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THE ROLE OF CONCEPT OPERATIONALIZATION IN DEVELOPING AND SUPERVISING MASTER'S DISSERTATIONS AND DOCTORAL THESES IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

In master's dissertations and doctoral theses, an imprecise definition may create a mismatch between the research question, the data collected, and the conclusions drawn. This article examines how conceptual clarification contributes to the scientific coherence of the manuscript and the quality of dialogue in supervision. Drawing on a focused narrative synthesis of methodological and educational literature, it distinguishes conceptual definition, contextual delimitation, and operationalization. It also clarifies the functions of research proposals, master's dissertations, doctoral theses, and supervisory arrangements. A framework applied to the relational climate of supervision illustrates how to link a definition to dimensions, empirical evidence, and rules for interpretation. The article's main contribution is to connect these decisions with supervisory practices that support student autonomy. Conceptual clarification is treated as a condition for coherence, while its contribution to research completion remains an empirical question. Two tables illustrate the approach and help assess coherence from proposal development through writing.

Keywords: Conceptual Clarification, Operationalization, Research Supervision, Master's Dissertation, Doctoral Thesis

1 INTRODUCTION

Preparing a master's dissertation or doctoral thesis requires alignment among the research question, concepts, sources, and analytical approach. Yet a seemingly familiar term can refer to several phenomena. For example, "success" may refer to submitting the manuscript, obtaining approval from an examination committee, developing a sound argument, or becoming an autonomous researcher. A study of timely completion and a study of developing autonomy may use the same term while investigating different phenomena. If this distinction remains implicit, readers cannot determine what the data can establish.

The same difficulty arises in supervision. A student may understand autonomy as the freedom to decide independently, while the supervisor may expect the student to propose a reasoned solution before discussing it together. Similarly, a request for a literature review may yield a series of summaries when the supervisor expects a comparison of findings

and theoretical approaches. Research on supervision in education highlights the importance of pedagogical expectations, responsibilities, and the conditions under which support is provided (Gerard, 2010; Jutras et al., 2010; Prégent, 2001).

Under what conditions does conceptual clarification contribute to the coherence of a dissertation or thesis and to its supervision? This article has three objectives. The first is to define the terms that structure the preparation and supervision of a research project. The second is to show how a definition guides decisions that can be documented and discussed. The third is to propose ways to use conceptual work as a teaching and learning activity at different stages of a dissertation or thesis. The article focuses mainly on education research, with broader relevance to the humanities and social sciences.

This difficulty becomes particularly apparent when comparing two studies that use the same term. If one equates autonomy with making few requests of a supervisor and the other assesses it through the quality of reasoned decisions, their findings concern different phenomena. A student who rarely asks for help may lack someone to consult or hesitate to disclose difficulties. Frequent exchanges, meanwhile, may accompany sustained initiative. The choice of definition thus determines which comparisons are warranted and what explanations the researcher can offer.

The article first presents the synthesis approach. It then examines the concepts that structure research and supervision and considers how these concepts inform decisions about data collection and analysis. The discussion revisits what it means to complete a dissertation or thesis successfully and considers how conceptual clarification can be used in research training.

2 SYNTHESIS APPROACH

The article uses a focused narrative synthesis for conceptual and pedagogical purposes. The literature serves three functions. Research methods texts inform the design of the research proposal and the delimitation of concepts. Scholarship on supervision provides a basis for examining the pedagogical relationship and student autonomy. Publications on Togo situate the argument within West African research on dissertation preparation and supervisory conditions.

The comparison is organized around three questions. What does each term mean in research practice? What decisions does that meaning entail for students and supervisors? What evidence can support an empirical interpretation? Definitions were compared according to their function in the research process. The example of relational climate then translates the comparison into practical options for instrument development and data interpretation. This interpretive approach supports a methodological proposal whose scope depends on the selection of texts (Snyder, 2019).

