

2023: Vol 4, Nr 2

doi: 10.24834/jotl.4.2.882

COMPLEXITIES OF A HYPOTHETICAL CO-SUPERVISION CASE – ON ROLES, EXPECTATIONS, INDEPENDENCE

Lizette Reitsma

K3, Malmö University – Lizette.reitsma@mau.se

Abstract

This essay reflects on possible complexities that embarking on co-supervising a doctoral candidate might entail. The hypothetical co-supervision case under consideration is one between different disciplines, organisations and countries, and it focuses on how differences in understanding the role of a PhD candidate might surface. Furthermore, the importance of reflecting on the nature of the project, whether it is an open brief or a specified project, is highlighted. This also necessitates consideration of the extent to which the supervisors connect ownership to the project idea, outcome, and process. Lastly, the importance of the role of the supervisor in supporting the PhD candidate towards becoming an independent researcher is raised. As a conclusion, attention is drawn to the need for potential co-supervisors to articulate and discuss their stances and expectations on the above questions prior to embarking on co-supervision; this is in order to prevent or lessen possible tensions at a later stage.

Keywords: co-supervision, expectations, role of supervisor, role of doctoral candidate

Introduction

This reflective essay is written as part of Malmö University's Supervisor Training course. For my research, I work with different universities in different parts of the world on a shared project. Ideally, we would like to get students involved in the work in order to support educational exchange between the different universities and to further the project effort.

This essay is based on an encounter I had with one of my collaborating researchers, a professor in Physics from an African country. This professor said that he thought we needed to get two PhD students

Lizette Reitsma

for the project “to lighten his workload.” The conversation stuck with me as it highlighted some of the complexities that come with supervising PhD students between organisations, disciplines and countries.

This raises the question of what a PhD position entails, and what it should offer the PhD student. For me, especially after having gone through the Supervisor Training course, stating that a PhD position can lighten the workload of one of the supervisors feels uncomfortable. From my understanding, the justification for the creation of a PhD post is much more akin to something that was addressed in my planning for a project with a range of project partners a few years ago. Within the project group, we had the ambition to attract a PhD candidate so that there would be someone to work on the project full time. One of the collaborating professors, however, pointed out that although we could have a PhD student associated to this project, we could not expect this person to do the work that we considered necessary since a PhD candidate must determine their own work and interest. In other words, a PhD student should have the freedom to shape their own process and questions, take ownership of the project, and develop independence as a researcher. This for me emphasized how to think about involving PhD candidates in project work.

The collaboration with the African university might result in a shared PhD position, where I will be co-supervisor together with the aforementioned professor. This might lead to some tensions because we are working between institutions, disciplines and countries, and these factors all may result in different understandings of what a PhD position involves. I do not fully understand what having a shared PhD would mean practically, nor do I understand enough about the specific university context that the professor works in to assume that these tensions will come to surface; however, I consider this relevant to reflect on.

In this reflective essay, I will start by addressing four potential conflicting perspectives on what a PhD position in such a hypothetical co-supervision could entail, and what consequences this could have for the roles each supervisor might take. Firstly, I will focus on the reasons for hiring PhD candidates and the implications this has for the tasks they need to perform. Secondly, I will address the role division between supervisors and the complexities that might arise from this. Thirdly, I will examine the student’s role within the larger institute and how this can impact the time they can spend focusing on their own careers. Lastly, I will focus on conflicts in understanding the nature of the PhD position, caused by the type of questions asked, the type of students hired, and the extent to which a PhD supervisor directs the outcome of the PhD. In the next section, I will highlight some suggestions for supporting researcher independence. Bearing in mind the importance of supporting PhD candidates’ independence, I will conclude with a suggestion on how to limit the potential conflicts that can arise between different researchers, institutes, countries and disciplines when setting up and embarking on a PhD journey.

Four Areas of Potentially Conflicting Perspectives

The tasks involved in a PhD supervisory position

The main task of the first supervisor is to act in the best interest of the candidate with regard to promoting learning. As stated by Brodin et al. (2020, p. 97), “It is the supervisor’s main duty to pay attention to the interplay between the individual and organisational and cultural factors of relevance of the case in question.” The supervisor also needs to place these different factors in a temporal perspective and assess

what is possible to achieve within the scope of the PhD. But what if the supervisor assigns tasks that do not contribute much to the candidate's learning or career development?

