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Using intelligent interaction to manage student–supervisor conflict: A qualitative study

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Abstract:

INTRODUCTION: Student–supervisor conflict is inevitable in an academic setting. The purpose of the present study aimed to argue that using intelligent interaction as an appropriate strategy to manage the student–supervisor conflict in Iranian nursing schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: This qualitative study was a part of larger grounded theory research. Data were collected by conducting a semi-structured interview with nine nursing students and five supervisors who were selected by purposeful sampling in the current investigation. Data analysis was done through the recommended method of Corbin and Strauss (2015).

RESULTS: Intelligent interaction was extracted as one of the main categories for managing student–supervisor conflict. Intelligent interaction consisted of four subcategories including use a logic strategy, competent role play, flexible and smart selection, and getting help from other sources.

CONCLUSION: Intelligent interaction is an appropriate strategy to resolve and manage the supervisor–student conflict in the Iranian academic setting. It is suggested that universities must consider intelligent interaction in developing a policy-procedure process for managing the student–supervisor conflict in Iranian academic settings.

Keywords:

Conflict, graduate nursing education, nursing student, supervision, theses

Introduction

Effectively dealing with conflict is a major challenge in people’s interactions in the workplace. Conflict is almost inevitable in individual and organizational life because it stems from so many different factors.^[1] Conflict is defined as “an interpersonal disagreement, or discord between two or more individuals, owing to the difference in opinion, competition, negative perceptions, poorly defined role expectations, or lack of communication.”^[2] Many individual differences, including differences in personality, culture, attitude, values, perceptions, and other differences, lead to interpersonal conflict. Conflict arises due to various factors. Differences in goals,

expectations, values, and actions on how best to handle the situation are inevitable.^[3] Studies have shown that conflict at a higher education level can occur between students and supervisors.^[4,5] Being unable to establish a good relationship at the academic settings can cause many difficulties for students, lecturers, and the educational system.^[6] Based on previous studies, 22% of the students and 34% of the supervisors faced some kind of supervisor–student conflict, some of which were mainly due to lack of information, unclear expectations, lack of feedback or too much feedback, lack of time, strict control, discriminatory or unfair attention, cultural and gender diversity, and lack of freedom and honesty.^[5]

Writing a thesis or dissertation is a complicated process, and some of the

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students may face many challenges and difficulties in this process. The supervisor–student relationship plays a major role in this process^[7] because having proper guidance from supervisors is necessary^[8] and helps students to overcome these challenges and difficulties and completion writing task efficiently.^[9] Although choosing the right supervisor is not the only factor affecting the supervisor–student relationship,^[10] it is one of the most important and challengeable factors which influence writing thesis or dissertation process. Therefore, a good relationship between supervisors and students is the main factors that motivate students, makes the writing process easier, and eventually leads to a well-written research report.^[11-16] The study of Mizani *et al.* (2013) indicated a significant positive relationship between the students’ abilities and the quality of the supervisors’ support.^[17]

Supervision of postgraduate students is not just an educational process but a hard work to build a good relationship between supervisors and students.^[18] Furthermore, there has been no prescribed guideline that matches both the expectations of the supervisor and the student to communicate effectively in order to build a working relationship since there are many variables involved. As a result, both parties have neglected some of their expected role and supervision is not as expected.^[19] However, there is a definite process to manage and resolve such problems in most universities. For instance, if students wish to change the supervisor in the middle of their research project, they could discuss the issue with the head of school or the head of research.^[20] According to the available publications, minimal technical and research support is provided to postgraduate students to compose their thesis or dissertation in the process of education by Iranian universities.^[6] In addition, there is no clear procedure in Iranian universities if there is a conflict between students and supervisors to properly manage and resolve the conflict. Inappropriate management of the student–supervisor conflict has negative results and prevents to achieve the education goal. On the other hand, using an appropriate strategy to manage the student–supervisor conflict leads to a scientific and creative relationship between students and supervisors.^[21]

