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Dialogic tensions in postgraduate supervision. Supervisees' perspectives on supervisory power, epistemic mismatch, agency and resilience

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Abstract

This study explores supervisees' perspectives on anti-dialogic praxis and epistemic tensions in postgraduate supervision at the University of Sindh, Pakistan. Based on semi-structured interviews with 15 research students (n = 9 male and 6 female), theoretically grounded in the theory of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), this research identifies five interrelated themes: power asymmetries and hierarchical relationships, epistemic mismatch and disciplinary tensions, feedback failure and epistemic uncertainty, structural and institutional constraints, and supervisee agency and resilience. The findings suggest that supervision is influenced by highly ingrained hierarchies, a lack of dialogic interaction, institutional and supervisory forces that restrict pedagogical interaction and knowledge production.

Introduction

Postgraduate supervision is key to academic quality, research excellence, and supervisee success. Globally, it is framed increasingly as a relationship of mentorship, collaboration, and power negotiation (Jackson, Davidson & Usher, 2022; Lee, 2008). Research studies have highlighted the struggles of research students including epistemic tensions, silence, and failure of dialogic praxis (Freire, 1970; Gurr, 2001; Lee, 2008). Supervisees often face ambiguous direction, unclear feedback, and power imbalances that shape their agency, identity, and degree completion (Bastalich, 2017; Halai, 2011; Malik et al., 2021; Zahid & Mahmood, 2025). In Pakistan, research supervision is often shaped by a culture of supervisor authority and supervisee subordination, with expectations that supervisees submit to the supervisor's authority. In addition, the institutional structures in this hierarchical system further reinforce completion over critical engagement and creative discourse (Ali et al., 2019). Many factors shape the academic environment of Pakistani universities, including rigid academic structures, strong authority, and the expectation that students accept what authorities have established. As a result, there is little space for questioning or divergent thinking (Rind, 2016). These structures can severely restrict doctoral students' ability, especially those beginning their thesis work, to express dissatisfaction, question suggestions, or propose new concepts without provoking criticism or repercussions from others (Cotterall, 2011; Guerin et al., 2015).

In Pakistani universities, supervisees face several issues, including institutional pressure, publication requirements in W-category journals, and linguistic barriers under English medium instruction policies (Bakhsh & Elbashir, 2026). These issues are compounded by supervisors' membership in various academic committees, heavy workloads, and leaving supervisees without sufficient guidance, leading to prolonged postgraduate research journeys. Recent research suggests collaborative supervisory practices, including joint publications and scheduled structured meetings (Masood et al., 2023). Supervisees often reported limited dialogic interaction, fewer professional training opportunities, and unbalanced supervisory relationships (Batool et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2026; Wisker, 2012). Based on local and global studies, postgraduate supervision in Pakistani higher education institutions remains underexplored.

Several studies show that supervisory relationships are complex, power-based relationships that significantly affect doctoral candidates' development (Gurr, 2001; Lee, 2008). Epistemic tensions matter in supervision when supervisors challenge, curtail, or decentre students' intellectual work. Epistemic tensions in doctoral research can stem from conflicting power relationships between supervisors and supervisees (Carter et al., 2026; Cotterall, 2011). Supervisors act as gatekeepers in academic approval and control knowledge production, which sometimes involves imposing their own intellectual agendas on doctoral students. This can create power imbalances that prevent the supervisee from fully expressing or developing their research ideas (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017). Driven by these tensions, a common scenario in Pakistan's academia is that supervisors suppress doctoral students' voices (Bakhsh & Elbashir, 2026).

The lack of dialogic praxis in the postgraduate supervision adds to these challenges. The reciprocal, two-way exchange of ideas, known as dialogic praxis, is essential to building a collaborative supervisory relationship that supports doctoral students' academic and personal development (Boud & Lee, 2009; Carter & Robinson, 2017; Haley et al., 2025). In Pakistan, however, a dialogic interaction breaks down when it becomes one-sided and hierarchical, a form of supervision often found here (HEC, 2021). When dialogic praxis fails, genuine engagement between a doctoral student and their supervisor breaks down, such that the doctoral student's point of view or ideas are either ignored or overridden by the supervisor (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017; Lee, 2008). This lack of genuine communication only accentuates the culture of silence, and students conclude that their supervisors subjugate them (Freire, 1998).

In higher education in Pakistan, postgraduate supervision is a complex relational practice, and an institutional environment is characterized by power, authority, and autonomy (Bakhsh & Elbashir, 2026; Khene, 2014). Postgraduate supervision is not merely a procedural and executive activity but a relational practice. The supervisory relationship is charged with pressure around authority and self-sufficiency, expertise and dialogue, and institutional requirements and personal growth (Carter et al., 2020; Cross & Backhouse, 2014; Whitelock et al., 2008). In doctoral supervision, scholars have long observed unequal access to research culture in constructing supervisory relationships (Deem & Brehony, 2000), institutional positioning (Clouder et al., 2020), and negotiation of space and authority (Grant, 2005; Manathunga, 2007). Critical pedagogical approaches illuminate these tensions. For example, Hickey and Forbes (2022) and Moriarty et al. (2008) base their arguments on Freirean dialogical pedagogy by suggesting that supervisory practices be understood as mutual inquiry, and Shih (2025) contextualizes supervisory practices within the wider transformations of hegemonic practices.

