

**Sibling Ghosts in the Machine: Sibling transference in PhD student-supervisor relationships<sup>i</sup>**

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In this short piece I focus on some of the ways that unconscious emotions emerge within a higher education context, specifically between doctoral research students and their supervisor(s), to think about how teaching and learning relationships are constituted both psychically and socially, between personal lives, institutions and social structures. Looking at the less rational, more unconscious aspects of the researcher-supervisor dynamic illuminates some of the gaps in current accounts of those relationships and their place in the construction of academic identities. More specifically, I want to go beyond the traditionally vertical focus of teacher-learner relationships to explore the significance and reach of siblings in inner and outer worlds.

The idea that relationships between students and teachers necessarily hold something of the parent-child dynamic is a universal one and is enshrined in policy and practice regarding all pedagogic relationships from primary schooling to doctoral supervision (Bibby 2010). But although siblings may appear in discussions of classroom group dynamics amongst pupils and students, the possibility that teacher-learner relationships could also hold and carry unconscious elements of other, lateral childhood relationships, particularly those with sisters and brothers, is far less explored. These are generally viewed as exclusively vertical and therefore not seen as subject to psychosocial forces that are more horizontal in origin and character. This is not to say that the parental dimensions of teacher-learner relationships, even those between adults, as in higher education, are not obvious or extremely important (Saltzberger-Wittenberg 1983). Rather than deny the significance of parents in relational conflicts and issues, I want to join others in thinking about the ways that the vertical and lateral dimensions in psychic life may 'entwine with' and 'infuse' one another (Vivona 2007).

Sibling studies have recently enjoyed an expansion of empirical foci and theoretical consideration in sociology, social psychology, psychoanalysis and psychosocial

studies (Mauthner 2002; Edwards, Hadfield, Lucey and Mauthner 2006; Sanders 2004; Punch 2008). Some psychoanalytic writers have argued that there has been a neglect and under-theorisation of sibling and other 'lateral' peer dynamics in psychoanalysis with a lively debate ensuing about how psychoanalytic theory and practice could or should go beyond Freudian-informed takes on the place of siblings in the structuring of the psyche (Coles 2004; Mitchell 2003; Sherwin-White 2007; Rustin 2007). Attempts to think outside the traditional confines set by the dominance of a universal Oedipus complex include Prophecy Coles' work on sibling transference (Coles 2007). Coles maintains that it is not enough to understand relationships with brothers and sisters as a transfer from parental ones, when it is clear that children often 'create triangles among themselves that are independent of oedipal parental triangles and these triangles exert a powerful influence upon psychic development' (Coles, 2003: 2).

The case study that I draw on comes from a small piece of research carried out by Chrissie Rogers<sup>ii</sup> and myself in which we asked three women who had completed a doctorate to write about and then talk to us about their relationships with their PhD supervisors (Lucey and Rogers 2007). Importantly for us, all of the respondents were sympathetic to the idea of unconscious dynamics and two had undertaken individual psychoanalytic therapies. We began by asking them to write a few pages describing and reflecting on various aspects of their relationships with supervisors. The women's own analyses were not altered, but they were theorised in the light of a psychoanalytically informed psychosocial framework, and the women gave their approval for this interpretation of their experiences to be used. The case that I will look at here is from Sarah, a white working class woman and her relationship with one of her PhD supervisors.

### **Emotions in teaching and learning**

Over the course of doctoral study the supervisor-research student relationship may involve two or more supervisors. For the supervisor this relationship is likely to be one of many working relationships. For the research student however, it may be an extremely important, even the *most* important one, for between three and six years. Much of the interaction between research student and supervisor(s) happens in

private. In the space of the supervisor's office, interpersonal dynamics shape the experience that each has of the other. There are rules, but these may be subject to the personalities and preferred working styles of the two parties. Here, the dry rationality of university board and funding-body rules and regulations gives way to the power of experience and biography, and to the ebb and flow of emotions, anxieties, investments, wishes and needs, where the messiness of everyday human states and states of mind are part of the matrix that makes this relationship work, or falter.

