



Exploring the Perceptions of Female PhD Scholars on Selecting a Supervisor: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry explored the experiences of PhD students in their relationships with their supervisors. The study identified three themes that emerged from the data analysis. The first theme highlights the importance of compatibility between the supervisor and student. Participants emphasized the need to find a supervisor who shares similar research interests, communication styles, and personality traits. They also discussed the negative consequences of not having a compatible relationship with their supervisor, including decreased motivation, lack of support, and difficulties with communication. The second theme focuses on the role of support from the supervisor. Participants emphasized the importance of having a supportive supervisor who is available and responsive, and who provides guidance and mentorship throughout the PhD process. They also discussed the negative consequences of not having a supportive supervisor, including feelings of isolation and frustration, and difficulties in completing their PhD. The third theme highlights the influence of power dynamics on the student-supervisor relationship. Participants discussed the potential for power imbalances in the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and the impact of these imbalances on their research experiences. The study highlights the importance of compatibility, support, and power dynamics in the student-supervisor relationship for successful outcomes in PhD programs.

Keywords: *work style, research interests, personality traits, mentorships, student-supervisor relationship.*

Introduction

Ph.D. study is a long and challenging journey that can be both rewarding and frustrating for scholars. Many Ph.D. scholars experience a range of emotions, including excitement, anxiety, frustration, and isolation throughout their research journey. One of the significant experiences of Ph.D. scholars is the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of work that needs to be done. The process of conducting original research, analyzing data, and writing a thesis can be daunting, especially when scholars feel like they don't have enough time to complete everything (Gardner, 2008). Ph.D. programs are an important avenue for producing new knowledge and building expertise in a wide range of fields, from science and engineering to humanities and social sciences (Borrego & Newswander, 2010). However, the Ph.D. journey can be challenging and complex, and the role of the supervisor is critical in shaping the experiences and outcomes of Ph.D. students.

The process of selecting a supervisor is a crucial decision for PhD scholars as it significantly impacts their academic journey. The choice of a supervisor can affect the quality of research, the experience of the scholar, and ultimately their success in the field (Baker & Lattuca, 2010). The selection of a supervisor is a complex and multi-dimensional process that involves various factors, including the compatibility of research interests, the availability and accessibility of the supervisor, and the supervisory style (Igumbor et al., 2022). The issue of gender equity in academia and the challenges faced by female PhD scholars in selecting a supervisor is not limited to a specific region or country. The underrepresentation of women in higher education and research is a global concern, and various initiatives and policies have been introduced worldwide to promote gender equity in academia (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017).

For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has launched several initiatives to promote gender equality in education and

research (De Soysa & Zipp, 2019). The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2018 highlighted the need for gender-sensitive policies and practices in education to address the gender disparities in academic fields. Similarly, the UNESCO Gender Equality in Research project aims to promote gender equality in research by identifying and addressing the barriers and biases that affect women's participation and advancement in academic research. In Europe, the European Commission has introduced several initiatives to promote gender equity in academia, including the Horizon 2020 program, which aims to increase the participation of women in research and innovation projects. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has also published several reports and guidelines on gender mainstreaming in education and research (EIGE, 2014).

In the United States, the National Science Foundation (NSF) has launched several initiatives to promote gender equity in STEM fields, including the ADVANCE program, which aims to increase the representation and advancement of women in academic STEM careers. Similarly, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has introduced several policies and programs to promote gender equity in biomedical research (DeAro et al., 2019). Several initiatives have been launched to promote gender equity in academia, including the Asian Development Bank's Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) initiative, which aims to promote women's participation and advancement in STEM fields in Asia Pacific. While the specific challenges faced by female PhD scholars in selecting a supervisor may vary across different regions and countries, the issue of gender equity in academia is a global concern. Initiatives and policies to promote gender equity in academia are essential to address the underrepresentation of women in research and to ensure that female PhD scholars have equal opportunities and support to pursue their academic careers (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017).

