really wish that we had that sort of thing in place here, but no.

Mark: We had no structure in place. The arrangement going forward was just simply by word of mouth. ... The challenge was this, we didn't have the MOU so there were no clear guidelines.

It can be postulated that Nina's (and any student's) desire for structure is indicative of a student who is entirely willing to submit to relevant accountability measures within the relevant academic field. This desire exhibits a sense of responsibility associated with her intent to make meaningful academic progress. For Mark, structure equates to guidance, and he acknowledges his need of it within a field that is unfamiliar to him.

5.3.1.3 Structure sometimes ineffective

In the isolated instance with Kevin where an MoU was in place, it did not prove effective in providing adequate structure and accountability in facilitating a healthy supervision space.

Kevin: I think supervisors, they know what they should do. This is not new because they are working with students who want to get out of the system. But you have supervisors who, when after you have signed what you have signed, then their attitude changes. Now they feel like you have no option or no choice but to wait for whenever they respond, and that's it. I feel that it's not actually fair.

Here we have an instance where the existence of an MoU proved insufficient at providing adequate structure and accountability within the supervisory relationship, potentially indicating a need for

structural mechanisms that go beyond the scope of the student-supervisor relationship. What notion of fairness did Kevin bring into the field, and what was it based on? It is possible that the sense of unfairness that Kevin expressed is rooted in the lack of structure and accountability that the MoU was meant to provide. Furthermore, Kevin's reference to the concept of fairness indicates that he had certain expectations based on his understanding of his rights in the field, and of the nature and level of support that he felt he was entitled to as a Master's student.

The data relevant to field structure – the field in the context of this study being that of the supervisory relationship – reveals that, among the students participating in this study, it was not an uncommon feeling that adequate structure governing the field was lacking. This lack of adequate or clear structure (real and/or perceived) created uncertainty and confusion in the minds of some students. Students also expressed their desire to have more structure in place. This lack of structure compromised students' sense of agency and power in the field, in terms of their ability to navigate it with clarity and confidence.

Regardless of the expectations the students brought into the field of postgraduate supervision, and the degree to which those expectations were legitimate, how well were they prepared for the practical reality they experienced? This question is explored in the next sub-section on "Field readiness".
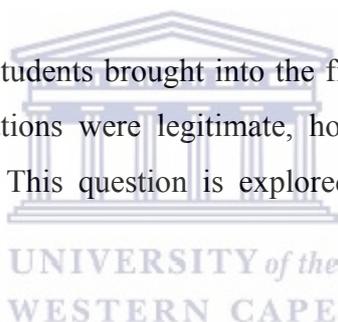
5.3.2 Field readiness

As stated earlier, in the context of this study, the specific field being referred to is that of the postgraduate supervisory relationship – a smaller sub-field of postgraduate education, which is itself a sub-field of higher education. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: pp.16-17) remind us that, "[a] field is comprised of a set of objective, historical relations between positions rooted in certain forms of power (or capital) … which the field imposes on all the objects and agents which enter in it". Additionally, as Grenfell and James (1998: p.20) have pointed out, each field will have its "own way of doing things, rules, assumptions and beliefs". Although there were no specific questions asked of students regarding their readiness and preparedness for the field of postgraduate research prior to entering it, some data relating to the topic did emerge during the interviews – more specific information along these lines is included in sub-section 5.7 dealing with student insights. This code therefore explores students' orientation to and preparedness for the field of postgraduate study at Master's level.

Nigel: For students, it's important to recognise that your supervisor is there not as the be all and end all of your experience. He/she is a guide, they are just there to help you accomplish what you set out to do. They have more experience than you and know the techniques and they can send you on the right path, and if you think they are sending you on the wrong path, you have the right to argue with them or even take your case elsewhere.

Nigel advocates a level of student confidence in questioning and/or resisting perceived supervision practices that are problematic. It is a level of confidence – informed by a strength of habitus and symbolic capital – that few students possess in the context of the supervisory relationship. Interestingly, Nigel struggled to adopt this kind of response himself. In fact, it did not even occur to him as an available option (more on this in sub-section 5.6 on habitus manifested).

Clayton: I think as much as possible, insist on accountability and guiding structures that hold yourself and the supervisor accountable, and know what your recourse is in the event that things go skew.

Allan: You need to have someone to challenge your mind and say hey, what are you talking about here? Then it is up to you to convince the person or to rethink what you are actually writing about. I think PhD needs that much more, but also not taking it away from the Master's level because at times you find like for some students, it's their first big project they have embarked on. Some have done proposals at bachelors and then honours, but definitely the proposals are different from real research. Now at Master's you have to engage with the data, the field work and all that.

Allan acknowledges that his academic journey prior to the Master's level of study did not equip and empower him with the cultural capital necessary to succeed at this new level. He also recognises his role as a learner, dependent on the insight of those more accomplished and experienced in a field that is relatively foreign to him. This means that as a new agent in the field of postgraduate supervision, he is in need of a guide – someone who is able and willing to help him make sense of this new educational terrain and equip him with the tools (both academic and cognitive) needed to succeed. In so doing, students like Allan are able to increasingly grasp and adopt the habitus of a competent and independent researcher. The postgraduate supervisor is ideally positioned to facilitate this kind of transition in the student's academic journey.

Kevin commented about postgraduate students not always being ready to tackle the tasks required of them at the Master's level of study, and about language being a barrier to progress for some students.

Kevin: I heard that in the Faculty they are trying to raise the number of students. Sometimes they do so by accepting students who are really struggling to write – not that they are dull – but if someone cannot converse in the language we are using, then they write 10 pages and they are not sure what they are writing about. Then it's not good for the supervisor and it's not good for the student. I don't know how they take people, but it seems to me they lower the grade. I'm talking about people who don't use English in their countries, they use another language ... But not matter how sharp a person is, if you don't give someone a guide really, how will they ... it's almost like driving. You need someone – you still need to hear from someone. I think that we didn't have that.

Kevin, similar to Allan above, expresses possessing insufficient capital required to successfully traverse Master's-level study. He notes that students cannot – regardless of what capital they bring into the field – make meaningful progress in the absence of an environment that facilitates them developing the kinds of capital required to thrive in the context of the postgraduate supervision space and the broader fields of Master's-level study and postgraduate education in general.

Commenting about the student's preparedness for Master's research, particularly the absence of structure in the supervisory relationship and where, in his opinion, the responsibility primarily lies as it relates to providing that structure, Nigel noted:

I think the onus would have to be on the supervisor. He's the only one actually knowing how the process works. He's been through it before with other students and he knows what students will need.

The data on field readiness yields a variety of student perspectives. Nigel proposes that students recognise both the superior field experience and symbolic, cultural and social capital that supervisors bring to the relationship. However, he goes on to say that students should exhibit confidence in speaking up should they feel their position in the field is being compromised as a result of supervision practices they find concerning. However, as noted earlier, it is a kind of confidence he himself did not possess, opting rather not to question his supervisor's practices. Where does this kind of confidence come from? Why do so few students seem to possess it in the

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context of either challenging or appealing to academic authority when they feel wronged or abandoned by the system they depend on? In a field within which a student's own symbolic and cultural capital is dwarfed by that of the supervisor and other relevant academic authorities, having the confidence and agency to respond with such boldness is a daunting prospect for any student.

Important to Clayton is the insistence of structure in the field that serves to guide and hold accountable both student and supervisor. This structure may strengthen student habitus and agency (see section 3.2 of Chapter 3), and thereby aide them in more effectively navigating dynamics associated with the inherent power imbalance in the supervisory relationship. Allan makes mention of first-time Master's students having the challenge of being exposed to their first big research project in a field they are unfamiliar with, whereas Kevin draws attention to compromised student agency in the field as a result of language barriers and inadequate writing competency.

Finally, Nigel shares his opinion that supervisors, being more experienced in and familiar with the field of postgraduate supervision, ought to leverage their superior capital in the interests of providing the structure and support that students require. Why then are supervisors – at least in the view of the students who participated in this study – not providing this kind of guidance and support? It may be that these supervisors largely unaware of their status as knowers and/or guides relative to their students – that the power and agency they hold is unconsciously held on their part. They may not be overtly mindful of the capital they possess and how they leverage that capital to either advantage or disadvantage their students. Alternatively, they may be mindful of all these things, but choose to – or are pressured to – largely ignore them in the interests of either self-advancement or self-preservation. Whatever the reasons are, the result is largely the same – the students who participated in this study did not receive the support and guidance that they needed and expected from the field of postgraduate supervision.

5.3.3 Pairing process

The process by which Master's students are paired with supervisors for the purpose of thesis research and writing varies between departments/faculties in any given institution of higher learning, and often between institutions themselves. The different permutations of this process include (but are not necessarily limited to) students who are given the freedom to choose their supervisor, those who are allocated a supervisor by the relevant academic unit, and students who are paired with a supervisor based on their enrolment in a specific research project as part of the

academic programme. Additionally, there are situations in which students are approached by supervisors directly and invited to collaborate on a Master's research programme.

This sub-section explores the process by which the students were paired with their research supervisor. In the case of three of the six students, the supervision relationship was based on the student's involvement with a specific research project. In these instances, the students were either invited by the supervisor to collaborate with him or her, were automatically paired with a supervisor based on an application to be involved with a specific research project or received a recommendation from another academic to partner with a specific supervisor.

> *Nigel: When I graduated at my previous university, I spent some time just chilling as a research assistant there and doing various odd jobs and stuff and then for some reason I started a blog and then this supervisor-to-be was experimenting with blogging with his students and they somehow found their way to the same platform I was on... he invited me to come aboard as a lecturer or a content developer to the course and then from there, the course was an honours level course and then from there, it developed into a Master's level course and he invited me to participate as a student.*

> *Clayton: When I was enrolling into my Master's programme there was a specific project in the department in question that I was told by an academic in the department could make use of my skills set, so I was essentially paired with a supervisor by means of recommendation. It wasn't really a process I had any say in, nor at the time when it happened, any reason to object in any way because I went in with a complete blank slate knowing nothing really about the academic who was recommended to be my supervisor. ... The recommendation was also made on the part of someone who was quite respected. So, at the time there was no reason to have any red flags. The recommendation was made also to be involved with specific project for my Master's programme to kill two birds with one stone, working on my studies while at the same time contributing to this existing project that needs my skills set.*

In Mark's case, the supervisor was allocated by the department and he had no say in the pairing process. The same applies to Clayton and Kevin – they were allocated a supervisor based on their involvement in a research project.

In the case of Nina, her supervisor actively pursued her, inviting her collaboration as a student at Master's level.

Nina: Initially I didn't want to pursue a Master's degree straight out of Honours year. So, then my Honours supervisor suggested that I take up my topic, same topic, to Master's level and just broaden the playing field basically. Then she was like, there's funding available, please do it, think about it, you have a great topic. It would be a good thing to do. So, I applied literally on the last day applications were due. I think I made it to hand it in just about 5 minutes before the closing time. Then I was accepted. She became my supervisor for Master's because it seemed like a good fit. Since she was my supervisor for Honours, I had no issues and then we got to work.

The notion of being pursued by the supervisor also applies to Nigel's situation, mentioned above. Allan had the opportunity to pick his supervisor – something which he was grateful for.

Allan: I think in the department where I did my Master's, I had to choose my own supervisor. ... I think that when students are given opportunities to choose their own supervisor, then in the relationship there is much understanding, because as I said, I was doing the modules, so I knew all the lecturers who are supervising.

As it relates to these six students and the process by which they were paired with their supervisor(s), the data reveals a field that is non-uniform in terms of the rules and guidelines that govern it. Data collected reflects varying degrees of agency (the capacity of individuals to make choices and to act independently) on the part of the students. These degrees of agency range from having complete control over the process (an isolated case), to having the decision made for them as a result of processes and circumstances beyond their control – a lack of power in this specific decision-making context. The data also demonstrates examples of students exercising agency in an effort to enhance their position within the postgraduate education landscape, such as Kevin's decision to apply to work on a specific project – a decision which granted him access to research at Master's level and the continuation of his academic journey.