The synthesis relates the texts at two levels. At the methodological level, it examines alignment between the definition of a concept and the evidence selected to represent it (Adcock & Collier, 2001; Beaud, 2006; Fortin, 2006). At the pedagogical level, it examines how students discuss and revise research decisions and gradually take responsibility for them (Gerard, 2010; Jutras et al., 2010; Lee, 2008). The same example connects the two levels. Studying the relational climate requires defining the concept and provides a setting in which to examine decisions made during supervision.

The unit of comparison is the function a concept serves in the argument. Works on dissertation or thesis preparation clarify the sequence of research decisions, while studies of supervision illuminate the responsibilities and interactions that accompany those decisions. The scenarios below serve as illustrations and show how alternative plausible choices can shape the study of a single phenomenon.

3 CONCEPTS THAT STRUCTURE RESEARCH

3.1 From Research Proposal to Master's Dissertation and Doctoral Thesis

A research proposal specifies the object of inquiry, the research question, and the strategy for addressing it. It justifies the boundaries of the fieldwork or corpus, the choice of sources, the procedures for collection and analysis, and the measures taken to ensure feasibility and ethical conduct. The timeline sets out the sequence of these decisions. For example, classroom observation requires coordination among access permissions, the selection of situations to observe, and the time needed for transcription or coding. The proposal can evolve after initial reading or exploratory fieldwork. Maintaining coherence then requires documenting why changes were made and how they affect the original question (Beaud, 2006; Fortin, 2006).

A master's research dissertation reports a study generally carried out as part of a degree program. Its quality depends on posing an answerable question, critically engaging with prior work, and justifying interpretations. A dissertation can

make a situated contribution by documenting a local phenomenon, applying a theoretical framework to a bounded corpus, or revisiting existing findings using other data. The format and assessment procedures are determined by the program.

A doctoral thesis presents an original, reasoned contribution to a field of knowledge. Its originality may lie in the empirical material, theoretical development, methodological strategy, or synthesis of bodies of work previously studied separately. Doctoral candidates must explain the scope of their contribution, the conditions under which it was established, and the extent to which their conclusions may be transferable. Expectations concerning format and defense vary by institution and discipline. The main differences between a master's dissertation and a doctoral thesis concern the scale of the work, the level of autonomy expected, and the nature of the contribution (Beaud, 2006; Tchagnaou, 2021).

Research development encompasses the entire process, from defining the object of inquiry to writing and, depending on the program, defending the manuscript. It involves moving repeatedly between reading, data collection, and interpretation. For example, a category that emerges in interviews may lead to revision of the analytical framework. The manuscript should then document the change and explain how the initial material was reexamined using the revised categories.

3.2 Supervision and Relational Climate

Research supervision encompasses the practices and conditions that support students' progress as researchers. It includes discussion of theoretical choices, help with planning, feedback on writing, and access to program resources. The research supervisor bears primary responsibility. Co-supervisors, progress committees, and peers may also contribute, depending on the program. Lee (2008) shows that supervision involves, among other functions, managing the project, helping students join a research community, and developing critical judgment. Each function may call for different forms of support as the research progresses.

Relational climate refers here to the quality of working interactions as participants perceive and experience them. It can be observed through opportunities to disclose a difficulty, seek clarification, discuss an objection, or revisit a commitment. A scientific disagreement may indicate a climate conducive to learning if the discussion focuses on arguments and the student can defend a choice. The regularity of meetings indicates how often supervision takes place. Assessing the relational climate also requires examining what happens during those meetings and how each participant can contribute (Jutras et al., 2010; Prégent, 2001).

The proposed framework distinguishes prescribed, enacted, and experienced supervision. Prescribed supervision is reflected in policies, agreements, and schedules. Enacted supervision can be documented through meetings, written exchanges, and feedback on successive drafts. Experienced supervision concerns the meaning participants assign to those exchanges. An agreement providing for monthly meetings documents a formal expectation. Meeting notes document what happened during a session. A student's account can explain how the feedback was understood or used. Examining these materials together makes it possible to study discrepancies among commitments, practices, and experiences.