More recent scholarship has begun to disaggregate these dynamics and to expand the evidence base beyond the Global North. Allee, Seccia, and Wooten (2026) build on the situated nature of scholarly identity to show how doctoral students' identities are shaped by and contest their supervisory contexts. Awuonda and Zaier (2026) emphasize the relational and dialogic aspects of doctoral mentoring. Regarding graduate education in management, Paulino and Bispo (2026), based on Bourdieu's theory, provide a mapping of "relational configurations" of supervision that—like Bourdieu—reproduces power dynamics, but also resists them, through an analysis of 37 oral-history interviews with students and

supervisors, a limitation which we also discuss below. In South Asia, the lived experiences of Pakistani postgraduates (Ali et al., 2019), the evolution and challenges of doctoral education in Pakistan (Halai, 2011), the desired support from supervisors by Pakistani doctoral students (Batool et al., 2022), the experience of abusive-supervision (Malik et al., 2021), and the experience of Pakistani doctoral students with their supervisors (Zahid & Mahmood, 2025) have been documented. Studies in other countries, such as Malaysia and the United Kingdom, also show how institutional culture defines supervisory expectations (Sidhu et al., 2013, 2014). Together, this literature suggests that this supervisory tension is not just a South Asian or purely individual phenomenon, but is generated in this relationality within specific institutional ecologies. This study extends the Freirean lens into anti-dialogic praxis, silence, and epistemic tension in Pakistani universities, while focusing on these relational and structural conditions.

This study seeks to reframe postgraduate supervision by recording supervisees' experiences of how they negotiate power, anti-dialogic praxis, encounter epistemic tensions, and remain resilient in the process of supervision. Within the framework of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), this study situates supervisees' experiences and shows how they establish agency, construct knowledge within the institutional hierarchy, and experience epistemic tensions during the research process and in their negotiations with supervisors.

The study's contribution is twofold. In theory, it brings Freire's critical pedagogy (which was created for popular education and adult literacy, not doctoral education) into the field of postgraduate supervision, identifying ways in which "banking" models are played out in supervision, and ways in which intellectual independence can be seen under "anti-dialogic" circumstances. In practical terms, it pinpoints feasible avenues for change in postgraduate supervision—feedback literacy, co-supervision, structured milestones, and space for dissent—that could help universities in resource-constrained South Asian contexts make a step towards supervision as dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy as a theoretical approach to examine education as a political, dialogical, and transformative process inseparable from power, knowledge hierarchies, and the social system. This position is not a neutral academic process, but a space for negotiating power, epistemological struggle, and identity construction in which the supervisee and the supervisor are asymmetrically situated.

A key tenet of Freire's theory is his critique of the banking model of education. Importantly, banking education is not a one-way transmission (Chalaune, 2021; Clemitshaw, 2013; Freire, 1970) because it privileges depositing and accumulating content over the learning process itself, separating the learning process from what is learned. This distinction is where we begin our study: many of the supervisory issues participants report are the direct result of the very opposite relationships: the relationships that lack a learning focus, where feedback, direction, and validation are given (or can be given) without regard for the supervisee's grasp. Banking-style relations in doctoral supervision are directive, hierarchical

relationships in which supervisors determine research direction, validate knowledge, and evaluate results. In contrast, Freire (1970) proposes a problem-posing method based on dialogue, shared learning, and critical questions, which offers a new model of supervision as a negotiation of knowledge.

The analysis is based on two other Freirean concepts. Conscientização (critical consciousness) is the way people become aware of oppressive conditions and develop the ability to change them (Chalaune, 2021; Clemitshaw, 2013); dialogue (reflection and action) is not only communication but a pedagogical act where it is possible to have epistemic reciprocity and joint construction of meaning in supervision.

Freire does not refer directly to postgraduate supervision, so we apply his ideas here explicitly, not assertively. We construct this bridge in two ways. First, supervision is read in Freire's later work, which attempts to moderate the critique of oppression with the potential for change and freedom, namely Pedagogy of Hope (1994), and then Pedagogy of Autonomy (1998, 2000), which constitutes a new perspective on education, and by extension on the formation of doctors, with a new orientation toward intellectual autonomy as a process rather than a mere production of a thesis. Freire helps explain why anti-dialogic supervision is educationally expensive and why supervisees' self-directed learning may be viewed as a struggling, but emergent, instance of autonomy. Second, we view Freire's critique as consistent with and reinforced by an education-centred approach to supervision, one that is marked by dialogue and formative feedback; when dialogue and formative feedback do not occur, supervision becomes detached from the student's learning process. This process creates many of the tensions, not simply a moral failing.

Freire also highlights dialogue as praxis: reflection and action. In postgraduate supervision, dialogue is not merely communication but a pedagogical act that enables epistemic reciprocity and shared meaning-making. The lack of timely feedback, clear guidance, and minimal interaction is a failure of dialogic praxis that results in epistemic isolation and emotional distress. Significantly, Freire’s framework prefigured the connection between education and structural conditions. Institutional constraints, including heavy supervisor workload, limited access to research resources, and systemic disciplinary mismatch practices, show how supervision is integrated into larger institutional ecologies. This critical framework shapes not only access to knowledge but also to opportunities for dialogue, support, and equity (Hodgson, 2019). Therefore, supervision operates at several levels of power: interpersonal (supervisor–supervisee), epistemic (knowledge validation), and structural (institutional).

The study is set in the Global South, but the Global South is used not as a descriptive term, but as an analytical concept. Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship suggests knowledge hierarchies and evaluation norms within southern universities may still be grounded in northern norms, placing students' "ways of knowing" and "languaging" as inferior (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2014). Combined with Freire, this literature helps explain the epistemic and linguistic tensions participants report, especially in relation to English-medium expectations, as examples of what Freire termed cultural invasion, where the dominant voice is privileged over other voices. We invoke coloniality, therefore, as an analytical rather than a contextual tool, one that links interpersonal and institutional power with broader epistemic hierarchies.

