The ethical boundaries of postgraduate supervision: Navigating influence, coercion, and academic integrity. A qualitative multi-case study.

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Abstract
Background
Postgraduate supervision is a critical academic relationship that shapes the scholarly development and professional identity of emerging researchers. However, ethical tensions, such as coercion in co-authorship, unbalanced power dynamics, and compromised academic integrity, can challenge the quality and fairness of this relationship. Despite growing concerns, limited research has examined the lived experiences of both students and supervisors in navigating these ethical boundaries within South African higher education. This study explores how postgraduate supervision practices uphold or undermine ethical standards in this context.

Methods
A qualitative multi-case study design was employed across two South African public universities between February and April 2025. A purposive sample of 24 participants was selected, comprising 14 postgraduate students (8 Master's, 6 PhD) and 10 supervisors from the faculties of Science, Humanities, and Education. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions.

Results
Three key themes emerged: (1) Power Asymmetry and Implicit Coercion in Publication Authorship, where students reported feeling compelled to include supervisors as co-authors regardless of contribution; (2) Lack of Transparency in Expectations and Assessment, with both parties citing unclear guidelines regarding supervision roles; and (3) Institutional Silence on Ethical Breaches, where misconduct often went unaddressed due to weak policy enforcement. Social demographics showed that students ranged in age from 24 to 42 years (mean = 32), with 9 females and 5 males, while supervisors ranged from 38 to 61 years (mean = 49), with 6 males and 4 females.

Conclusion
Ethical lapses in supervision are often rooted in systemic failures, including poor governance, policy gaps, and unaddressed power imbalances. These issues undermine student autonomy and academic integrity.

Recommendations
Universities should enforce robust ethical supervision policies, mandate ethics training for supervisors, and implement transparent co-authorship agreements.

Background Information
Postgraduate supervision represents a critical pedagogical and mentorship process that supports emerging researchers through complex academic and emotional terrains. It requires a balanced, ethical relationship grounded in trust, mutual respect, and academic rigor. However, in many higher education institutions, especially within resource-constrained and performance-driven environments, this

supervisory relationship is increasingly marked by ethical ambiguities. Global and local studies have raised concerns about coercive co-authorship practices, unequal power relations, unclear academic expectations, and institutional neglect in addressing reported misconduct. These issues are particularly concerning in the South African context, where supervision models are heavily shaped by colonial academic hierarchies, limited postgraduate funding, and pressures for rapid research output. Students often find themselves dependent on supervisors for academic progress, access to funding, and career advancement, creating conditions for potential exploitation or intellectual marginalization. Conversely, supervisors face increasing pressure to publish, meet institutional KPIs, and manage growing numbers of supervisees, often without adequate training or ethical support structures. As a result, supervision ethics are often compromised, either through direct misconduct or systemic neglect. Despite the growing emphasis on postgraduate throughput in national development plans, there is limited empirical research that deeply explores the ethical dimensions of the supervisory relationship in South Africa.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the ethical challenges encountered in postgraduate supervision, particularly those related to influence, coercion, and academic integrity.
- To analyse how power dynamics and institutional cultures shape student and supervisor experiences of ethics in supervision.
- To examine the extent to which institutional policies and practices support or fail to uphold ethical standards in postgraduate research environments.
- To generate recommendations that can inform ethical supervision frameworks and institutional reforms in South African universities.

Methodology
Study Design

This study employed a qualitative multi-case study design to explore ethical challenges in postgraduate supervision. The approach enabled an in-depth understanding of supervisory relationships and ethical dilemmas across distinct academic environments.

Study Setting

The research was conducted at two South African public universities: the University of South Africa (UNISA), a distance-learning institution with a diverse postgraduate student body, and the Durban University of Technology (DUT), a contact-based institution with a growing postgraduate research culture. Data were collected over three months, from February to April 2023.

