



## Impact of Strict Research Supervision on Research Assistants' Practices, Confidence, and Data Integrity in Uganda

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Research supervision is increasingly recognised as a critical factor in ensuring the integrity and reliability of field-based data collection. This is particularly in contexts where early-career researchers and enumerators often operate with limited experience. Yet, few empirical studies have documented how these enumerators perceive and experience supervision in practice and especially strict supervision. This study investigated the impact of strict supervision on research assistants' practices, confidence, and perceptions of research integrity in Uganda.

**Objective:** To assess the contribution of strict supervision to the promotion of ethical practices and high-quality data collection in field research.

**Methods:** This study adopted a descriptive and exploratory research design. The population for this study consisted of research assistants and enumerators who had participated in a strict supervised data collection exercise. The study used structured questionnaire administered to 19 enumerators out of 20 who participated as research assistants. Responses were analysed using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were summarised using descriptive statistics and presented in tables for clarity. Qualitative responses (to open-ended questions) were subjected to thematic analysis. Ethical principles guided all stages of the research.

**Results:** The findings of the study reveal that close supervision significantly enhances not only methodological rigor but also adherence to ethical protocols and confidence in conducting research. Improvements in punctuality, accuracy, and accountability were reported by respondents. Most respondents acknowledged that supervision reduced the likelihood of shortcuts and data that is compromised. However, the study reveals that strict oversight was also associated with challenges such as loss of autonomy and reduced flexibility. In addition, occasional tensions between supervisors and enumerators were also associated with strict supervision. Despite these challenges, the majority of participants revealed that strict supervision was necessary for producing not only credible but also trustworthy research outcomes.

**Conclusion:** In contexts where early-career researchers dominate fieldwork, strict supervision therefore emerges not only as a safeguard against shortcuts but also as a pedagogical tool that strengthens the professional capacity of the next generation of scholars.

**Unique Contribution:** This study situates enumerators' voices within broader debates on research governance. It contributes to debates on balancing autonomy and accountability in research practice.

**Key Recommendation:** There is need to institutionalise supervision as research governance. There is also need for institutions to invest in training supervisors in mentoring, communication and conflict management.

**Keywords:** Supervision, Research Integrity, Data Quality, Enumerators, Uganda, Field Research



## INTRODUCTION

Ensuring research integrity is a central concern in both academic and applied research (D'Souza, et al 2020). The quality of evidence generated depends not only on the methodological design but also on how fieldwork is conducted and supervised (Malsch & Salterio, 2016; Okoro & Nwafor (2015)). In many low and middle-income countries, research assistants and enumerators often shoulder the responsibility of data collection. Yet their work is rarely scrutinized beyond final outputs pointing to weak supervision and limited training. In addition, pressures to deliver results on time and within budget frequently contribute to compromised ethical standards and poor data quality (Bamberger & Mabry 2019).

Supervision plays a dual role. First, it serves as a mechanism for quality assurance and secondly, it is a pedagogical process as it builds capacity among early career researchers (Phaswana-Mafuya, 2023). Pearson & Brew (2002) highlighted the importance of close mentorship in nurturing research skills and fostering ethical behavior. However, supervision often varies in intensity especially in field research. Depending on circumstances, supervision may range from minimal oversight to highly structured and strict monitoring. Its impact can be diverse for example, while strict supervision may enhance accountability, studies indicate that it may also generate tensions (National Academies of Sciences, et al 2017).

In Uganda, as in much of the Global South, research assistants often engage in research projects with limited prior experience. Few empirical studies have studied how these research assistants perceive and experience strict supervision in practice (Davis & Wilfahrt, 2024). This article addresses this gap by examining the experiences of 19 research assistants who worked under strict supervision during a data collection exercise. We ask: To what extent does strict supervision contribute to the promotion of ethical practices and high-quality data collection in field research?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research integrity is the cornerstone of credible scholarship (Gupta & Mishra 2024). It encompasses not only honesty but also accountability. Research integrity also encompasses transparency, respect for participants, and adherence to ethical and methodological standards (Steneck, 2006). In research practice, weaknesses in any of these dimension's compromise both the credibility of findings and the legitimacy of research institutions. According to Konken & Howlett (2023), threats to integrity often emerge during fieldwork when enumerators or junior researchers face resource constraints, uncooperative respondents or pressure to meet deadlines.