This research extends Freire's critical pedagogy to postgraduate supervision (MPhil & PhD) by showing that supervision is a critical pedagogical space where power, knowledge, and identity intersect. It adds that, although supervisory practices tend to recreate hierarchical and anti-dialogic conditions, supervisees actively shape meaning and resilience. Through a Freirean lens, this research re-positions postgraduate supervision as an active and conflictual pedagogical process, with the possibility of transformative learning hinging on how far supervision can be pushed from dialogue, hierarchy, and knowledge transmission to critical co-construction.

This research addresses the following research questions:

1. How do power asymmetries, epistemic mismatch, and institutional constraints shape supervisor - supervisee relationships in postgraduate research in Pakistani settings?
2. How do supervisees use their agency and resilience to negotiate supervisory relationships through a critical pedagogical lens?

Materials and Methods

This study adopted an interpretive research design with constructivist epistemology (Mncina et al., 2024). The interpretive paradigm places greater emphasis on participants' meanings, experiences, and views instead of testing set hypotheses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with postgraduate students, which allowed us to explore the major themes in a structured manner and, at the same time, provided us with the flexibility to pursue emergent issues. This method is especially suitable considering the aim of our research: to learn how supervisees negotiate their agency and resilience and make sense of tensions in supervisory relationships.

This study is especially suited to an interpretive research design with a constructivist epistemology, which allows for the exploration of supervisees' agency and epistemic tensions in the culturally and institutionally complex context of doctoral supervision in Pakistan. The interpretivist approach focuses on the subjective and socially constructed nature of reality, giving more importance to the participants' experiences of reality than to universalist statements (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). Constructivist epistemology also validates multiple realities by clarifying that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the participants, thus foregrounding the voices of the supervisees who are usually missing in hierarchical academic environments (Walsham, 2006). The dialogical and flexible nature of this approach enables meaning to emerge contextually, highlighting the contradictions and hybrid identities found in supervision in postcolonial contexts (Alase, 2017). This methodological choice ensures that the study is sensitive to supervisees' voices and provides rich, context-specific knowledge of supervisory practice.

Participants

The study involved 15 postgraduate students (9 PhD & 6 MPhil), enrolled at the University of Sindh, Pakistan. Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 52 years (mean age = 35.4 years), and they represented diverse disciplines, including Education (2), English Linguistics (6), English Literature (4), Sociology (2), and Psychology (1). The sample included nine male and six female participants, with supervisory experience spanning six months to five years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling using networks of academic contacts across other departments in the same university. Inclusion criteria required that participants be currently pursuing an MPhil or doctoral degree, have an active supervisor, be willing to share supervision experience openly, and be able to participate in an interview in English. Although purposive sampling is associated with selection bias, this method suits our aims and aligns with an exploratory and experience-based study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and September 2025. Fifteen interviews were conducted by the first and third authors who have experience in qualitative research and local information, primarily face-to-face (13), supplemented by video calls (2). Each session lasted between 40 and 60 min (average interview time = 50 min).

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcription was accomplished carefully to capture non-native accents, colloquial expressions, and instances of code switching between English and the local languages, as the transcription had to maintain the linguistic authenticity of the participants, but at the same time, it had to be understood by them. The interview guide comprised open-ended questions that enquired about (1) what the participants expected of supervision and how this was met or not met regarding actual supervision experiences; (2) particular cases of epistemic tension or conflict in supervisory relationships; (3) patterns of communication and feedback; (4) emotional experiences (5) sources of support outside formal supervision (6) perceptions of the supervisor's competence. All participants answered six core questions. A pilot testing of the guide was conducted with three supervisees before the actual data collection to ensure that the guide was clear and culturally acceptable.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, which followed six iterative steps. First, all researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading the 15 transcripts repeatedly and listening to the recordings multiple times. Second, they coded inductively; each researcher coded all transcripts line by line, staying close to participants' language and producing semantic, latent, and initial codes. Third, the team convened to compare the sets of codes; instead of calculating an inter-rater reliability coefficient, which would not be in keeping with the interpretivist, reflexive focus of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the independent codes were collated, differences were discussed, and decisions were made by consensus, with minority readings documented in an audit

trail. Fourth, we iteratively grouped codes into candidate categories by meaning, then created six provisional themes. Fifth, we cross-checked provisional themes with coded extracts, the full data set, and the two research questions, reducing the number of themes and merging similar themes. Sixth, we identified, labeled, and illustrated themes with extracts.

We only introduced Freire's (1970) sensitizing concepts of dialogue, banking education, the culture of silence, and conscientização as an interpretive layer after the inductive process. We let theme development work from the data, while the Discussion explores their theoretical meaning. Along the way, we explored other possibilities for certain passages (such as did the opening questions to a learner by a supervisor imply a dialogic invitation or an abdication of responsibility to guide the learner; was a disciplinary mismatch a sign of a supervisor's failure or a failure of the learner to engage in co-supervision); some possibilities were embraced and others were rejected, and this judgment is reflected in the Findings. The study used investigator triangulation (all researchers independently coded all transcripts; proceeded to member reflection, three volunteer participants (purposively selected for variation in discipline, gender and degree) commented on whether the provisional themes resonated with their experience; reflexive journaling that the team shared and discussed in analysis meetings; and an audit trail of who coded what and how each coding decision was made, and what was rejected and why.