In instances where students have little to no say over who their supervisor will be, these students may carry a degree of uncertainty (if not concern) into a supervisory relationship that is inherently characterised by an imbalance of power, with the supervisor possessing the lion's share. This sense of uncertainty or concern may be based on anecdotal reports from other students/peers regarding difficulties experienced working with a specific supervisor. Perhaps a student previously had

unpleasant dealings with a supervisor at an earlier stage of their academic journey. Many (if not most) first time Master's students hold the view that the supervisory relationship can either greatly facilitate or hinder their academic progress. Students may derive a greater sense of peace of mind from having a say in which supervisor they are partnered with, given that they are able to examine and investigate their options and identify a supervisor who exhibits a temperament, research focus and/or academic reputation (among other potential traits) that they find appealing.

For those students who lacked any choice and/or sense of agency related to choosing their supervisor and whose supervisory relationship did not benefit from an MoU and the structure it is intended to provide, feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty were quite common in the midst of a field they were unfamiliar with, and as various supervision-related challenges materialised. Regardless of the structure of the field of postgraduate supervision, a student's readiness for it (or lack thereof), or the degree to which a student has agency in terms of choosing a supervisor, the potential for difficulty and strain is ever present in the supervisory relationship (Lategan, 2008). The next section explores the various challenges experienced by the students in the context of their supervisory relationship.

5.4 Challenges encountered

This organisational code chronicles the various challenges and/or obstacles the student participants encountered in the context of their supervisory relationship. The issues vary in scope and impact and are highlighted by the excerpts of the collected data detailed in the sub-sections below.

5.4.1 Differing expectations and deliverables

As discussed in section 2.5 of this thesis, expectations can play a significant role in the quality of the supervisory relationship (Kiley, 2011; Lessing, 2011). The students and supervisors often did often not see eye to eye in terms of their expectations of each other, and of the nature of the work that was to be submitted and reviewed.

> *Kevin: One of the key issues with that my supervisor would say one thing today and then say another thing the next day. So, for example she would say you have to submit this work and sign it by Friday, then somehow on Wednesday, she would say, actually you have to submit that work tomorrow. So, the problem was that you would be working on some other things knowing that you have until Friday. Then she would say you now have to submit it tomorrow morning. I remember 2 nights that I did not sleep.*

https://etd.uwc.ac.za

For Allan there was confusion around a perceived rushing of his work.

> *Allan: I wanted to take much longer, but the supervisor wanted me to finish in a specific time. So that was a bit challenging because I really felt like I needed more time, and there was a lot of time left. It was more pressure and I think in that time I was quite confused because I found it hard to tell my supervisor that, look, I really want to finish maybe in six months' time or in four months' time, not now. But my supervisor was like ... you need to submit, you need to submit. So, it was quite hard, very hard.*

Allan may have felt rushed to complete his thesis before he was ready, influenced by a supervisor feeling external pressure from the faculty or university to graduate him within a deadline he was unaware of. Based on the previously mentioned National Development Plan (2013) that emphasises the need to ultimately produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million per year by 2030, it is reasonable to envisage this goal exerting pressure at individual, departmental and institutional levels in the field of higher education.
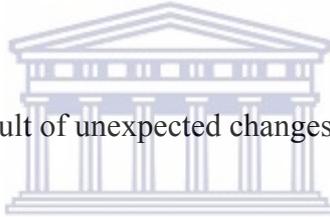
Nina shared about confusion as a result of unexpected changes in research topic.

> *Nina: She was fine with the proposal the first 3 meetings. Then she said, are you sure you want to pursue this topic? I would rather want you to pursue something about ghosts in the Eastern Cape and prominent accident sites along a certain highway, and the social sort of ... not rumour, but speculation around these sights about spirits, and whatever. So, I said, listen I don't know how that ties into our field at all, but I did the research on this topic for Honours and we had agreed we are taking up this topic for Master's. … She then mailed me later that day to ask if I want to consider changing the topic to the one she suggested. I said, listen that doesn't sit well with me, just from a moral aspect I don't believe in wandering spirits and ghosts. It's not me. It's not something I want to pursue, and I don't see how it fits into this field at all.*

When student expectations were challenged or entirely disrupted as a result of behaviour and/or choices on the part of the supervisor, the result was compromised student agency, manifested as confusion, anxiety, stress, and worry. It would follow that these consequences would undermine students' capacity to earn and accumulate symbolic and cultural capital in the field by way of steady, substantive academic progress. Additionally, students' feelings of anxiety and worry were

rooted in their awareness of entering the field of postgraduate supervision with insufficient capital of their own to succeed independently. They were acutely aware of being in need of guidance, and therefore found the prospect of a lack of expected support to be stressful.

5.4.2 Shift in supervisor's attitude/availability

Following from, and associated with, the aforementioned issue of students' expectations of the field of postgraduate supervision, and how these expectations were disrupted, some students also experienced an unexpected shift in their supervisor's demeanour and attitude towards them. For example, speaking of her supervisor's unexpected suggestion of a radical change in research topic that represented a total departure from what they had previously agreed on, Nina shares:

> *Nina: The thing is, there wasn't even a point where it went skew because there was nothing to alert me. She asked very politely if I would like to change my topic. I very politely declined, and the conversation then continued about my proposal ... So, then I went back to her with my completed proposal, expecting her to give the last few changes, additions or advice whatever, and then after we would send it through and then I would get cracking with my project. Unfortunately, the whole proposal was submitted to her, and up until today, she hasn't responded. Within that period of time, the course fees were paid in full. My bursary had paid out and after the money was paid, I just never heard from her again ... No one else could help me because they were like, you need to speak to your supervisor, and she is here. I even requested a meeting in November that year with the HOD and I said: Can I change supervisors? And then everyone was stunned and was like: but this has been your lecturer since 1st year, she was your Honours supervisor, you guys have a strong relationship. I really thought we did up until she just stopped responding.*

Nina's observation that no-one else could help her is of interest. In her experience, the field lacked any mitigating checks and balances that might have served to foster her sense of agency in seeking assistance from sources outside her supervisory relationship. Were these other sources unable or unwilling to assist (or both)? Either possibility is problematic – the former pointing to significant dysfunction in the system at large, while the latter suggests motivations at an individual level that did not have her best interests at heart as a registered Master's student.

Kevin shared the experience of his supervisor giving him one instruction in private, and then reprimanding him in view of the head of department for not doing something different.

Kevin: My supervisor sent a mail to me and she copied my Director. She had been doing it for some time whenever it worked to her advantage. She said, Kevin, you haven't done this, and you were supposed to do this. And then I'm thinking, but you told us we shouldn't have done it this time. The other thing is she would give you something to do and while you are busy working with that she says, oh stop that now and work on this one. Now people work different. You can't just stop and switch and now you want this thing in one hour and it has to be done differently.

This behaviour on the part of the supervisor resulted in Kevin experiencing feelings of confusion and anxiety in the field. He felt that his progress was constantly undermined by shifting deadlines and deliverables, and that his supervisor was bringing his character into question in the view of the Director of the relevant academic department. The impact on students' agency when they feel abandoned (if not betrayed) by the academic authority they look to for guidance and support can be marked. For students in this situation who are determined to make academic progress, regardless of the habitus, personality and temperament they bring into the supervisory relationship, their only recourse is to push back against a system they feel is treating them unfairly. Pushing back in this way is something that even the most self-assured student is likely to find unpleasant at least, if not entirely intimidating – and for many students who would rather shy away from confrontation with academic authority altogether, it is practically impossible. Kevin's feelings in this regard escalated as further breakdown in the supervisory relationship occurred, as documented in the data in the sub-sections to follow.

5.4.3 Erratic/zero supervisory contact

Research has demonstrated the importance of research students receiving regular feedback in constructive and positive forms (Hathorn et al., 2009), and that the nature of the supervisory relationship can be influenced for the better or worse depending on the manner in which that feedback is provided (Wang & Li, 2009). A number of the students shared experiences of erratic contact with and feedback from their supervisor, making it difficult to progress consistently with their studies. Mark spoke of his experience with his first supervisor and second supervisor (he requested and was allocated an alternate supervisor some way into his Master's journey).

Mark: I was constantly feeling like I was walking on eggshells around my first supervisor. There was a combination of lack of availability in terms of getting meetings, and there was no

room for dialogue because of the confrontational nature, and there were problems with my supervisor keeping appointments and also problems with temper issues. ... My second supervisor was quite good, but then left the country. He would only make very, very few meetings when he was around, and then he would disappear for 2 or 3 months. Not available much for meaningful engagement.

The narrative that postgraduate students often hear from and at institutions of higher learning is that great care is taken to craft supportive academic and learning environments that facilitate student success. Students are told of universities' commitment to developing skilled researchers and providing them with the resources necessary to accomplish their educational and career goals. This narrative contrasts with Mark's experience, and those of other students represented in this study. This data indicates a disconnect between what institutions of higher learning state they ascribe value to and seek to foster, and what many postgraduate students seem to experience in reality.

Nigel commented that for every singular round of submission of work and receipt of feedback from his supervisor, often up to three months would pass. Clayton shared similar experiences.

Clayton: I would say in the first year ... I was noticing that feedback based on my submissions of work were very erratic. I would send emails asking for advice or asking for some counsel based on work that I had sent in and emails would often go unanswered entirely for a month, 2 months at a time, without even an acknowledgement that it was received. My requests for a meeting were largely ignored. ... I explained that I was trying to get some time even just 15 minutes to just get some clarity on some work I had submitted, and I was told pretty much flat out that there was no time available and that a meeting could not be arranged and that my supervisor would get in contact with me as and when they were able to. ... it was becoming very difficult to make any kind of meaningful forward progress.

Nina's experience of supervision absence was relatively severe. The break in contact was abrupt, unexpected, and permanent. This development came early (around May of her first year) during the course of submitting her proposal to her supervisor, up until which time the supervisory relationship had seemingly been progressing well, with no issues. Nina had expressed her discomfort with a radical change in research topic that had been proposed by her supervisor.

Nina: That is the last conversation I had with my supervisor. Then my supervisor said, I will check your proposal and get back to you, and then we will send it off if everything is fine. Never heard from her again. ... She didn't seem too upset at me saying no to her proposed topic change. She just said, OK fine, it's your choice. But then I never heard from her again and I went to look for her during consultation hours. I called her office. I left messages with a secretary at the department for her to call me back. I mailed her countless times and she never replied up until today ... there wasn't even a point where it went skew because there was nothing to alert me. She asked very politely if I would like to change my topic. I very politely declined, and the conversation then continued about my proposal. And then, silence ever since.

Students' experience with erratic feedback and supervisor unavailability was common, and as a result, most of the students interviewed felt that their academic progress was held hostage to varying degrees. In each case, when this roadblock was hit, an alternate source of support was either unclear to the student, or entirely absent/unavailable. Students found themselves isolated and alone in the midst of a field that typically promises ample student support, but that in reality seemed structured to disenfranchise and disempower them. This notion of students feeling abandoned and marginalised – the contradiction between what students are led to expect versus what they actually experience – represents a common thread through much of the data. It is also worth noting that the power the supervisor wields within the field of postgraduate supervision is not an individualised phenomenon – it is characteristic of the way the field is created, and the way 'players' are positioned and how those positions maintained. This apparent status-quo of power imbalance and student disenfranchisement in the field of postgraduate supervision is replicated far beyond the scope of this study and the institution relevant to it.

Similar to the disruption of student expectations explored in sub-section 5.4.1, highly erratic or non-existent supervisory feedback also compromised student agency and resulted in feelings of frustration, uncertainty and hopelessness. Students lacked the means to take their academic journey forward in meaningful ways and felt powerless to effect any change in the regularity of engagement that they had with their supervisor.

5.4.4 Lack of support/empathy for students

The provision of mentoring and support to the student through supervision plays a key role in the student's development as a competent, independent researcher (Lee, 2010). The data collected

during the course of this study reveals that these elements are not always present in the supervisory relationship.