If we accept hiring PhD candidates to offload our own workload as the aforementioned professor suggested, there is a risk that those candidates are assigned work that needs to get done, but that does not necessarily support their career or development. This sounds like a concept we talked about in the session *Equality, gender, sex, age, in supervision*, namely "academic housework." Heijstra et al. (2016) define academic housework as "all the academic service work within the institution that is performed by all academic staff, both women and men, but that receives little recognition with the process of academic career making or within the definition of academic excellence." It becomes important to understand who is doing this kind of work in the academic workplace and who is spared as this could result in unequal opportunities.

This reflection started with the aforementioned professor suggesting that due to his excessive workload he needed help and saw hiring two PhD students as a good solution. This would obviously not be ideal for the candidate's learning and career development. However, it might highlight a struggle that many academics are facing, namely that of an increasing workload which partly or mainly consists of administrative service work. In some cases, the academic's institution might lessen this burden by having service providers who take care of such tasks. This, however, cannot be assumed. Whether and to what extent this might occur can be different between institutions and countries and might therefore also influence the way that we, as supervisors, understand the role of the PhD candidates.

The role division between supervisor and co-supervisor.

Besides academic housework being assigned to PhD candidates, academic housework can also influence a PhD supervisory team. This is highlighted by Heijstra et al. (2016): "Previous results have identified that early career academics are to a larger extent involved in academic housework than associate and full professors, as the latter are more likely to be able to redistribute such tasks to academics in more subordinate positions." In addition, they also point out that "even though the job descriptions of academics in various ranks may be very similar, some academic tasks tend to land disproportionately on the shoulders of certain academics and much less on others, due to gender regimes and the more subordinate position of early career academics." If I were embarking on a co-supervision with my project partner, there might be challenges related to this due to my being a female, early career researcher. Hierarchies in academia (and in general) might play more of a role in the specific African context than they do in Sweden. It is important to think about how this will affect the supervision and my personal role in it. It might turn out like the narrative of a co-supervisor (described by Brodin et al., 2020, p. 90) who took on most of the supervising work because the principal supervisor was very busy. However, this principal supervisor would allocate different work procedures and assignments that were not in line with the plan, thereby making the work of the co-supervisor redundant. When the co-supervisor contacted the principal supervisor to attempt to achieve a clearer distribution of the supervisory tasks, the principal supervisor was not interested in this and simply said, "I am the principal supervisor, and you are assisting me."

A second challenge might be in relation to gender. Though it is debatable whether offering emotional support could be understood as part of the supervisory role (Christie & Jurado, 2013), Heijstra et al. (2016) point out that this kind of work can also be understood as doing academic housework. According

Lizette Reitsma

to Misra et al. (2011), not only is offering emotional support demanding and time consuming, but it is also service work that often remains invisible. This type of work is more often performed by female academics, diverting them from research (Misra et al. 2011). I do not claim this will be the case, but with gender norms being more traditional in the specific African context, this kind of work could form part of my duties. This might not be a problem, but it is important to bring the matter to attention in talking about how we will allocate supervision tasks so as not to take these kinds of dynamics for granted. It is also important to keep in mind that, besides the expectations of the supervisory team, the expectations of the PhD candidate might also be affected by the culture they come from. This can have consequences in how they approach the supervisory team and can in this way reinforce certain dynamics based on gender or academic hierarchy.

Differences in demands from associated institutes

I undertook my PhD in the United Kingdom. Unlike here in Sweden, I was solely a student, with a scholarship. I was not burdened with administrative academic tasks. Of course, I also did not have the benefits of being employed (e.g., there were no structures in place for sick leave or holidays, etc.), but it was understood that my sole priority was finishing my PhD work. This was the case for most of my fellow students and it meant that we could more easily refuse tasks that we felt did not serve the purpose of furthering our career or finishing our PhDs. While hierarchies might work differently in the context of the African university, a Swedish PhD candidate employed by the university will also have responsibilities towards their faculty and department. These different contexts might be difficult to balance, and it is here that the role of the principal supervisor is important in order to make sure that the PhD candidate can focus enough of their time on finishing their degree. However, we have to keep in mind that we, as supervisors, are also tied to the institutes we work for, which might mean that even though we would ideally prioritize the student's learning, we also need to tend to our employer's needs. Our status and the positions we have in those institutes might influence how well we can stand up for our students. How the institutes support us in stepping up for our students is also of great influence: Is it accepted to question whether our students should work on tasks outside of their PhD work? And, if so, to what degree?