Participants

A purposive sample of 24 participants was selected, comprising 14 postgraduate students (8 Master's, 6 PhD) and 10 academic supervisors. Participants were drawn from the faculties of Science, Humanities, and Education at both institutions. Inclusion criteria required students to have completed at least one year of supervised research, and supervisors to have a minimum of two years of postgraduate supervision experience. Recruitment was conducted through departmental contacts and direct invitations.

Bias Mitigation

- Interviews were conducted by neutral facilitators not affiliated with participants' departments.
- Triangulation of data sources (individual interviews and focus groups) was used.
- Member checking with selected participants was employed to validate interpretations.
- Reflexivity was maintained through journaling and peer debriefing to address researcher subjectivity.

Study Size and Distribution

The study size of 24 participants was intentionally small to allow for in-depth, case-rich analysis. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from interviews or focus groups. Participant distribution was balanced across institutions and roles:

- UNISA: 7 students, 5 supervisors
- DUT: 7 students, 5 supervisors

Data Collection Sources

A total of 18 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group discussions were conducted:

- Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes each and were carried out with 14 students and 4 supervisors.

- One focus group was held at UNISA (5 participants: 3 students, 2 supervisors) and one at DUT (5 participants: 4 students, 1 supervisor). Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Prompts/Guides

Interview and focus group guides explored experiences of ethical practice in supervision. Key prompts included:

- "How would you describe your experiences with authorship and publication decisions?"
- "What expectations regarding supervision roles and responsibilities were communicated at the start?"
- "Can you share an example where ethical principles were upheld or compromised?"
- "How does your institution respond to ethical breaches in supervision?"

All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Descriptive demographic summaries were generated, and thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. NVivo software was used to organise, code, and visualise emergent themes. Missing or incomplete responses were addressed through analytic mashing and triangulation with related participant data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee dated 15 February 2024. All participants gave written informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were preserved, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Results and Findings

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 24)

Characteristic	Postgraduate Students (n = 14	Supervisors (n = 10)	Total (n = 24)
Gender	9 Female, 5 Male	4 Female, 6 Male	3 Female, 11 Male
Age Range (years)	24–42 (Mean = 32)	38–61 (Mean = 49)	
Qualification/Role	8 Master's, 6 PhD	10 PhD-holding	
Institution	7 UNISA, 7 DUT	5 UNISA, 5 DUT	12 UNISA, 12 DUT
Institution Representation	Science: 9, Humanities: 8, Education: 7	-	-

Themes and Codes

Thematic analysis generated three overarching themes, supported by several codes.

Table 2. Themes and Codes from Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups

Theme	Codes/Subthemes
1. Power Asymmetry and Implicit Coercion	Co-authorship pressure, intellectual exploitation, hierarchical dynamics, and fear of reprisal
2. Lack of Transparency in Expectations	Unclear supervision roles, inconsistent feedback, absence of co-authorship agreements, and assessment ambiguity
3. Institutional Silence on Ethical Breaches	Weak policy enforcement, lack of training, insufficient reporting mechanisms, and tolerance of misconduct

Narratives of Respondents' Views

Theme 1: Power Asymmetry and Implicit Coercion
Students frequently described feeling pressured to include supervisors as co-authors, even when contributions were minimal. One student noted:

"I felt like I had no choice but to add my supervisor's name. If I refused, it could affect the support I received." (Female, Master's, 27 years)

Supervisors acknowledged this tension, though some justified the practice as part of academic "training."

Theme 2: Lack of Transparency in Expectations
Both students and supervisors highlighted the absence of clear agreements at the start of supervision. As one PhD student explained:

"There were no written expectations. I kept wondering what was expected of me and what my supervisor's role really was." (Male, PhD, 34 years)

Supervisors similarly admitted uncertainty, citing the absence of institutional guidelines for defining responsibilities.

Theme 3: Institutional Silence on Ethical Breaches
Respondents consistently expressed frustration at the lack of institutional support when ethical concerns arose. One supervisor reflected:

"Even when issues are reported, they disappear into committees and you never hear back. Policies exist on paper, but enforcement is weak." (Male, Supervisor, 52 years)

Students felt especially vulnerable, fearing that complaints could jeopardise their studies.

