

BALANCING AUTHORITY AND MENTORSHIP: AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS

By

Ayodele Ebunolu Nwisagbo, PhD.

Department of Educational management, Faculty of Education,
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

ebunolu.nwisagbo@ust.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4395-8739>

+2348064192896

Abstract.

This article provided a comprehensive exploration of the ethical dimensions of the supervisor-supervisee relationship in academic settings. It delved into the literature on authority and mentorship, identifies core ethical principles, and proposes a detailed framework for navigating the complexities of these relationships. The article discusses potential breaches of ethical principles, outlines codes of conduct for both supervisors and supervisees, addresses challenges in these relationships, and offers recommendations for effective management. The benefits of this framework for all stakeholders—supervisors, supervisees, and institutions—are thoroughly examined. By providing a robust ethical framework, this article aims to enhance the quality and integrity of academic supervision, fostering a supportive and productive environment for all involved.

Keywords: Authority, Breaches, Code of Conduct, Ethics, Supervisor, Supervisee,

Introduction

The relationship between supervisors and supervisees in academic settings is a cornerstone of academic and professional development. Effective supervision is essential for fostering the growth and success of supervisees, contributing to the overall mission and reputation of academic institutions. However, this relationship is inherently complex, involving a delicate balance of authority and mentorship. Supervisors hold significant power and responsibility, which can lead to ethical challenges if not managed appropriately. This article aims to provide a comprehensive ethical framework for navigating the supervisor-supervisee relationship, ensuring that it is both productive and ethical.

Authority and Mentorship

The concepts of authority and mentorship are foundational to understanding the dynamics of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Authority refers to the formal power and responsibility vested in supervisors to guide, evaluate, and make decisions regarding the work of supervisees. This authority is necessary for maintaining standards, ensuring accountability, and achieving institutional goals (Johnson & Ridley, 2016). However, the exercise of authority must be balanced with mentorship, which involves a more supportive and nurturing role. Mentors provide guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for professional development, helping supervisees to grow and succeed in their academic and professional careers (Kadushin & Kadushin, 2018).

The balance between authority and mentorship is critical for fostering a healthy and productive relationship. Excessive emphasis on authority can lead to a hierarchical and controlling environment, stifling creativity and independence. Conversely, an overemphasis on mentorship without clear boundaries can result in a lack of accountability and direction (Johnson & Ridley, 2016). Effective supervision requires a nuanced approach that integrates both elements, creating a supportive yet structured environment.

Ethical Principles

Ethical principles provide a foundation for guiding the behavior of supervisors and supervisees. These principles include respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (American Psychological Association, 2017a). Respect for autonomy emphasizes the importance of recognizing the supervisee's independence and decision-making capabilities. Supervisors should encourage supervisees to take ownership of their work, make informed decisions, and develop their professional identities (Kadushin & Kadushin, 2018).

Beneficence requires supervisors to act in the best interest of the supervisee, providing support, resources, and opportunities for professional growth. This includes facilitating access to training, research opportunities, and networking events, as well as offering constructive feedback and guidance (Johnson & Ridley, 2016). Non-maleficence mandates avoiding actions that could harm supervisees, such as creating a hostile work environment, exploiting their labor, or providing inadequate support. Supervisors must be mindful of their actions and their potential impact on supervisees (American Psychological Association, 2017a).

Justice involves ensuring fairness and equity in all aspects of the supervisory relationship. This includes equitable distribution of resources, recognition of achievements, and fair evaluation practices. Supervisors should strive to create an inclusive and equitable environment, free from discrimination and bias (Dahal, 2024).

Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to guide the supervisor-supervisee relationship. The developmental model emphasizes the importance of tailoring supervision to the developmental needs of the supervisee, recognizing that supervisees progress through different stages of professional development (Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). This model

suggests that supervisors should adapt their approach to meet the evolving needs of the supervisee, providing more directive support in the early stages and gradually shifting to a more collaborative and consultative role as the supervisee gains independence and expertise. The relational-cultural model focuses on the importance of the supervisory relationship itself, emphasizing the need for a strong, supportive, and collaborative relationship between supervisors and supervisees (Barnett & Molzon 2014). This model suggests that effective supervision is built on trust, mutual respect, and open communication, with both parties actively engaged in the process. The relational-cultural model highlights the importance of addressing power dynamics and fostering a sense of connection and belonging.