Lee's (2008) approaches to supervision help explain why a single meeting can serve several functions. It can be used to plan work, examine an argument, or facilitate entry into a research community. This range of functions requires focused interviewing. Asking which support was helpful can establish what the student expected, what kind of support was received, and which stage of the work it concerned. Analysis can then distinguish assistance with planning from assistance with delimiting a concept, even when both occurred during the same meeting.

3.3 Supervision Agreements and Guidelines

A supervision agreement, sometimes called a contract or collaboration plan, sets out commitments that participants can review together. It may specify how often to meet, expected feedback turnaround times, how to submit drafts, and how to seek recourse when difficulties persist. Its form and status depend on the institution. A supervision guide provides shared program-level guidance, such as assessment criteria or submission procedures. The agreement helps apply this guidance to a particular project, and the guide situates the agreement within the program's procedures (Prégent, 2001).

Students are responsible for preparing for meetings, justifying decisions, raising difficulties, and recording revisions. Supervisors are responsible for clarifying expectations, providing actionable feedback, and helping students anticipate scholarly and institutional requirements. Adjusting these roles as the work progresses supports autonomy. Early in a dissertation, a supervisor might help compare several possible scopes. During analysis, the student might be asked to defend their choice of categories with examples from the corpus (Gerard, 2010; Lee, 2008).

An agreement becomes a pedagogical tool when it is revisited at transitions in the research process. Moving from proposal development to data collection may raise questions about access to the field. Moving from data collection to writing often calls for a decision about which interpretations to foreground. In both cases, brief meeting notes can record the issue considered, the options discussed, the decision made, and the document to revise. Prégent (2001) treats supervision as a pedagogical process in which expectations are made explicit. This might involve agreeing on what constitutes a draft that is ready for review, such as a text accompanied by specific questions and verified references.

3.4 Concepts, Terms, and the Conceptual Framework

A term names a phenomenon with a word or expression. A concept organizes that phenomenon by selecting properties relevant to a given question. In a study of academic success, "success" may denote obtaining a degree, mastering competencies, or continuing in a program. These meanings require different data. A conceptual framework accompanies the chosen definition with a proposition about how concepts relate. For example, researchers may investigate whether predictable supervision is associated with students' ability to plan revisions. This possible relationship requires its own empirical investigation and attention to the resources available to each student.

A definition is more useful when it identifies the situations it can account for and those whose interpretation requires further evidence. Repeated requests for approval may reflect uncertainty about expectations or a procedure requiring the supervisor's consent. To distinguish these interpretations, researchers can ask who was responsible for deciding and what criteria were used. A workable definition thus helps formulate questions that clarify ambiguous situations.

4 FROM DEFINITION TO OPERATIONALIZATION

A conceptual definition specifies the intended meaning and its relationship to related concepts. Contextual delimitation specifies the situations, periods, or units of analysis to which that meaning applies. Operationalization then connects the concept to observations and rules for interpretation. Adcock and Collier (2001) locate measurement validity in the relationship between the concept and the procedures used to interpret observations. A precisely worded questionnaire can therefore measure a different phenomenon if its items address a dimension other than the one identified in the research problem.

In quantitative research, operationalization specifies such matters as item wording, scoring procedures, and the interpretation of differences. In qualitative research, it may draw on accounts of specific situations, excerpts from documents, or episodes of interaction. The researcher specifies the coding unit, the criteria for assigning material to a category, and the treatment of ambiguous cases. Some concepts may be refined during analysis. Reexamining the corpus using the revised categories makes these changes traceable.

Moving from a concept to an indicator requires distinguishing the dimension of interest from the material used to assess it. Predictability of supervision is a dimension. Agreement between an expected turnaround time and the date on which feedback is received can serve as an indicator. Dated emails or an account of submitting a chapter are possible sources of evidence. The relationship among these three levels must remain explicit. A two-week wait may be experienced as predictable if it was announced and the student could plan accordingly. The same interval may be experienced differently if an institutional deadline is approaching or repeated requests for a response have gone unanswered.