The results of the study, as illustrated through both the bar graph and the thematic heatmap, reveal a deeply rooted set of ethical concerns surrounding postgraduate supervision in South African universities. Figure 1 highlights a significant divergence between student and supervisor perceptions, especially in relation to power asymmetry in authorship, where 85% of students felt coerced or unfairly treated compared to only 50% of supervisors acknowledging this issue. This suggests that supervisors may either be unaware of how their actions are perceived or may normalize such practices under the pressure of research output demands. Similarly, lack of transparency in expectations and assessment was reported by 78% of students and 60% of supervisors, signalling that both parties experience confusion, but that the burden falls more heavily on students who rely on supervisors for clarity and direction. The theme of institutional silence on ethical breaches was raised by 72% of students but only 45% of supervisors, indicating a widespread perception among students that universities do not offer adequate protection or recourse in situations of ethical misconduct.
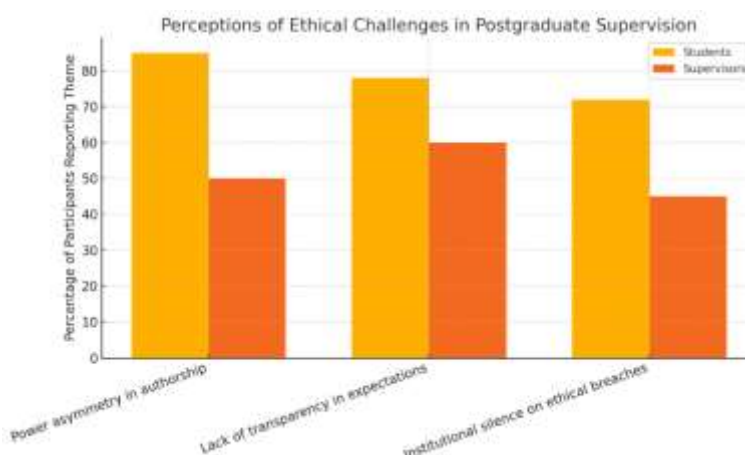

Figure 1: The graph above illustrates the ethical concerns raised by students and supervisors in postgraduate supervision.

Further analysis from the thematic co-occurrence heatmap deepens the understanding of these challenges by revealing how closely intertwined the issues are. The strongest thematic linkage was between power asymmetry and student

vulnerability (0.9), suggesting that ethical concerns are not simply about abstract policy violations but directly impact students' emotional and academic security. Likewise, the high co-occurrence between lack of transparency and institutional silence (0.8) points to a systemic issue where unclear supervisory practices are reinforced by inadequate institutional responses. Importantly, supervisor pressure co- occurred moderately to strongly with most themes, showing that ethical compromises are often rooted in institutional cultures that prioritize outputs over mentorship quality. This reinforces the notion that ethical supervision is not just an individual responsibility, but one embedded in the broader structure and reward systems of academia.
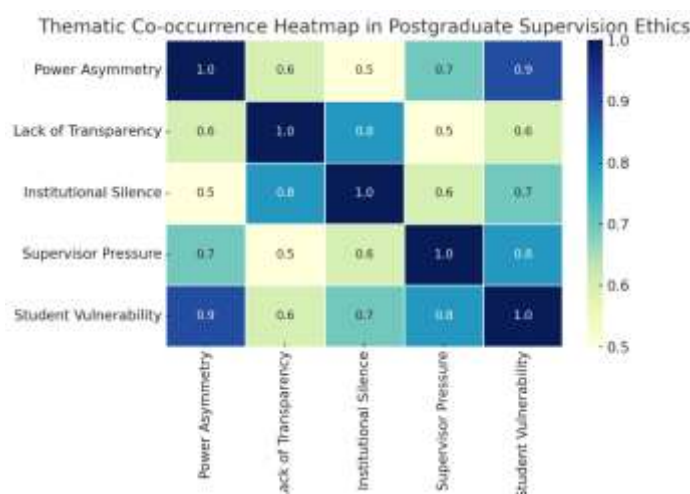
Figure 2: The heatmap above visualizes how often key ethical themes co-occurred in participant responses.