The social justice model extends beyond individual relationships to address broader systemic issues, emphasizing the importance of creating an equitable and inclusive environment for all supervisees (Eaton, 2022). This model encourages supervisors to be aware of and address issues of power, privilege, and oppression, ensuring that supervision is culturally responsive and socially just. Supervisors should actively work to dismantle barriers and create opportunities for marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Core Ethical Principles of Supervisor-Supervisee's Relationship

Respect for Autonomy

Respect for autonomy is a fundamental ethical principle that requires supervisors to recognize and support the independence and decision-making capabilities of supervisees. This principle is essential for fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility in supervisees, encouraging them to take an active role in their professional development (Kadushin & Kadushin, 2018).

Practical Implications

- **Encourage Independent Thinking:** Supervisors should encourage supervisees to think critically and independently, fostering a sense of intellectual curiosity and autonomy. This can be achieved through open-ended questions, challenging assumptions, and encouraging supervisees to explore different perspectives.
- **Provide Opportunities for Decision-Making:** Supervisors should provide opportunities for supervisees to make decisions and take ownership of their work. This includes involving supervisees in project planning, decision-making processes, and problem-solving activities.
- **Respect Professional Boundaries:** Supervisors should respect the professional boundaries of supervisees, avoiding micromanagement and allowing supervisees to work independently when appropriate. This helps to build trust and fosters a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy.

Beneficence

Beneficence requires supervisors to act in the best interest of the supervisee, providing support, resources, and opportunities for professional growth. This principle is essential for fostering the development and success of supervisees, ensuring that they have the tools and opportunities they need to thrive (Clark, Broussine & Watts, 2015).

Practical Implications

- **Provide Constructive Feedback:** Supervisors should provide regular, constructive feedback that is specific, actionable, and focused on professional growth. Feedback should be delivered in a supportive and respectful manner, with a focus on helping supervisees to improve and develop their skills.
- **Facilitate Professional Development:** Supervisors should actively support the professional development of supervisees by providing opportunities for training, research, and networking. This includes encouraging supervisees to attend conferences, workshops, and seminars, as well as providing access to resources and mentorship opportunities.
- **Promote a Positive Work Environment:** Supervisors should foster a positive and supportive work environment, free from harassment, discrimination, and other forms of misconduct. This includes promoting a culture of respect, collaboration, and inclusivity, where supervisees feel valued and supported.

Non-Maleficence

Non-maleficence mandates avoiding actions that could harm supervisees, such as creating a hostile work environment, exploiting their labour, or providing inadequate support. This principle requires supervisors to be mindful of their actions and their potential impact on supervisees (American Psychological Association, 2017a).

Practical Implications

- **Avoid Exploitation:** Supervisors should avoid exploiting the labor of supervisees, ensuring that workloads are reasonable and that supervisees are fairly compensated for their contributions. This includes avoiding excessive demands and ensuring that supervisees have sufficient time and resources to complete their work.
- **Provide Adequate Support:** Supervisors should provide adequate support and resources to supervisees, ensuring that they have the tools and guidance they need to succeed. This includes providing clear expectations, regular feedback, and access to necessary resources and training.
- **Address Harmful Behavior:** Supervisors should address any behavior that could harm supervisees, such as harassment, discrimination, or other forms of misconduct. This includes taking proactive steps to prevent such behavior and addressing any incidents promptly and effectively.

Justice

Justice involves ensuring fairness and equity in all aspects of the supervisory relationship. This includes equitable distribution of resources, recognition of achievements, and fair evaluation practices. Supervisors should strive to create an inclusive and equitable environment, free from discrimination and bias (Curtis, 2023).

Practical Implications

- **Ensure Fair Evaluation Practices:** Supervisors should ensure that evaluation practices are fair, transparent, and based on clear criteria. This includes providing regular feedback, setting clear expectations, and using objective measures to assess performance.
- **Promote Equity and Inclusion:** Supervisors should actively promote equity and inclusion, ensuring that all supervisees have equal access to opportunities and resources. This includes addressing issues of power, privilege, and oppression, and creating a supportive environment for marginalized and underrepresented groups.
- **Recognize Achievements:** Supervisors should recognize and celebrate the achievements of supervisees, providing opportunities for public acknowledgment and reward. This includes highlighting successes in departmental meetings, publications, and other forums, and providing letters of recommendation and other forms of support.