Kevin: So she would say for example, go and write a title. I had no idea really. When we did our Honours we wrote a small project, but it was in one course and then it wasn't compulsory. Now it's compulsory in the department to have a research project. So, it was almost the first time I came across a thesis, and so to say, go and write a big project ... you need to give me a guide ... when we wrote something, for her she would say: 'No, this is really bad'. I understand it was bad then, looking back at what I wrote then versus what I write now. I know it was bad. But I think my supervisor was really harsh – didn't have time for us. So, I don't think she was really supportive. I think when you are dealing with someone who has never been exposed to research, you need to be a bit cautious how you respond to their attempts ... There was also a way that she was treating foreigners. She was treating foreigners differently from the way she was treating nationals. She is a foreigner by the way from my own country. But I think she realised with foreigners, you are kind of desperate and you really need the money and you don't have any other source of income, so you will just bear with whatever is going on. So, what she then did was, she would make sure that she pays this national who was working on the project. It was required that she works with a national. So, she would pay her and wouldn't pay us.
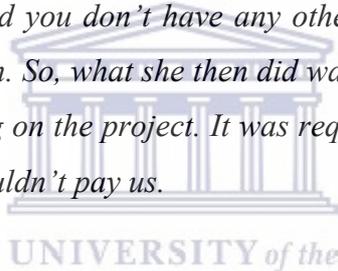
Although it is impossible to know with any certainty what motivated Kevin's supervisor's conduct, it is likely that Kevin's sense of alienation in the field as a result of not feeling adequately supported was exacerbated by the fact that he was literally a foreigner. The habitus that he brought into the fields of postgraduate education and postgraduate supervision, as a student living and studying in a country not his own, would likely have increased any difficulty he experienced in appealing to alternative academic authorities for support. Kevin's status as a foreign student may have potentially contributed to a mind-set of 'me versus them', especially in light of his feelings of not receiving adequate guidance in the field.

Some students not only felt inadequately supported, but completely abandoned, having experienced a support vacuum or even hostility from their supervisor. Nina had done everything in her power in an attempt to secure an alternate supervisor from the relevant academic department when she realised no progress was possible in her current situation.

Nina: ... the HOD wouldn't allow me to change supervisors. He said he spoke to her and she said that she hadn't received my mails. I said but here is the list of the emails and the list of calls and he's like you will need to speak to her because she's my colleague and I don't want trouble there either ... I got the very clear impression that I was being directed to solve my problems with my supervisor myself and I had no recourse there. I didn't feel that there was any other support available to me from the university. Even the Deans office. Because from the HOD, the next person up on the hierarchy was the Dean. The dean spoke to me and said, 'Look you need to speak to your supervisor – I called your HOD and he said he already told you to speak to your supervisor. We can't change supervisors unless she says that she can't handle your project for whatever reason' ... So, the next year came around, and I registered again with the same supervisor still on the record, and I revisited those conversations with the HOD and Dean. I said look, it's a new year. I am still willing to do this, and I want to pursue this, but I need a supervisor. I need someone to guide me because how do I get my proposal approved or my chapters approved, or anything approved if I have no one sitting at the table on my behalf? I was met with the same response - that I have a supervisor and I need to speak to that person.

Clayton also experienced a lack of supervisory engagement and had also made every attempt to secure alternate supervision support from the relevant department after becoming convinced that his academic journey was being severely stunted.

Clayton: At that stage, I wrote an email to my supervisor saying it seems that there is a lack of time to provide the kind of support that I need, and I respectfully asked if I could make arrangements to get another supervisor. At that point in time, essentially my place as a student at the university was placed under threat. I was told that I would essentially get the degree through my supervisor or not at all. It became very clear that the response I was met with when respectfully asking for an alternate supervisor was one of, I guess, aggression. It was contested. It was not met with any kind of support or empathy and I realised then that I was kind of in a bit of a battle ... So, suffice to say while I was initially even though very intimidated to have this conversation with my supervisor who is a very revered and established academic, I did so. But increasingly as I saw the response I was met with, it became more and more difficult to have that conversation and I realised that we were sort of locking horns and there was going to be no meaningful progress. ... After detailing my case, producing a bunch of written records via email and other supporting documents, essentially the first response from the Head of the Department was: 'OK Clayton, I hear what you're

saying, but let me actually tell you how all of this could be your fault' ... The impression I got at the meeting was that the protocol was going to be for the academics involved to sort of surround the supervisor with support and essentially make me out to be the bad guy ... I was getting no support from the head of the department or from the acting DVC at the time and I made the very carefully calculated decision and also the very difficult decision to completely abandon my programme in the existing faculty and in so doing, kissing goodbye the better part of almost 2 years' worth of work which represented a lot of sacrifice, a lot of time and energy invested which I had to throw away because I had no expectations of finishing my degree in that department and faculty in the foreseeable future without serious resistance and major consequent delays ... I also think there was an issue of...I think the supervisor really just not – if I could just be frank – giving much of a damn, when it came to really giving the relationship any kind of justice in terms of the kind of support that was required."

The contrast between what students are told to expect from the field of postgraduate supervision in terms of the support they will receive, and what they experience in reality as demonstrated by Nina's and Clayton's accounts above, is stark. Not only did these students not receive adequate guidance from the field nor any nurturing of their sense of agency within it, but they were instead also forced to fight their way through non-responsive and seemingly apathetic (even hostile) academic channels in what were ultimately futile attempts to secure alternate sources of support and guidance. It could be postulated that the field, in this case, seems to be structured to protect the supervisors' interests and position, rather than the students', which could be why both of these students were met with hostile, rather than empowering, responses.

After experiencing problems with his supervisor involving unexpectedly changing deadlines and deliverables, as well as being accused of conduct that he felt he was not guilty of, Kevin, like other students, felt compelled to escalate his concerns to the relevant academic authority – a decision that he found intimidating and difficult to act on. The difficulty for him was rooted in this hatred of confrontation and the intimidation and stress he felt in engaging in it. Kevin's natural inclination and preference was to avoid confrontation at all costs. However, his hesitancy in this regard was eventually trumped by a stronger motivating factor – his desire to make progress with his studies. His contact with the academic director did not go as he had hoped.

Kevin: After the altercation the Director said to me: 'You know Kevin, this is a small world. ... If you are not careful, if you have an altercation with this particular person then you may meet some other academic this side, maybe they know each other ... But if you don't want to,

it's still fine. If you can you can just apologise but if you don't want to apologise then it's OK.' I went and apologised to her ... She called me. After I had copied the HOD in my email response. She then called me. She said, 'Kevin, clearly we are not on the same page. Stop coming to the project and stop coming even to the facility. No longer come here.' She was the one who fired me. Then I thought to myself, I had to contest this because she had not given me any warning. She should have given me a warning and a written warning. She could have done that.''

The students who shared their experiences regarding a lack of support took no pleasure in conflict and were in fact intimidated by the idea of confrontation and speaking up about their circumstances. However, in the interests of academic progress, they felt compelled to escalate their concerns within the context of the proper academic channels, as best as they understood them at the time. In doing so, none of these students received the support they requested and hoped for. They were instead met with apathy or indifference, or hostility and aggression. It appears that the default position of the relevant academic authorities that were approached by the students for support was either to abdicate responsibility or side with the supervisor. In these instances, the reality of the power imbalance in the supervisory relationship was clearly demonstrated. The students had no meaningful agency or capital with which to improve their position in the existing field. There is also a recurring theme of students feeling abandoned by the very authority figures they eventually, hesitantly sought assistance from – authority figures who showed no interest in confronting the questionable supervision practices they had been made aware of. For these students, the field had come to be perceived as a hostile terrain that failed to live up to its promise of the facilitation of academic development and personal and professional growth.

One of Bourdieu's research interests was to understand how forms of hierarchy contribute towards maintaining inequality (Gopaul, 2015). As a sub-field of higher education, postgraduate education, especially, encourages students to develop skills of critical thinking and an ever-increasing habitus and agency as skilled researchers. Students are encouraged to question and challenge convention, at least in theory. However, what the data is revealing, based on the narratives of the students who participated in this study at least, is that students are expected to know their place, to respect their academic 'elders' and to be content with whatever form of support they receive, at whichever pace it is provided. Increasingly, this appears to be the primary common thread running through the data – the dichotomy between the field students are promised and led to expect, and the one they actually experience. As discussed earlier in Chapter 3 of this thesis, not every agent or player in the field has equal awareness and understanding of the rules of the game. Some players possess 'trump cards'

(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and differing volumes and calibre of capital with which to compete, giving certain agents in the field of postgraduate supervision (supervisors) significant power advantages and leverage over others (students).

5.4.5 Relational strain and conflict

Lategan (2008) has pointed out that conflicts are unavoidable consequences of being in an intimate (if professional) relationship for a considerable length of time. Sections 2.5 and 2.6 of Chapter 2 of this thesis particularly explored the nature and potential causes of conflict. Most of the students who participated in this study were no strangers to conflict in the context of the supervisory relationship.

> *Mark: I was constantly feeling like I was walking on eggshells around my supervisor ... there was no room for dialogue because of the confrontational nature and quick temper. I had also heard similar accounts from other students who were being supervised by this person ... I lost interest in my topic over time – I didn't feel my supervisor knew much about the topic or cared too much about it – my supervisor was retiring soon. My sense was that his heart wasn't in the supervision process.*

The data has already demonstrated students' need of an able and willing guide in the field of postgraduate supervision as they endeavour to transition to the status of skilled, independent researcher. An intimidating supervisory atmosphere, as experienced by Mark, does not foster an environment in which student's curiosity can thrive – one in which they feel safe and encouraged to ask questions, let alone one in which they feel empowered to constructively debate issues with their supervisor.

Clayton's relationship with his supervisor had become characterised by chronic conflict and strain that showed no signs of abating in his foreseeable academic future.

> *Clayton: The relationship continued to become increasingly strained because the lack of contact continued well into my 2nd year. ... Cutting a long story short, by the time I came to the end of August/beginning September of my 2nd year, I had not yet had my first face to face meeting with my supervisor for that year. So, there was not meaningful feedback given at all ... So, for whatever reason, I just got the impression that my academic progress was just not much of a priority at all. Then again, as I mentioned, when I respectfully asked for an alternate supervisor so I could make progress, I was met with threats and hostility from my*

supervisor, and things from there just went from bad to worse. So, I think also there was an element of professional ego involved, kind of a case of – how dare you cross me or how dare you question me? And the fact that I had the nerve to call into question the quality of my supervision and the gall, it seemed, to ask for an alternate supervisor. That just caused the existing strain in the relationship to be taken up a notch.

As previously mentioned, Kevin had also encountered strain in his relationship with his supervisor, whom he experienced as harsh, unavailable, and who had on numerous occasions sought to compromise his reputation and perceived work ethic in the view of the relevant head of department. Nina had grown weary of unsuccessfully attempting to engage with a supervisor who had completely abandoned her responsibility to her, and who continuously disregarded and actively brushed aside all of Nina's pleas for engagement and direction.

Consistent conflict in the supervisory relationship resulted in an ever-widening chasm between student and supervisor. Students exercised their limited agency in the field to avoid, address and then eventually navigate beyond this conflict as best they could, ultimately perceiving themselves as powerless to secure the support and intervention they sought via the proper academic channels.

5.4.6 Shared/common supervision experiences

The students who participated in this study were aware of the fact that the difficulties they experienced in their supervisory relationship were not unique to them. Students naturally talk amongst themselves, and in so doing sometimes come to learn of common supervision experiences that are often tied to specific supervisors.

Allan: So it's the responsibility of the student to find out which person they can work with if the department is open to students choosing their own supervisors. They have to find which person they can comfortably work with because that information is there from students. They will tell you: Oh, this supervisor will be able to finish in this period. The other one you will be able to finish in that period, like that. Students know. If you get a challenge with a certain supervisor, you might find it's not only you. You might find all other students that go to that supervisor – they always get stuck and they don't finish and get frustrated and all that.