Therefore, supervision is widely acknowledged as one of the strongest safeguards against integrity risks. According to Pearson & Brew, 2002, effective supervision not only enforces compliance with ethical standards but also nurtures researchers' methodological competence and professional responsibility. This is so especially when it applies to early-career researchers who often lack experience. In this case, the role of supervisors extends beyond mentoring to active quality assurance (Chukwu, et al 2024). However, the intensity and style of supervision vary



significantly. According to Blair et al (2029), it ranges from minimal oversight to close monitoring with daily checks and mandatory reporting.

The literature on supervision highlights a central issue of concern and that is a balance between autonomy and accountability. While strict supervision strengthens accountability and data quality on one hand, it can reduce autonomy, innovation, and morale on the other hand (Lee, 2008). This tension described as the “paradox of supervision” (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo & Nkata 2021), means that too little oversight risks misconduct but too much supervision can stifle creativity and learning.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan 2012) provides a useful lens for understanding this dilemma. The theory posits that individuals are motivated when three psychological needs are met. First is autonomy that is the sense of choice and independence). Second is competence - the ability to master tasks. Third, is relatedness meaning the feeling of being supported and connected. Accordingly, strict supervision enhances competence and relatedness through feedback and guidance. It also undermines autonomy if it becomes very rigid. Finally, the balance of these dimensions determines whether supervision leads to empowerment or disengagement.

According to Namara et al (2023), in the Global South, the supervisory environment is shaped by unique institutional and socio-economic contexts. It is in this context that research assistants work under resource constraints, political pressures and limited training opportunities (Leck 2014). Studies in research governance have documented shortcuts such as bypassing ethical approval, manipulating samples or neglecting informed consent – all in situations of weak oversight (Were, et al 2023). In contrast, studies that emphasize close supervision show improvements in data accuracy, ethical compliance, and researcher confidence (Murphy & Wright 2005). Yet at the same time literature cautions on the dangers of over supervision.

## **CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study draws on Self Determination Theory (SDT). This theory helps to explain how supervision affects enumerators’ motivation and confidence. The conceptual framework rests on three interrelated dimensions:

1. Supervision Intensity and Quality. This is in the form of frequency of feedback, methodological demands and ethical checks imposed during fieldwork.
2. Research Integrity Practices. This is adherence to honesty, accuracy, confidentiality, and avoidance of shortcuts.
3. Motivation and Confidence. This means the extent to which supervision strengthens or undermines enumerators’ sense of competence, autonomy, and professional growth.

These dimensions interact within an institutional environment that sets expectations, provides training and enforces accountability. The framework thus positions strict supervision as both a



mechanism for safeguarding research integrity and a potential source of tension around autonomy and creativity.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive and exploratory research design. The aim was to document research assistants' experiences of strict supervision during fieldwork and to assess how such supervision shapes adherence to research integrity. The exploratory orientation was appropriate given the limited empirical work on enumerator experiences in Uganda and the Global South more broadly.

### Study Population, Respondent Profile and Sampling

The population for this study consisted of research assistants and enumerators who had participated in a supervised data collection exercise (see the next section for the context and setting). An open call for research assistants was publicly advertised by the leadership of the Food Systems Governance Project at Kabale University. 35 applied and 20 applicants were selected. All of those selected worked as enumerators and completed the exercise. The main criteria for selection were the ability to read and engage respondents in the Ugandan local language of Luganda. The other key criterion for selection was possession of a Bachelor's degree. While 20 enumerators successfully participated and completed the enumeration exercise, only 19 participated as respondents for this particular research study. They represented different academic backgrounds, disciplines and levels of prior research experience. The age range was between 24–48 years. In terms of gender, we had 15 females and 4 males. In terms of academic levels, there were 10 undergraduates and 7 postgraduates. The rest 2 did not specify. The research experience before this study varied from none to extensive. This diversity enabled the study to capture a wide range of perspectives across early career researchers.

The socio demographic and professional composition of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Respondent Profile**

| Variable                         | Category               | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender                           | Female                 | 15        | 78.9%      |
|                                  | Male                   | 4         | 21.1%      |
| Academic Level                   | Undergraduate          | 10        | 52.6%      |
|                                  | Postgraduate (Masters) | 7         | 36.8%      |
|                                  | Not mentioned          | 2         | 10.6%      |
| Research Experience Before Study | None                   | 1         | 5.3%       |
|                                  | Minimal                | 4         | 21.1%      |



| Variable | Category      | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------|---------------|-----------|------------|
|          | Moderate      | 7         | 36.8%      |
|          | Extensive     | 5         | 26.3%      |
|          | Not mentioned | 2         | 10.6%      |

Most respondents were female (79%), and over half were undergraduates (53%). This indicates that the group largely consisted of early-career researchers. Twenty six percent (26%) reported extensive prior research experience. Lastly, more than half (63%) had either minimal or moderate exposure to research.

### Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was pretested and this helped ensure questions were clear and logical and valid and reliable. The instrument was organized into five sections. The first section was on background information – demographic and academic characteristics. The second section was on Past Research Practices that is the independent experiences and use of shortcuts. The third section of the questionnaire was on the current experience under strict supervision in terms of benefits, challenges and confidence. The fourth section was on perceptions and reflections. This was about the lessons on research integrity and necessity of supervision. The last section of the questionnaire was on looking forward in terms of the anticipated influence on future research and preferred supervisory practices.

The questionnaire was administered in person.

### Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data (e.g., age, gender, academic level, responses to closed questions) were summarized using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and presented in tables for clarity. Qualitative responses (to open-ended questions) were subjected to thematic analysis.

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step procedure:

1. Familiarisation with the data;
2. Initial coding of responses;
3. Searching for emerging themes (e.g., confidence, accountability, autonomy, challenges);
4. Reviewing and refining themes;
5. Defining and naming themes;
6. Integrating themes into the findings and discussion.

This approach allowed for both breadth and depth. It ensured that numerical patterns were supported by rich qualitative insights.



## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured of confidentiality. Data were anonymized and identifiers were removed in reporting. The study emphasized respect for participants and integrity in data handling aligning with global standards of ethical research practice (Steneck, 2006).

## **Research Setting**

The respondents of this study had just completed a fieldwork exercise. This activity was implemented in a deliberately strict supervisory environment designed to safeguard sampling integrity, ethical conduct, and day-to-day data quality. The approach combined fixed rules (for randomization and starting-point adherence), real-time supervisory decision-making (for on-site adjustments), and systematic documentation (daily written reports and georeferenced audit trails). Fieldwork spanned Isingiro, Rakai, Kyotera, and Masaka districts/city divisions between 21–28 August 2025, with teams working in paired locations each day (Points A and B) and a daily target of 25 interviews per point (50 per day), while monitoring gender balance.

Supervisors coordinated community entry at district, sub-county and Local Council (LC) levels, often with technical support from extension officers and elected leaders. This layered entry served both legitimacy and risk-mitigation purposes: local officials-oriented teams to terrain, advised on access, and resolved refusals rooted in misunderstanding. Teams adhered to pre-randomized Points A and B but operated with a strict, documented adjustment protocol when points fell in non-settlement areas (farmland, forest, grazing land, lake). Adjustments were minimal, anchored to the nearest viable settlement and clearly landmarked (churches, trading centers, health facilities), with the displacement distance recorded. All adjustments were pre-approved on site by supervisors, recorded in daily reports, and cross-checked against GPS coordinates (compiled survey points list), providing an audit trail for external verification.

Supervisors enforced a standard daily workflow: (i) verify point and, if necessary, apply the adjustment rule; (ii) secure LC guidance and local contact persons; (iii) brief enumerators on sampling pathing and gender balance; (iv) complete 25 interviews per point; (v) file a same-day written report. The supervisory environment required clear introductions, respondent consent, and respectful refusal management. Supervisors documented reasons for non-response. Supervisors managed access constraints proactively. Interviews were conducted primarily in local languages - Runyankore/Rukiga (Isingiro, Rakai hinterlands) and Luganda (Rakai, Masaka), with Kiswahili and English where relevant. Supervisors reported no translation barriers that would threaten data validity. Each day closed with a written field report to the overall research manager detailing site characteristics (crops, livestock, settlement patterns), challenges and mitigations, interview counts by sex and any protocol adjustments. A compiled roster of GPS points (lat/long for all A/B sites across districts) accompanied the reports, reinforcing a transparent, auditable record of where and how sampling occurred.

In sum, strict supervision was not merely intensive oversight; it was a codified operating environment characterized by (i) rule-bound sampling with narrowly proscribed adjustments; (ii) layered authority engagement to secure social license and cooperation; (iii) real-time supervisory



decisions documented in daily memos; (iv) quota and gender balance enforcement; (v) ethics-first communication with respondents and leaders; and (vi) redundant navigation systems (GPS, maps, local guides) to protect the sampling frame in hard-to-reach or urban contexts. This environment made it possible to maintain methodological rigor while responding to the practical realities of fieldwork—terrain, weather, connectivity, religious schedules, and urban time pressures—without sacrificing integrity or data quality.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study. It is organized in a such a way to reflect respondents experiences in past research and their experiences under a strict supervisory regime.