Positionality and Reflexivity

We make positions explicit as part of the qualitative tradition of understanding the researcher as an instrument of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The research team is located in the Pakistani higher education sector. It comprises researchers who have advanced through postgraduate studies and supervision in South Asia, including at least one supervisor and others who have recently been supervised. This insider view also gave us linguistic and cultural access to participants' accounts, including code-switched and culturally specific ways of expressing deference. However, it also risked predisposing us to interpret supervisory encounters critically and problematically. We were interested in this topic because we frequently received informal reports from students at our institutions who could not express their confusion or disagreement with supervisors, and we decided to study these experiences more systematically than anecdotally. We were mindful of the risk of suggesting that supervisors were somehow responsible, and students were somehow innocent; throughout the analysis, we repeatedly returned to the transcripts to test the data against this interpretation and in favor of a more nuanced reading. When we disagreed, we saw this difference as analytically fruitful, not a mistake to be corrected.

Ethical Consideration

This study involved human participants; therefore, we fully complied with international ethical standards, including the principles highlighted in the Belmont Report and the Declaration of Helsinki (2013). Before data collection, we followed institutional and ethical requirements and sought approval for conducting

this research. The Institutional Ethical Review Committee of the Institute of English Language & Literature, University of Sindh reviewed and approved this research (reference no: IERC/138, dated 10.04.2025). We obtained informed consent and administered a prepared consent form from all participants. We clearly explained the purpose, procedure, and voluntary nature of participation in the study. We also ensured they could withdraw at any stage without hesitation or harm. We considered ethical measures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and we used the data only for research purposes. We conducted this research with respect for participants' dignity, rights, and well-being. No harm was inflicted during the research process.

Findings

We first outline the analysis to frame the themes. The Findings are not intended to provide a representative description of postgraduate supervision at the university, nor are they intended to assert that supervision is necessarily or invariably problematic. Some of the participants also shared positive moments of support and specifically mentioned the structural pressure on their supervisors (see Institutional and Structural Constraints). The extracts below present supervisees' perceptions from one side of a two-party relationship and are analyzed accordingly; where an extract has more than one possible interpretation, we state that. This section presents evidence for themes.

Power Asymmetries and Hierarchical Relationship

Postgraduate research supervisees show that power imbalances and hierarchical academic structures deeply influence them where supervisory authority and power intersect. They describe how power asymmetries produce silence and constrained autonomy.

My supervisor makes decisions on my research direction, she does not really consult me, and I come to a meeting and she has already decided what I should do next, I want to say that I had another idea but I do not know how to do it, I do not know whether I can do it. My supervisor holds a PhD; she has the power to give me the analysis. I say nothing because I fear of failing. (MPhil candidate, male, English Linguistics).

This statement by the supervisee shows the psychological calculation and fear of the supervisor's power. He suppresses his own intellectual urges since the approval of his supervisor is institutionally mandatory. Although the supervisor probably does not mean to suppress student voice, the imbalance of institutional power makes real conversation challenging. The fact that a supervisee then says that 'she can pass me or fail me' places emphasis on the inherent power imbalance that is used to structure the relationship. This is not necessarily an accurate reflection of what the supervisor means; rather, it reflects the participant's perspective on how power is being used, and, as he mentions, an open exchange can feel risky because of the asymmetry of assessment.

This observation aligns with the literature on power relations in Global South contexts, where hierarchical power relations may marginalize student agency (Showunmi et al., 2024). The supervisee's fear reflects

power asymmetry, not only poor academic results but also affective factors that prevent open communication. This situation becomes a tool for self-censorship, as supervisees are reluctant to reveal their difficulties, express dissent, or seek clear instructions.

I just fear telling him that things are not going well, that I am confused. I do not understand the theory. When I say I am struggling, my supervisor becomes distant, he will become harder on me. He will think that I do not deserve to be in this program. So I keep silent, I did not ask him to help me. (Doctoral candidate, male, English Literature).

A supervisee's statement reflects a strategic calculation: the threat of disclosure (possibility of withdrawal of supervisors, increased scrutiny, or negative publicity) is greater than the benefit of receiving help. Importantly, the supervisee's fear is not irrational paranoia but a grounded observation. This power dynamic prevents supervisees from getting support when they need it most, leading to a spiral in which they find it hard to talk openly with supervisors. Conversely, some reported that supervisors seemed more interested in defending their own power and knowledge and saw student inquisitiveness or different conceptualizations as a threat to supervisory validity rather than an opportunity for intellectual exchange.

During my meetings with my supervisor, when I proposed an alternative theoretical framework, my supervisor got upset. He replied, I have been conducting research of 20 years, I know what works, and what is right? This was not even a question; this was me challenging him personally. Since that time, I have learned not to question his methods since it is his research project and not mine. (Doctoral candidate, female, English Linguistics).

This statement shows how the supervisor's defensiveness can reduce intellectual conversation to hierarchical assertiveness. A supervisee concluded that this is his project, suggesting the power balance has shifted so she sees the research project as the supervisor's property rather than her scholarly growth.

The above extract illustrates how oppressive pedagogical practices occur when power is concentrated, and dialogue is substituted by one-way decision-making. The supervisee's silence is not simply a choice but the result of what Freire calls a culture of silence, which is created through a system of power relations. The supervisory space becomes a non-dialogic location where knowledge is deposited but not co-constructed.

A supervisee's reliance on a supervisor for evaluation further enhances the hierarchical relationship, which entails power dynamics in institutional assessment systems. This situation demonstrates the dominance of expertise as a form of authority, in which the supervisor's positional power prevails over the potential of epistemic reciprocity. This is epistemic marginalization, in which students' ideas are suppressed internally before they can enter the dialogic space. Therefore, power asymmetry is not merely external (in the form of authority) but also internal (self-regulation and self-censorship) (Freire, 1970).

Feedback Failure and Epistemic Uncertainty

Some supervisees described delayed feedback as a serious concern and a source of frustration. More importantly, they expressed that they waited longer than expected for it. They appeared demotivated, and epistemic uncertainty prevailed.