The aim of the PhD: getting project work done or supporting independence

Becoming an independent researcher and shaping a unique research identity should be central to the fulfillment of a PhD journey (Brodin et al., 2020). How centrally we place those two aims might, however, differ between different disciplines and between academics in general, as we might understand the aim of PhD positions in alternative ways. How much independence and freedom a PhD candidate gets within their research depends on the nature of the research question, on how the project is set up, and to what extent the supervisors disable or enable independence.

Regarding the nature of the project, there are various ways in which a research question can come into being. For example, the candidate can get the freedom to define their own research question (which is more common in the social sciences) or the doctoral candidate's education takes place within a research project designed by the supervisor (which is more common in the natural sciences, medicine and technology). There are pros and cons for each of those formats, both for the student and the supervisor. For students, having an open brief might mean that it is easier to remain enthusiastic about their work. At the same time, it might also be easier to drown in the task of limiting the research focus. For

supervisors, it might be challenging to support students who are trying to define their focus as this might fall outside of their expertise. It might also result in projects that are of less interest to the supervisor. Remaining interested might then become challenging. As for a specified project, it might be easier for students to get started with such a project, and they also might benefit from being part of a research team as this can also contribute to their learning. They might, however, feel that their freedom is limited and that it is difficult to find a unique research identity. For supervisors, having a student be part of a project might be beneficial as they will work in the supervisor's field of expertise, and the latter can also learn from their contributions. However, it might feel that the student will expect instructions regarding how to do the work as they feel they are not free to make their own decisions within the bigger project. Cases where the PhD project is part of a supervisor's project are growing (Brodin et al., 2020) due to how obtaining research funding works. This might result in only certain candidates being recruited (e.g., those who are more focused and organised from the start), rather than recruiting "riskier" candidates who have less focused plans; it might be easier to understand whether a candidate can solve a specified problem if they have a clear and focused plan to start off with. This trend might have consequences for how independent those students really will become or how well they are able to develop their own unique research identities, and it might thus be important to take extra care that these perspectives remain central while supervising in such situations.

It might be our ambition, as supervisors, to support independence and the shaping of a research identity, but it is important to consider whether we are also supporting these outcomes in practice. Here, it becomes vital to keep track of how we relate to the PhD candidate's work. I think it is therefore of great importance to understand for ourselves what we aim to gain from supervising PhD candidates in the first place, and how the PhD projects came into being. What are our ambitions regarding the projects the candidates are involved in? Do we, through the work of the candidates we supervise, aim to further our own research and research output? Is the project a result of funding applications in which we invest time and effort? Reflecting on these questions is necessary as all these factors might have implications for the amount of freedom we are able to give our PhD candidates in their research journeys. For example, we will have a stronger influence on the research direction if we connect a strong sense of ownership to the project idea and outcome. To take ownership of something provides people with the ability to take control of it and explore and alter their environment (for example, White, 1959; Csikszentmihalyi & Halton, 1981; Rudmin & Berry, 1987; and Beggan, 1992). Conversely, that which cannot be controlled does not provide space to take ownership (for example, Lewis & Brook, 1974). Thus, if a supervisor connects too much ownership to a project, it might be impossible for a doctoral candidate to take control. This might mean that if, as a supervisor, you receive funding for a project to recruit a PhD candidate, it might be a better idea to become a second rather than a principal supervisor as the connection with the project might blur your focus on the candidate's best interests with regard to promotion of their learning.