Since conflict management of student–supervisor relationship can play a very important and valuable role in the professional future, it is important to understand the conflict resolution process. Although some of the student–supervisor conflict can be resolved through dialog between two parties or discussing the issues in the liable committees, some of those conflict will lead to students’ withdrawal from study or requesting to change the supervisors.^[4] Few studies have been conducted to determine the proper management

strategies and the appropriate procedures to resolve the student–supervisor conflict. Although it is expected that students and supervisors must negotiate to resolve their own conflict, there are many different procedures to resolve the student–supervisor conflict which is not included in the policy-procedure process of academic settings. These procedures include negotiating, traditional intermediaries, third-party consultation, and arbitration.^[5]

Since are little data on the resolving procedures of the student–supervisor conflict in Iranian academic settings and universities do not have a definite police-procedure process in this regard, it is necessary to develop an efficient and suitable process for resolving the student–supervisor conflict. The purposes of the present study are to argue that using intelligent interaction as an appropriate strategy to manage the student–supervisor conflict in Iranian nursing schools. Using a qualitative approach helps to get a deep knowledge of the experiences of supervisors and students when dealing with the student–supervisor conflict.

Materials and Methods

The present study was a part of a grounded theory research project which aimed to explore the process of student–supervisor conflict management in Iranian nursing schools. Nine nursing students and five supervisors were selected using purposeful sampling method to have maximum variation sampling [Table 1]. Since the student–supervisor conflict is inevitable in organizational settings,^[1] the only inclusion criterion was the willingness of postgraduate students and supervisors to participate in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants for collecting data.

Table 1: Information of participants

Number of participants	Student or supervisor	Grade
1	Student	Master of Science
2	Student	Master of Science
3	Student	Ph.D.
4	Student	Ph.D.
5	Student	Master of Science
6	Student	Master of Science
7	Student	Ph.D.
8	Supervisor	Associate professor
9	Supervisor	Associate professor
10	Student	Ph.D.
11	Student	Ph.D.
12	Supervisor	Associate professor
13	Supervisor	Associate professor
14	Supervisor	Professor

Interviews were conducted from March 2018 to April 2019.

After explaining the research purpose to participants, they signed an informed written consent form. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable room where the participants were more convenient. The interviews were recorded by a voice recorder. At the beginning of each interview, the students were asked to explain how they chose their own supervisor. However, it has been asked by the supervisors to explain their own experiences of postgraduate students’ supervision in the process of their research. Then, the follow-up questions were asked by participants according to the interview process. Duration of interviews was from 30 to 91 min with the mean interview time of 50 min.

For data analysis, each interview was verbatim transcribed. Then, the transcripts were read and re-read over and over to recheck the correctness of transcripts. Next, the transcripts were coded and assigned into categories and subcategories through constant comparative analysis method. At the last stage, the main categories were extracted from the concepts.^[22] The trustworthiness of the study was accomplished based on the four criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.^[23] For this purpose, the data analysis process was rechecked by two researchers. In addition, three participants were asked to review the extracted coded to confirm the analyzing process. To ensure reliability, the researchers ignored their prior knowledge about research, write them down during the study, and compare their prior knowledge with the findings of this study. Finally, the findings were examined by three peer researchers to assess the confirmability. Maximum variation of samples was done to assure the transferability of the results.

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Iran University of Medical Sciences (IR.IUMS. REC1396.9321199003). The objective of the study was explained to the participants, and informed consent was obtained from each of participant. Participants were assured about their confidentiality and privacy.

Results

In the process of data analysis, the category of “intelligent interaction” was extracted as one of the main categories in managing the student–supervisor conflict. Intelligent interaction refers to the importance of interaction between two parties who are involved in a relationship for reducing the negative outcomes of conflict. The category is composed of four subcategories including “appropriate strategy,” “competent role play,” “flexible and subtle selection,” and “getting help from other sources” [Table 2].

Table 2: Codes and subcategories of intelligent interaction

Category	Subcategories	Codes
Intelligent interaction	Use a logic strategy	Management of conditions
		Suitable relationship
		Respect for the professor’s position
		Hard effort
Competent role play	Competent role play	Raising problems
		Guide student indirectly
		Comprehensive support
		Fulfilling guidance duty
Flexible and smart selection	Flexible and smart selection	Student’s correct decision
		Selection based on personality traits
		Selection based on professor’s research field
		Selection based on the professor’s scientific ability
Getting help from other sources	Getting help from other sources	Getting help from an advisor
		Getting help from other people who are not members of the research team

