

# Supervisor and Intern Reflections on a Year of Research: Why It Worked

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**Abstract:** Explorations on the relationship between undergraduate research assistants and their supervisors have yielded often conflicting results, sometimes indicating that these relationships are highly rewarding and beneficial to both parties while, at other times, suggesting that undergraduate assistants do little more than drain faculty time with few relevant contributions to the actual projects (Potter, Abrams, Townson, & Williams, 2000). This article focuses on a narrative of both supervisor and research assistant experiences working in an internship setting over the course of one academic year, and on perceptions regarding why the relationship was productive and enhanced the teaching and learning of both parties involved.

**Keywords:** research, research internship, undergraduate supervision, research narrative

## Supervisor's Reflections

### Background

*"You don't want him in your class."* I knew about Brandon before we worked together, and before he became a psychology major: some of my colleagues warned me that teaching Brandon meant that I should expect to be questioned regularly, and that if Brandon didn't like my answers, he would push me to provide a rationale for them. I didn't see why that was a problem, and I wasn't intimidated. As a former social work clinician and administrator, I am drawn to the "difficult" cases as challenges. The more disengaged or combative a student appears, the more I try to convert them to love what they're learning. In my classroom, students are personally responsible for their behavior. I hope to create an environment that beckons them to study further for their own sense of satisfaction. I relish the opportunity to open a student's mind, especially if he or she is skeptical. To ensure that students maintain an interest, I include role-plays and discuss composite case vignettes drawn from my years in clinical practice. I looked forward to teaching Brandon if he was so challenging, because, if nothing else, he would keep other students on their toes, watching the action.

I also knew about Brandon because he boldly revealed his sexual orientation on a Facebook thread, coming out as gay in a discussion about the importance of marriage being between a man and a woman, as advocated by one of the most conservative ministers within the religious society we live in. I monitored the thread with empathy, respecting his choice to go public, but also feeling a sense of kinship as an "outsider."

Only two years prior to reading Brandon's post, I had ended a much-wanted pregnancy at twenty weeks' gestation, due to our fetus being diagnosed with a deadly and incurable syndrome. I had only recently learned, nearly four years later, that a few community members had called my husband and I "baby killers." The resentment, confusion, and anger I began to harbor toward

those who played at the pageantry of care while secretly condemning me was still fresh. During our initial period of bereavement, meals were sympathetically delivered to our doorsteps wrapped in checkered cloths with notes and bible passages tucked gingerly between the covers. As time passed, the well-wishes and kind check-ins slowed to a trickle and were replaced by acrid words of criticism. I couldn't help but wonder how many Facebook commenters who claimed that they, and God, still loved Brandon despite his "choice," would end up abandoning him.

By the time Brandon and I connected academically, it was the fall of his junior year. I was teaching him for the first time in my social psychology course, and had already been pleased by his engagement with the class. As expected, he was a frequent participator and stimulated heated discussions among his peers, but I recognized within him a love of learning and critical thinking, and was heartened by his engagement with the sometimes-difficult topics we discussed.

That fall, Brandon began stopping by my door after class, during office hours, and in between. As I had just begun to promote my research agenda at our traditionally teaching-based institution, I was usually quite busy and preferred that students make appointments. Sometimes, Brandon walked right in and presumptuously sat down at my desk. Other times, he leaned in by the door and asked if I had a moment, or if I had time for lunch. It was always refreshing to see him, but I had little time to spare. My term was tightly scheduled between teaching classes, research, advising, and department chair responsibilities.

We scheduled an hour in which to discuss his reasons for wanting to connect. When we sat down, Brandon told me about his "existential crisis" in the psychology major. He feared he was pursuing the wrong field, and that, aside from my social psychology course, he wasn't feeling particularly challenged or inspired. He was considering transferring to a larger institution with a variety of programs that might appeal to him more from a social perspective as well: he was feeling claustrophobic attending college in the same community where he went to high school. He was surrounded by the same friends and, yes, nosy locals who had grown accustomed to asking entitled personal questions about his life.