Supervisors' role in PhD supervision – my perspective

Reflecting on my own experiences as a PhD student, I think that I was very lucky. My PhD position and project were open for me to shape. I had to apply for the position by pitching a research focus. I did not have to elaborate in detail how I would address this focus but rather share my considerations of why this was a relevant and beneficial project on which to embark - I was a "riskier" student. One of the first things my principal supervisor said to me was that he did not mind so much which direction I would take as long as I felt curious and motivated to go in that direction, for, he stated, "The most important thing for a successful PhD is to keep yourself motivated." Whatever I embarked on, my supervisor never

gave his opinion directly but rather asked all the critical questions that came with going in a certain direction. I think this helped me to a great extent in finding my own research identity and my own voice. Besides my supervisor, my university had many formal and informal structures to help me establish my viewpoint. For example, we had peer review sessions and seminars. Every year we had certain chapters that we had to finish and that we then had to discuss with a panel of faculty members. These chapters were by no means used in the final dissertation but they helped to practise getting thoughts on paper and learning to construct my argument. This finding your voice or way within your discipline is referred to as “socialisation,” which is about “a newcomer being made a member of a community, which in the case of graduate students, is the community of an academic department in a particular discipline” (Golde 1998, p. 56). Such socialisation is important for developing scholarly independence; this occurs through three distinct phases, according to Gardner (2007, 2008, 2010), each making the PhD candidate a little less dependent on the supervisors. I think supporting the development of scholarly independence is a major part of being a supervisor. These three different phases suggest a flexible, changing role for the supervisor, adjusting to the process and the needs of the PhD candidate. For me, this resonates with the notion of a “good enough mother” (Winnicott 1953):

In the first stages of her infant’s life, the mother will almost completely adapt to her infant’s needs. However, when the time proceeds, she will start to adapt less and less completely and gradually according to the infant’s growing ability to deal with her failure. (Winnicott 1953:53)

This notion of the good enough mother has been used and adapted in my field, Participatory Design, as the notion of the good enough designer (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011). I consider it relevant to transfer this thinking to the role of a supervisor as well, since that role is constantly dependent on the development, transformation, and growth of the other. Of course, it is problematic to view the supervisor’s role in the light of that of a parent as this suggests major dependencies and maybe introduces even more complex power structures. But I bring up this metaphor to emphasize that a supervisor from a “good enough” perspective does not try to “do it all” for the doctoral candidates they are supervising. Instead, they try to enable the candidate to develop and build their own capacities and take control. Rather than being responsible for the outcome, the supervisor should successively allow the PhD candidate to take charge of their own work. I think that this changing role comes with an emphasis on active listening, which is also highlighted in Brodin et al. (2020, p. 103). When my principal supervisor frequently asked critical questions, I think he showed that he was actively listening. By posing counter questions, he aimed to create within me a greater capacity to personally navigate towards a solution, thereby also developing my ability to resolve similar problems in the future. This, I consider, has been important in becoming an independent researcher with my own identity and voice.

On the Supervisor Training course, we have talked several times about how important it is to converse with the PhD candidate about your expectations and their expectations. A tool for this could be “Successful Supervision – a dialogue facilitator,” which I think is relevant. In thinking through some of the challenges that might arise if I were to embark on supervising PhD candidates with a supervisor from another field, country, or institution, I think it is of great importance that we do a similar kind of check prior to even initiating recruitment. How do we understand the role of the PhD candidate? What do we consider our responsibilities as supervisors to be? How do we understand the division of labour? How do our roles change over time? If these complexities are already on the table before the doctoral candidate is in the picture, this will prevent or lessen possible tensions at a later stage. Even during the actual PhD candidate’s journey, it is important to keep talking about our expectations in order to make sure we are still aligned and aware of how the other is thinking.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have brought up four different areas on which supervisors could have conflicting perspectives. Firstly, it can be about the kind of tasks that PhD candidates should engage in: Are we obviating the need for the candidate to spend time on tasks that could be classified as academic housework so that they may develop their learning, or do we see academic housework as central to the PhD candidate's job description? Secondly, how do we understand the role division within the supervisory team? What dynamics might arise? How are these dynamics influenced by cultural perspectives on gender norms and academic hierarchies? Thirdly, what pressures can we expect from our institutes? What (employment) structures enforce such pressures? Are we able to stand up for the PhD candidates we supervise? Lastly, there might be different perspectives and realities regarding what a PhD brief can look like. Different forms (e.g., an open versus a closed brief) can have an impact on how well PhD students can develop independence and a research identity. Even if it is the ambition that the PhD candidate may have the freedom to develop their own learning, this might be hindered by the supervisor taking ownership of part of the project, process or outcome. It is important to reflect on these issues in order to prevent this. Through these perspectives, I do by no means aim to provide a complete picture, but rather point out that there are many different standpoints that could make embarking on a shared supervision of a PhD candidate quite complex. Reflecting on those perspectives can highlight that there are multiple ways to think about what a PhD position entails or could entail.

