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Communication accommodation to achieve research student autonomy

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Abstract

Universities throughout the world are grappling with ways to improve the quality of research supervision and thereby improve successful completion rates. Much effort has been spent on defining the research skills students are expected to develop and how to assist students improve them, e.g. Willison (2012). The concept of developing researcher autonomy has also been the focus of research, e.g. Gurr (2011). As supervisors, we help our students become skilled autonomous researchers through discussions and feedback, in other words, through our communication skills. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) can be applied in research supervision to improve the communication process and ultimately both the student experience and the student outcomes.

Communication Accommodation Theory provides a framework that 'predicts and explains many of the adjustments individuals make to create, maintain or decrease social distance in interaction' (Giles and Ogay, 2007). CAT provides a way to articulate expectations of both supervisor and research student in relation to preferred modes of communication, e.g. directive or non-directive, and to address the power relationship inherent in the relationship e.g. (Willemyns et al., 2006). The supervisor can respond to questions such as 'What should I do?' along the lines of 'Let's see. What are the options?' This approach encourages students to transition to using their own judgement and discernment skills rather than just providing answers. Over time, the student develops a habit of identifying and evaluating options, proposing solutions, and finally taking responsibility for their choices.

Keywords

research, achieve, student, accommodation, autonomy, communication

Disciplines

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Agenda

- **Concerns about research student completion rates**
- **Developing researcher skills**
- **Developing research student autonomy**
- **About communication accommodation theory**
- **CAT and relevance to research supervision**
- **Improving completion rates with CAT**

Concerns about research student completion rates



- Completion/drop out rates vary according to discipline
- Sciences have the lowest drop out rates around 30% (Jimanek, 2010)
- Concerns about investment of institution and academic time without return due to non-completes

Concerns about research student completion rates

- Funding tied to candidature
- Not all candidatures are tied to grants or institutional projects
- Not all candidature arrangements are the same and also discipline dependent (for example PhD, PhDi, DBA, MPhil)
- Funding arrangements are not a sufficient incentive to push completions
- Penalties and fees tied to extended candidature
- Is this enough?



Developing researcher skills



- Developing researcher skills is a requirement under the AQF
- Different background experiences mean that the range of skills to be developed varies widely
- Same outcome requirements under the AQF regardless of starting point
- How do we accommodate the differences to achieve research student autonomy?
- Do we prepare HDR supervisors to facilitate this?

Developing researcher student autonomy

- Student researchers need to be self-determined learners
- Phd's should be competent in autonomy (Gurr, 2012)
- Heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2000) integrates self-determined learning with deeper cognition to transcend the acquisition of knowledge and skills
- Supervisors facilitate the process with guidance, however guidance requires effective communication



Developing researcher student autonomy

- HDR supervisory training tends to follow an apprenticeship model
 - learning from own supervisor
 - learning from an experienced supervisor
- This process does not necessarily provide experience with all situations
- Can invoke an approach of “do unto others...” which may not necessarily be appropriate to the situation



About communication accommodation theory (CAT)

- Communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1971) was developed to ***“explain how we manage certain facets of interpersonal communication”*** (Giles & Baker, 2006)
- CAT is a framework for examining evolving and changing interpersonal interactions (Gallios et al, 2005)
- CAT research in higher education includes conversations examined between post graduate students and supervisors (Willemyns, Gallois & Callan, 2006)