Possible Breaches and Management of Supervisor-Supervisee Issues

Breaches of Ethical Principles

Despite the best intentions, breaches of ethical principles can occur in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Common breaches include abuse of power, lack of transparency, and failure to provide adequate support. These breaches can lead to a hostile work environment, decreased productivity, and professional stagnation (Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, 2011; Johnson & Ridley, 2016).

Examples of Breaches

- **Abuse of Power:** Supervisors may use their authority to intimidate, manipulate, or exploit supervisees, creating a hostile and oppressive work environment. This can include excessive demands, unreasonable expectations, and the use of power to control or dominate.
- **Lack of Transparency:** Supervisors may fail to communicate clearly and transparently with supervisees, leading to misunderstandings and mistrust. This can include withholding information, providing unclear feedback, and failing to set clear expectations.
- **Failure to Provide Support:** Supervisors may neglect to provide adequate support and resources to supervisees, hindering their professional development and success. This can include insufficient feedback, lack of access to training and resources, and failure to address concerns and issues.

Handling and Investigation of Breaches

Institutions should have clear procedures for reporting and investigating ethical breaches, ensuring that all parties are aware of their rights and responsibilities. This includes establishing a confidential reporting system, conducting thorough investigations, and providing support to affected individuals (American Psychological Association, 2017a).

Steps for Handling Breaches

- **Establish a Confidential Reporting System:** Institutions should establish a confidential reporting system that allows supervisees to report ethical breaches without fear of retaliation. This can include online reporting tools, anonymous hotlines, and designated ethics officers.
- **Conduct Thorough Investigations:** Institutions should conduct thorough and impartial investigations into all reported breaches, ensuring that all parties have an opportunity to present their perspectives. Investigations should be conducted by trained professionals and should follow established protocols and procedures.
- **Provide Support to Affected Individuals:** Institutions should provide support to affected individuals, including counseling, advocacy, and other forms of assistance. This can include providing information about available resources, connecting individuals with support services, and ensuring that their rights are protected.
- **Implement Corrective Actions:** Institutions should implement corrective actions to address identified breaches, ensuring that appropriate measures are taken to prevent future occurrences. This can include disciplinary actions, training and education, and policy revisions.

Codes of Conduct

For Supervisors

Supervisors play a critical role in establishing and maintaining ethical standards in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. A clear code of conduct can provide guidance and structure, helping supervisors to navigate complex ethical issues and uphold their responsibilities (American Counselling Association, 2014).

Key Elements of a Supervisor's Code of Conduct

- **Respect for Autonomy:** Supervisors should respect the independence and decision-making capabilities of supervisees, encouraging them to take ownership of their work and develop their professional identities.
- **Beneficence:** Supervisors should act in the best interest of the supervisee, providing support, resources, and opportunities for professional growth. This includes facilitating access to training, research opportunities, and networking events, as well as offering constructive feedback and guidance.
- **Non-Maleficence:** Supervisors should avoid actions that could harm supervisees, such as creating a hostile work environment, exploiting their labour, or providing inadequate support. Supervisors must be mindful of their actions and their potential impact on supervisees.
- **Justice:** Supervisors should ensure fairness and equity in all aspects of the supervisory relationship, including equitable distribution of resources, recognition of achievements, and fair evaluation practices. Supervisors should strive to create an inclusive and equitable environment, free from discrimination and bias.

- Professional Integrity: Supervisors should uphold high standards of professional integrity, adhering to ethical guidelines and best practices in their work. This includes maintaining confidentiality, avoiding conflicts of interest, and engaging in ongoing professional development.
- Communication and Collaboration: Supervisors should foster open and respectful communication with supervisees, actively listening to their concerns and perspectives. Supervisors should also collaborate with other professionals and stakeholders to ensure comprehensive support and guidance for supervisees.

For Supervisees

Supervisees also have a responsibility to uphold ethical standards in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. A code of conduct for supervisees can provide guidance and structure, helping them to navigate complex ethical issues and uphold their responsibilities.