Mark: I got hold of the director and I explained my issues. Eventually he came back to me and said they had received quite a few complaints, and eventually agreed to change the supervisor

... This notion that I encountered, of lecturers covering up for each other, it was also pretty common amongst other students I was in contact with. They would have similar experiences.

Nigel: Of the 5 of us that came through that project to do a Master's there, only 1 actually got a Master's in the end, and that took quite a few years and a few changes ... two of them dropped out round about the same time I did. One about six months before me, and one about six months after. And then I don't know about the last one.

It was noted earlier that the apparent status-quo of power imbalance and student disenfranchisement in the field of postgraduate supervision is replicated far beyond the scope of this study and the institution relevant to it. The data presented in this sub-section supports that observation, revealing that not only is the experience of the lack of supervisory support and the prevalence of conflict between student and supervisor common amongst the students who participated in this study, but it is also understood by these students to have been relatively common amongst their peers in the broader field of postgraduate supervision. This awareness gave some of the student respondents a sense of comfort, knowing that they were not alone in their experience and that therefore, at least possibly, the supervision challenges they encountered were not a result of problematic attitudes or behaviours on their part. However, any sense of comfort they derived did unfortunately not translate into any meaningful academic progress for the students.
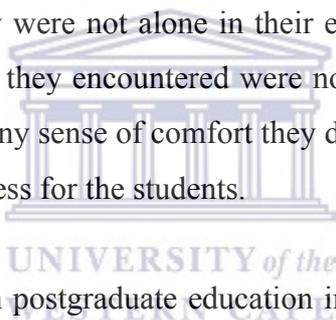
We seem to have reached a point in postgraduate education in South Africa where more than 100 doctoral graduates per million per year are required by 2030 – graduates who can contribute meaningfully to the country's knowledge economy – yet there is a bottleneck of stunted academic progress exists at Master's level. If the default position in the field of postgraduate supervision, particularly at Master's level, is one of protecting the supervisor and marginalising the student, the next generation of confident, empowered PhD graduates and researchers may be compromised. Furthermore, for those students who do manage to complete a Master's degree facing the kinds of struggles seen in this data, there is a question raised as to how many of them may leave their Master's programme wanting nothing to do with PhD research. If the data in this study is representative to any significant degree of what happens to a larger extent at this specific institution of higher learning, and in the higher education sector as a whole, it highlights serious questions and concerns relevant to the field of postgraduate supervision in South Africa and beyond.

5.4.7 Changes in research topic

One of the issues that emerged regularly in the data is that of the unexpected change in research topic. Most of the students interviewed experienced this challenge at some point in their relationship with their supervisor, and it compromised the enhancement of their cultural and symbolic capital in the field as a result of their stunted academic progress.

> *Nina: She mailed me later that day to ask if I want to consider changing the topic to the one she suggested. I said, listen that doesn't sit well with me … it's not something I want to pursue, and I don't see how it fits into this field at all … I later found out that the topic she suggested was something that she was working on with another department at this university.*

In Nina's case, not only was the change of topic completely unrelated to her previous research and what she and her supervisor had agreed upon, but it became apparent that the change was motivated by her supervisor's intention to use Nina's research in support of her (the supervisor's) own research project. Nina's experience in this regard raises questions about one aspect of how the field of postgraduate supervision may be structured, as regards the pressures or temptations supervisors are facing, either relevant to publishing targets mandated by the institution or based on financial incentives associated with publishing. These may be influencing them to use Master's students as little more than their own research assistants.

Nigel experienced repeated changes in research focus that grew increasingly substantial over time.

> *Nigel: My topic changed a lot – basically between each of our interviews or several interactions you would find new angle to explore or a new topic entirely, and then at the same time I would be interested as well, so I could pursue that, so it derailed my progress a lot … In thinking about it now, the changes they grew bigger over time. So initially there was a topic and the changes were within the range of that topic and then later on everything gets scrapped and restarted. That happened at least 3 times with complete restarts. I had already been collecting data as well, then the changes that came after that meant the data collection was invalidated … I wouldn't say it would've been disrespectful, but it seemed presumptuous to contradict someone who has had so much success in his field.*

During one of the few interactions he had with his supervisor, Clayton also experienced an unexpected change in research focus that resulted in wasted time and effort.

Clayton: So, towards the end May/beginning June I started to have some real concerns. When I did manage to secure a meeting towards the middle of my first year in the programme, my supervisor told me that the focus/topic of my study needed revision, that he might not have done a good job of initially articulating the focus of the study, and that I would need to shift gaze. This meant that the work I was forced to do in isolation over the preceding months was largely wasted. This was exactly the kind of confusion that I was hoping to avoid through regular and meaningful supervisory contact. In fact, it's the exact the point that the supervision guide I mentioned earlier made as well.

These changes in research focus significantly hindered the students' academic progress, and their response to the circumstances they faced in this area were varied. These responses are explored in section 5.6, dealing with how students' habitus manifest in the face of supervision-related challenges and how it influenced the choices they made in attempting to navigate issues they were facing.

5.4.8 Thesis subordinate to supervisor's project

Another challenge faced by most of the students interviewed for this study was the realisation that the importance of their thesis and making meaningful progress towards completing it, in the opinion of their supervisor, seemed subordinate to the larger project(s) being run by their supervisor and that they were part of as research students.

Nina: I later found out that the topic she suggested was something that she was working on with another department at this university. It was a collaboration. So, she had asked a few of her students to change their topic in some form that would include doing whatever research in the Eastern Cape around the same sort of base and then our understanding was then that we would have to conduct research and collect data on her behalf, for her own bigger project.

Nigel: I don't think my supervisor even noticed delays in the progress of my thesis because he was checking with me about a whole bunch of other stuff as well on the side, and there were other projects besides the thesis that we were running. So, I don't think he ever really noticed the thesis until the very end.

Kevin: I later realised that my supervisor was busy with many projects, so the pressure was just too much for her. But she would then say, the focus is not on your research project, not

on your thesis, it's on the project. Then I'm thinking, yes, it's on the project, but we also have to do work on my thesis. ... I think that her focus was on the funded research project because of the deliverables. Our own work was really compromised because of that ... she wanted people who would work on her project, and I think she was really concerned about money. So, we were used as pawns. I think she took us so that we could work on her project.

Clayton: When my supervisor eventually made contact with me, it wasn't to provide me with the guidance I needed. He attached an academic article written by one of his research students and asked me to edit it prior to it being published as part of the project he was running. Suffice to say, I was not a happy camper.

Kevin's use of the word 'pawns' appropriately encapsulates what the data in this sub-section appears to suggest. The students' own research interests and passions were stifled and side-lined. Instead, they were viewed and used as pawns – useful for protecting 'more important' pieces in the game and facilitating their advancement across the field of play. It is a continuation of the theme expressed previously – the common thread running through the data that highlights the contradiction in the field of postgraduate supervision between the theoretical value placed on seeing students advance and succeed, and the bottleneck brought about at the Master's rung of study by inadequate supervision practices that ultimately hinder students rather than help them.

The students who participated in this study entered the field of postgraduate supervision, most of them having little to no say regarding which supervisor they were paired with, expecting and/or hoping to be met with an environment that would give them the best chance of achieving their academic goals. These hopes and expectations were severely compromised by the challenges they faced, as outlined in this section. The impact that these challenges had on the students' capital in its varying forms, is the subject of the following section.

5.5 Impact on capital

This section examines the ways in which the various supervision-related challenges discussed above have impacted the students and the forms of capital at their disposal. For a detailed discussion of capital, as it is referred to here in the context of Bourdieu's theorisation (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), kindly refer to section 3.2 of Chapter 3.

5.5.1 Academic impact

As would be most expected, the supervision-related challenges experienced by the students had a profound impact on their academic progress. In most of the cases, the problems encountered were severe and persistent enough to make the students' completion of their programme of study virtually impossible.

> *Nina: I even applied at a different institution and they didn't want to accept me just on the basis of my supervisor being one of their colleagues. So, they said, even if you apply at every other institution in the country, we all know each other because we all work in the same field, we run in the same circles, and there is the matter of peer review of one another's work ... I began to understand that unless my supervisor actually intervenes and gives me either what I need by way of helping me progress in my existing programme, or by way of giving me permission to find another supervisor, I am stuck, and I can't do anything ... I thought about picking it up this year but, just because of what happened the last time, I honestly don't see a way forward for myself in this. As much as I want to obtain that Master's degree, where am I supposed to go now? ... I got that feeling with the Dean, because that was his attitude, that it was a matter of my word against my supervisor's ... I took it as far as I could take it and couldn't take it any further. I had to abandon my academic plans.*

Nina's observation regarding how academics operate in a small field and resist upsetting its equilibrium by risking offending one another represents a powerful insight into the way the field works regionally and nationally to protect current allocations of power, position, and capital that significantly favour the supervisor over the student. In her case, this resulted not only in her loss of power in the immediate field of postgraduate supervision she shared with her supervisor, but also in the broader field of postgraduate education within which she was unable to secure an alternate academic trajectory.

> *Mark: I committed two years to full-thesis by research, and then had to change to three years of structured MA with course work. In total, I spent five years at the Institution with no success. Eventually I had to leave. I couldn't afford to live in the country any longer.*

> *Nigel: I had the feeling that there was something not quite right, either in terms of the structure of my course, or the lack thereof, or the progress I was making, or the lack thereof. But I wasn't quite sure how to go about addressing it or what avenues were available to me to do so. It was either going to chug along at the pace that it was, or eventually I was just going*

to get fed up and drop out, which is what I ended up doing ... I did learn a lot in the taught components, got to work with various techs and stuff, so it wasn't a complete waste, but after the taught components were over, then everything felt like a big waste of time. Yes, I learnt interesting things, but I never get to use them in any fashion, so it felt like I had largely wasted at least, say 6 months of my life. And in the end, I never succeeded in getting my degree.

Associated with the issue of academic impact is the subject of the forced termination of most of the students' study programme – forced in the sense that they had exhausted all reasonable and official means available to them, or that they were aware of, in an effort to make meaningful academic progress. As Golde (2000) and Lovitts and Nelson (2000) have pointed out, most students who self-terminate do so silently and almost completely unnoticed by relevant departmental and institutional figures and/or structures. The existence of exit interviews that shed light on the issues contributing to self-termination are relatively rare. The feedback on this issue provided by the students participating in this study provides an intriguing glimpse into their motivations and reasons.

Ultimately, students enrol in a postgraduate programme in order to earn their degree – all other benefits are peripheral to, or as a result of, this primary goal. Therefore, the academic cost described in the data above represents the greatest loss associated with the supervision-related challenges described in this chapter. Some of the students interviewed were able to pursue an alternate course of academic action in another faculty or at a different institution; others like Nina and Nigel have never attained their desired qualification. For all these students, the loss of time and the wasted effort cannot be reversed, only potentially mitigated. Nina and Nigel were left demoralised by their experiences and had, as at the time of the interviews, lost all confidence in or desire to pursue academic advancement. Mark spent five years at the South African university in question and was eventually left with no choice but to leave the country without the degree he desired. Essentially, none of the students interviewed – with the exception of Allan who was able to choose his supervisor – were able to attain their degree in collaboration with the supervisor they were paired with. The impact on the students' symbolic and cultural capital – as represented by successful academic achievement – was substantial and long-lasting.

What are other implications are associated with students' not attaining the qualification they desire? Their academic success at Master's level would have potentially resulted in a myriad of associated benefits and the accumulation of various forms of capital. These include their access to the PhD level of study and further enhanced cultural and symbolic capital (academic pedigree), access to

higher levels of economic capital through improved career opportunities, and generational benefits in light of their achievements paving a smoother path for their children and family members to pursue similar academic advancement. Additionally, these students' inability to complete their degree also resulted in a loss to the knowledge economy in their specific discipline and in the country at large due to potentially meaningful research that never got completed and published. What is also unfortunate is the distaste that some of these students developed for any further involvement in academia at all.