Nepal has seen a growing number of women pursuing PhD degrees in recent years. However, the process of selecting a supervisor for their research is a crucial and often challenging task for female PhD scholars in Nepal. The perception of female PhD scholars on selecting a supervisor is important to understand in order to provide effective support for their academic and personal development. PhD supervisors have a diverse range of responsibilities, including providing discipline-specific knowledge and technical support, encouraging students towards publications and presentations, offering pastoral support, and preparing them for their thesis defense. Effective supervision is crucial for a positive PhD experience, high-quality work, and a good supervisor-student relationship. While some relationships may be challenging, many progress into mentorship and collaboration (Regmi et al., 2021). Hence, it is interesting to identify the opinions of PhD scholars regarding the factors to consider when selecting a supervisor.

Methodology

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore the perceptions of female PhD scholars on selecting a supervisor. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that emphasizes the importance of participants' personal experiences and stories in understanding a particular phenomenon. It seeks to uncover the meanings that participants attach to their experiences and how these meanings are shaped by their social and cultural contexts. Participants for this study were recruited through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria for the study were female PhD scholars who had recently selected a supervisor or were in the process of selecting a supervisor. Ten participants were recruited from a Tribhuvan University of Nepal.

Data collection for this study was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their personal experiences and perceptions related to selecting a supervisor. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved identifying patterns and themes in the data and interpreting these patterns in relation to the objective. The analysis was conducted iteratively, with the research team revisiting the data multiple times to refine and confirm the identified themes.

Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, and their informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. All participants were given pseudonyms (1-10) to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality.

The narrative inquiry approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' personal experiences and perceptions related to selecting a supervisor. This approach was particularly useful in uncovering the meanings that participants attached to their experiences and how these meanings were shaped by their social and cultural contexts.

Results

Theme 1: Importance of Compatibility

All participants emphasized the importance of finding a supervisor who is compatible with their work style and preferences. Participant 4 stated, "I wanted a supervisor who I

could work with collaboratively, someone who could listen to my ideas and help me develop them." Similarly, Participant 7 said, "It's crucial to have a supervisor who comprehends your work approach and inclinations."

The participants emphasized the importance of finding a supervisor who shares similar research interests, communication styles, and personality traits.

Participant 1 said, "Finding a supervisor with whom you have a personal connection is crucial. It's essential to have someone with whom you feel at ease and can freely discuss ideas."

Participant 3 said,

"The key takeaway for me is that establishing a strong relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is crucial. Without trust, any issues or conflicts that arise cannot be effectively resolved. However, if there is a good relationship, where the supervisee feels comfortable being vulnerable and seeking help, then even questionable decisions can be worked through together towards a positive outcome."

Participant 4 said "For me, it's really important to find someone who is passionate about the same research topics as me. I want someone who is just as excited about my research as I am."

Participant 5 said, "I think having a supervisor who understands your work style and preferences is really important. For example, I prefer to work independently and have a supervisor who gives me the space to do so."

Participant 8 said, "It's not just about having similar research interests. You also need to feel comfortable with your supervisor's approach to research and the way they communicate their ideas."

The participants also discussed the negative consequences of not having a compatible relationship with their supervisor, including decreased motivation, lack of support, and difficulties with communication.

These sentiments align with previous research that highlights the importance of compatibility in the student-supervisor relationship. (Cheon et al., 2009); Harkins (2020) argue that compatibility between supervisor and student is necessary for successful outcomes. They suggest that compatibility includes shared values, interests, and communication styles. Additionally, Shahsavari and Sudzina (2017) found that a good fit between supervisor and student positively affects student satisfaction and productivity.

Theme 2: Role of Support

All participants also emphasized the importance of having a supportive supervisor who is available and responsive. Participant 5 said, "I need someone who is going to be there for me when I need help or guidance." Participant 10 added, "Support also means having a supervisor who is willing to advocate for you and help you navigate the academic landscape."

Participant 9 said,

"For a supervisor, it is essential that they possess the ability to create a comfortable environment where questions can be asked easily and time can be allocated for meaningful discussions to enrich knowledge. Having a keen aptitude for research, a good understanding of theory and philosophy, and a willingness to learn would be advantageous qualities. Furthermore, the ability to self-motivate during stressful times is crucial for successfully obtaining a PhD."