Our school is small, hovering at an enrollment of approximately 250 students, and while our psychology major is one of the largest, my "big" courses hit caps of 30. It's one of our hallmarks, appealing to potential students with promises of small student-to-faculty ratios, but I can also appreciate how the environment can be stifling for homegrown locals looking to spread their wings beyond what's often referred to as the "Bubble": here, children are safe, protected, and sheltered throughout their maturity from the frightening realities of the city that lies just a few miles south.

Ramirez (2012) noted that undergraduate students are "simultaneously developing competence in the interpersonal arena" (p. A57) while navigating the pre-professional skills that will assist them once they graduate. Brandon's situation was reflective of this to me. I saw an opportunity to help him grow as an intelligent, capable young person in both academic and interpersonal contexts. As Ramirez expressed, "Oftentimes the mentor may be most influential for a young adult who is in the throes of an emotional maelstrom by simply modeling how an emotionally balanced adult behave" (p. A57).

I didn't want Brandon to leave our college, and thought about ways to keep him here. As I had been intending to offer internship opportunities to qualified psychology majors, I asked him if he might like to be the first of these to work on my upcoming research study exploring the final words of the dying. I told him that this would be quite challenging, since psychology majors aren't required to take introductory research methods until their senior capstone experience, and that I would expect him to put in many self-directed hours combing the relevant academic literature for research in support of my hypothesis.

Upon offering him the opportunity, Brandon's eyes lit up. I expected him to ask, "Really? You think I could do that?" Instead, he got straight to the point.

"I've been wanting to do some type of research while I'm here and I think maybe that's the type of psychology I'd be interested in. How many hours could I do?" he asked.

I explained to him the nuts and bolts of credit hours and learning outcomes for the internship, and he pulled out a notebook. "So, 50 hours of work is one credit? Maybe I should start at that. I have trouble staying on-task when I have to work by myself. I think that's going to be a big challenge for me."

"I know how you feel," I said. "I can be a big procrastinator but there's a pretty strict timeline to this research. We need a literature review complete by the end of the term, and goals and outcomes for the research along with that. So this isn't the kind of internship where you can wait to do everything last minute and succeed. If you're anything like me, you've become good at that type of work. But research is methodical, and sometimes even circuitous. Just when you think you've found something to support your hypothesis, other citations spring up refuting it. You need to be intentional and mindful, and not give up when you become frustrated. Do you think you can do that?"

"Will we be meeting a lot to talk about my progress and what I'm finding?" he asked. His eyebrows furrowed into a familiar scrunch. The subtext of this expression, to me, read as follows: I might need extra help. Usually so confident in his academic abilities, Brandon appeared nervous. I wanted to challenge him but not push him too far.

"Absolutely. I'll be relying on you to help me get my work done, and trusting that you know what you're doing. We'll need to spend some time going over how to critique research articles, and I'm going to have to give you an accelerated tutorial, but I think you have the capacity to get it done."

I felt confident that Brandon would learn quickly, but I wondered if he would lose interest after looking through a few articles. The language of peer-reviewed publication is, in itself, a completely different way to communicate. Those unfamiliar with it, especially at the undergraduate level, find it dry and too tentative. My students have always expressed frustration at my often-repeated statement that "studies suggest, they never show." When students want to do an impression of me, they usually repeat this all in unison, but they betray me with eyes rolling back into their heads.

## **The Internship Process**

In the initial weeks of the internship, Brandon did struggle. He often felt, in his own words, “floundery” trying to critique research, and was insecure in the conclusions he drew. He huffed. He paced my office as if there were concrete answers hidden behind my bookshelf. Our initial meetings consisted of much centering and redirection, and my repeated reassurance that he was on the right path. I reinforced his critiques of the limitations of research studies he found and how they helped support or invalidate my (soon to become “our”) hypothesis for my own study was valuable.