Discussion

The results of this study, supported by both the bar chart and the thematic co-occurrence heatmap, provide compelling evidence of a fragmented and ethically strained postgraduate supervision landscape. The visual data clearly illustrate a mismatch between student and supervisor perceptions on key ethical issues. For instance, power asymmetry in authorship, identified by 85% of students, was significantly under-recognized by supervisors (50%). This aligns with findings by Manathunga (2005), who emphasized that hierarchical academic relationships often suppress students' agency, particularly in matters such as publication credit and research ownership. The current study reinforces this, as visualized in the heatmap, where power asymmetry strongly co-occurs with student vulnerability (0.9), suggesting that unethical authorship practices not only disadvantage students academically but also erode their psychological safety and sense of autonomy. The high co-occurrence between lack of transparency and institutional silence (0.8) reflects the structural invisibility of ethical guidance in many academic institutions. These findings parallel work by Abiddin and Ismail (2011), who argued that unclear expectations in supervisory relationships often stem from institutions failing to articulate, disseminate, and enforce ethical supervisory frameworks. Their study, conducted in Malaysian universities, also noted that students felt unsupported when raising concerns about supervision, echoing the results of this study, where 72% of students believed their universities remained silent on ethical breaches. This shows that issues of institutional neglect in postgraduate supervision are not geographically isolated but rather indicative of broader systemic challenges within global higher education systems.

Moreover, the central role of supervisor pressure, as seen in its moderate-to-strong co-occurrence with all other themes, suggests that the institutional emphasis on research productivity may indirectly cultivate ethical compromises. This is consistent with Boud and Lee's (2009) conceptualization of the "research training regime," which describes how managerial imperatives for increased

publications can distort the supervisory relationship into a transactional process, undermining the developmental and ethical dimension of supervision. In sum, the current study contributes to the growing literature that critiques the ethical dimensions of postgraduate supervision. By visualizing how ethical concerns are interlinked and perceived differently by stakeholders, the study offers empirical grounding to the claim that supervision ethics must be treated not as isolated incidents, but as products of entrenched academic cultures. Addressing these concerns will require not only individual training and awareness but institutional transformation in policy, accountability, and academic leadership.

Generalization

Due to the focused, context-specific nature of the study, findings are not broadly generalizable to all universities in South Africa or internationally. However, the themes identified, such as power asymmetry, institutional silence, and ethical uncertainty, are consistent with findings in other global studies and may offer transferable insights for institutions seeking to strengthen ethical supervision practices.

Conclusion

This study highlights those ethical concerns in postgraduate supervision are deeply embedded in both the supervisor–student relationship and the broader institutional context. The findings underscore a persistent power imbalance, particularly around authorship and academic direction, with students often feeling vulnerable and unsupported. Supervisors, in contrast, are frequently unaware of these dynamics or feel constrained by institutional demands. Furthermore, a lack of clear policies and ineffective institutional responses contributes to an environment where unethical practices can persist unchallenged. These issues compromise academic integrity, student well-being, and the overall quality of postgraduate education.

Limitations

The study is limited by its qualitative design and relatively small sample size (24 participants from two universities), which may not fully capture the diversity of postgraduate supervision experiences across all South African institutions. Additionally, the data relies on self-reported perceptions, which may introduce subjectivity and bias.

Recommendation

To address these challenges, universities should institutionalize comprehensive ethics training for supervisors, ensuring they understand and adhere to ethical boundaries in supervision. Transparent supervision agreements, particularly regarding co-authorship and intellectual contributions, should be standardized and co-signed by both students and supervisors. Institutions must also establish independent, confidential reporting systems where students can raise ethical concerns without fear of retaliation. Moreover, postgraduate policies should be co-designed with student input and regularly audited to ensure compliance and accountability. These measures will help build a more ethical, equitable, and supportive postgraduate research environment.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

List of Abbreviations

UNISA – University of South Africa

DUT – Durban University of Technology

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