Participant 10 said,

"I have both supervisors and co-supervisors assigned to me, but unfortunately, they have not met my expectations in terms of support and guidance. Personally, I believe it would be advantageous to have a supervisor who can offer motivation and support during difficult times. Pursuing a PhD can be a daunting and stressful experience, often leading to feelings of anxiety and depression. Therefore, having a supportive supervisor and fellow scholar can play a vital role in this journey."

Participant 1 said, "Being a supervisor means being a supporter who can help the scholar navigate the academic environment. The supervisor should also be able to introduce scholar to different opportunities and other scholars."

The participants emphasized the importance of having a supervisor who is supportive of their research goals and who provides guidance and mentorship throughout the PhD process.

Respondent 3 said,

"I hope that my supervisor will be extremely supportive throughout my PhD, encouraging me to do all my good work and willing to address my concerns. I feel that he will be truly invested in my progress. The work is my own. But he will guide me to my destination"

Respondent 5 remarked,

"In my opinion, the supervisor should be someone who is eager to support the scholar's development as a researcher. He should be eager to critique the scholar's work and help the scholar's academic development. This also encourages scholars to engage in academic work. "

The participants also discussed the negative consequences of not having a supportive supervisor, including feelings of isolation and frustration, and difficulties in completing their PhD. Previous research supports the importance of supervisor support. Janta et al. (2014) argue that the quality of the student-supervisor relationship is a key factor in student success. They suggest that supportive relationships between supervisors and students positively affect student motivation, productivity, and satisfaction. Similarly, Devos et al. (2017) found that lack of support from supervisors was a major factor contributing to graduate student attrition.

Theme 3: Influence of Power Dynamics

All participants also discussed the influence of power dynamics on the student-supervisor relationship. Participant 1 stated, "There can be a power imbalance between supervisor and student, and that can be really uncomfortable." Participant 1

added, "Power imbalances can be really subtle, but they can have a big impact on your research experience."

The participants discussed the potential for power imbalances in the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and the impact of these imbalances on their research experiences.

Participant 5 said, "I think it's important to understand the power dynamics between scholars and supervisors. Making sure that scholars and supervisors are on the same page has a lot to do with research and careers. Scholars and supervisors are two sides of the same coin."

Participant 6 said, "I also have two supervisors who are really controlling me and who are trying to dictate every aspect of my research. It's a really unpleasant experience for me and I feel like I have no autonomy in my own work."

Participant 9 said,

"Power imbalances may be almost imperceptible, but they can greatly affect a scholar's study experience. For example, if a scholar's supervisor always insists on meeting in their office instead of a neutral location, this can create a sense of discomfort or discomfort."

Participant 2 said,

"The issue of power dynamics holds significant importance for me, as I strongly believe in gender equality and the capacity of women to excel in all fields, just as men do. Therefore, it is essential for me to have a supervisor who acknowledges and respects my unique perspective and experiences. This prospect fills me with great excitement, knowing that I can contribute my skills and abilities to an environment that values and celebrates diversity."

The participants also discussed the potential for gender and cultural power imbalances, particularly for female PhD scholars and scholars from minority backgrounds.

This aligns with previous research that highlights the impact of power dynamics on the student-supervisor relationship. Small and Attree (2016) argue that power imbalances can lead to student dissatisfaction and can negatively affect student learning and progress. Additionally, Laufer and Gorup (2019) found that power imbalances between supervisors and students can contribute to student attrition.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that compatibility and support are crucial factors for female PhD scholars when selecting a supervisor. All participants emphasized the importance of finding a supervisor who is compatible with their work style and preferences. This is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the importance of compatibility between supervisor and student for successful outcomes (Bryson & Grunert Kowalske, 2022; Phillips & Johnson, 2022). Compatibility between supervisors and students has been identified as a key factor in successful student outcomes. This is supported by (Bryson & Grunert Kowalske, 2022; Phillips & Johnson, 2022), who argue that compatibility includes shared values, interests, and communication styles. It is clear from the verbatim quotes of the participants that they valued a supervisor who they could work with collaboratively and who understood their work style and preferences.