Within weeks, I began looking forward to our meetings more and more, and felt I was helping something grow. As the mother of two young children, I often have these moments of pride, when I can step back and appreciate that mastery has occurred: it happened when my daughter grasped a fork for the first time with her chubby fingers and speared the center of a piece of macaroni, then plunged it into her gap-toothed mouth and applauded herself. It happened when my son pumped his stick-thin legs on a “big boy swing” for the first time, reaching his toes forward to kick my hands at the crest of every upswing. And it happened when Brandon began to find articles on his own, reading more than just the abstracts and presenting me with piles of dog-eared printouts every Tuesday and Thursday morning when we met.

He created flow charts and Venn diagrams of the major themes we were studying and we began to engage in deeper dialogue about the purpose of my research. We argued about the benefits of qualitative versus quantitative reasoning: Brandon’s analytic perspective appreciates numbers because they are distinct, reliable, and can be manipulated with the right formulas. I, in turn, passionately explained the shortcomings of utilizing solely statistical analyses of survey questionnaires, especially for my study, in which I aimed to recruit a small sample size. I devotedly explained the benefit of narrative, rich troves of data a researcher can submerge herself in, inductively building themes and supporting them with powerful participant disclosures. We settled on an agreement that generalizability is important and that large-scale studies with high power analyses build strong mountains upon which smaller N studies, populated by engaging participant stories, provide a compellingly beautiful landscape.

To date, we have waded through much unknown territory together and have experienced many teachable moments. When we discovered that the research question I was considering had already been explored extensively, Brandon told me, “I feel like this was a waste of time. Doing all this work for nothing. Finding out we need to start from the very beginning.” My perspective was different. I explained, “This is exciting! Now we know the literature far better than we did at the beginning! And we know the gaps, limitations, and questions that remain unanswered. This is part of the process. Now we just need a new question based on what we’ve found.” As a result, the research changed direction, onto a much more unique path in which I have been able to make good use of Brandon’s contributions.

It appears that a relationship like ours has been documented in existing studies on undergraduate research experiences. I find myself relating to a respondent in Potter et al.’s (2000) survey of faculty mentoring undergraduate research assistants, who said: “It is wonderful to get to know students and be part of their being able to ‘do’ science. It is like Christmas, watching them

unwrap the process of science and how that experience changes them—and I get to see it!” (p. 25). Even in the process of writing this article together, I’ve watched Brandon unwrap a new gift of dissemination: he’s beginning to understand the power of using his own voice as the multifaceted person he is: he can rely on research to reinforce his own understanding of our relationship, but use his own narrative to frame it. He does it in his own unique, sometimes dramatic, but always deeply concentrated way, and I enjoy shaping and guiding the process.

Houser, Lemons, and Cahill (2013) have applied Lewin et al.’s (1939) management styles to the undergraduate research relationship as a way to understand mentors’ management of their students. I relate most to the democratic model, in which a mentor “consults with the undergraduate students, listens, and considers their research ideas...” (p. 299). Recently, Brandon and I were working on a literature review manuscript advocating a need for research into the experiences of formal direct care providers working with underserved minority populations on hospice. I was struggling to find a novel way to present a summary of why minorities may be less inclined to pursue end of life care, as there is a trove of research on the topic. One day, about a half an hour before we were scheduled to meet, Brandon texted me the following:

It seems there’s two sections: barriers due to white culture (suppression and racism), and barriers due to minority culture (reaction). Perhaps that perspective frames our caregivers perfectly as they are trying to bridge the gap. Also, just as that clicked in my head, I’m listening to Jurassic Park, and it got super epic.

