

2024: Vol 5, Nr 1

doi: 10.24834/jotl.5.1.1256

THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY IN THE SUPERVISION PROCESS

John H.S. Åberg

Department of Global Political Studies, Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University, john.aberg@mau.se

Abstract

In this essay I reflect on the problem of authority in the doctoral supervision process. It is the role of the supervisor to prepare, guide, and teach the doctoral student how to take on the academic world and become a good social scientist. To this end, I argue for a hierarchical teacher-student relationship as it leads to unambiguous role expectations. I further define the supervisor-student relationship in terms of virtue, rather than power. I also reflect on my own PhD experience which illustrates the problem of authority.

Keywords: Supervision, Authority, Hierarchy, Virtue Ethics

Sammanfattning Svenska (Heading 2)

I denna essä reflekterar jag över auktoritetsproblematik i doktorandhandledning. Det är handledarens roll att förbereda, vägleda och lära doktoranden hur man tar sig an den akademiska världen och blir en god samhällsvetare. För detta ändamål argumenterar jag för en hierarkisk relation mellan handledare och student eftersom det leder till entydiga rollförväntningar. Jag definierar relationen mellan handledare och student i termer av dygd snarare än makt. Jag reflekterar också över min egen doktorserfarenhet som illustrerar auktoritetsproblematiken.

Nyckelord: Handledning, auktoritet, hierarki, dygdetik

Introduction

Modern man's problem is the rejection of certain types of authority, in particular traditional and charismatic authority. Modern man disregards tradition and the wisdom of elders, and so as well the charisma of prophets. And although the charismatic lure of ideological demagogues is a distinctive modern phenomenon, the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state is, in principle, dominating its subjects by way of legal-rational authority. Everything old can and should be rejected. Only what is secular and rational can be accepted as legitimate authority, and the meta-narratives of national development and scientific progress give meaning to life (for a discussion of different types of authority, see Weber 1946: 78-80).

Postmodern man's problem is different. Postmodern man's problem is the disregard of authority altogether, or rather, the rejection of any stable or permanent sense of authority. In discarding the meta-narratives of modernity, perhaps for good reasons, postmodern man is instead subjected to a range of pseudo-authorities, disposable by the whims of emotion, provisional interests, and temporary trends vulnerable to the exploits of corporate power.

Whereas modern man does understand that the teacher-student relationship has never been equal, and should not be equal, postmodern man does not.

By way of introduction, this schematic divide of two "models of man" serves to illustrate that in our postmodern era a central problem of the supervision process is the problem of authority. My argument is simple. Supervision will benefit from a hierarchical teacher-student relationship with clear role expectations, and the supervisor-student relationship should be defined in terms of virtue, not power.

Below follows first my personal narrative, after which I reflect on and problematize the supervision process more broadly by considering questions of authority and hierarchy. I then briefly discuss academic culture before I conclude.

Personal Experience

As an academically inexperienced student with a newfound but fragile love for a few favorite theories, I viewed my Chinese supervisor with contempt, as a person lacking adequate insights to guide me given his mediocre, uncritical theoretical perspectives. In other words, I disregarded his (meta-)theoretical authority. Of course, my disposition shone through, and I was met with resistance from my supervisor, so much so that I asked the head of department for a change of supervisor. He listened to my concerns, but told me, in a way that unmistakably conveyed the seriousness of the matter: "In China, normally we do not change supervisors. For the sake of your future and your career, I think it is best that you learn how to work with your supervisor and submit to his guidance." To cut a long story short, a mixture of fear and persuasion made me accept the advice, and I started respecting my supervisor's authority and began exploring the world within the bounds of his guidance. We developed a cordial, hierarchical teacher-student relationship with clear role expectations. I had to reevaluate my previous theoretical proclivities, but I learned the craft of social science.