### Past Research Practices and Independent Fieldwork Context

Before joining this project, respondents reported a wide range of experiences with research. According to the findings, some had worked independently using questionnaires and interviews while others experimented with digital tools. A few noted that they had previously been supervised, while two respondents indicated that this was their very first fieldwork experience. Overall, the picture that emerges is one of loosely organized, minimally supervised or fully independent practices. The protocols varied widely and documentation was often weak.

When asked directly about encountering shortcuts in past research, responses were as follows:

**Table 2: responses on encountering shortcuts in past research**

| Response                                | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Yes                                     | 10        | 52.6%      |
| No                                      | 7         | 36.8%      |
| Not applicable (first-time researchers) | 2         | 10.6%      |

The qualitative data provided insights into the most common shortcuts involved bypassing key procedures. These included:

Bypassing ethical approvals: *“Early in my career, I witnessed colleagues bypass ethical approvals especially under tight deadlines.”* (Respondent 7). This quotation reveals how ethics were bypassed especially when deadlines were close and especially where the supervisory environment was weak.

Skipping sampling protocols: *“Some students were not willing to participate, so instead of following the sample, I chose others randomly to make up the numbers.”* (Respondent 1). This reveals how convenience replaces methodological rigor when researchers are left unsupervised.



Pressure-driven compromises: “*Yes, triggered by our coordinator who wanted us to finish before the present time.*” (Respondent 10). This reveals pressure from above.

Other respondents mentioned using smaller than planned samples, rushing analysis to meet deadlines, or making substitutions without documentation. For many, such choices were driven by time pressure, limited resources, or difficult geography. Those who resisted shortcuts emphasized personal values and professional integrity, with one stating: “*I faced challenges but opted to take the proper procedures instead of shortcuts because that would compromise the outcomes.*” (Respondent 8)

In low-supervision environments, community entry was typically ad hoc. Teams approached whichever leaders were available rather than following a structured cascade from district officials to LC1 leaders. Randomized points, when provided, were often softened in practice: enumerators shifted starting locations informally to nearby trading centers or to households that were easiest to access. As one respondent explained, “*Research was conducted under a person’s consideration, sometimes not considering the present procedures.*” (Respondent 10). Others admitted relying on personal judgment to decide where to begin and whom to interview: “*I was conducting research independently relying on my own knowledge to guide my data collection.*” (Respondent 9).

Ethical safeguards in earlier fieldwork were inconsistent. Formal consent processes were sometimes omitted, and refusals were not always recorded. Documentation practices leaned on retrospective summaries rather than real-time reporting: “*I used to interview a person and then report afterwards using the summarized work done.*” (Respondent 13). Some used handwritten notes without geo-referencing, which limited traceability. One respondent described it simply: “*I used to collect written data.*” (Respondent 11). Supervisory feedback, when present, was sporadic and often arrived only at deadlines, which some linked to stress and reduced quality control.

Poor road networks, scattered homesteads, and long distances often forced enumerators to improvise in the field. Without a supervisor to authorize formal adjustments, they made pragmatic but undocumented changes—choosing accessible households or abandoning randomization altogether when terrain or time constraints intervened. Network gaps and missing contacts further delayed progress, and without institutional backup, enumerators prioritized completion over procedural rigor.

Independent contexts provided greater autonomy but limited structured learning. Skill acquisition was self-directed, often relying on university coursework or prior informal exposure: “*At my university I did research.*” (Respondent 17). For those with no prior experience, early assignments lacked modeling in areas such as ethical communication, refusal management, or sampling discipline (Respondents 14–16). Confidence, where it did grow, tended to be task-specific rather than anchored in a holistic understanding of research integrity.



In sum, the independent environment was marked by ad hoc entry and sampling, variable ethical adherence, logistics-driven improvisations, and limited documentation. These conditions allowed for speed and flexibility but also left research vulnerable to bias, weak accountability, and compromised credibility.

### Transition to a Strict Supervisory Environment

By contrast, the strict supervisory environment of this project replaced ad hoc practices with rule-bound procedures: authority cascades structured entry, randomization was preserved through documented adjustments, gender and quota tracking were enforced daily, and audit trails (GPS points, memos) ensured transparency. Where low supervision leaned on individual discretion and expedience, strict supervision institutionalized discipline, traceability, and shared accountability—a shift that respondents overwhelmingly credited for raising their skills, confidence, and appreciation of research integrity.