These are the moments that arouse my passion for teaching and researching, and make me laugh. He may be inexperienced, but Brandon’s fresh eyes are useful and helpful tools in my practice, and the language he uses to share his ideas is always engaging. I agreed with his analysis of barriers to access, and we began working in the direction he suggested, which also helped to organize our ideas and structure of the paper. On projects such as these, the 12-year age gap between us feels irrelevant, and it is almost like working with a peer. Brandon never fails to remind me of my authority in our relationship, however. Yesterday I received the following text message:

Tomorrow let’s set a game plan and strategize for the rest of summer—my independent work is falling, and I’m beginning to eat myself over it mentally. I’m going to miss you very personally and professionally this summer, especially when it comes to work motivation!

My response? “I’ll miss you a lot too...so get on assignment and find me some articles for the paper, and look for a specific journal to target as publisher for it!”

Indeed, in my six years of working as a professor, this relationship with my research intern has been one of the most enriching highlights. I look forward to building more mountains with him, and filling in the scenery as we go.

## **Intern Perspective**

### **Background**

“Who’s getting smoothies today?” - 10:01 am

“If you order them, I’ll pick them up on my way.” - 10:02 am

“Okay! Chai too?” - 10:02 am

“Yes of course!” - 10:03 am

“Sweet. See you at 10:40!” - 10:05 am

My supervisor loves fruit smoothies. They have to be blended enough though; chunks are unacceptable. Chai lattes are also deeply loved, especially poured over ice with a shot of espresso. But the most coveted items from the café we frequent are the chocolate chip scones.

I could summarize my relationship with the renowned Dr. E in a traditional narrative with the classic descriptions of an apprentice who finds a mentor and through this relationship finds his place in the world. I could tell you of a young, energetic, student looking for a guiding force to make meaning out of the academic sea of nonsense into which he was proverbially born. But instead, I’m going to tell you a tale of Star Wars and smoothies.

What turns an average, run-of-the-mill puree of fruit into a flavorful, yet nutritious, quintessential drink of the Gods? The perfect recipe? The perfect fruit? Extensive blending? In fact, as I have learned from Dr. E, it is a combination of innumerable factors.

Attending a small liberal arts college is cliché these days. But when I tell you my school is small, you must understand: I mean SMALL. The enrollment usually hovers right around 250 students. Total. Oh, did I mention the college is perfectly nestled within the iron-clad walls of a town that ideologically transports the visitor back a few centuries?

Our town lies within a community founded on a deep pseudo-Christian faith. The community is reminiscent of small-town America in the early 20th century. On a walk around town, it is hard to spot unfamiliar faces. Most people in the community are related to each other: my grandparents were second cousins. The morality and ethics of the community center around the idea of an ultimate married love elaborated upon by the 18th century scientist-turned-mystic upon whose works the religion was founded.

It was into this world that on a mid-February day in 2014 I disclosed some ground-breaking news; news that was unheard of within our town’s ideological boundaries. In a Facebook post, and in words far more eloquent than I will relay now, I stated that I was, in fact, gay. The polarization this act created was astounding and comprehensive: suddenly, everyone had to pick sides. Before, people could hang their heads low and keep their mouths shut when LGBTQ issues were brought into discussion.

For a time, I felt a bit like a political figure-head: to some I was a modern day example of the oppressed speaking out against the majority rule; to others, I was the antichrist.

A year and a half later, I was in the midst of an existential crisis. Growing up surrounded by religion in our community, it was no easy task to accept my sexuality. As a young teenager, and as I started to develop feelings for my male friends, I suppressed every sexual urge starting a chain-reaction of obsessive compulsive tendencies leading to the development of major depressive disorder by the time I began my freshman year of college. By the time I was 18, I had, in part, accepted the fact that I was gay, but my depression had reached a climax. I began engaging in self-injurious behaviors, and came within a stone's throw of taking my life.

It was then that I first met Dr. E. Two of my closest confidants were so worried about my emotional state that they asked Dr. E to assess me for suicidality. I remember in that interview that I immediately felt a strong draw towards her. I felt safe and comfortable: I didn't have to censor what I said. She asked all of the right questions and instilled in me a sense of hope that things would get better. It was soon after this event that I began to discover my passion for psychology. I wanted to help other people who were enduring similar hardships, and understanding the human mind seemed the best way to do so.