5.5.2 Emotional impact

Kiley (2011) notes that when either supervisor or student falls short of meeting the expectations of the other, that stresses of varying kinds can crop up in their academic relationship. The strain and anxiety associated with the supervision-related challenges experienced by the students took a significant emotional toll on them.

Nina: So, I mean, as a paying customer then, not even as a student but as a customer, I am very unhappy about service delivery … I sort of feel like a juvenile delinquent. I have that sort of feeling … It makes me feel like they just wanted to get my money, and that's that, with no concern for actual service delivery, because once the money was paid no one had any empathy for me after that. I am still disappointed until today.

Mark: My supervisor was very authoritative; their word is law. The difference in stature makes tackling the supervision issue difficult, particularly for those students who shy away from confrontation. My self-esteem was knocked, and I felt stagnated – seeing others making progress, going on with their lives.

Clayton: The emotions that it brought up in me were feelings of great frustration, lots of confusion and also fear around investing a large chunk of time and energy into work and not knowing if I was doing the right thing and if what I was working on would be second guessed later on, or if I would be told that it was irrelevant and that I should be working on something else instead. So, it was quite difficult to make any kind of meaningful progress … The friction and the confrontations that ensued when I eventually raised the issue with my supervisor led to an incredible amount of emotional stress. I felt the need to seek counselling from the university's counselling centre.

https://etd.uwc.ac.za

Kevin: I dreaded my supervisor at some point. It's like, she's coming … she was like a mom, but at the same time she was quite heavy-handed, and I think it crushed our spirit. I think one needs confidence in life, you know. I need to feel confident that I can do something, and I need that encouragement that says: You know, you're not doing it well, but you can. I don't think we had that support. At some point I thought maybe I cannot do this, or maybe this is too much for me … When I would think about the situation, I would think of deleting the emails because just reading the mails was painful. Even hearing my supervisor's name, just the name mentioned would bring pain into my heart … This was really a difficult time.

The data relating to emotional impact speaks of students who battled feelings of despondency, disappointment, frustration and despair. Whether they avoided confrontation and largely suffered in silence or attempted to exercise a sense of agency in escalating their concerns through the appropriate channels, none escaped the field of postgraduate supervision emotionally unscathed. A journey that was meant to provide a sense of stimulation, growth, constructive challenge and reward had instead devolved into one of anxiety, frustration, and even dread for all the students concerned, to a varying extent.

However, the real and potential consequences of this emotional impact are more far-reaching. Many of these students' future habitus as skilled, independent researchers were significantly damaged. Not only will some of them not develop into the kinds of academics they aspired to become, but even for the few who do manage to progress into higher levels of research, the wounds associated with their emotional trauma will likely accompany them for some time, to one degree or another influencing how they in turn mentor other students. As is the case with the academic impact discussed earlier, the real, eventual cost is practically impossible to quantify accurately.

5.5.3 Financial impact

Given the fact that most of the students interviewed for this study were unsuccessful at completing the academic programme they enrolled in, it stands to reason that there was an associated loss of financial capital that accompanied their exit from the programme in question. For example:

Nina: I got that feeling with the Dean, because that was his attitude, that it was a matter of my word against my supervisor's. So, I just decided, that's that, money wasted. I am out for the count.

Mark: There was time lost with academic delays. ... I had to partially support myself through financial pressures and difficultly finding work. I worked two jobs, and then xenophobia in the country added to the work and financial pressures I was facing as a foreign student, so challenges of survival became real. Eventually I had to leave. I couldn't afford to live in the country any longer.

Allan: Students who have got funding, they have got less worries and they are more settled, compared to students who have funding challenges and all that. Like, when I did my Master's, I had to think about rent, I had to think about transport and all of that. My student account was still showing I had debt and I was getting these messages and emails from student management, and it was so hectic ... Yet, while someone is just struggling and hanging in there for two months without a response to work submitted...where is this person going to get all this extra rent, extra transport, for an extra 3 months?

For Nina, the loss of financial capital was the result of being unable to complete her degree, with no option for the reimbursement of the course fees she paid. Nigel, Clayton, and Mark faced a similar consequence. In the case of Mark and Allan, the relatively limited financial capital they brought into the field of postgraduate education – capital largely informed by relative socio-economic disadvantage – was placed and further strain by supervision-related challenges and resultant delays in their studies, thereby further compounding the pressures they were facing. Additionally, to reiterate a point made previously, these students lost the access to higher levels of economic capital which would most likely have been brought about through improved career opportunities attributed to the attainment of their Master's degree.

5.5.4 Physical impact

It is also reasonable to expect that the academic, emotional, and financial toll that the supervision-related challenges took on the students would inevitably affect their physical wellbeing as well. The acute and chronic stress the students faced became manifest in their lives in various physiological ways. For example:

Clayton: I experienced chronic fatigue and exhaustion. As someone who has always been quite healthy, I found my body quite run down and I had become prone to all sorts of infections that I had never dealt with in my life before. These included a foot fungal infection, gingivitis, issues with tension and inflammation in my back, bronchitis – and all these things

experienced within a course of a few months against a backdrop of previously never really being sick at all to that kind of extent. There was a huge physical toll on me and emotionally as well. I just felt for a long time under an incredible amount of stress, strain, intimidation, and having to navigate those waters, and trying to find a way out and a path in a new faculty was one of the toughest things I have ever had to face. So, it was very difficult on all sorts of levels.

Kevin: I think I lost a lot of weight as well. It was a really difficult time for me. Mostly I would sleep, I remember that very well. I would sleep, wake up. I was exhausted. I was tired and I had fatigue. I can't really do anything. You feel that you failed. I felt like time is passing me by and maybe I should have done things differently.

The negative academic, emotional, financial and physical consequences experienced by the student participants were not experienced in isolation. Rather, it was common for an impact in one area to result in a knock-on effect in another/others.

If one imagines a straight trajectory between two points, A and B, with point A representing these students' entry point into their Master's programme, and point B representing their successful graduation and emergence as skilled, confident researchers, how did the combined effects of all the challenges and consequent impacts they faced influence their habitus development as emerging researchers? For five out of the six students interviewed, the knocks off course from this trajectory were acute and chronic enough so as to make their arrival at point B practically impossible. The field of postgraduate supervision (specific to the context of the Master's programme they shared about) not only failed to facilitate the development of these students' habitus as confident and enthusiastic researchers – it in fact worked actively against them, constraining the academic potential that their Master's programme was meant to recognise and nurture.

5.6 Habitus manifest

Bourdieu (1999, 2000) employs the concept of habitus – discussed in section 3.2 of Chapter 3 – for the purpose of attempting to explain individual and social behaviour, and the link between the structure of a field and a person's or organisation's agency within it. The agent/student in the field of postgraduate supervision may in some cases be at least partially aware of the impact of habitus on their choices and perceptions, while in other cases (more commonly) may be entirely oblivious to its influence. The focus of this section is on how students' habitus contributed to their choices

and actions in responding to supervision-related challenges, in addition to how their journey through their Master's programme, reflected above, influenced their further development of habitus.

5.6.1 Accepting and confronting challenges

Allan articulates a habitus brought into the field – and shared by a number of the students represented in this study – that contributed to an attitude of acknowledging and confronting the challenges he was faced with.

> *Allan: … At times you are accepting your situation and take it as it is, and so I had to accept my situation and take it as it was, and make sure that I was also putting in that extra mile … I have to console myself, I have to do everything, which wasn't quite easy … Some supervisors might not really understand the situation that students are in, and you might find that in most cases someone is of course struggling with standard of living, accommodation, and all that. Yet, someone is just hanging in there with 2 months without a response to work submitted, and now, where is this person going to get all this extra rent, extra transport, for an extra 3 months? But as I said, it's one of the challenges that they accept as the situation that it is.*

Allan was mindful that there were forces at work within the field that were beyond his control, but he endeavoured to improve his position in it as best he could. He came to expect little to no support from external sources and took it upon himself to champion his own progress in the field, or at least his efforts to navigate the circumstances within it. It could be that there exists an inherent, built in side-effect of the field of postgraduate supervision – which privileges the supervisor over the student – that leads students to believe that to succeed is to do so alone, and against the odds, rather than with help, support and guidance. Based on the data relevant to this study, it appears that at least five of the six students interviewed would consider that to be the case.

5.6.2 Student proactivity and/or tenacity

In light of the challenges they were facing in the field, the students in this study exhibited a great deal of proactivity and grit in doing whatever was in their power to advance in the field and make progress with their studies. Where circumstances had them feeling boxed in and trapped, they went to great lengths in attempting to find a way forward – some with greater boldness than others, depending on the levels of confidence and determination they brought into the field. Despite whatever level of confidence each student had, their fight to make progress was a difficult and intimidating one.

Nina: ... I went to look for her during consultation hours. I called her office. I left messages with a secretary at the department for her to call me back. I mailed her countless times and she never replied up until today ... I even requested a meeting in November that year with the HOD and I said: Can I change supervisors? I met with the Dean of the faculty as well ... I even applied at a different institution and they didn't want to accept me just on the basis of it's one of their colleagues ... I didn't drop out. I registered the following year again, just thinking if I registered, they have to give me a different supervisor. But they didn't. I got the same response. They said, but you have a supervisor – you need to speak to your supervisor.

Mark: I got hold of the director and I explained my issues. Eventually he came back and said they had received quite a few complaints, and eventually agreed to change my supervisor ... Initially it was difficult – I'm not comfortable with confrontation. Eventually I felt obligated to speak up and take action to seek an alternate path – time was being wasted. I had to make progress

Clayton: I actually tried to make contact with my supervisor continuously. I went to the individual's office, spoke to the assistant and on one occasion sat there in the office physically until the supervisor walked in, ... and I was told pretty much flat out that there was no time available and that a meeting could not be arranged ... At that stage I then decided to escalate my concerns through the proper channels which was the Head of the relevant department who I called a meeting with and at that meeting there was also present the Acting DVC, one of the acting DVCs of the university at the time. Also present was my counsellor who I had been seeing at the university's student counselling centre. ... In the process of reaching the decision to quit my programme, I had also been making plans to contact an alternate faculty so that by the time I had reached the end of my 2nd year in my initial programme, I would have been ready to take up a brand new Master's programme in a new faculty and to start my academic, or to at least, continue my academic journey essentially from scratch with a brand new topic and a new research project.

When Master's students drop out of their academic programme, those observing from a distance may propose numerous reasons or theories to make sense of their non-completion. These narratives may speak of students being lazy, or not really wanting to obtain their degrees badly enough. Students may sometimes be characterised as being difficult to work with, resistant to constructive feedback, or simply weak or incompetent learners, among other behaviours and attitudes. Of course,

there are instances in which these characterisations may be completely accurate. However, the data collected in this study suggests that there is more to the picture. In some cases, these characterisations represent only part of the story. In other cases, they are entirely false. The actions illustrated in the data above are not those of students who are lazy or indifferent. These are the actions of students who were eager and desperate to attain the academic achievement that motivated them – at least in part – to enrol in their Master's programme in the first place. Through intense anxiety and a sense of intimidation in a field characterised by an imbalance of power, these students, if nothing else, demonstrated their desire for academic progress and success that they were willing to fight for.

Having the willingness to fight (or at least an understanding of the need to do so), and the capacity to effectively do so, are of course different things. The students in this study had experiences of being subjected to injustice – whether real or perceived – within the field of postgraduate supervision. Addressing this injustice was no easy task for any of them. Their relative lack of power, capital and agency in the field made speaking up for their rights as they understood them, very difficult. In some cases, the students were acutely aware of their hesitation to confront intimidating circumstances, while in others, avoiding conflict was motivated by a sub-conscious behavioural script. In truth, in all the cases it was most likely a varying combination of both scenarios. For example:
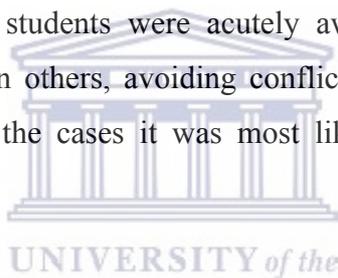
Clayton: While I was initially very intimidated to express my dissatisfaction to my supervisor who is a very revered and established academic, I did so. But increasingly as I saw the response I was met with, it became more and more difficult to have that conversation and I realised that we were sort of locking horns and there was going to be no meaningful progress.