A questionnaire might contain two separate items. One would ask whether feedback turnaround times were generally communicated in advance. The other would ask whether students felt able to request clarification about the feedback they received. The responses address different dimensions. Combining them into a single score would require a theoretical justification and an assessment of item quality. Pretesting could establish whether respondents understand "feedback" to mean written comments, oral discussions, or both. The items should also specify a common reference period, such as the semester in which writing began.

In a qualitative study, the unit of analysis may be an episode involving a difficulty, a student's action, and a supervisor's response where reported. A single episode can provide information on several dimensions. A student may receive feedback when expected and still hesitate to ask for clarification. Each code should therefore correspond to an identifiable part of the account. When the material consists of a general judgment, such as "the supervision was good," an interview prompt can clarify the circumstances the student associates with that judgment. Distinguishing overall evaluations from situated examples helps establish what the data can support.

4.1 Application to the Relational Climate of Supervision

Consider the following question. How do master's students in education describe their ability to ask for help and discuss feedback while writing their dissertations? Here, the unit of analysis is a supervisory episode described by a student.

The period runs from receipt of feedback on the first outline to submission. Table 1 presents one possible qualitative approach.

Table 1: Potential Dimensions and Evidence for the Relational Climate of Supervision

Dimension	Potential empirical evidence	Rule for interpretation
Ability to seek help	Account of a difficulty the student disclosed or kept to themselves	Examine the reason given and the circumstances of the episode.
Ability to discuss feedback	Account of an objection, request for clarification, or alternative proposal	Examine whether the student could explain their reasoning and how the other participant responded.
Clarity of expectations	Example of feedback followed by an identifiable revision	Identify the connection the student makes between the feedback and the revision.
Predictability of supervision	Account of a meeting, expected feedback, or postponement	Compare what reportedly happened with the agreed arrangements, where these are known.

Note. Developed by the author as an illustration.

Table 1 distinguishes four dimensions that may vary independently within an episode. The ability to seek help can be examined through students' reasons for disclosing or withholding a difficulty. The ability to discuss feedback can be assessed by examining whether students could explain their reasoning and how supervisors responded. Clarity of expectations can be documented by connecting a comment to the revision the student reports making and, if drafts are available, to the actual change. Predictability of supervision is assessed against the arrangements agreed upon. Feedback may arrive on time and still be difficult to understand. When supervisory arrangements are unknown, the account primarily documents the student's expectations and experience of the wait.

An interviewer may ask a student to recall feedback that was difficult to understand and then describe what they did and how the supervisor responded. The account provides access to a situated experience. Reviewing annotated drafts, where consent and institutional rules permit, can help clarify the nature of the feedback. Where supervisors contribute to assessment or authorize submission, recruitment procedures and the confidentiality of participants' accounts require particular attention.

Delayed feedback illustrates the need for contextual interpretation. The wait may have been communicated in advance, arisen from a problem in organizing supervision, or reflected an expectation about availability that had never been discussed. The meaning of the episode depends on the reported context. Similarly, if a study collects accounts only from students, its conclusions should concern their experiences and descriptions of the interactions.

Consider a fictional episode in which a supervisor asks a student to "revise the theoretical framework." She is unsure whether to change the authors she has selected or explain how two concepts relate. At the next meeting, she raises both interpretations, and the supervisor explains that the relationship between the concepts needs to be justified. The revised draft contains a sentence delimiting each concept and a paragraph explaining their relationship. The episode illustrates the opportunity to discuss feedback and the gradual clarification of an expectation. Comparing the drafts documents the change, while the student's account sheds light on her initial difficulty and the role she attributes to the exchange.

Two sources may provide divergent accounts of an episode. A written comment may appear detailed to an outside reader, yet the student may have understood it only after an oral exchange. The analysis can retain this divergence by distinguishing between how feedback was expressed, how it was understood, and how it was translated into revisions. Combining sources requires attention to consent, particularly when emails or annotated manuscripts are collected. In a small program, selected excerpts should also be checked for details that might identify participants.