I have already submitted my first chapter three months ago. Three months! I have not yet heard, so how can I proceed when I am unable to know what is wrong or what is right? I wrote and rewrote paragraphs in my head a hundred times. I imagine what my supervisor may write to me. I am tired of writing to him now. Sometimes, he replied all is good, just submit without providing any constructive feedback. (MPhil candidate, female, Psychology).

One of the supervisees explained that feedback delays not only decelerated her research process but also caused her psychological torment. She cannot move forward without guidance, but she cannot passively retreat; instead, she goes through a draining liminal process of anticipatory rumination. Supervisors with a disproportionately large number of supervisees, particularly in resource-limited situations, find it more challenging to provide timely feedback. However, feedback failures are more severe for students. As demonstrated above, sometimes she receives a response of 'all is good after just submitting the thesis. This indicates the supervisor's carelessness and negligence in the research process, and timely feedback can improve the quality of her research thesis.

My supervisor's statements include such remarks like this section is weak or you need to make your argument stronger, but what weak means is not stated. He starts underlining almost all sections of the thesis. Weak how? In logic? In evidence? In clarity? I do not know what to correct as I do not know the issue. I have made various revisions and he tells me no, not like that as well but he did not tell me what like that should be. (Doctoral candidate, male, Sociology).

This feedback is composed of non-pedagogical judgments. Although the supervisor has indicated what to improve, the supervisee lacks the relevant knowledge to revise effectively. With abstract or unclear feedback, students feel criticized without having a chance to learn. This is especially problematic in the Global South, where students may be unfamiliar with the academic writing conventions that their supervisors presume they know. In multilingual settings like Pakistan, where English is the language of instruction, neither supervisors nor supervisees are native English speakers; linguistic barriers worsen feedback (Canagarajah, 2002).

The above statement shows the epistemic confusion, and disruptive nature of non-specific and vague evaluative feedback that interferes with meaningful interaction in research. In Freirean (1970) terms, calling work weak without specifying the reason is an anti-dialogic pedagogical act, where authority is given based on judgment, rather than dialogue. Instead of providing relevant support, the supervisee clearly does not receive what they need. This attitude reflects a banking model of supervision. The indecisiveness of the supervisee, whether the problem is in logic or interpretation, leads to a lack of problem-posing interaction, which is a prerequisite for building critical consciousness and intellectual

clarity. The lack of dialogic interaction in feedback fails to engage in meaning-making co-construction. In this instance, feedback becomes a one-way claim of authority, rather than a cooperative process of idea enhancement. It reinforces hierarchical power relations and limits the supervisee's ability to actively produce knowledge.

Whenever I visit my worthy supervisor, he begins saying theoretical underpinning is vague, it needs justification. He writes that my conceptualization is too superficial, I need to be more nuanced, so I had to look up what a nuanced conceptualization is. I am already writing in a second language. It seems like I am being evaluated not only on my ideas but also on my English and it is not my language. (MPhil candidate, female, Sociology).

This statement by a supervisee explains stratified linguistic multiplicity. In universities in the Global South, including Pakistan, English-medium instruction creates a problematic situation where students are forced to speak and write in English. The above expression shows the supervisee being evaluated in English, not on ideas. When supervisors provide feedback in complex academic language, they inadvertently establish more impediments to understanding rather than helping students understand. The excerpt shows how epistemic assessment and linguistic judgment interact to create stratified marginalization in supervision.

This critical situation increases the focus on language, where the supervisee is expected not only to meet conceptual expectations but also to meet dominant linguistic standards. This is in accordance with Freire's cultural invasion aspect, in which superior forms of expression are favored at the expense of other voices and meaning-making that may be silenced.

In addition, it shows the continuation of expertise-as-authority, in which academic norms are dictated rather than negotiated. The supervisee's linguistic status also complicates co-constructed knowledge, as language becomes a gatekeeping system that limits involvement. Rather than facilitating dialogic interaction, supervision reinforces an epistemic hierarchy favoring fluency and rhetorical sophistication over the growing scholarly voice.

Epistemic Mismatch and Disciplinary Tensions

Some supervisees reported epistemic mismatch and disciplinary tensions in their supervisory practices. Many supervisors seemed unsure how to meet their supervisees' needs.

In the first encounter, my supervisor asked me what I expected in supervision, and I believed she would inform me! Is she not aware of what a good master's thesis should be, what schedule to adhere to, what meetings ought to be? Rather, she is asking me to define it. It leaves me nervous. But how will I know when she does not know?. (MPhil candidate, male, English Linguistics).

This may be a valid concern for supervisees: when supervisors lack clear supervisory structures, they may become either passive or too direct. A supervisor's question suggests she may lack confidence in

her supervisory skills. The fact that most supervisors engage in supervision without training or orientation suggests that this academic situation may be more prevalent than is known.

The above narrative shows how supervisory experiences may cause anxiety, role ambiguity, and epistemic uncertainty. 'What do you expect of supervision? represents a superficially dialogic intervention; however, in reality, it becomes anti-dialogic (no scaffolding). This creates a space of ambiguous authority without proper direction. The supervisee's nervousness reflects the affective aspect of supervision, where ambiguous expectations erode confidence and reduce engagement. The narrative shows that the lack of clear guidance presents neither authoritative direction nor meaningful collaboration. Moreover, some supervisees shared that their supervisors struggled to guide them through research methodology and statistical analysis.

As a research student, I selected mixed methods since I believed that it suited my research questions. My supervisor has purely qualitative expertise. She said she knew nothing about mixed methods, but she said that was honest but not helpful. So, now I am left to learn the quantitative part on my own. She should not be supervising quantitative part. (Doctoral candidate, male, English Linguistics).

