A wholistic approach to doctoral research supervision: What should it include?

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Abstract: This round table presentation will facilitate discussion on the question:' a wholistic approach to doctoral research supervision: what should it include?' It will be suggested that a wholistic approach by supervisors to doctoral candidates facilitates an acknowledgement of the candidate within a network of social and familial relations and with multiple and varied demands on them. This is particularly important given the changing face of candidates who are increasingly part-time, mature professionals with families. It also allows the relationship between the candidate and supervisor to be acknowledged as always involving multiple strands and 'hidden dangers' (McWilliam, Singh & Taylor, 2002) Such an approach assumes that all events are in some way interrelated, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and that we cannot build our reality out of the parts or elements of a reductionist analysis in a building block fashion. Therefore, when considering a wholistic supervisory practice there cannot be simple rules to follow nor can we reduce the success or failure of that supervision to the supervisor. However, beginning with an acknowledgement of complexity and interconnection, it is possible to devise multiple methods and sites of support for the process. A wholistic supervisory practice framework would need to include the difficult issue of explicit negotiation of both the implicit and explicit power relationships between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate (Grant 2001) and between the academic supervisor and the institution. The current, and continuing, emphasis on rational accountability by institutions of the supervisor – candidate has led to an emphasis on training within doctoral studies, which can be viewed as problematic (Kendall 2002). It is suggested, following, on from Yeatman (1995), that rational accountability should ultimately rest with the candidate and not with the supervisor. Flexible and creative feedback systems between candidate and supervisor and between supervisor and institution would then need to be developed. Some suggestions as to how that may be possible will be offered for general review and discussion.