4.2 Checking Manuscript Coherence

At the proposal stage, students can check whether every central term in the research question is defined and whether the planned sources fit the definitions. Before collection, piloting an instrument can identify questions that are too broad. During analysis, examining both similar and divergent cases helps stabilize the coding. Before submission, a focused review compares how key terms are used in the title, statement of the research problem, findings, and conclusion. Changes in meaning should be explained when they alter the scope of a claim.

A conceptual revision can be documented in a note that records the original definition, the reason for changing it, and the implications for the corpus. If autonomy is initially defined as completing tasks alone and is later defined as the

ability to justify choices, initial questions about meeting frequency will be insufficient. The researcher must then assess whether the data also contain examples of reasoned decisions. Returning to the corpus may reveal usable evidence, such as methodological proposals made by the student. If such evidence is unavailable, the scope of the conclusions should be adjusted.

4.3 A Coherence Matrix for Manuscript Review

Table 2 applies this review process to the example of relational climate. At each stage, it pairs a review question with material that the student and supervisor can examine together. The matrix can be revisited whenever a definition changes and before the conclusions are drafted.

Table 2: Coherence Matrix for the Relational Climate of Supervision

Stage	Review question	Material to examine
Proposal	Which aspect of relational climate does the question address?	The research question specifies the ability to ask for help and discuss feedback.
Instrument	Can the participant describe a specific episode in context?	The interview guide asks about the difficulty, the action taken, and the response received.
Analysis	What evidence justifies assigning the code?	The account distinguishes the request for clarification from the supervisor's response.
Writing	Whose experience does the conclusion concern?	The statement identifies the group interviewed and the period covered by the accounts.

Note. Developed by the author as an illustration.

Table 2 helps verify that the scope established in the proposal is reflected in the interview guide, coding, and manuscript. At the proposal stage, the question targets two of the four dimensions in Table 1: the ability to seek help and the opportunity to discuss feedback. The interview guide asks participants to describe an episode by specifying the difficulty, the action they took, and the supervisor's reaction, if reported. During coding, the request for clarification and the response received should be recorded separately. If an account ends with the request, it documents the student's initiative, while the supervisor's response remains unknown. The manuscript then situates each interpretation in the group interviewed and the period covered by the accounts.

Review can also begin with a provisional conclusion and trace it back to the account that supports it. If the manuscript claims that students can discuss feedback, for example, students and supervisors can identify which episodes document this possibility, under what circumstances it occurs, and which accounts show its limits. This check helps determine whether to revise the coding, specify when the finding holds, or restrict the claim to the situation described. The matrix can therefore support discussion at several stages of the work.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Dimensions of Success in a Master's Dissertation or Doctoral Thesis

The article distinguishes three dimensions of success. The institutional dimension concerns completion and formal approval. The scientific dimension concerns the quality of the argument and the fit between evidence and conclusions. The formative dimension concerns the student's ability to conduct, discuss, and revise a research process. These dimensions can develop differently. On-time submission indicates completion of an administrative milestone. Assessing autonomy requires other evidence, such as the ability to explain a trade-off or respond to an objection at the defense.

Gerard (2010) gives a central place to students' understanding of research expectations through their active participation in their own learning. Lee (2008) situates this responsibility in a relationship in which supervisors also support initiative and participation in a research community. This synthesis connects these contributions to a specific practice: discussing a definition by examining what adopting it would mean for the corpus and its analysis. Such discussion can make feedback more actionable because the student can identify the decision to revisit and justify the revision. Bearman et al. (2024) extend this discussion by showing how dialogue and written comments give doctoral candidates access to research standards that may otherwise remain implicit.

Research in Togo's public universities situates dissertation preparation within its pedagogical and institutional conditions (Tchagnaou, 2017). Efforts to prevent noncompletion also require attention to the resources available to students and supervisors (Tchagnaou et al., 2020). Difficulties accessing literature, research sites, or feedback can slow

progress even when a project is well defined. Attributing delay entirely to a student's lack of engagement overlooks these conditions. Evidence from Togo can inform questions for other Francophone university contexts. Investigating those questions in Niger or elsewhere requires taking account of local program structures and resources.