The idea of emotion in teaching and learning, and in the relationship between students and teachers, holds a troubled place in theories of education. Perhaps this is partly due to the disturbing shadows cast by the libidinal relations of teaching and the paradoxical place of desire in learning (Todd 1997). But emotion is most certainly woven into the constantly shifting sands of (in)dependency in the classroom and supervisors office and in pedagogical frameworks that enshrine the notion of the independent learner (Bibby 2010). As Anne-Marie Cummins (2000) points out in relation to study skills literature aimed at students in higher education, difficult emotions, while recognised, are viewed as a troublesome by-product of the learning process, rather than being a fundamental part of it. In this framework, the learner must learn to bring messy, confusing, blocking or destructive internal states under control through the harness of rationality. This is primarily achieved through reflection on the part of the student, for instance on what kind of learner you are (deep or surface for example), and the mastering of a set of skills and cognitive routines that can be acquired through appropriate training.

In this higher-education study skills literature there is less focus on the quality of relationship between teacher and learner, whilst in the large advice and guidance literature for PhD students and their supervisors, there is, to a greater or lesser extent, acknowledgement that the relationship between the post-graduate student and the established academic(s) that take on the supervisory role has quite an impact on the experience of doing, and supervising a PhD (see for example, Wisker 2005; Finn 2005; Philips and Pugh 2000; Delamont, Atkinson and Parry 2004). However, the same split between emotion and cognition and the insistence on a rational approach that Cummins refers to is maintained.

Existing discussions of student-supervisor relationships are often premised on the assumption that all aspects of the dynamic, including dimensions of power, can be known about, talked about and institutionally governed. This presupposes a hyper-rational model of the subject and indeed, of institutional life, in which people relate to one another in clarity and ‘truth’, seeing and hearing only that which is ‘really there’ and entering into the relationship entirely unencumbered by the traces of previous experience. Whilst literature on how to get a PhD and/or how to supervise one does not steer clear of the kinds of difficulties that can arise in student-supervisor relationships, there is an underlying assumption that the source of the problem is open to identification; that it can be known and named and then solved within the framework of a professional, institutionally bound relationship. These texts focus on the positive: how to build the kind of student-supervisor dynamic that will support smooth progress of the student’s work through all the various stages of their research and end in the desired outcome for both student and supervisor - the successful completion of a doctorate and award of PhD. Such texts often construct the relationship as a pragmatic and prescriptive one, and one that is conducted between adults. Imbalances in power between student and supervisor are rarely made explicit in either personal or institutional discourses. Of course, there are strengths to this approach. Students and supervisors need to gather a set of practical and intellectual skills: supervisors must be able to effectively direct the student and help him or her towards a gradual accumulation of successes in the various tasks that need to be undertaken during the course of the doctoral journey. Meanwhile, at times students need to take the supervisor’s direction, as well as take responsibility for delivering on concrete tasks, such as producing a transfer report. But this model of learning and learners as apolitical, free from a psychic (or any other) history and unaffected by personal or institutional power, domination or resistance (Cummins 2000), can only get us so far in thinking about the more difficult aspects of ‘the PhD Journey’.

Student-supervisor relationships are constituted in and through multiple locations and sites. As institutional relationships, they are inscribed with the dynamics of hierarchy and subject to formalised codes of practice and conduct. As well as institutionally and professionally defined, these relationships are personal: they may be conducted in relative privacy; they may be intimate and at times intense. Of course there are always

exceptions to this rule (Silverman 2005), but most research students need, want and indeed expect support and guidance throughout this journey.

As with all educational ventures the PhD process carries a multitude of investments for the student and the supervisors. In the current audit culture in universities, where PhD students are bureaucratically ‘processed’ and constantly pushed to ‘progress’ (and show the evidence of that progression) towards completion, these investments are more likely to be about enhancing career prospects than anything else. Students who want to study for a PhD out of a desire to learn about and develop their own interests may not be as concerned about enhancing their careers and therefore may be less concerned with producing a thesis within a given time (Cribb and Gewirtz 2006). However, these students are antithetical to the advent of a performance and auditing culture in HE. This kind of *laissez faire* attitude towards completion is not only discouraged but also actively legislated against in most universities, leading to far fewer who are motivated in these ways. It also has an effect on the production of academic knowledge – the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of it. With intense pressure to successfully complete within 3 (full-time) or 6 (part-time) years, there is less time for uncertainty and not knowing, both prerequisites for learning, for students and supervisors. This pressure may encourage the position and power of a more senior and well known academic to decide what does and does not count as appropriate academic endeavour or knowledge to students (and relatively junior colleagues). Feminists and others have written of the difficulty of finding a voice in the ‘expert system’ of academia where so often power is established and exercised in the silencing of counter-arguments. Furthermore, the problem of speaking cannot be separated from the audience that one is speaking to and ‘Many students experience the presence of this academic Other in terms of the theft of their capacity to speak and make sense of their own experience’ (Hoggett 2000: 116).