Key Elements of a Supervisee's Code of Conduct

- Respect for Authority: Supervisees should respect the authority and expertise of supervisors, adhering to established guidelines and protocols. This includes following directions, meeting deadlines, and engaging in professional behavior.
- Professional Development: Supervisees should actively seek opportunities for professional development, engaging in training, research, and networking activities. This includes taking responsibility for their own learning and growth, and seeking feedback and guidance from supervisors.
- Communication and Collaboration: Supervisees should maintain open and respectful communication with supervisors, actively participating in discussions and feedback sessions. Supervisees should also collaborate with other professionals and stakeholders to ensure comprehensive support and guidance.
- Integrity and Accountability: Supervisees should uphold high standards of integrity and accountability, adhering to ethical guidelines and best practices in their work. This includes maintaining confidentiality, avoiding plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, and taking responsibility for their actions.
- Respect for Colleagues: Supervisees should respect the rights and dignity of their colleagues, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment. This includes avoiding harassment, discrimination, and other forms of misconduct, and promoting a culture of respect and collaboration.

Challenges and Management of Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship

Challenges

Despite the best intentions, challenges can arise in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Common challenges include power imbalances, communication issues, and differing

expectations. These challenges can lead to conflict and undermine the effectiveness of the supervisory relationship (Barnett & Molzon, 2014).

Examples of Challenges

- **Power Imbalances:** Power imbalances can create tension and conflict in the supervisory relationship, particularly if supervisors exercise their authority in a domineering or controlling manner. This can lead to feelings of disempowerment and resentment among supervisees.
- **Communication Issues:** Communication problems can arise due to differences in communication styles, unclear expectations, or lack of transparency. These issues can lead to misunderstandings, mistrust, and conflict.
- **Differing Expectations:** Differing expectations regarding workload, performance standards, and professional development can create tension and frustration in the supervisory relationship. This can lead to conflict and a lack of alignment between supervisors and supervisees.

Management Strategies

Effective management of these challenges requires proactive communication, clear expectations, and regular feedback. Supervisors and supervisees should engage in regular meetings to discuss progress, address concerns, and align expectations. Institutions can also provide training and resources to support effective supervision (Johnson & Ridley, 2016; Eaton, 2022).

Strategies for Managing Challenges

- **Proactive Communication:** Supervisors and supervisees should engage in proactive communication, regularly discussing progress, concerns, and expectations. This includes scheduling regular meetings, providing timely feedback, and maintaining open lines of communication.
- **Clear Expectations:** Supervisors should establish clear expectations regarding workload, performance standards, and professional development. This includes providing written guidelines, setting clear goals, and regularly reviewing progress.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Supervisors and supervisees should develop skills in conflict resolution, learning to address and resolve conflicts in a constructive and respectful manner. This includes seeking mediation or other forms of support if necessary.
- **Training and Development:** Institutions should provide training and development opportunities for both supervisors and supervisees, focusing on communication skills, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making. This includes workshops, seminars, and other forms of professional development.
- **Feedback and Evaluation:** Supervisors and supervisees should engage in regular feedback and evaluation, providing constructive feedback and opportunities for growth. This includes

conducting regular performance reviews, seeking feedback from multiple sources, and using feedback to inform future actions.

Benefits of the Framework

For Supervisors

A comprehensive ethical framework can provide significant benefits for supervisors, enhancing their professional satisfaction and effectiveness. By adhering to ethical principles and guidelines, supervisors can foster a supportive and productive work environment, reducing the risk of ethical violations and associated consequences (Hall & Martins, 2019). These includes;

- Enhanced Professional Satisfaction: Adhering to ethical principles can enhance professional satisfaction, fostering a sense of fulfillment and pride in one's work. This can lead to increased job satisfaction and overall well-being.
- Improved Relationships with Supervisees: A strong ethical framework can improve relationships with supervisees, fostering trust, respect, and collaboration. This can lead to more productive and enjoyable working relationships, enhancing the overall supervisory experience.
- Reduced Risk of Ethical Violations: By adhering to clear ethical guidelines, supervisors can reduce the risk of ethical violations and associated consequences. This can protect their professional reputation and reduce the risk of legal and ethical issues.

