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**Conceptualising Doctoral Supervision in Malaysia  
as a Small Culture**

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# Conceptualising Doctoral Supervision in Malaysia as a Small Culture

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## Abstract

Research on doctoral supervision in the field of Intercultural Communication has traditionally been applied to cross-cultural comparison, particularly across national systems and cultural boundaries. However, recent years have witnessed that such comparison is being challenged and re-analysed in light of potential risk of over generalisation and stereotyping in its observation. In this research, we consider the relevance of small cultures (Holliday 1994, 1999) as an alternative approach to conceptualise doctoral supervisory practice as a dynamic on-going group process through which its members make sense of and operate purposefully within particular contexts and shared behaviours. Narrative-based qualitative research was designed to generate and analyse the data. The participants were a purposive sample of six recently graduated PhD students at a Malaysian public university. One-on-one narrative interviews were conducted with the students to gather their supervisory narratives. Analyses of the students' transcripts were completed using a holistic-content approach (Lieblich et al. 2008). Findings reveal a distinct set of behaviours and understandings that constitute the cultures of supervisory practice in the Malaysian university context. Through the notion of small cultures, this research proposes that cultures of PhD supervision can be best understood through an analysis of shared norms, behaviours and values between students and supervisors during supervisory practice. This research hopes that the move from a focus on large culture (i.e. Malaysianness per se) to a focus on the meaning-making process between students and supervisors from different backgrounds can assist education practitioners such as PhD supervisors to avoid stereotyping and overgeneralising.

*Keywords:* PhD supervision, small cultures, meaning-making process, intercultural communication

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## Introduction

Over the last 35 years, studies on the subject of doctoral supervision have been undertaken by various scholars, mainly in countries such as England, Australia, Canada and the US. Many of those studies have cited the link between good supervisory practice, low attrition rate and timely completion of a PhD program (Golde 2000; Marsh et al. 2002; McAlpine and Norton 2006). Recognising the importance of doctoral supervision for doctoral students' success, many of the studies on doctoral supervision have focused on mechanisms for supervisor training and development, such as supervisory styles (Acker et al.

1994; Hockey 1996; Deuchar 2008), the theoretical models of the different aspects of the supervisory process (Wisker et al. 2003; Mackinnon 2004; Grant 2005; Gatfield 2005), the guidance for thesis writing or data analysis (Manathunga 2005), developing students' research skills, attitudes and thesis (Ives and Rowley 2005; Heath 2002; Kiley 2009), or supervision as apprenticeship for teaching and research (Pearson and Brew 2002).

Some studies also established that doctoral supervision is a complex phenomenon. Grant and Manathunga (2011: 351) viewed supervision as “a place of puzzling and confronting complexity.” Some scholars have also noted that the complexities of supervision are influenced by many aspects and are not necessarily connected to national differences. For example, supervision is a space where doctoral students face the challenges of becoming accustomed to the departmental, disciplinary and institutional cultures (Acker 2011), where there is high possibility of mismatched expectations in supervision since the students' experiences are “individual, complex, personal and contextually mediated (McCormack 2004: 321).

In this paper, we consider the relevance of utilising the notion of Small Cultures (Holliday 1994, 1999) as an alternative approach to understanding doctoral supervision phenomena in a Malaysian higher institution context.

## Theoretical Background

Holliday (1999) proposed the notion of Small Cultures as an alternative means so as to understand people's behaviours, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality or international differences. In general, Holliday (1999) distinguishes culture as of two types: ‘Large’ culture refers to cultures that are characterised by geographical places such as countries and regions (e.g. British, Chinese); ‘small’ culture refers to social groupings such as families and classrooms. The term small cultures is also used to refer to culture as “a dynamic, ongoing process to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances” (Holliday 2011: 205). In essence, Small Culture enables an understanding of cohesive behaviours of social groupings by investigating how culture operates at its basic level.

According to Holliday (1999), the formation of Small Cultures involves four elements: The need for group cohesion or social continuity; cultural residues and influences, such as family or education, from which people draw but in which they do not necessarily confine their thoughts or behaviours; social construction processes such as routinisation, naturalisation or institutionalisation as part of the building of cohesive behavioural norms; products of small cultures such as cultural practices, values and statements of culture.

Several studies have utilised the small cultures model to understand the experiences of supervision between supervisors and students from different background; Davcheva et al. (2011) studied the experiences of four supervisors in two UK universities and found that supervision could be seen as an emergent, dynamic, fluid space of meaning making and negotiation between doctoral students and their supervisors (128). Magyar and Robinson-Pant (2013: 667) in their study of international doctoral students' experiences in UK universities regarded supervision as a potential space for intercultural learning. Sahar (2018) found evidence of elements of small cultures within supervision, where the supervisors and students engaged in shared norms and behaviours, with recognisable conventions in order to complete the supervisory tasks successfully and meaningfully.

In our study, we extend the existing studies by conceptualising doctoral supervision as a social space whereby student and supervisor participate in a set of behaviours, share similar values and operate within recognisable rules in order to achieve agreed goals.

## Methodology and Data

Our research aim is to understand the small cultures of doctoral supervision by exploring PhD students' experiences when interacting with their supervisors and participating in the completion of supervisory tasks. To achieve this aim, we conducted narrative-based qualitative research to generate and analyse data. In the study, we conducted one-on-one interviews with six local and international PhD graduates from one public university in Malaysia. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a Holistic-Content approach (Lieblich et al. 2008). The emerging key themes were then interpreted and discussed in light of the theoretical framework and research objective.

## Findings

The results of the study reveal key characteristics of small culture formation within supervision.

1. *Group cohesion or social continuity*: The needs for group cohesion vary from guidance to validation:
  - a. Striving for guidance
  - b. Pursuing mentorship
  - c. Seeking knowledge
  - d. achieving graduation on time
  - e. requesting validation of knowledge and skills
2. *Cultural residues and influences*: The students' meaning making process during their supervision is shaped by micro and macro cultural contexts:
  - Micro
    - a. Personal: values and beliefs
    - b. Family: emotional and financial
    - c. Prior education: academic and research skills
    - d. Professional/ career background
    - e. Peers/ colleagues
  - Macro
    - f. Postgraduate research environment: Administrative and support
    - g. The university policy and regulations
    - h. Ministry of Higher Education policy
    - i. Internationalisation of Higher Education
3. *Social construction* process involves routinisation and institutionalisation that contributes to cohesive behavioural norms:
  - a. Completing Postgraduate coursework
  - b. Supervisory meeting
  - c. Receiving Feedback
  - d. Learning Process

- e. Managing the writing process
4. *Cultural products* can be categorised into visible and invisible goals and statements of cultures:
    - a. Visible goals: thesis submission, graduation on time, awards, publication, conferences
    - b. Invisible goals: discipline, satisfaction, friendships, becoming scholarly, responsibility, promotion
    - c. Statement of cultures: multifaceted roles of supervisors, supervision continuum, mismatched supervisory expectations

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we presented the relevance and significance of the notion of Small Cultures in understanding the complexity of supervision practices between students and supervisors from diverse backgrounds. Within this notion, supervision is seen as a dynamic space where supervisor and student meet, interact and participate within a set of established routines and rules. The students' meaning-making process is enhanced by drawing on their micro and macro cultural contexts in order to complete the supervisory tasks and achieve shared goals.

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