Model of CAT

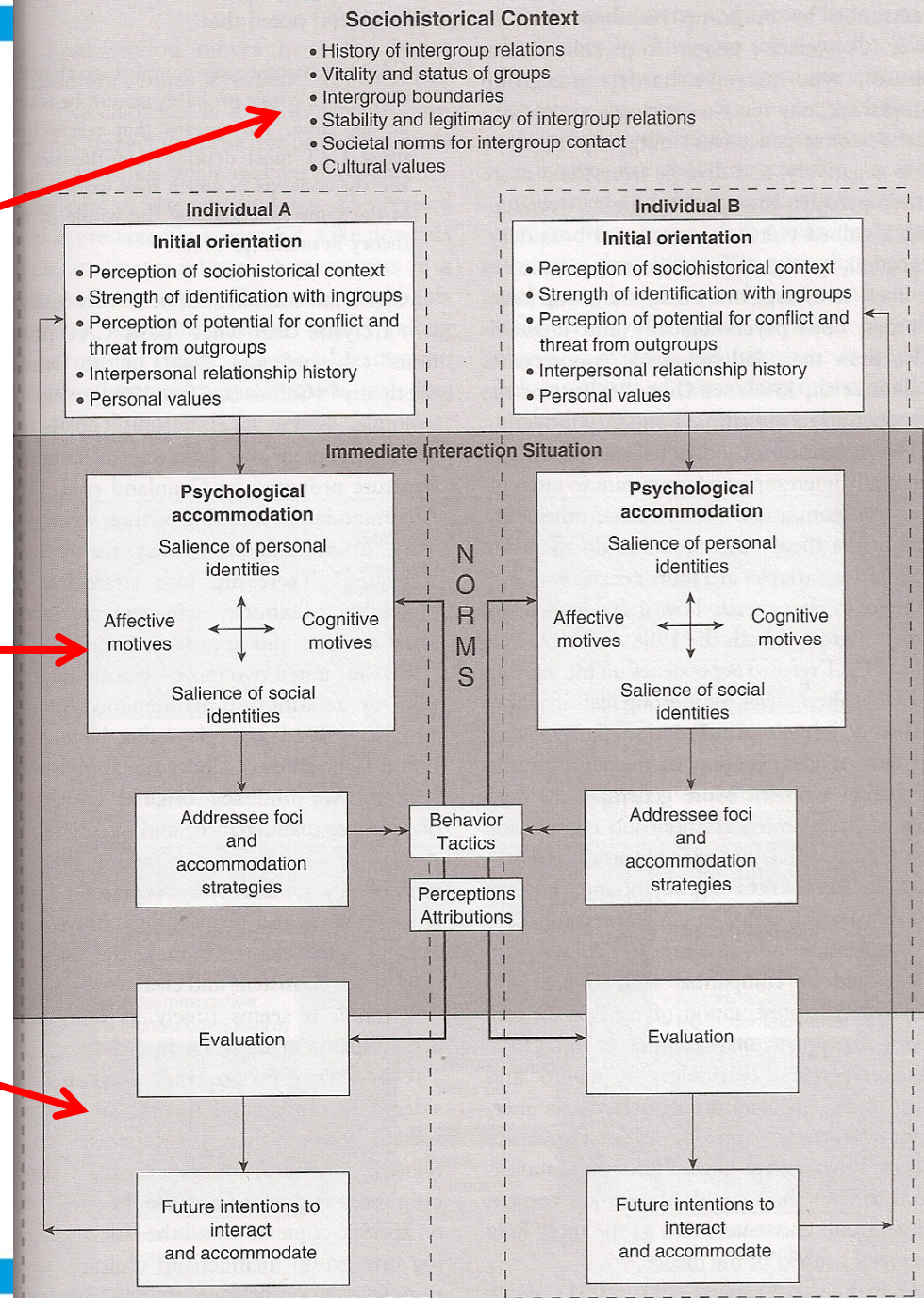
Sociohistoric Context

Interactions between research students and their supervisors

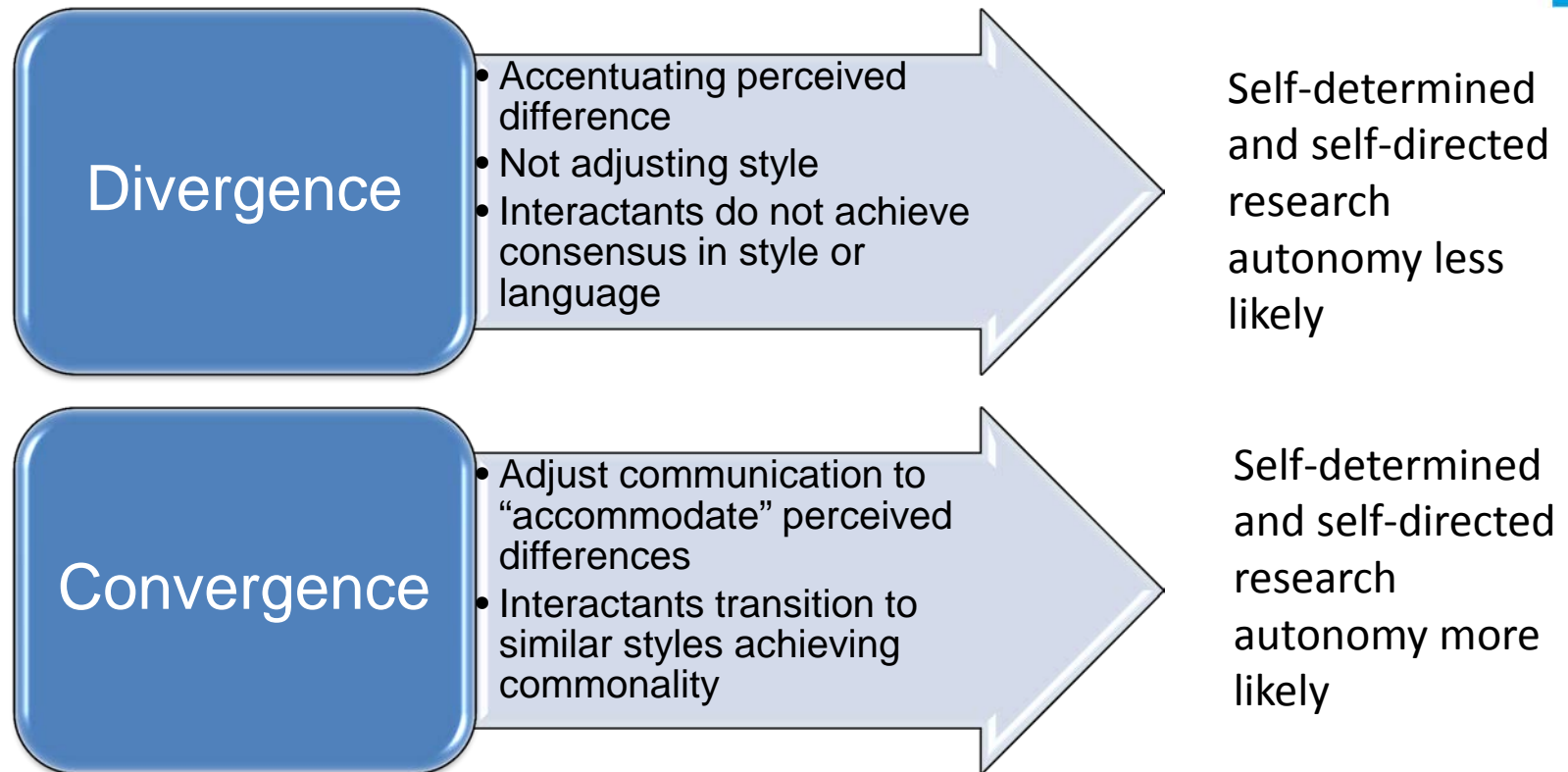
Accommodation strategies are dependent on motives and identities

Evaluations influence further interactions

Figure 6.1 Full Model of Communication Accommodation Theory
(Gallios et al, 2005 , p.133)

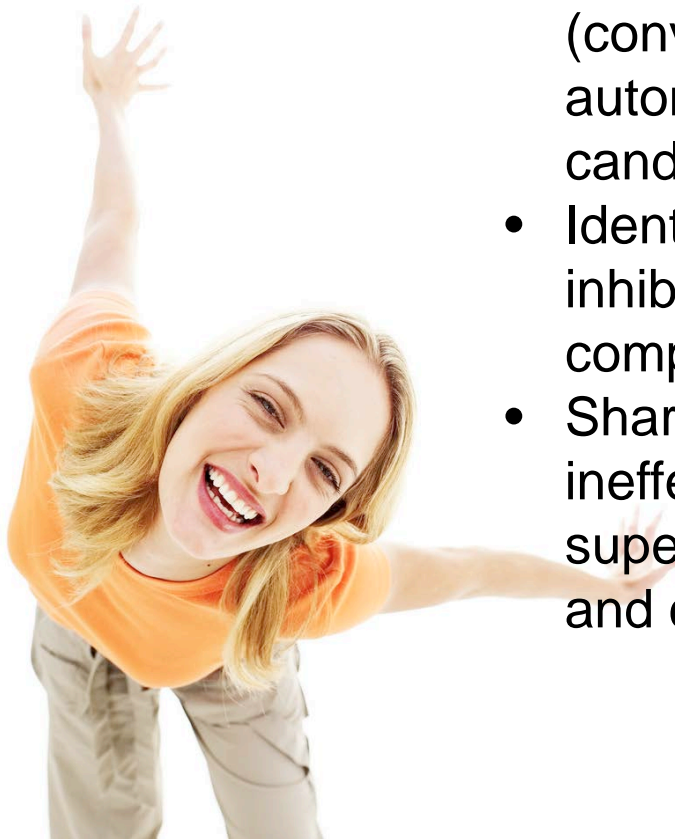


The supervisor - research student relationship and CAT



Using CAT to improve student autonomy

- Understand the supervisor-research interactions over time (i.e. how they evolve)
- Identify supervisory communication (convergent) strategies that promote autonomy and how they evolve over the candidature
- Identify supervisory divergent strategies that inhibit autonomy and/or lead to non-completes
- Share the effective and create awareness of ineffective strategies by developing HDR supervision capabilities to improve autonomy and consequently completions



Questions?



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