The only way I can describe Dr. E is to make an analogical parallel. Imagine for a moment that we are living in the universe of Star Wars during the second and third episodes. Obi Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker are battling the dark side of the force as they form a deep-seeded brotherly relationship. Anakin is a young, yet extremely intelligent and powerful Padawan, or apprentice, who must be guided with a firm, yet cunning, hand. Obi Wan is the perfect Jedi master for Anakin, as he guides him on the path to becoming the most powerful Jedi in history (Forget for a moment that Anakin turns to the dark side and kills Obi Wan at the end of episode III.)

Dr. E and Obi Wan Kenobi are essentially interchangeable. They both embody wisdom while exuding energetic intelligence and wit. Both are phenomenal mentors to their respective students. Differences are clear, although they exist mainly at the surface level: where Obi Wan wields a light saber in the classic Jedi garb of floor length white robes, Dr. E swings the psychological and academic equivalent of a light saber underneath a hipster haircut that changes color on the regular.

As for me, I take on the role of Anakin Skywalker. The rash, energetic student to the wise even-keeled master. Like Anakin, I often need to be reined in as my intellectual arrogance and impulsiveness have the potential to lead me down a dark road. This is where the analogy begins to break down however, as I do not plan on turning to the dark side.

The scene is now set for the epic that is the story of Dr. E (the Master) and Brandon (the Padawan). Indeed, we often used the above analogy as we developed our professional and personal relationship. The story officially begins with a meeting in Dr. E's office in the midst of my existential crisis in the fall of 2015. At this time, I had been entertaining a passion for psychology for almost a year, and I was afraid my affection for the subject was beginning to dwindle. Dr. E was quick to point out that the classes I was enrolled in that fall were not

challenging me and the lack of motivation I was experiencing was quite natural. She then proposed that I begin working on a research internship looking into the final words of the dying under her guidance. Due to the potential merit I would gain from becoming a published co-author, I accepted the offer, despite the fear that I would be completely unmotivated, and so, would be adding a major stressor to my life as I struggled to maintain an adequate level of work.

### **Themes of Mentor Relationships**

In order to generalize my experiences, I will turn to a study regarding the nature of mentor relationships. Smith, Paretti, Hession, and Krometis (2014) identified several important themes that defined relationships including: autonomy, project clarity, challenging assignments, mentor contact, role modeling, feedback, and assistance. I apply these themes to our relationship in the following section. This example can be used as an anecdote for successful relationships for future mentors.

*Autonomy.* The independent nature of research was daunting at first. During the first week of the internship, I procrastinated starting my work until the last moment. I sat down on Sunday afternoon with my computer and began running searches on various databases, looking for any research on death and dying. I felt drained and restless after the first half hour and had to exercise intense self-control to continue working. I emailed Dr. E a lot during this time, trying to find a way to stay on-task. I think Dr. E realized while working on my own, I needed a sense of structure. She trained me up more and more in the language of research. We began spending more time working together with me bringing her reviews of articles. This helped me maintain focus and engagement. Sometimes we work in the same environment on our laptops together on our respective tasks. It helps knowing she's staying on-task, too.

*Project Clarity.* During the first month of my research internship, my fears of floundering were seemingly realized: I felt as though I had no idea how to conduct research and was simply wasting time. As I began reading articles, I had no idea what to look for and frustration ensued. Dr. E explained that this was an expected reaction since it was my first time doing research. I felt like Dr. E just threw me into cold, unfamiliar, deep water. I must have drained at least three blue highlighters, which, I guess, are as close as I'll get to a light saber right now. I asked for help and Dr. E didn't take it personally. She offered more and more guidance on the specific nature of the research process and what she was looking for, and it wasn't long until I felt comfortable enough to fully apply myself.