Use a logic strategy

This subcategory encompasses strategies, which are considered as a logical strategy by both supervisors and students based on conditions, to prevent or manage possible conflict. For instance, one of the study participants pointed out: *“The whole of my life was influenced by my research project and completion of my thesis was the priority in my life. Even I resigned twice times because I did not like to have a challenge with my supervisor. The first time was when I start MA and the second time was 1 year after starting MA.”* In some cases, supervisors believed that it was their own responsibility to manage and resolve the student–supervisor conflict. The following quotation was taken from a study participant. *“Occasionally, I might read student’s work more than 20 times because the student is not good, but there are some cases which I only read the student’s work only one a time.”* One of the appropriate strategies taken by students to manage the student–supervisor conflict was respect for the supervisor’s position and hard effort. Participant: *“If I understand that one has a professor’s position and dignity, I first and foremost attribute any possible weaknesses to myself rather than to that person.”*

Competent role play

This concept reveals that a supervisor guides the student thoroughly and supports her/him during the process of thesis compilation to have a competence role play. Based on this role, students have also done their best to manage the conflict by making the best decisions. In this regard, one of the participants said: *“I move at the same pace as my students knowing exactly what they are doing. For example, in the proposal writing process, I tell them to merely state the problem, then I ask them to take the next step. This way, I know in what stage the student is and what is she/he is doing.”* Another participant explained:

“I hear from here and there that a hospital is looking for new personnel and I notify my students to go fill out a form. So, I try to even provide them with job opportunities that would give them the necessary motivation to move forward with their studies.” Regarding proper decision-making, one of the participants said: *“I was on the look for a good supervisor from the 1st day because thesis compilation is the main part of M. A graduation. We can overcome the education process with all the ups and downs, but I believe that the thesis creates more difficulties for us than the courses.”*

Flexible and smart selection

One of the main factors in successfully composing a thesis is the selection of supervisors and students. This is a factor that is carefully noticed by both students and supervisors leading both groups to choose individuals who are more suitable and compatible with them, hence avoiding possible conflict. In this regard, a study participant said: *“When I first started my M. A, I wrote a research paper for which I had already selected a supervisor. Luckily, the same supervisor was there when I entered that university. My research was on finding personality traits which are shared between me and him/her.”* One of the important selection factors for both students and supervisors was the similarity between the topic of the student’s thesis and the research field of the supervisor that avoid any possible conflict in this regard. Another participant said: *“I can accept topics on management in general. When a student refers to me with a research topic in this regard, I will accept to be his/her supervisor. This is my main criterion for selecting a student.”*

In this regard, another participant said: *“Once I selected the topic of my thesis, I looked for professors who had more expertise and research in this regard. I chose my supervisor based on my topic and research method.”* The supervisors’ expert knowledge in the related research field was one of the criteria considered by students to avoid and manage possible conflict. Another participant stated that *“Knowledge on the chosen topic was important to me especially since I have been involved, either as a student or a professor, in university settings and I have worked with different professors, so I can tell by talking to a professor whether that person does or does not have the necessary knowledge in the field I want to study and this is an important factor that helps me make the right decision.”*

Getting help from other sources

To avoid and manage possible conflict, students and professors who needed help in specific filed tried to get help from other people outside the research group such as advisors or other individuals who had the necessary expertise in that field. One of the students said: *“Well, getting help from a good and active advisor helped me a lot and I was even happier with the help I got from my advisor than what my supervisor offered me. I didn’t really have*

much relationship and communication with my supervisor.” Another student stated that: *“I did my best to work on my thesis and when I cannot solve my problems I got help from people who had the necessary expertise in my field of research.”* Supervisors also got help from other expert people whenever necessary as stated by a participant of the study: *“Whenever I felt I did not have enough knowledge to help the student, such as in phenomenology or grounded theory, I got help from an advisor. I mean, when I don’t have sufficient expertise about the methodology of a thesis, I try do not involve myself and instead I select another advisor or supervisor to help me with the methodology. For such methodologies, I turn to an advisor with the necessary expertise in that field.”*