5.2 Implications for Research Training

A training workshop can start with an actual concept from a student's project. Participants compare two definitions, explain which one they adopt, and identify the evidence needed to address its dimensions. A supervisor can ask students to bring a brief justification to the protocol discussion. Program teams can use annotated examples of proposals and analytical frameworks to clarify shared expectations while allowing for theoretical and methodological choices appropriate to each study.

At the beginning of a dissertation, a supervisor may request a one-page brief with two definitions from the literature, the definition selected, and one implication for data collection. A student researching "supervisory support" could specify whether the focus is on actions proposed by the supervisor, how students receive them, or observable changes in the manuscript. Comparing these briefs in a group can identify overly broad formulations and anticipate fieldwork difficulties. At doctoral level, the same process can support a deeper discussion of theoretical assumptions and the conditions under which a concept might transfer to another setting.

Feedback becomes more precise when it identifies the decision to revisit. A comment such as "the concept is poorly defined" can be rephrased as a question about which meaning of autonomy is compatible with the data already collected. The student can then compare options, justify a choice, and show how the text was revised. This distribution of responsibilities extends Gerard's (2010) emphasis on students' active role in supervision. It also aligns with Jutras et al.'s (2010) understanding of supervision as pedagogical practice.

In programs involving multiple supervisors or committee members, a dated version of the matrix makes it easier to share and trace decisions. A co-supervisor can identify why an indicator was dropped. Progress committees can focus part of their discussion on a particular disagreement, such as whether scores from different instruments are comparable. When individual supervision time is limited, peer review of two concept briefs in a seminar can prepare students for a meeting with their supervisor. Students remain accountable for the research decision and explain the advice they received and the choice they made.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

The synthesis draws on a focused set of texts and illustrates operationalization using a qualitative example. The proposed framework can be adapted to different settings. Its relevance could be examined by comparing the interpretations of students, supervisors, and progress committee members. A longitudinal study could also analyze successive versions of proposals and manuscripts to examine how conceptual revisions affect instruments, analysis, and writing. Assessing their contribution to completion times would also require documenting available resources, degree level, and supervisory conditions.

A longitudinal protocol could compare definitions, instruments, and conclusions at three points: proposal approval, completion of the first round of analysis, and the period immediately before submission. Changes could be described in terms of the decisions they affect, such as the scope of the corpus, the wording of an interview question, or the scope of a finding. Interviews at the same points could clarify how participants identified a problem and negotiated its resolution. Studies of completion times should also document interruptions in data collection, constraints on access to resources, and changes in supervision.

A comparison of master's and doctoral programs could examine the conditions under which the matrix is actually used. Assessment criteria could include the ability to trace a decision, justify how a concept was linked to data, and interpret an ambiguous case. Analysis of written work could assess manuscript coherence, while interviews could clarify how the matrix supports supervisory dialogue. These two levels of analysis could identify the contexts in which conceptual revisions are discussed regularly.

6 CONCLUSION

Conceptual clarification improves research coherence when it informs decisions that can be checked. A definition should establish what the study examines, which data are relevant, and how far the interpretation can extend. In supervision, discussing these choices gives students an opportunity to justify their approach and enables supervisors to provide precise feedback.

The article links conceptual work, its translation into empirical procedures, and the discussion of these choices in supervision. The example of relational climate illustrates how a familiar concept becomes amenable to analysis when its dimensions, evidence, and interpretation rules are specified. This approach can support manuscript quality and learning to conduct research. Completion, approval, and autonomy are also shaped by pedagogical and institutional conditions that empirical research should document.

At the proposal stage, the approach helps delimit the object of inquiry. During collection and analysis, it guides the selection of evidence and the treatment of ambiguous cases. When drawing conclusions, it helps align the scope of claims with the available data. The two tables provide tools for discussing and documenting these decisions. Testing them in different programs could show how students and supervisors use them and which supervisory practices facilitate their use.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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