*Challenging Assignments.* I read countless articles on the experiences of dying individuals and I became a mini-expert on deathbed experiences. Reviewing articles was challenging because I had to be sure I read the articles comprehensively while honing my ability to speed-read. The challenge did not seem insurmountable once I found my footing, yet it provided enough stretch to keep me engaged. Soon, I was able to take what I had found and present it to Dr. E: it turned out that the initial research question had already been answered in the literature. While I felt a bit like I had single-handedly killed Dr. E's research project, I knew it was inevitable: if I didn't find the research, someone else would have. And all was not lost. Dr. E adjusted the research question to focus on the experience of caregivers of the dying instead of on the dying themselves. Soon, we began researching once more. This project progressed through the next



term and by the summer, we had a study outlined and were in position to launch as soon as we received external funding.

*Mentor Contact.* The research process has been the most educational and rewarding part of my college experience. But what has changed my life has been the relationship with Dr. E. Effective mentorship does not stop at the door of higher learning, but extends to all facets of the mentee's life. As Dr. E and I became more efficient in our academic endeavors, we became closer as kindred spirits who share similar passions for life. Through our time together, we have found that our minds share many features. A common utterance of Dr. E is "you remind me so much of a young me." These words are one of the greatest honors I have ever received. The relationship we have developed is unique for a number of reasons. First and foremost, we are both willing to expend tremendous effort when we care about a subject or person. This has meant that despite extremely demanding and differing schedules, we have carved out time to work together.

The best example of this took place on an early summer night in June. In order to work around our schedules, we found ourselves beginning to work at 8:00 pm on a Friday, pizza in hand. While certainly unconventional, this type of atmosphere has allowed me to grow into my role as a student and intern in a way unachievable in the classroom.

The relaxed nature of our relationship has meant that text messaging has become our primary means of communication. The speed and ease of texting has allowed us to have a slow running dialogue for the last several months. Entertaining internet memes, humorous jokes, and questions and comments on the nature of life and reality often make their way into our text conversations. The comfort and safety I feel from the knowledge that Dr. E is so easily reachable has enhanced my life immensely.

*Role Modeling.* What began as a simple relationship between a professor and student has morphed into something far more powerful. I don't see Dr. E simply as a teacher. That is part of it, to be sure, but I see her as a friend, a guide, a sensei, a master of her trade and someone who has conquered her greatest fears and is now helping me to do the same. I have gained so many amazing opportunities from my work with Dr. E. I accompanied her to the state capitol as she delivered a powerful speech on access to abortion. At her side, I went to the Ivy League college where she's an alum and met the dean of the doctoral program in clinical social work. Together, we delivered a talk on our research to the faculty of our college (and I ensured that we wore complementary colors). For all of this, I am grateful.

*Feedback.* While I am generally confident in my intellectual abilities, I need a certain level of affirmation to maintain my confidence. Dr. E is swift to praise when appropriate, and to gently push me beyond my perceived abilities when needed. While I have had many falls throughout the course of this internship, Dr. E always offers guidance on how to succeed the next time.

*Assistance.* I don't know where I would be today had I declined when Dr. E approached me about a research internship. Our work has given me an identity that serves as a compass for my life, keeping me on course when I begin to falter. It has given me a safe space where I can exercise my intellect, leading me to new perspectives and paradigms. Beyond that, I have been given a mentor who guides me with compassion and care while consistently making me laugh

and reaffirm my love for psychology and humanity.

### **Conclusion**

In the words of one participant from Potter et al.'s (2009) study, "Mentoring [research] is an excellent way of relating to your students and productively challenging them. It allows them to explore their own potential, discovering both their abilities and limits" (p. 25). We both find this statement to be true: the past year has been an educational and enriching year for us both, allowing us to connect more deeply to the field of psychology with renewed investment in the interpersonal relationships at our college that help faculty and students flourish.

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