### Summary Contrast

| Dimension             | Low/No Supervision (Earlier Practice)      | Strict Supervision (This Study)                                   |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Community entry       | Ad hoc; who's available                    | Tiered (district → sub-county/extension → LC1)                    |
| Starting points       | Informal shifts when inconvenient          | Controlled, documented adjustments to nearest settlement/landmark |
| Sampling              | Convenience drift under pressure           | Protocol pathing with quota & gender tracking                     |
| Ethics                | Uneven; approvals sometimes bypassed       | Consent, refusals logged; supervisor oversight                    |
| Documentation         | Retrospective summaries; limited geo-audit | Same-day memos + GPS points (audit trail)                         |
| Problem-solving       | Individual improvisation                   | Supervisor-authorized, costed mitigations                         |
| Learning & confidence | Self-directed; variable gains              | Feedback-rich; skills + integrity reinforced                      |

### Experiences under Strict Supervision

Respondents overwhelmingly described strict supervision as a positive and transformative experience. It improved methodological rigor, confidence, and adherence to ethical standards.

### Learning and Confidence

*Being under strict supervision has boosted my confidence in handling research tasks. I have learnt different methodologies.”*

(Respondent

1)



*“Close supervision helps refine ideas and correct mistakes at an early stage. Deadlines are met and shortcuts are avoided.”* (Respondent 3)

These quotations suggest strict supervision was not only useful as an oversight function but also as a continuous practice-based training.

### **Supportive Environment**

*“Supervisors listened to our problems and tried to help us find solutions rather than just being strict.”* (Respondent 8)

*“This collaborative approach fostered autonomy while ensuring guidance, maintaining quality, and enhancing mental wellbeing.”* (Respondent 7)

This indicates that the dimension of relation in supervision is important. It shapes how rules and controls are perceived.

However, it is important to note that in spite of the positive experiences, several respondents highlighted challenges:

| Reported Challenge                  | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Heavy workload & tight deadlines    | 3         | 15.8%      |
| Loss of autonomy / fear of judgment | 2         | 10.5%      |
| Frequent feedback (stressful)       | 2         | 10.5%      |
| Contradictory instructions          | 1         | 5.3%       |
| Difficult terrain / long distances  | 1         | 5.3%       |
| Personal adjustment                 | 3         | 15.8%      |
| No major challenges                 | 6         | 31.6%      |

Some of the respondents identified stress and linked it to pressure and at times conflicting guidance Examples:

*“Conflicting opinions between supervisors and researchers have caused tension. Pressure and stress have created anxiety, reducing creativity.”* (Respondent 3)

Other respondents pointed to supervisors’ rigidity in location adjustments  
*“The challenge is that even in places where it is difficult to collect data, we were not allowed to adjust location.”* (Respondent 9)

### **Impact on Confidence**

The majority reported that strict supervision increased their confidence significantly.



| Confidence Level        | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Increased significantly | 15        | 78.9%      |
| Increased somewhat      | 1         | 5.3%       |
| Decreased somewhat      | 1         | 5.3%       |
| No change               | 0         | 0%         |
| Not answered            | 2         | 10.6%      |

Below are the illustrative reflections from the respondents:

*“With close supervision I have learnt how to conduct research properly without taking shortcuts.”* (Respondent 9)

*“My motivation increased, and my anxiety reduced. I now feel research will not give me a difficult time.”* (Respondent 5)

*“Although strict supervision initially felt challenging, frequent feedback improved my skills and made me feel more capable.”* (Respondent 7)

The one respondent whose confidence decreased attributed it to interpersonal dynamics:

*“There is failure to display different research skills since some supervisors are less friendly.”* (Respondent 12)

### ***Lessons on Research Integrity***

Respondents repeatedly emphasized honesty, accountability, and ethical conduct – research integrity emerging as a central theme.

*“Honesty is essential. Data should never be misrepresented. Accountability means I am responsible for accuracy and reliability.”* (Respondent 3)

*“Discipline must be at its peak for one to be trusted with confidential information.”* (Respondent 8)

*“Confidentiality and politeness help to gain trust and collect better results.”* (Respondent 14)

A total of 89% (17 out of 19) explicitly identified integrity as central to credible research.