For Supervisees

A comprehensive ethical framework can also provide significant benefits for supervisees, enhancing their professional development and career prospects. By working in an ethical and supportive environment, supervisees can develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed in their academic and professional careers (Kahn & Kozlowski, 2025; Eaton, 2024). The following are the benefits;

- Increased Professional Development: A strong ethical framework can enhance professional development, providing opportunities for growth and learning. This can include access to training, research opportunities, and mentorship, helping supervisees to develop their skills and expertise.
- Supportive Work Environment: Adhering to ethical principles can foster a supportive and nurturing work environment, helping supervisees to feel valued and respected. This can enhance job satisfaction and overall well-being, leading to increased productivity and success.
- Opportunities for Growth and Independence: A balanced approach to supervision can provide opportunities for growth and independence, allowing supervisees to take ownership of their work and develop their professional identities. This can lead to increased confidence and self-efficacy, enhancing career prospects and professional success.

For Institutions

A comprehensive ethical framework can provide significant benefits for academic institutions, enhancing their reputation and overall effectiveness. By fostering a culture of ethics and integrity, institutions can attract and retain top talent, contributing to their overall mission and success (American Psychological Association, 2017b). Benefits for Institutions are;

- Higher Quality Research and Academic Output: A strong ethical framework can enhance the quality of research and academic output, fostering a culture of excellence and integrity. This can lead to increased recognition and reputation, attracting top students and faculty.
- Improved Reputation and Attractiveness: Adhering to ethical principles can enhance the reputation and attractiveness of academic institutions, making them more appealing to prospective students, faculty, and donors. This can contribute to increased enrollment, funding, and overall success.
- Reduced Risk of Legal and Ethical Issues: By establishing clear ethical guidelines and procedures, institutions can reduce the risk of legal and ethical issues, protecting their reputation and financial stability. This can lead to increased trust and confidence from stakeholders, enhancing overall institutional effectiveness.

Conclusion

The supervisor-supervisee relationship is a complex yet vital dynamic in academia, balancing authority with mentorship. Adhering to core ethical principles; respect, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, is fundamental to navigating this relationship productively. Institutions must support this by establishing clear procedures, providing training, and fostering a culture of integrity and accountability. Ultimately, a robust ethical framework benefits all stakeholders, enhancing professional development, institutional success, and the overall health of the academic environment.

Suggestions

For Supervisors

Supervisors are critical for maintaining ethical standards. Their key responsibilities are:

1. Engage in Ongoing Professional Development: Enhance skills through workshops, training, and mentorship.
2. Foster a Culture of Transparency and Open Communication: Encourage sharing concerns via regular meetings and timely feedback.
3. Seek Feedback and Be Open to Constructive Criticism: Use feedback from reviews and reflective practice to improve.
4. Promote Equity and Inclusion: Ensure equal access to opportunities and support for marginalized groups.

For Supervisees

Supervisees must uphold ethical standards to contribute to a productive environment. They should:

1. **Actively Seek Feedback and Opportunities for Professional Growth:** Engage in training and seek feedback from supervisors and mentors.
2. **Maintain Open and Respectful Communication with Supervisors:** Participate actively in discussions and provide timely updates.
3. **Take Responsibility for Your Own Learning and Development:** Set clear goals and engage in self-directed learning.
4. **Promote a Positive and Supportive Work Environment:** Foster respect and collaboration, and avoid misconduct.

For Institutions

Institutions must establish ethical standards by providing training and clear procedures. It is recommended that institutions:

- **Develop and Implement Comprehensive Codes of Conduct:** Provide clear guidelines and procedures for reporting ethical breaches.
- **Provide Training and Resources to Support Effective Supervision:** Offer workshops focusing on communication, conflict resolution, and ethics.
- **Establish Clear Procedures for Reporting and Investigating Ethical Breaches:** Create a robust framework to ensure transparency and accountability. The detailed steps are:
 1. **Develop a Comprehensive Reporting System:** Establish multiple, safe reporting channels with clear guidelines.
 2. **Conduct Thorough and Impartial Investigations:** Use trained professionals and standardized procedures.
 3. **Provide Support to Affected Individuals:** Offer counseling and protect reporters from retaliation.
 4. **Implement Corrective Actions:** Enforce disciplinary measures and use findings to improve policies.
 5. **Promote Transparency and Accountability:** Provide updates on investigations and communicate outcomes appropriately.

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