Nigel: It didn't even occur to me to escalate matters when things started going wrong. I mean, no, as far as I was concerned, the supervisor is the person running the project, and I went with that.

Acceptance of the existing structure of the field made it all the more difficult for Nigel to challenge something that seemed 'right', or at least, something that was accepted by him and everyone around him as simply being the way things are.

Kevin: I respected my supervisor as an elder. I think at some point I felt, this is a bit too much. I'm a quiet person, quite reserved – and I don't want to be confrontational and all

those kinds of things. So, in fact at one point after the fall out, one person came to me and said, you know what, we can take this forward and escalate. I said let's not. I don't want to be involved in her downfall. I don't want to do that.

Regardless of the conscious or sub-conscious motivations that either prompted students to actively have their voices heard, or to avoid tackling the issues they were facing head on, one of the common threads through these stories is the difficulty each student experienced in communicating their frustration and concerns to their supervisor and to the broader academic structures.

5.6.3 Student disillusionment

Nina and Nigel speak of a sense of disillusionment that most of the students who participated in this study had come to experience at some point during the course of their Master's journey.

Nina: I probably should have said to my supervisor from the start, you better choose the topic and my name just goes on the research, because it seems like that's the only way a student gets the degree. It's when it's not about your own idea, it's not about your research or your personal interest in a certain topic. It's whatever your supervisor wants, and then they get to say, I supervised so many people for the year and this is why I deserve my bonus at the end of the year ... So as much as you would want to think that postgraduate research is about your own investigation and your own interests and wherever you want to be in your field, it doesn't really feel that way ... I literally don't take anything at face value anymore. I will admit I was dof,[3] even when I went to see the HOD, I didn't believe that this woman was simply not responding to me. I literally thought she was on sabbatical, forgot to tell me she was doing something, she had a family crisis or something.

Nigel: I got myself a full-time job. It felt more productive because I was getting stuff done on a daily basis that were going to not disappear. And then my response was basically to start neglecting it, so then I just concentrated on work instead of the thesis ... I definitely started interacting a little less, and when my supervisor suggested bigger changes, I would just ignore them mostly. So, I would say my apathy was largely unconscious at first, but maybe towards the end I was very conscious of what I was doing ... I had the feeling that there was something not quite right, either in terms of the structure of my course, or the lack thereof, or the progress I was making, or the lack thereof. But I wasn't quite sure how to go about

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[3] "Dof" is an Afrikaans term meaning slow or dull of mind, or, possibly also in this context, naive.

addressing it or what avenues were available to me to do so. It was either going to chug along at the pace that it was, or eventually I was just going to get fed up and drop out, which is what I ended up doing.

It is this kind of disillusionment that contributed to the majority of the students ultimately giving up their fight for progress within the field and abandoning their academic journey in the programme they enrolled in. The strain associated with the challenges they encountered eventually become more than they could or were willing to bear. The students entered their academic programme with a shared, common aspect of habitus as learners in and strangers to the new field of Master's supervision. Their habitus as knowers and researchers was not fully given the opportunity to evolve and grow in the field but was instead undermined. It is reasonable to propose that their decision to terminate their studies was motivated by, in ways unique to each student, their undermined, wounded habitus operating at both the conscious and sub-conscious level.

5.7 Student insights/suggestions

This section explores the feedback of the student interviewees to the relevant South African university (and to others), to supervisors, and to students with regard to potential supervision-related enhancements and constructive student advancement within the fields of postgraduate research and supervision.
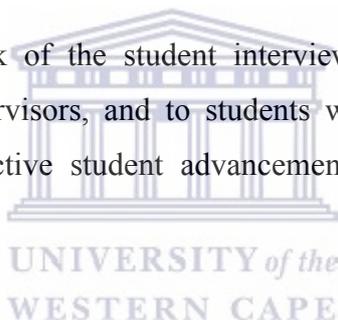
5.7.1 Academic versus supervision expertise

Some of the students articulated their understanding of the difference between an academic's research pedigree and expertise, versus their capacity to effectively teach and impart knowledge.

> *Allan: So it can be quite challenging because on the one hand you have to find someone who has the right experience, published in the field that is of interest to you, but it also has to be someone that is going to help you get through in a timely way and assist you to complete as strongly, and also as quickly as possible as well. So, it can sometimes be difficult to find a match on both counts.*

> *Mark: Just because a supervisor has got a real strength in a particular research area and a strong academic gift, that does not necessarily translate into an effective teaching approach. Supervisors ought to understand that the process is like coaching – like football – be invested in the student's progress and success – be passionate, own it.*

Clayton: I think lots of people might be quite accomplished as academics and researchers but that does not necessarily translate into the kinds of temperament and personality and social skills that it takes to become an effective teacher or a coach or a champion of a student's academic programme ... I would say to supervisors - remember the times when you yourself were a student, when the journey was confusing and intimidating and often overwhelming, when you needed the kind of support that your students need from you as a supervisor and be there for them.

The majority of the students interviewed had no doubts regarding the research competency, experience and skill that their supervisor(s) brought to the supervisory relationship. However, what they did express a desire for was a supervisor who exhibits greater levels of empathy, patience, and understanding in imparting the knowledge that they have.

5.7.2 Accountability/support structure needed

One theme that was strongly expressed among most of the students interviewed is the importance of structure in the field of postgraduate supervision that serves to hold both the student and the supervisor accountable to each other, to the relevant academic department, and to the University as a whole.

Allan: The department might not be able to say to a supervisor, 'you are not fulfilling what you agreed on with a student'. So, I think for the department or university, change something – have supervisors give their report as to why this student is not progressing. Which I think if it's taken seriously, would be a good thing for students, because other than that, it can be hard for a student to know to control the supervisor if it's the supervisor's nature to change what's expected of the student ... If a structure says to the supervisor, you have to give feedback on what you have done so far, what you have covered with the students, give a report – those reports, if they are looked at, which I don't know – but I think if the system was kind of like that, then it would be easier for the supervisor and the student as well ... Also, I think the students should be given a chance to have somewhere to sign or to find out what the supervisors have said. It's not a project of only a student or a supervisor. It's a project between these two. It's a relationship they have together, so it will be very unfair if the student doesn't have the chance to comment on or sign to say: OK, I confirm what the supervisor is saying ... We have this person, this student, who is a little bit inferior, and there

is this superior. So how do you balance those two relationships? It has to be enabled by the system so that the student is also is able to speak out, is able to raise their voice.

Nina: There has to be some kind of MOU system in place and a higher checking point … At undergraduate level you have course evaluations. Something like that needs to be implemented at postgrad level where you say, this is what your relationship and your experience has been like with your supervisor, and someone has to tally that and respond if there are issues … There needs be some kind of rating of postgraduate supervision and an MOU that needs to be agreed upon, either each year, or each semester … You need to be open to listen to your students. We aren't just little bags of money to fill your pockets. There is a certain service delivery point that has to be taken into perspective and you can't just say to the student that you are not working, or you are being uncooperative, so that's that. Yes, there is the SRC and whatever, but does it really need to be taken up that far then? Do we need to start a protest to get attention every single time we have an issue?

Nigel: For the wider university, I don't want to say they can't just let these people run their own sections, but they should ensure that students and supervisors all check in with the rest of the department or faculty at the university at some point. They need to interact with them, report their research to them, get wider feedback on a more regular basis, rather than just relying on one person's vision to guide the whole programme … I very rarely go the formal route, but ultimately, I would have had to in my situation, and if there had been something like an MoU in place, then at least I could have felt like I wasn't imposing on him anytime I wanted him to do something. I don't like the term MOU because it sounds so high level, but yes, that kind of thing would definitely be helpful to pretty much everybody doing their thesis.

Clayton: To the institution I would say there has to be a better structure in place for keeping both students and supervisors in the supervisory relationship accountable towards one another and to the institution. In my case, there was a lack of any MoU. It was sort of a gentleman's agreement based on verbal agreements, but that proved to be completely fruitless, and when things did start going skew, there was nothing I could point to that had been signed by my supervisor or by me to really call to account either of us in the relationship. So, that lack of structure really made way for I think the abuse that I experienced. So, I think the university needs to be mindful of putting structures in place that holds both parties accountable.

The desire expressed by the students to operate within a field governed by comprehensive accountability structures is of interest. It speaks to the mindset of students who are willing to have their own conduct placed under greater scrutiny, and who are willing to submit to this kind of structure if it brings about conditions in the field that are fair, just and empowering.

5.7.3 Importance of an orientation process

A number of the interviewees expressed the value they believe would be derived from a thoughtfully created and implemented orientation process for postgraduate students – a process that would serve and benefit students and supervisors alike.

> *Mark: I feel like for the institution, they should have a week where students can negotiate a MoU. They should have a panel of lecturers, who share the student's interests, do some simple presentation, like say: 'I'm Dr so and so, this is my research interest, this is the kind of research I've done, this is how it would work' … students could also introduce themselves and share why they're here and what they're working towards.*

> *Nigel: Students should know the wider university, their department, the faculty, and they should know what the positions or levels of authority are and how they can go about getting things done. They should know about the postgraduate school of studies and that they can get help there … I think it would be useful for there to be a more comprehensive and official, even like an orientation process, for postgrad students, where they know how they fit in the big scheme of things, the kind of services available to them, like the postgrad institute or who they could contact if they need to escalate matters or get a second opinion as a sounding board.*

> *Clayton: I think it would be beneficial to students to also be able to attend workshops that inform them of what their rights are, what is expected of them, and also to inform them of what structures are in place, or avenues that they can pursue when it comes to trying to or needing to seek support when they feel the support is not forthcoming in the immediate supervisory relationship.*

5.8 Conclusion

The clear, common thread running through these student narratives is the contradiction that exists in – these students' experience at least – between what the field of postgraduate supervision assures students of in terms of support and empowerment, and what it actually delivers in practical, real

terms. Each student interviewed for this study experienced supervision-related challenges to some degree, along with the difficulty of attempting to navigate them. They entered the fields of Master's research and postgraduate supervision mindful that they did not possess the capital necessary to succeed without the guidance and support of more experienced 'players' and authorities in the field – their supervisor(s) and relevant academic support structures.

For five out of the six students, these challenges resulted in significant damage to their habitus as emerging researchers, and ultimately in the non-completion of their academic programme. These five students exited the field of postgraduate supervision without the degree they desired, with no enhancement of their capital, and no fulfilment of their academic potential. Instead of the support and guidance they needed and anticipated, the field proved to be a source of stress and difficulty that impacted their lives in a variety of damaging ways. The next chapter explores and summarises the findings and recommendations associated with the analysis of the collected data presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to provide six Master's students at a South African university with the opportunity to tell their stories about challenges they have faced in their postgraduate supervisory relationship. Given the South African National Development Plan's recognition of the need and value associated with producing significantly higher levels of PhD graduates, this study focused on the Master's rung of the academic ladder because PhD research is dependent on the successful completion of Master's-level study. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What sort of supervision-related challenges have Master's students experienced and what impact have these challenges had on students' ability to succeed at this level?
- How did these students perceive these challenges and how did the resultant perceptions influence their response to the circumstances in question?
- How have Master's students navigated these challenges in research supervision?
- What dynamics are evident in the supervisory-relationship that influence attitudes, choices and actions?
- What can we learn from both student successes and struggles that can inform changes in the field of supervision that will benefit other students and supervisors?
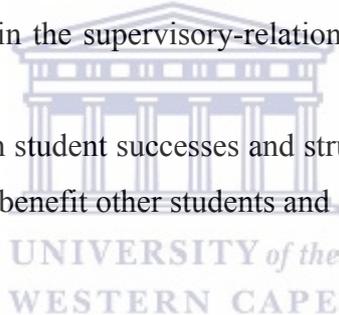
6.2 Findings

This study was conducted through a narrative research process. I conducted semi-structured interviews with six Master's students who have encountered and attempted to navigate supervision-related challenges – challenges related to the completion of a full or mini research thesis.