This represents how methodological mismatches create an ambivalent relationship between autonomy and abandonment. Here, the narrative presents no support from the supervisor in the research. Responsibility shifts to the supervisee, who has to learn and proceed with their research without support. This lack of support translates into unguided autonomy, where a supervisee must maneuver methodological complications without guidance. Misalignment in methods forces students to make complicated methodological choices without the required mentoring. This not only exacerbates cognitive and emotional stress but also indicates a wider structural constraint on supervision practices, with expertise boundaries limiting dialogic and supportive learning relationships. One supervisee stated that his supervisor had an irrelevant degree in the field. She also said that this was common in higher education institutions in Pakistan.

It also highlights a structural issue: that a single supervisor and the difficulty outlined can be best met by co-supervision or a supervisory panel, which has access to the required methodological knowledge – which was not available in this case. The extract is not an indictment of any particular individual weakness, but of the lack of institutional breadth in methodological approaches, and the supervisor's awareness of her own limitations is not a failing.

My supervisor is a senior professor and holds a PhD in English Linguistics. However, I conduct PhD research in literature. We disagree on many areas in research because our fields are different. Unfortunately, I feel that I have to adjust to his demands instead of what is correct in my discipline, when he seems to be uninterested or says that it is too complicated when I attempt to explain my methodology, such as linguistic analysis or IPA transcription. (Doctoral candidate, male, English Literature).

The statement foreshadows that disciplinary mismatch is not a pro forma issue but a systemized form of practice that generates long-term epistemic conflicts in supervision. In a Freirean (1970) sense, to

accommodate intellectually is to present evidence of some internalized accommodation to the power of the dominant authority, where the supervisee sets aside disciplinary knowledge to conform to the demands of their supervisor.

This interaction echoes Freire's view of adapting under oppressive systems, where learners alter their intellectual stance to accommodate the demands of hierarchy rather than engage in actual dialogue. This lack of two-way interaction turns supervision into an anti-dialogic area and precludes the existence of co-constructed knowledge. Supervisors' and supervisees' epistemological support differs according to their backgrounds in literature and linguistics, respectively. This repeats contradictions in the methodology. As one supervisee shows, mismatches in the field are common and point to how these institutional structures make them normal.

Institutional and structural constraints

Some supervisees said their supervisors were overly busy with other supervisees, regular classes, and administrative responsibilities. Although this realization was understandable, it also caused tension, as it acknowledged that the supervisor was not really open to substantive mentorship.

My research supervisor teaches three courses, he has many students to supervise, he is on the graduate committee and he is yet to publish, when would he have time to see me? I consider making a meeting and I know he will give me an indirect answer or cancel the meeting and so I no longer bother. He is busy all time. I work on my thesis by myself. I think he does not care. The system is broken. (MPhil candidate, male, English Literature).

This narrative is alarming and represents the hierarchical dimensions of supervisory authority and power. A supervisee gains a painful insight into systemic constraints and feels their impact on their research journey: the supervisor's unavailability. More importantly, the research student reacts to this inaccessibility by disengaging and resigning to isolation. In Pakistan, institutional circumstances are not always easy to change; universities lack the means to recruit more staff, decrease teaching assignments, or compensate for supervisory duties. As a result, the mismatch between demand and the supervisory capacity is structurally irreversible.

The statement, supervisor is busy all the time, and the system is broken' can be seen as a part of systemic limitations that contribute to the problem of power asymmetries and epistemic marginalization in research supervision. The absence of ongoing conversation prevents the formation of co-constructed knowledge. As demonstrated, *I work on my thesis by myself. I think he does not care.* Competing obligations and supervisors' over-commitment frequently hinder successful supervision, causing delays, cancellations, and frustration.

When I told my supervisor that I cannot access databases she recommended, she replied that I should find other sources but I simply cannot because it is behind costly paywalls. I fail to access good research articles. Our library has no subscriptions and she is not aware that it is a real barrier to me and I am not able

to complete the literature review, she wants me to do it by any means. (Doctoral candidate, female, Education).

This expression shows a severe equity problem: supervisors and supervisees exist in disparate material realities. Inability to access reputable journals or research repositories creates a critical situation in which research students struggle because required datasets are unavailable. These limitations become apparent when supervisors are unaware of or appear insensitive to this reality. This stems from the supervisor's ignorance and the institutional system.

The above narrative demonstrates how structural and relational restrictions create considerable tension in the research process. No access to research materials limits supervisees' chances of critical engagement with literature, thus making them unable to produce knowledge independently. Forcing supervisees to write a literature review under such circumstances reflects supervisory practices that require scholarly activity without the required tools, strengthening dependency and restricting learning. Systemic obstacles can turn supervision into a hierarchical process, in which a student's agency is restricted and identity is suppressed. Some supervisees described institutional policies that slowed their research and supervision: no specifications on supervision, degree specifications, changing schedules, or bureaucratic demands which appeared arbitrary.

No one ever explains to me what I will do at various phases of my research, there is no schedule, I do not know whether I do coursework or whether I am writing a chapter and whether I should start fieldwork. My professor says that he has no knowledge or knows nothing. He always says, go and find yourself, and I visit various offices for my work. I feel I am lost. (Doctoral candidate, female, English Linguistics).

The supervisee identifies a systemic problem that is not clearly defined: without clear institutional structures, supervision becomes improvisation. This reflects a supervisor's lack of interest or awareness of supervisory procedures. This approach places much pressure on supervisees who feel lost. The narrated words *'go and find yourself'* reveal power-dominated discourse in which the supervisor is the authority. This indicates emotional loss for a supervisee working without dialogic guidance. This narrative highlights relational, procedural, and epistemic issues that acutely limit a supervisee's progress. Such vagueness creates an anti-dialogic, non-problem-posing environment in which the supervisee has no opportunity to engage critically in the process because she is not given structured direction.