### **Necessity of Strict Supervision**

The vast majority agreed that strict supervision is necessary:



| Position                   | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes, necessary             | 15        | 78.9%      |
| Yes, but with reservations | 3         | 15.8%      |
| Not necessary              | 1         | 5.3%       |

Below are voices of those who were in support.

*“It eliminates the chances of taking shortcuts.”* (Respondent 9)

*“Some might aim at ending the day quickly, but strict supervision ensures everyone is focused on set goals.”* (Respondent 15)

Those with reservations stressed the need for balance:

*“Strict supervision is necessary for beginners, but as researchers gain experience, independence should be encouraged.”* (Respondent 3)

Respondents further stated that their future research will emphasize ethical compliance, time management and problem solving skills:

Ethical compliance - *“I will strictly follow procedures and apply ethical considerations.”* (Respondent 1)

Punctuality and time management – *“Improving punctuality and managing fieldwork time better.”* (Respondent 12)

Independence and problem-solving – *“I can now convince skeptical people about research and handle rude respondents better.”* (Respondent 16)

On supervising others, many advocated for balanced approaches:

*“I would foster creativity and allow innovative ideas, while still providing constructive feedback.”* (Respondent 3)

*“Personally, I would not physically move with them but would conduct meetings to hear their experiences and require daily feedback.”* (Respondent 11)

## **DISCUSSION**

This study that set to examine the contribution of strict supervision to ethical practices and data quality in field research speaks directly to long standing debates in research governance. Overall, the findings of the study show that strict supervision plays a positive and decisive role in strengthening research integrity though with concerns on autonomy, stress and creativity. The contrast between past research experiences and their supervised fieldwork in this study reveals the ignored part of research administration – the governance value of structured oversight. Findings suggest that in unsupervised setting, research integrity seems to depend on individual



values rather than institutional safeguards but with strict supervision it transforms integrity from a personal aspiration into an enforceable collective standard.

Strict supervision also emerged as a powerful pedagogical process in that most respondents reported to have made substantial gains in confidence, ethical awareness and building their methodological competences. This means that supervision is a form of mentorship rather than policing. The use of frequent feedback, daily reporting and close engagements enables early career academics and researchers to internalize good research practices. This is very important as this helps them to move beyond task completion toward formation of their professional identity. These findings agrees with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The study shows that strict supervision supported competence especially through skill-building and feedback and relatedness through supportive supervisor relationships). At the same time a few respondents that experienced strict supervision as stressful reflects the “paradox of supervision” identified by scholars like (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo & Nkata, 2021). In this case excessive supervision and control risks undermining confidence, autonomy and creativity. However, supervision that is strict, when it is perceived as fair and transparent, can exist with motivation and professional growth.

### ***Contextual Dynamics in the Global South***

The Ugandan context reflects not only the strengths and weaknesses of supervision but also broader research environments in the global south characterized by logistical challenges, uneven training and overreliance on research assistants among others. In such setting, weak supervision may occasionally drive researchers into unethical practices. Yet under strict supervision, unethical practices such as shortcuts are likely minimized. The findings extend existing literature by providing empirical evidence that rigorous oversight can improve both accuracy and ethical compliance in global south fieldwork. This is especially so in contexts where early-career researchers dominate fieldwork.

## **CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This study demonstrates that balancing supervision with opportunities for autonomy is essential in capacity building particularly for early-career researchers. In contexts where early-career researchers dominate fieldwork, strict supervision therefore emerges not only as a safeguard against shortcuts but also as a pedagogical tool that strengthens the professional capacity of the next generation of scholars. The findings suggest that strict supervision is most effective when implemented with sensitivity especially when thoughtfully designed and relationally grounded. The findings suggest that supervision is central to research governance and it should be structured to balance accountability with learning and control with professional growth.

There is therefore need to institutionalize supervision as research governance. There is also need for institutions to invest in training supervisors in mentoring, communication and also conflict management. This is in a bid to ensure that oversight is supportive rather than intimidating. There is also need to adopt flexible and auditable fieldwork systems like GPS verification, use of daily reports etc. for they enhance transparency and accountability.



As regards to future studies, there is a need for multi-country analyses of how national regulations, funding modalities, and institutional cultures either enable or constrain integrity focused supervision. Finally, future research could experiment with co-designed governance models in which research assistants, supervisors, and institutional leaders jointly develop supervisory guidelines, digital monitoring tools, and feedback mechanisms. Such work would deepen understanding of how macro-level research governance reforms can sustain integrity while still protecting autonomy, learning, and innovation in field-based research.

### **Ethical clearance**

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Availability of data and materials**

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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