6.2.1 Limitations of the study

In preparing to discuss the findings and implications of this study, it is important to be mindful of its limitations. This study was conducted using a relatively small sample size. While this limited sample size allowed me to chronicle each student's experience with challenges in postgraduate supervision reasonably comprehensively, it also means that care must be exercised when it comes to extrapolating the findings of this study beyond its specific data set. I have therefore endeavoured to remain mindful of avoiding liberal, sweeping assertions about the broader fields of postgraduate

supervision and postgraduate education that enter the realms of speculation and presumption, unsubstantiated by the data relevant to this study.

The analysis of the data yielded the following answers to the research questions, which have been used to structure this section of the chapter.

6.2.2 Challenges encountered

The students faced a range of supervision-related challenges, most of which were common to all of their experience. These challenges were:

- Strain and conflict resulting from mismatched expectations between student and supervisor,
- Unexpected shift in supervisor attitude/availability and erratic/zero supervisory contact,
- Lack of support/empathy for students – both from their supervisor and from broader academic structures/channels,
- Relational strain and conflict – often subsequent to students questioning supervision quality,
- Unexpected and drastic changes in research topic that significantly hindered students' academic progress, and
- Students found that progress with their own thesis was subordinate to the progress made on the supervisor's related or independent project.
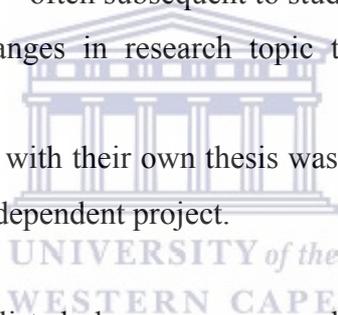
The supervision-related challenges listed above vary somewhat from key related findings on the subject uncovered by the literature to date. The data shows little (if any) correlation to Wisker, Robinson and Shacham's (2007) findings on the negative impact of feelings of isolation on students' progress, and/or students' difficulty in adapting to a one-on-one working relationship with their supervisor. While the students interviewed for this study most likely experienced these issues at least to some degree during their Master's journey, none of them highlighted them as key factors influencing their academic progress. Similarly, the issues of religion and spirituality (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), culture (Nilsson, 2007), gender (Petersen & Gravett, 2000), and sexual orientation (Long, 1997) played little to no role in these students' Master's experience. It is also worth noting that issues related to socio-economic disadvantage (Badat, 2010) were not highlighted by the interviewed students among the challenges that directly impacted their supervision-related experience.

https://etd.uwc.ac.za

The observations of Wright (2003) and El-Ghoroury (2012) that students possess varying levels of personal determination that can directly influence their ability to overcome obstacles encountered in the course of their studies, were reflected in the interviewed students' tenacity in addressing and navigating the challenges they faced, even if their attempts ultimately proved futile in the face of a lack of meaningful support structures. The data also corroborated research findings indicating that when students and supervisors hold inaccurate or unrealistic expectations of each other (Kiley, 2011; Lessing, 2011; Wisker et al., 2007), problems potentially emerge in the supervision relationship. Kiley's (2011) point that when either supervisor or postgraduate student fails to meet the expectations of the other, varying problems and stresses can take hold, is supported by the data in this study. Furthermore, some of the students did express their need of a guide in the new (to them) field of postgraduate supervision and study, bringing to mind the findings of Gascho-Rempel (2010) and Govender (2011), noting students' level of academic preparedness as it relates to academic writing ability, and their knowledge about how to conduct effective research independently, as possible factors affecting research completion.

The challenges encountered by the interviewed students related to their thesis being side-lined by the supervisor's research project, the lack of support structures and empathy available to students who seek help, drastic changes in research topic/focus, and abrupt and prolonged supervision/supervisor unavailability are as yet not represented in the literature to a significant extent.
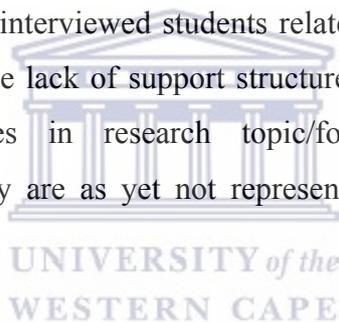
6.2.3 Navigating challenges

Students attempted to navigate these challenges through direct contact with, and appeals for help and support from, their supervisor. When this approach yielded no positive results, students then sought intervention from relevant, 'higher' academic channels such as the head of department or the dean of the faculty. Some students also sought assistance from other independent institutional support structures such as writing coaches and counselling services. Not only did the students exhibit proactivity in pursuing the courses of action outlined above, but they also did so with determination, and despite feelings of intimidation and their experience of great emotional stress. I have not encountered research in the literature that specifically focuses on measures Master's students have adopted in an attempt to navigate the kinds of supervision-related changes referenced in section 5.4 and sub-section 6.2.2. This relative gap in the research may well be due to the limited research that has been conducted on the subject of postgraduate supervision from the student's perspective, as mentioned in sections 1.2 and 2.8 of this thesis. Of course, this is not to suggest that

research of this nature is entirely non-existent. It does, however, suggest that it is currently relatively under-represented in the literature, and that there is a need to invest more research effort and resources into illuminating this specific area. Because the student voice is often over-looked or silenced in fields marked by unequal power relations, such as postgraduate supervision, listening to, and validating, students' experiences of this field offers us an important perspective into how it is structured, and the implications of this structuring.

6.2.4 Supervision-related dynamics

Each student experienced a great sense of intimidation in expressing their concerns – both to their supervisor and to broader academic channels – related to their inability to make consistent (or any) academic progress. These students had no desire for, and took no pleasure in, confrontation, preferring instead to actively avoid it. However, with this intimidation eclipsed by their desire for academic progress, they took the step of making their concerns known. As outlined in sub-section 5.6.2, despite facing significant emotional stress, students demonstrated proactivity and determination in sharing their concerns with their supervisor, and subsequent to feeling that this action yielded no constructive results, also with relevant academic channels – heads of department, deans, and academic directors – in an effort to secure alternate forms of academic support. However, as demonstrated in sub-section 5.4.4, the students' requests for supportive intervention did not yield the results they had hoped for.

Universally, the response these students were met with ranged from apathy and indifference at best, to aggression, manipulation and hostility. These students became acutely aware that the fields of postgraduate supervision and postgraduate education that they had entered with a sense of anticipation and enthusiasm could not be depended on for guidance, nor any recognition, nurturing, and enablement of their academic potential and their habitus as emerging researchers. Instead, they encountered a field that, in their experience, appeared structured to maintain and protect the power of their supervisor and broader academic authorities – a field in which the students felt powerless to exercise a sense of agency in any meaningful way. One student's use of the word 'pawns' articulates what the data seems to suggest – the students' own research interests and passions were stifled and side-lined. Instead, they were viewed and used as pawns – useful for protecting and advancing 'more important' pieces in the game, their supervisors in this instance. As this realisation set in, the students were overcome with increasing feelings of disillusionment, powerlessness, and hopelessness, eventually resulting in all but one student's decision to withdraw from their academic programme.

6.2.5 What can we learn?

What can be learned from these student narratives? There are a number of common threads that run through the student stories that raise issues worthy of consideration. First and foremost, there exists a stark contradiction between assurances given to these students by the fields of postgraduate education and supervision in terms of the support and guidance they could expect, and what they experienced in reality, referenced for example in sections 5.4.3, 5.4.8, and 5.8 of this thesis. Among the various factors that have been identified as impacting and impeding the completion of postgraduate research and associated throughput rates (see section 2.5), this contradiction in the fields of postgraduate supervision and postgraduate research merits being named among them. It is my suspicion that this dichotomy in these fields negatively influences postgraduate students' (Master's students in particular) habitus as researchers and their chances of successfully completing their research to an extent far greater than the literature currently alludes to. It represents a subject worthy of further research and examination. The apparent status-quo of power imbalance and student disenfranchisement in the field of postgraduate supervision is replicated beyond the scope of this study and represents another common thread in the data. Not only did most of the students interviewed experience the same phenomenon themselves, but most of them expressed their awareness of the associated supervision-related challenges being experienced amongst their broader student peer group(s). The data presented in sub-section 5.4.6 attests to this fact.

The next common thread has to do with the fact that students desired and welcomed structures that would hold them (and their supervisor) accountable (sub-section 5.7.2), and demonstrated great resilience and persistence under stressful conditions in seeking out support and solutions in light of the challenges they faced (sub-section 5.6.2), contradicting any potential speculation that they did not succeed because they were lazy, indifferent, did not want it badly enough, or were resistant or antagonistic towards feedback/criticism, etc. Furthermore, this proactive and determined behaviour exhibited by the students interviewed for this study stands in contrast to the phenomenon of behavioural self-handicapping – a student actively manufacturing an obstacle or embracing conduct that is likely to impede performance – highlighted by Snyder et al. (2014). On the contrary, these students demonstrated behaviour in keeping with a desire for academic progress, and the drive to exercise the relatively limited capital at their disposal in the field to attain it.

Finally, the challenges the students encountered took a significant academic, emotional, financial, and physical toll on most of them, with 5 out of the 6 students interviewed ultimately unable to complete their academic programme. The fact that limited research has been done on postgraduate research from the perspective of students (as mentioned in sections 1.2 and 2.8), and that the

existence of exit interviews shedding light on the reasons behind students' decision to self-terminate can be few and far between (Golde, 2000; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000), suggests that the reasons presented in the literature for poor throughput rates in postgraduate studies in general, and Master's studies in particular (see sections 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7), paint a picture that is incomplete, at best. The research data presented in this study suggests there is great value to be derived from further study into the supervision experience of Master's students – in their own words and from their own perspective.

The data collected for this study bears testimony to one of the aspects of Bourdieu's research interests – understanding how forms of hierarchy contribute towards maintaining inequality (Gopaul, 2015). It has demonstrated how capital, while theoretically open to all, is by definition unequal in its distribution in the field (Grenfell, 2009). These students found themselves in a disempowering field within which they were unable to enhance or leverage the capital at their disposal. The research has confirmed the notion that conflict is an unavoidable consequence of being in an intimate (if professional) relationship for a lengthy period of time (Lategan, 2008), and that problems potentially arise when the student's expectations regarding supervision, and those of the supervisor(s), are at odds (Wisker et al., 2007).

Similarly, this study has affirmed the argument made by Kiley (2011) that when either supervisor or postgraduate student fail to meet the expectations of the other, challenges and stresses of varied kinds can arise. Petersen's (2007) assertion that supervision training is critical to the supervision process as it relates to empowering supervisors with the expertise to be successful in supervising the students under their guidance, has also been demonstrated in the data, as has Halse's (2011) emphasis regarding the importance of supervisor training and development before the act of supervision begins, formally provided as supervisor professional development. Ultimately, the research has confirmed Bailey's (2002) observation that the supervisory relationship plays a crucial role in the successful completion of the degree, capable of making or breaking the student's research experience, with potential damaging ripple effects experienced on a personal, institutional, and societal scale.

6.3 Implications

The findings resulting from this study's data hold implications that are relevant to stakeholders at various levels in the fields of higher education, postgraduate education, and postgraduate supervision, from education-orientated policymakers in government and the higher education

sector, to supervisors and students themselves. These implications are far reaching and widely relevant in this manner because the issues at hand – the efficacy of postgraduate supervision and the cultivation of new skilled and independent researchers – exert an international, national, regional and institutional influence that is almost impossible to exaggerate. A key implication relates to the issue of supervisor training, raised by most of the students during the course of their interview.