This sense of being lost shows that it is not only confusion about procedures but also an insecurity of identity as an emerging researcher. Ambiguous expectations and inconsistent supervision are the main causes of stress and burnout among doctoral students, as well as student attrition (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000). The statement shows how procedural opaqueness, ambiguous guidance, and unspecified interaction act as emotional and epistemic obstacles and compel supervisees to navigate research activities in a solitary, self-guided manner, which increases anxiety and frustration.

Supervisee Agency and Resilience

This theme expands the active negotiation, adaptation, and maintenance of research. Despite institutional and structural constraints, supervisees establish their agency and show resilience.

Although my supervisor favors quantitative methods, I chose to stick with qualitative research design due to the suitability of the design to my research questions. I had to read extensively on my own and defend each step in meetings, which was challenging, but I desired my research to be methodologically sound. I kept going. (MPhil candidate, female, English Literature).

This statement indicates strong agency in the supervisee, who takes charge of methodological decisions even when supervisory congruency is low. This critical consciousness shows that the supervisee is active and fully engaged in her research. She does not conform to supervisory preferences. This situation creates a paradox, whereby a lack of dialogic space in supervision is offset by supervisees who construct a self-driven epistemic space. The phrase '*I kept going*' refers to passion and resilience. She is determined to make her research sound, which shapes her academic identity through self-directed learning and perseverance, especially when the system does not support her. Therefore, she does not receive agency; she creates it through struggle. It is a manifestation of resilience as an intellectual and relational accomplishment.

Several times, I felt like I was about to quit because I did not receive any guidance. However, I kept reminding myself of my objectives. and I did many things without mentorship, and silently I kept working on my own ideas. (MPhil candidate, male, English Literature).

In this statement, resilience is framed as a multi-layered emotion regulation and a strategic bargaining process. Adjusting quietly to his ideas reflects a form of critical agency exercised within constraints, but not overtly. This suggests a supervisory situation with no relationship- building or supportive mentoring to drive the supervisee toward self-managed learning. Despite the lack of guidance or mentorship, the supervisee maintains momentum through goal-oriented persistence, which underscores the importance of resilience. Non-dialogic interaction compels him to create a dialogic space internally.

As the above suggests, the supervisee's agency and resilience are not predetermined qualities but are relationally and structurally constructed through constant negotiations with power, disciplinary expectations, and institutional restrictions. Although supervision may limit dialogic engagement, students actively reconstruct their identities as autonomous, which proves that resilience is both a cognitive and political practice in hierarchical academic settings. Nevertheless, some supervisees reported reframing their experiences, finding meaning in struggle and resilience, and committing to their research.

My research process has been a difficult one, more difficult than I anticipated. My supervisor does not like me. We do not have mutual understanding in the research journey. Despite, I am still here. My research means everything to me. I have started learning to make my own decisions about my work. I did not get motivated by my mentor. I reminded myself that I could do it. (Doctoral candidate, male, Education).

This supervisee is incredibly resilient and agency-based, re-conceptualizing structural constraints into developmental opportunities. The statement *I reminded myself that I could do it*' shows strong resilience without mutual understanding and motivation. The above statement presents a strong interplay of emotional conflict, perseverance, and agency, and how the supervisee manages difficult supervisory relationships and remains committed to their research. The phrase 'my research means everything' narrates the critical consciousness of a supervisee who can find meaning in a challenging research process. This autonomy implies that intellectual growth is possible even in resource-limited settings or without mentorship. It brings out resilience as not only endurance but also as an act of self-construction, in which the negotiated sense of meaning, identity, and direction are achieved in the context of hierarchical constraints.

Discussion

This study explored supervisees' perceptions of power, epistemic (in)compatibility, structural constraints, and emotional dynamics in their research at a Pakistani university. The participants' accounts indicate that postgraduate supervision is not simply a pedagogical practice but a relationship involving five interrelated themes that takes place in the institutional setting. We present what follows as participants' views, not as fixed properties of supervision, and we focus on the ambivalences as described in the Findings.

Theoretically, this study offers new insight into the field and practically adds to expertise on postgraduate supervision research. Freire's critical pedagogy (developed for schooling and adult literacy) can also be applied to postgraduate supervision, as it is in the banking model, which extends the disconnection of teaching and learning into postgraduate supervision. The vertical relationship between teacher and learner (Freire, 1994, 1998, 2000) can emerge even in anti-dialogic contexts, providing a theoretical background extending Freire's critical pedagogy to postgraduate supervision. This supports other approaches that take relational (Paulino & Bispo, 2026) and Bourdieusian (Hickey & Forbes, 2022) perspectives on supervision as a field of contested capital and recognition, and argue that the supervision relationship is more educational than administrative. Practically, it defines actionable levers —discussed below—at the institutional level that can facilitate a shift in supervision to dialogue in low-resource environments.

Supervisees widely reported power asymmetry: some said they were afraid to ask questions or share ideas that could jeopardize their degrees. In the Pakistani university context, supervisors not only evaluate students' performance but also act as gatekeepers to resources, publications, and networks, leaving participants feeling dependent (Abiwu, 2024; Giroux, 2010; Sidhu et al., 2014). However, several participants identified systemic limitations on the part of the supervisors (excessive workloads, lack of resources, unclear institutional demands), highlighting that the narratives should not be interpreted as supervisors consistently causing students' problems, but rather as them operating in a system that constrains their capacities. These dynamics resemble Freire's (1970) culture of silence, where teaching without speaking parallels passivity in the banking of education, as well as Lee's (2008)

directive/functional models, and Hickey and Forbes's (2022) discussion on expertise-as-authority. Grant (2005) and Manathunga (2007) also describe supervision as an arena of contestation where students try to negotiate their way to silence and compliance.