Participants in this study also emphasized the importance of having a supportive supervisor who is available and responsive. Wu and Parker (2017) argue that the quality of the student-supervisor relationship is a key factor in student success, and that supportive relationships between supervisors and students positively affect student motivation, productivity, and satisfaction. Similarly, supervisor support has been identified as crucial for student success. Gratrix and Barrett (2017) argue that supportive relationships between supervisors and students positively affect student motivation, productivity, and satisfaction. Devos et al. (2017) found that lack of support from supervisors was a major factor contributing to graduate student attrition. The participants in this study also emphasized the importance of having a supervisor who is available and responsive, as well as someone who is willing to advocate for them and help them navigate the academic landscape.

The impact of power dynamics on the student-supervisor relationship was also discussed by participants. All participants acknowledged that there can be a power imbalance between supervisor and student, which can negatively impact the research experience. This is consistent with previous research that has highlighted the impact of power imbalances on student satisfaction, learning, and progress (Nelson & Friedlander, 2001; Seponski & Jordan, 2018). The importance of addressing power imbalances between supervisors and students cannot be overstated. Supervisors hold significant power over their students and this power can be wielded in subtle ways that may not always be apparent to the student. Addressing power dynamics can involve a range of strategies, including clear communication about expectations, regular check-ins, and setting boundaries (Spouse, 2001).

The findings of this study align with these assertions and further highlight the need for supervisors who are willing to advocate for their students and help them navigate the academic landscape.

The findings of this study suggest that female PhD scholars value compatibility and support in the student-supervisor relationship, as well as the need to address power imbalances between supervisors and students. These findings have important implications for the selection and training of supervisors, as well as for the support and development of female PhD scholars. It is crucial that institutions and programs work to foster positive and supportive relationships between supervisors and students, while also addressing the complex power dynamics that underlie these relationships.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of female PhD scholars on selecting a supervisor. The results suggest that compatibility and support are critical factors in this decision-making process, and that power dynamics play a significant role in the student-supervisor relationship. These findings have important implications for the selection and training of supervisors, as well as for the support and development of female PhD scholars. It is essential for institutions and programs to recognize the significance of these factors and take steps to address them. This may involve providing training and support for supervisors, encouraging open communication between supervisors and students, and addressing power imbalances in the relationship. It is also crucial to recognize the unique experiences and challenges faced by female PhD scholars and to

provide them with the necessary resources and support to succeed in their academic pursuits.

This study highlights the importance of a positive and supportive student-supervisor relationship for the success of PhD scholars, particularly female scholars. By prioritizing compatibility, support, and addressing power imbalances, institutions and programs can better support their students and promote successful outcomes.

Implications

The implications of the findings of this study are significant for various stakeholders in the academic world. The results highlight the importance of selecting a compatible and supportive supervisor for female PhD scholars. Institutions and programs can use this information to provide guidance and resources for students when selecting a supervisor and to train and support supervisors to be more attentive and responsive to the needs of their students.

In the Nepalese context, the findings of this study may have significant implications for the academic community, particularly for female PhD scholars. Nepal has made significant progress in recent years in terms of increasing women's participation in higher education, including in doctoral programs. However, women continue to face unique challenges and barriers in the academic world, and addressing these challenges is essential for promoting gender equality and empowering women in the academic field. The findings of this study suggest that female PhD scholars in Nepal may face similar challenges to those identified by the participants in this study. For example, selecting a compatible and supportive supervisor may be a critical factor in the success of female PhD scholars in Nepal. Institutions and programs in Nepal may need to provide guidance and resources to help students select a supervisor who is compatible with their work style and preferences and who can provide the necessary support and guidance to help them succeed in their academic pursuits.

Additionally, addressing power dynamics in the student-supervisor relationship may be particularly important in Nepal, where traditional gender roles and expectations may reinforce power imbalances between male supervisors and female students. Institutions and programs must recognize these power imbalances and work to address them through clear communication channels, setting boundaries, and promoting a culture of mutual respect and open communication. The findings of this study highlight the unique experiences and challenges faced by female PhD scholars in Nepal, which may be similar to those faced by women in other developing countries. Institutions and programs must recognize these challenges and provide the necessary resources and support to empower female PhD scholars in Nepal to succeed in their academic pursuits.

The implications of this study for the Nepalese context call for increased attention to the unique challenges faced by female PhD scholars and the need to provide them with the necessary resources and support to succeed. By prioritizing compatibility, support, and addressing power imbalances, institutions and programs in Nepal can promote gender equality and empower women in the academic field.

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