For example, one student mentioned that there ought to be a preliminary course for supervisors which could prepare them for the responsibilities of supervision and spell out the skills and attitude required. The student went on to say that if a lecturer wants to be a supervisor, he or she has got to be certified, and a refresher course should be required every four years. Another student expressed the belief that it is important that supervisors, particularly, embark on thorough, meaningful training, saying that there are many people who may be quite accomplished as academics and researchers, but that does not necessarily translate into the kind of temperament and personality it takes to become an effective teacher, coach, or champion of a student's academic programme. In this student's view, supervisors need to be informed of what is required of them in terms of emotional quotient and temperament in order to be able to handle the myriad of challenges that students face. Finally, another student echoed the need for supervisors get some training from the university or institution in question – perhaps in the form of workshops where they get exposed to relevant supervision techniques and guidelines. This student also noted that it is one thing to be intelligent and an accomplished academic or researcher, but it is another thing to be able to guide a student or to teach effectively.

With reference to the abovementioned student's comment about supervisors being exposed to relevant techniques and guidelines, one potential learning is that a systemic approach, rather than a university-based approach only, may be needed. Some universities will have more resources than others, but if the system demands the implementation of this sort of supervisor training, and necessary funding is made available and 'ring-fenced', capacity could then be developed beyond what currently exists, thereby reaching more supervisors. This could also normalise supervisor development and training, as opposed to making it seem special, or only for 'bad' supervisors.

Another key implication relates to the contradiction – a key common thread – that is evident in the student narratives, as has been previously stated, between what the fields of postgraduate education and supervision claim to be about in terms of facilitating student success, versus the supervision breakdown and dysfunction that can occur in reality. Remedying the bottleneck phenomenon at the Master's rung of study (Mouton, 2010), which significantly compromises successes with respect to

PhD throughput and research skills development, requires that this contradiction be recognised, acknowledged, quantified, and addressed.

6.4 Recommendations

The implications of this study open numerous potential avenues for further relevant and worthwhile research. These avenues include:

- Exploring the prevalence, nature and causes of Master's supervision dysfunction in the field of South African postgraduate education;
- The contradiction in the field of Master's supervision – examining the dichotomy between what students are promised, versus what they encounter in the field;
- Further researching the prevalence or lack of supervision training in the South African higher education sector, along with the core elements comprising this training (and arguing its inherent deficits);
- Examining the importance and relevance of 'soft-skills' development in supervisor training and practice – the coach versus the expert, and why (or why not) students require one over the other;
- The role of emotions in influencing Master's and/or PhD students' success; and
- Researching the potential value and most effective means of cultivating students' habitus as emerging researchers – beyond academic development, equipping postgraduate students with aspects of Emotional Quotient that help them develop a temperament that facilitates success (proverbially teaching students how to fish).

6.5 Conclusion

For Pierre Bourdieu, field is an arena of contestation, characterised by struggle or tension (Martin, 2003; Wacquant, 2007). This understanding of the concept of field has been clearly and consistently demonstrated by, and represented in, the data that comprises these student narratives. Their experiences in the field of postgraduate supervision were epitomised by the struggle for, and the imbalance and maintenance of, power. Hart (2012) has argued that promoting the capacity to dream and aspire in a supportive environment is a goal necessary for helping students to fulfil their academic promise and evolve into skilled and independent researchers. This kind of guidance and encouragement nurtures academic potential and reduces students' vulnerability in the relevant field (Dubois & Rousseau, 2008). It is unfortunate that the students who participated in this study were not beneficiaries of a nurturing environment such as this.

It is my hope that this study – along with an increased research focus beyond it on the contradiction in the field of Master's (and postgraduate) supervision between the guidance and support that students are promised, versus the struggles they experience – will help facilitate the identification and implementation of policies and strategies that secure ever-improving chances of academic success for future postgraduate students intent on achieving it.

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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Thousands of postgraduate students in South Africa successfully graduate each year – testament to numerous rewarding and fulfilling student-supervisor relationships. However, postgraduate research throughput and problems associated with appropriate supervision are and remain key focus areas for many higher education institutions around the world. The supervisory relationship is not one-sided. A productive and rewarding supervisory process requires that both student and supervisor(s) are committed to fulfilling clearly articulated responsibilities relevant to the research project at hand. Additionally, while good supervision speaks to the competencies and strengths of a particular academic, it is also an institutional responsibility.

In South African, the higher education landscape is increasingly fraught with varied challenges, including issues related to attrition and completion rates. South African universities are grappling with challenges related to rapid and significant transformation, an increased proportion of student bodies who hail from historically disadvantaged groups and who are relatively unfamiliar with library resources and the practice of autonomous research. Additionally, lecturers are navigating larger student numbers and ever-changing curricula and teaching methods. Students are also increasingly aware of their rights, insisting on competent and accessible supervision.

The need exists to adopt measures that improve postgraduate completion results. Failing to do so not only has a potential negative financial impact on the student who may be penalized for not completing his/her programme within the designated timeframe – there are also risks linked to lost research contributions, and the associated waste of precious time, effort and resources suffered by the student, the supervisor(s) and the relevant institution.

This study will aim to shed light on some of the reasons why a number of Master's students at a South African university have encountered perceived supervision-related problems severe enough so as to warrant them seeking out professional counselling services. Along with an examination of postgraduate supervision in South Africa and beyond, the research will take the form of profiles and stories of the relevant student participants, based on a narrative approach involving face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The study will examine the impact that these problems have had not only on the students' academic progress, but also on their emotional, physiological and (where relevant) financial wellbeing. The research will also seek to highlight the strategies these students have adopted to navigate and cope with the challenges in question. The study will invite the participation of students studying at Master's level who have made contact with counselling support services in an effort to navigate supervision-related dynamics. The students will be invited to participate via flyers and posters that will be on display in the reception area and counselling rooms

of the counselling centre. Introductory contact will be initiated via email, WhatsApp, phone call or face to face, in keeping with what each student is most comfortable with.

Risk statement - Should a participant experience any emotional discomfort as a result of the interview process, appropriate professional counselling has been arranged with the manager of the counselling centre from within which the students have agreed to participate in the study. The counselling centre provides free professional counselling to registered students on a variety of issues, including navigating challenges in postgraduate supervision. This counselling service will, as mentioned, be free of charge, i.e. the participant will not incur any costs or inconvenience. Some of the participants may already be in pre-existent contact with a counsellor they are comfortable with. For those who are not, the manager of the counselling centre will assist them in identifying a counsellor they are at ease with. Counselling centre manager: Contact details removed.

Anonymity and confidentiality - The audio and written transcripts resulting from the interviews, as well as the signed consent forms, will be stored digitally in a password protected hard drive and in a password protected folder in Google Drive (to guard against computer malfunctions), and both the hard drive and any physical data (forms, notes, etc.) will be stored securely in the relevant academic department. The principal researcher alone will have access to the relevant folder passwords, and will grant the supervisor access to the data as needed. Any relevant physical data and hard drive(s) will be stored securely in the relevant academic department. The data will be stored for five years after the completion of the study, and the results will be included in the researcher's dissertation, and also in conference and journal papers. All applicable publications will adhere to ethical guidelines regarding the anonymity of the participants themselves and other identifying details they may reveal (e.g. a comment that could point to the supervisor's identity). The participants' anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms, and participants will have an opportunity to review their transcripts before the data is used in the thesis, to check that the narrative is a true representation of their story, and to flag any concerns they may have over anonymity or other relevant issues. Any comments they want excised or changed will be removed or edited accordingly, thereby further reducing any risk around confidentiality.

Should there be any questions about this research, kindly contact:

Principal Researcher:

Grant Alexander Cyster / Contact details have been removed.

Supervisor:

Dr Sherran Clarence / Contact details have been removed.

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS SHEET

MA Study: Narratives in postgraduate studies: Stories of six Master's students who have experienced supervision-related challenges at a South African university

Introductory Statement: Thank you for participating in this research study, designed to gain insight into your supervision-related experiences as a postgraduate student at a South African university. The aim of the study is to explore the challenges you've perceived and experienced in the context of your supervisory relationship. Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however, the researcher would be grateful if all questions are responded to.

1. Describe the process by which you were paired with your supervisor, and what sort of formal supervision structure or arrangement was agreed upon?

2. What were your expectations of the supervisory experience at the start of your course, in terms of the nature and regularity of contact, and what were these expectations based on?

3. Do you believe that your expectations were realistic and legitimate? Why, or why not?

4. How far into your research was your concern first raised regarding the nature of your supervisory relationship, and what were the initial warning signs for you?

5. What was your initial response to the problem(s) that you perceived to be emerging in the context of your supervision, and what sort of emotions did these challenges evoke in you?

6. How comfortable were you in sharing these concerns with your supervisor? Were there suitable platforms or places where you could share your concerns?

7. In your opinion, what was the cause of the problems in your relationship with your supervisor?

8. What do you think you could have or should have done differently as a student that may have minimized the risk of the problem occurring, or even prevented it altogether?

9. What ultimately led you to seek or consider seeking counselling support from the University, or to withdraw or consider withdrawing from your Master's programme?

10. How have the supervision-related challenges you've experienced affected your academic journey, or any other sphere of your life?

11. Based on your personal situation and the experiences you have had with the supervisory process, what advice would you offer to students, supervisors and the institution?

APPENDIX C: INITIAL DATA CODING TABLE

General Codes	Emergent Codes	Comments
Challenges	Conflicting Research Deliverables Differing Expecations Erratic/Zero Supervisory Contact Expectation-Based Friction Inadequate Feedback/Engagement Insufficient Supervision Capacity No Student Support Relational Strain/Conflict Shared Supervision Experiences Shift In Supervisor's Availability Supervision Not Prioritised Supervisor Changing Topic Supervisor Lacking Empathy Thesis Subordinate 2 Project Unexpected Supervision Vacuum Varying Supervision Quality	Chronicles the various challenges and/or obstacles the student participants encountered in the context of the superviosory relationship.
Field Readiness	Knowing/Fighting 4 Rights Masters Supervision Dependence Masters Versus PhD Some Postgrads Ill-Prepared Student Unfamiliar With Context	Students' orientation to and preparedness for the field of postgraduate supervision at Masters level.
Field Structure	Deviating From Structure MOU in Place No Accountability/Guiding Structure Structure Sometimes Ineffective Student Expectation	The respective rules governing the six supervisory-relationships
Habitus Manifest	Accepting & Confronting Challenges Student Disillusionment Student Proactivity/Tenacity Students' Difficulty Communiucating Supervision Causing Self-Doubt	How students' habitus contributed to their choices and actions in responding to. supervision-related challenges
Impact on Capital	Academic Impact Compromised Completion Rate Emotional Impact Financial Impact Financial Influence/Strain Forced Study Termination Impact of Strain/Pressure/Conflict No Recourse Available Physical Impact Wasted Effort & Time	How the various supervision-related challenges have impacted the students and their forms of capital.

Part 2 of the table can be found on the following page.

General Codes	Emergent Codes	Comments
Pairing Process	Pairing - How It Should Be Relationship-Based Choice Research Potential Supervisors Student Chooses Supervisor Student Recruited To Project Supervisor Allocated - No Choice Supervisor Pursues Student Supervisor Tied 2 Project	The process by which the student was paired with his or her research supervisor.
Power Imbalance	Academics Supporting Academics Diificulty Changing Supervisor Dishonest Supervisor Conduct Healthy Dialogue Impossible Hostile Supervision Approach Impact of Power Imbalance Misappropriating Student Research Perceived Supervisor Prejiduce Student Lacking Agency/Power Supervisor Mischaracterising Student	How differences in and the influence of student and supervisor capital were manifest.
Student Insights	Academic vs Supervision Expertise Support Structures Needed Orientation Process Needed Student Feedback Important Student Peer Support Supervision - Soft Skills Key Supervision Training Required	Student feedback to the institution, supervisors and students with regard to potential supervision enhancements.