In the following discussion of Sarah and her relationship with one of her PhD supervisors, I take up ideas about power, knowledge and voice to think about how early object relationships can come into play in this highly charged pedagogic context. But whereas most psychosocial texts on teaching and learning focus on the ways in which parental object relations come alive in situations of teaching and learning (Britzman; Boldt and Salvio), I explore the significance of sibling object relations.

With regard to Hoggett's notion of the 'academic Other', this may resonate just as easily with 'a heroic or critical older (or other) sibling' (Mitchell 2003: 12) as with a parent. However, the internalisation of siblings as figures of authority 'confronts the psyche with difficulties that need to be distinguished from internalised parental figures. For instance, sibling relationships do not seem to be given up or worked through in the way we have come to expect from oedipal conflict' (2003 12).

### *Sarah*

Sarah is a white, British woman, from a working class background who works as an academic in the UK. During her doctoral studies she had four different supervisors. Her account of one of these relationships brings to our attention the power of a different kind of transference, not so much to do with early parental relationships but with strong childhood bonds with older sisters (Coles 2003; Mitchell 2003; Lucey 2010). This example also highlights that, while positive transferences and projections may be hugely beneficial for student and supervisor, they can also eventually come to represent a bar to a realistic understanding and appreciation of our own creative resources.

Sarah first registered for a PhD in the social sciences in 1995 and got along so well with her supervisor, Dr Fraser, that when she offered Sarah some part-time research work she didn't hesitate in saying yes. Sarah felt hugely supported by Dr Fraser. Importantly, she felt that Dr Fraser was able to recognise her potential as an academic and wanted to nurture that.

She would ask for my opinion about the research and really encourage me to take risks, to say what I thought. Then I couldn't believe it when she thought that my ideas were really good. She seemed to be able to do something with my words and ideas. I don't know, turn them into another language, an academic language that I was dazzled by. I was dazzled by her to be honest.

In Sarah's written account of her relationship with this supervisor she linked her tendency to form 'strong, positive bonds with women who are about 10 years older than me' (as was Dr Fraser) with her relationship with her sister, also 10 years her senior. This much loved and admired older sibling provided help, protection and comfort for Sarah when she was a child. Crucially, for this working class girl who, at

that time, was the only child in her family and on her estate to go to grammar school, she acted as a patient and kind intermediary between home and the outside world. This was partly because, although her sister did not do well at school, she was intent on social mobility and respectability through work and semi-professional training. As a child and then a teenager, her sister introduced Sarah to new ideas, social experiences, and was able (perhaps more than their parents) to advise and guide her in relation to 'the future'. This mediating aspect of the sisters' relationship was mobilized again in Sarah's growing bond with Dr Fraser, who Sarah felt offered her recognition for her cleverness, understanding of her lack of confidence and a bridge between Sarah and a terrifying academic world. Coles notes that sibling transference can be very positive: 'highly seductive, compelling and loving' (2003: 13) and this seems to describe well the initial relationship with Sarah's supervisor.

Of course, there were vertical dimensions to their relationship – after all, Sarah was 10 years younger than her sister, and as is usual in families (especially for girls), her sister would have been expected to help look after her younger siblings in childhood. This parental aspect was certainly present in Sarah's description of her sister as carer and protector. However, in Sarah's mind, the 'dazzlement' by her supervisor was connected to childhood fantasies about a glamorous older sister. As a child she watched her teenage sister grow, in her eyes, 'into a beautiful young woman, who was incredibly confident and glamorous and had impossible amounts of freedom.' Although this was a mainly positive sibling relationship in which Sarah received care and protection, what she perceived to be her elder sister's confidence, beauty and autonomy also provoked some difficult unconscious feelings for Sarah. Admiration of her sister had led to both envy and a gradual psychic diminution of her own talents and qualities. As Sarah grew older tensions began to emerge in their relationship with Sarah feeling 'completely inadequate' around her sister.

I don't remember ever having any arguments with her, but I sort of became aware and she kind of let me know that it wasn't ok to disagree with her, about anything. And I do remember that was really frustrating, because she was coming out with a lot of things that I didn't agree with her about.

In her late-twenties, a violent row that in Sarah's words, 'came out of nowhere', caused the sisters to break all contact for two years.