From reflecting on my own PhD journey, I learned that my supervisors gave me a lot of freedom to develop my own identity and become an independent researcher. How much they were involved in my work was dependent on the ongoing phase of the PhD, much like being a parent in the development of a child. This suggests a changing role for the supervisor. The parent-child developmental metaphor is interesting as it might help a supervisor to actively think about what kind of support the PhD candidate could benefit from, depending on which stage in the process they are at.

I realized that there is always interplay between the supervisors (principal supervisors and co-supervisors), and the supervisory team and PhD candidate, where factors such as the institutes for which they work, the country in which they work, and where they come from all come into play. From reflecting on the conflicts that could potentially arise, I consider it of great importance to begin discussing our preconceptions, expectations and understandings as supervisors as early as the planning phases of a PhD position and to continue discussions throughout the process. In these discussions, we should not just focus on our own interaction but also how we are affected by, for example, the institutes we work for or the countries we work in. Of course, this will not necessarily guarantee success, but it might facilitate the PhD journey as a supervisory team. In the worst case, it might highlight that the expectations will be hard to match and that it therefore might be better to embark on different collaborations rather than on shared supervision of a PhD candidate.

References

- Beggan, J.K. (1992). On the social nature of nonsocial perception: The mere ownership effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(2), 229-237.
- Brodin, E., Lindén, J., Sonesson, A., & Lindberg-Sand, Å. (2020). *Doctoral supervision in theory and practice*. Lund: Studentlitteratur AB.

Lizette Reitsma

- Christie, M., & Jurado, R. G. (2013). Using communicative action theory to analyse relationships between supervisors and PhD students in a technical university in Sweden. *Högre utbildning*, 3(3), 187-197.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Halton, E. (1981). *The meaning of things*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Golde, C. M. (1998). Beginning Graduate School: Explaining First-Year Doctoral Attrition. *New directions for higher education*, 101, 55-64.
- Gardner, S. K. (2007). "I heard it through the grapevine": Doctoral student socialization in chemistry and history. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 54, 723-740. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-006-9020-x>
- Gardner, S. K. (2008). "What's too much and what's too little?": The process of becoming an independent researcher in doctoral education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79, 326-350. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.0.0007>
- Gardner, S. K. (2010). Contrasting the socialization experiences of doctoral students in high-and low-completing departments: A qualitative analysis of disciplinary contexts at one institution. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81, 61-81. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.0.0081>
- Heijstra, T. M., Einarsdóttir, Þ., Pétursdóttir, G. M., & Steinþórsdóttir, F. S. (2017). Testing the concept of academic housework in a European setting: Part of academic career-making or gendered barrier to the top?. *European Educational Research Journal*, 16(2-3), 200-214.
- Lewis, M. & Brook, J., 1974. Self, others and fear - Infants' reactions to people. In M. Lewis & L. S. Rossenblum, eds. *The origins of fear*. New York, NY, USA: Wiley, pp. 165-194.
- Misra J, Lundquist J, Holmes E, et al. (2011) The ivory ceiling of service work. *Academe* 97(1): 22-28.
- Rudmin, F.W. & Berry, J.W. (1987). Semantics of ownership: A free-recall study of property. *The Psychological Record*, 37(2), 257-268.
- Sverdlik, A., Hall, N. C., McAlpine, L., & Hubbard, K. (2018). The PhD experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 361-388
- Thorpe, A & Gammman, L. (2011). Design with society: why socially responsive design is good enough. *CoDesign*, 7(3-4), pp. 217-230.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena – a study of the first not-me possession. *International Journal of Psycho Analysis*, 34, pp. 89-97.
- White, R.W. (1959). Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence. *Psychological Review*, 66(5), 297-333