Discussion

One of the main categories of intelligent interaction was a use a logic strategy that was used by supervisors and students according to the existing conditions. Similarly, Ghorbanalizadeh *et al.*, (2013) indicated that the priority of managers to solve conflict and problems in an organization was to use collaborations suggesting good decisions and appropriate strategies.^[24] In general, the student–supervisor conflict management is the process of identifying the appropriate role of conflict among groups and using appropriate techniques to eliminate or stimulate them to enhance organizational effectiveness.^[25] The conflict between people occurs in all types of human relationships and in all social environments. Consequently, conflict management is a type of management that can act in the best way in a conflict situation causing a balance between the parties and manage the conflict.^[25]

Between different courses of higher education, postgraduate education has the task of educating specialized human resources in the field of education, research, and services.^[26] This mission will be achieved if supervisors and students successfully fulfill their assigned roles to prevent conflict and manage the existing one. Accordingly, another main category of intelligent interaction is to have a competent role play that indicates the importance of fulfilling the assigned duties. In a study by Mizani *et al.* (2013), a positive and significant relationship was found between student’s capabilities and the quality of guidance provided by the professors.^[17] In this regard, studies also showed that the feedback and encouragement that the students received from their supervisors had a vital effect on their thesis compilation experience. They revealed that supervisors’ effective guidance and supervision could significantly affect the quality of the Ph. D. program and determine its final success or failure.^[27] The success of Ph. D. programs depends heavily on the supervisor, a person who needs to provide time, experience, and support to strengthen

the students' research skills and attitudes and ensure the publication of a standard thesis.^[28]

Perhaps, one of the most important decisions of a university student at the beginning of research activity is to choose the supervisor;^[29] hence, wise and proper selection of a supervisor by the student can be of great prominence in successfully passing through Ph. D. course duration. University students have diverse and numerous criteria for selecting a supervisor.^[30] In this study, we found that a flexible and smart selection of a supervisor was based on the supervisor's personality traits, the field of research, and academic ability. This finding was also emphasized in other studies indicating that the availability of the supervisor and his/her specialization, the field of research, and interests were some of the criteria for selecting the supervisor.^[30] One of the important criteria discovered in the present study was making a choice based on the topic of the thesis. This strategy was proposed by the supervisors and the students for preventing and managing potential conflict. In this regard, Mohammadi *et al.* (2016) stated that the relevance of the thesis topic to the scientific background of the supervisor as well as to his behavior and manner of treatment was among the criteria that students referred to as the characteristics of a suitable supervisor.^[30] A wise and flexible selection is importance because the quality of supervisor–student relationship is not only influenced by the way of selecting a supervisor^[10] but also by the satisfaction with the decision made about the supervisor, which can affect the facilitation of dissertation compilation process, the student's motivation, and final quality of the dissertation.^[11] Therefore, one can avoid and manage the potential conflict in the supervisor–student relationship through wise and flexible selection. One of the other categories of intelligent interaction, which was used by the participants of the present study for conflict management, was getting help from other sources.

One of the other main categories of intelligent interaction used by the participants of the present study for conflict management was getting help from other Sources. During the research period, university students expect from their supervisor to guide them through all the research processes, but this expectation is not met;^[31] therefore, the students get help from other resources when faces with irregular supervisor–student visits, busy professors who do not pay enough attention to their the thesis, the professors' low research abilities, and his/her inability to help them, professors who do not have enough qualifications to help them, inadequate guidance, and allocation of small amount of time to their thesis.^[5,29] On the other hand, a dynamic relationship with a lot of people, including supervisors and advisors, is necessary to successfully compose a thesis,^[32] and a thesis is written

by a research team made of a student, a supervisor, an advisor/s, and reviewers^[33] since their guidance can cover the weaknesses in the thesis composition process.

Limitations of the study

One of the main limitations of the present study was the lack of access to individuals with much experience of conflict. Due to ethical reasons, identifying these individuals was not possible; therefore, the interviews were conducted only with participants who were willing to participate in this investigation. Therefore, it is advisable to identify specific participants using specific sampling techniques such as the snowball method.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that although conflict between students and supervisors is inevitable, students and supervisors are trying to come to a successful end by employing intelligent solutions. There is a greater probability of more complicated conflict between students and supervisors in universities due to the absence of a clear policy-procedure process. It is suggested that universities have to consider intelligent interaction in developing a policy-procedure process for managing the student–supervisor conflict in Iranian academic settings.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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