Of course, the capacity to idealise is important; it helps us to fall in love and to maintain hope for a brighter future in conditions of adversity. Sarah's positive identification with Dr Fraser worked well for them both at first; they wrote and published well-received work together. Sarah however, had so thoroughly disowned her own capacity for intellectual work and her creativity into the figure of Dr Fraser that she was convinced that

all the ideas, all the good bits about the articles, all the cleverness belonged to Dr Fraser and not me. I knew that I couldn't do anything without her.

This meant that all the capacities that Sarah needed to function and grow as an academic were no longer available as internal resources for her to draw upon. By locating them in another, she ended up feeling utterly depleted of her own talents, disabled in her work and entirely dependent on Dr Fraser.

This is rarely a dynamic that can be sustained in perpetuity. Firstly, both Sarah and her sister had refused to acknowledge the rivalry that was present in their relationship by ignoring Sarah as a competitor. This competition and envy was again being refused in her relationship with Dr Fraser. Joanne Lacey's (2000) frank description of her emotional and academic relationship to both a body of work by working-class feminist writers and her PhD supervisor in terms of 'academic fandom' is important here. Although she 'worshipped' the supervisors' work and constructed her as a 'powerful mentor', Lacey also raises the spectre of her envy of the supervisor's success. She fantasised that these idealised figures had everything that she wanted but was struggling hard to get.

Secondly, it is a common experience for idealised objects to fall or be pushed off the pedestal on which they have been installed. The idealised object inevitably fails to live up to the ideal expectations and quickly turns into its opposite. Just as Sarah's relationship with her sister could not continue under the weight of her distorting idealizations, neither could her relationship with Dr Fraser survive Sarah's persistent projection of her own capacities, nor her subsequent disappointment in this 'dazzling' object.



Of course, this is a necessarily one-sided account, from the student's rather than supervisor's perspective. Although we can safely surmise that Dr Fraser brought her own unconscious defences, anxieties and fantasies to this relationship, we cannot know about the precise nature and effects of these in this particular relationship. Referring specifically to connections between professional relationships and sibling relationships, Docherty (1988) argues that 'close identification that idealizes the professional relationship and denies difference may offer the therapist or scholar a sense of the perfect, conflict-free bond with a peer that had never existed with a sibling' (p404). Narcissism is not the only preserve of the primary care giver: an older sister may also bathe in the idealising gaze of a younger one and come to view her as 'an admirable, younger clone' (op cit). Might it be that Sarah's highly flattering projections appealed so strongly to the narcissism of the supervisor (and were perhaps just as dazzling to her), that she was unable (or unwilling) to adequately repel them?

Although they may originate in internal, psychic conflicts, these disjunctions and distortions of experience are well supported in the competitive, highly critical world of academia (Gillies and Lucey 2007). Here, systems such as peer review, although sounding innocuous enough, merge powerfully and painfully with the critical dimension of the superego - the internal, nagging, often highly judgemental and surveillant authority figure. As Mitchell points out, isn't it just as likely to be our peers as our parents that provide the model for these ego-ideals (2003:4)?

Sarah's relationship with Dr Fraser gradually broke down to the extent that when Dr Fraser moved institution, Sarah was so 'furious' with her that she took the opportunity to continue her studies with two new supervisors. Sarah could easily have repeated this pattern within the new supervisory relationship, of idealization followed by furious disappointment, but she managed not to. While the pain of disillusionment is hard to bear, if it can be tolerated, it can provide the basis for relationships in which the failings of the self and the other can be recognised and (at least some of the time) accepted. Sarah's new supervisor relationships worked well for her and she was able to construct and hold a much more realistic and 'bounded' view of her own and their roles and capacities. Over time, she and her sister also gradually repaired and rebuilt their relationship on less projective grounds.

## Conclusion

Where does this kind of analysis leave us? Taking up a psychosocial perspective cannot guard against the difficulties, failure even, of student-supervisor relationships. Reflecting within this model will not 'liberate' PhD students and their supervisors from ever experiencing anxiety, disappointment, fury or feelings of worthlessness in their academic lives. But in thinking more expansively about how the 'ghosts' of sibling as well as parent relationships walk about with us (Docherty 1988), we might allow for a roomier examination of the psychological investments in maintaining the psychic and social status quo and in striving for change.

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<sup>i</sup> Some of the ideas discussed here and the case study included in this piece were originally published in Lucey and Rogers (2007).

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