The findings also suggest that the mismatch between discipline and methodology can also be an epistemic tension. Importantly, the analysis indicates that mismatch is not an individual failure, but an institutional design failure; one cannot be an expert in all designs or disciplines, and it is appropriate to acknowledge the limitations of one's expertise (as in the mixed methods account). What is important and the data call into question is the lack of co-supervision or supervisory panels, which are routine ways of providing complementary expertise, for these students. This aligns with Lee (2008), who emphasizes the discipline of enculturation, and critiques of knowledge-bounded supervision (Aitchison & Lee, 2020; Hickey & Forbes, 2022; Pyhältö et al., 2015).

Another tension was widespread uncertainty, including ambiguous instructions and delayed or unclear feedback. Participants' experiences suggest that without prompt, targeted feedback, progress and identity development can become frozen, and ambiguity is linked to stress and attrition (Delamont et al., 2000; Ives & Rowley, 2005; Lee, 2008; Wisker, 2012). Institutional ecologies, or the conditions of the institution, also limited dialogue and equity, with workloads, committee work, and limited access to the database being additional factors (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Giroux, 2011), highlighting the fact that supervision is not solely about individual practice, but rather about institutional ecologies as well (Manathunga, 2007).

Finally, participants demonstrated agency and resilience through adaptive strategies, self-directed learning, and persistence. In a Freirean perspective, and from the current scholarship on scholarly identity in doctoral education (Allee et al., 2026), as well as agency and structure in doctoral supervision (Wilkin et al., 2023), this could be understood as the development of a critical consciousness and a developing process toward intellectual autonomy, one that is self-induced, not facilitated (Freire, 1994, 1998, 2000; Lee, 2008). While we acknowledge that there is a continuum between endurance and resilience here, the emphasis is on meaning-making and identity construction in the face of constraint, rather than endurance (Cotterall, 2013; Gardner, 2009), and framing self-reliance as "resilience" should not divert attention from the institutional failures that have put it there.

Recommendations for Future Research and Limitations

This study has several limitations. Most critically, only supervisees' voices are heard and not those of supervisors. Because supervision is co-constructed, the hearing of one party may make it hard to distinguish perceptions from the phenomenon and may risk privileging one side of the relationship. These findings have therefore been expressed as perspectives, and extracts that could also be interpreted in other ways have been identified, calling for further investigation with supervised dyadic or multi-perspectival (supervisor and supervisee) designs, as in (Paulino & Bispo, 2026), in order to explore the co-construction and negotiation of the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee, and

also the possible misunderstandings. Second, the study is based on a single university and a purposive sample; therefore, the narratives are not statistically generalizable and may not represent accounts in other institutional or disciplinary contexts. Third, the data are self-reported perceptions collected at a single time point; longitudinal and mixed-methods designs could track change in supervisory relationships. Fourth, the study was conducted in one particular Global South context (resource-constrained); comparative studies help clarify how academic culture influences supervision.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The results indicate some practical implications. First, supervisor development must shift away from a managerial focus and toward a dialogic practice: developing the ability to give specific, formative, and dialogic feedback (not evaluative labels), in feedback literacy, and in the relational and emotional aspects of mentoring. Second, this directly addresses the mixed-methods and disciplinary-mismatch experiences reported here; institutions should treat disciplinary and methodological mismatch as a design challenge to be solved structurally, rather than as an individual supervisor's problem through co-supervision, supervisory panels, and support for methodological expertise. Third, there should be clear, accessible, and well-written expectations and milestones (coursework, chapters, fieldwork) to avoid leaving students to "discover themselves." Fourth, universities and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan should focus on structural enablers of dialogue such as limits on supervisory load, recognition of workload in supervision, and equitable access to databases and research resources, as these aspects significantly influence the possibility of dialogue. Lastly, postgraduate programs should provide safe, non-punitive avenues for students to express confusion or disagreement (peer groups, mentoring, channels for raising concerns without punishment), which might help to break the silence and promote intellectual autonomy.

Conclusion

The study highlights postgraduate supervisees' views of supervision at a Pakistani university and argues that postgraduate supervision is an embodied, power-laden, relational experience shaped by epistemic, institutional, and pedagogical circumstances, rather than a neutral procedure. Participants' experiences suggest that tensions within supervision were often felt as deeply embedded in the system, especially in resource-limited settings, and that Freire's critical pedagogy represents anti-dialogic conditions in which hierarchy and silence oppressed voice. Meanwhile, the participants also acted autonomously and resiliently, explaining their methodological choices, coping with disciplinary mismatch, and persevering. Rather than generalizing about supervision, or assigning responsibility for its shortcomings, the study offers specific directions for institutionally actionable supervision—dialogic feedback, co-supervision, clear milestones, and provision for dissent—to bring supervision closer to what Freire's pedagogy envisions.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

Research approval reference no. (IERC/138, dated 10.04.2025).

Participants consent

All participants voluntarily consented to participate in this study.

Competing Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Illustrative probes

Can you give an example? How did that make you feel? What did you do next? What helped you? What would have helped you?

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Author Contribution

[Author 1]: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.[Author 2]: Methodology, Investigation (data collection), Data curation, Writing – review & editing.[Author 3]: Formal analysis, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.[Author 4]: Literature review, Resources, Writing – review & editing.All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The interview data behind this study are not publicly available, to protect participant confidentiality, but anonymized data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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