The problem of authority

The specific problem above concerns the disregard of the (meta-)theoretical authority of the supervisor. This can lead to a situation where the student simply does not listen to the supervisor because they might represent the wrong theoretical perspective, or they might suggest readings that are not “critical” enough. In this case, the doctoral student already has their mind set on what the truth is, and the supervisor should basically reinforce that conviction rather than challenge it. This is problematic because the university is not a “safe space” (Ringmar 2019). Instead, the university is a place where worldviews are challenged, assumptions questioned, hypotheses refuted, and where research findings are hotly debated in public. Science must also be systematic; that is, it involves a rigorous “application of a set of theories and concepts so as to produce a ‘thoughtful ordering of empirical reality’” (Weber 1999a, 160; cited in Jackson 2011: 20). It is the role of the supervisor to prepare, guide, and teach the doctoral student how to take on the academic world and become a good scientist.

One way to solve the problem of authority could be to carefully match the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological positions of the student with those of the supervisors. Yet this is not necessarily a satisfactory solution because it risks going against a core goal of the supervision process, namely, to encourage “critical, creative, and independent thinking” among doctoral students (Brodin 2021: 194-203). It might also risk creating a form of “alienated pluralism” (Young 2020) where scholars with different philosophical, theoretical, and methodological positions rarely, if ever, meet to discuss and challenge each other’s assumptions and assertions.

Accepting the authority of the supervisor does not negate autonomy, critique, or creativity; but it sets the foundational parameters for stable role expectations. And deference to the supervisor’s critique, guidance and instructions will in most cases, as a general rule, bode well. After all, the supervisor has years or decades of experience, while the doctoral student is at the beginning of the journey. My argument implies a rejection of the supervisor-student relationship as one defined by power and power struggles (cf. Christie and Jurado 2013), although miscommunication, misunderstanding, and conflict certainly can and do occur. To define the supervisor-student relationship as a power relationship because there are institutional and relational hierarchies fails to grasp the virtue ethical qualities of the teacher-student relationship. Virtues such as diligence, truth-seeking, inquisitiveness, and intellectual humility are learned through practice and emulation and by being attentive to the instructions from a wiser and more knowledgeable teacher – all directed to the end of becoming a good scholar.

The supervisor has “practical authority”; that is, he or she is “in authority” by occupying a specific academic position. Yet it is by virtue of the supervisor’s “theoretical authority” that he or she becomes “an authority,” an authority figure with specific knowledge and expertise (for different types of authority, see Lang 2015, chapter 2). I am particularly referring to the meta-theoretical and methodological knowledge of the supervisor that enables the doctoral student to learn the craft of science; it is not about micromanaging the student’s autonomous and creative research process. Neither do I claim that discussions of power are irrelevant, as power might indeed affect teacher-student relationships (Lindén 2021: 76-81); yet when so happens it is an exception, not the rule. As one should not define the relationship based on the exception, a virtue ethics perspective (MacIntyre 2007) is suggested for understanding the meaning, qualities, and ends of the supervisor-student relationship.

Ideal-typical Comparison

If we compare the characteristics of the doxas in the humanities, the natural sciences, and the educational sciences, as outlined by Brodin and Lindén (2021: 136-138), then we can observe important differences. In the social sciences, the role of the supervisor should not be that of a mentor alone but that of a teacher as well, and the role of the doctoral student should not be that of an apprentice but more of a novice. The doctoral student is a beginner when it comes to carrying out in-depth and extensive research, and thus needs more than mere mentoring, so direct instructions and corrections are needed as well. This means merging the ideal types of the humanities and the educational sciences.

A perspective that emphasizes the theoretical authority of the supervisor resonates differently with various types of doctoral supervision. Jitka Lindén (2021: 14-16) distinguishes between three types of doctoral supervision: student-oriented, project-oriented, and process-oriented supervision. In student-oriented supervision, the supervisor can either perform a “listening and supportive role” or being a more “active role model” (Lindén 2021: 14-15). The former is far from the model I sketched above, whereas the latter has more affinities and involves a recognition of the supervisor’s theoretical authority. The process-oriented supervision describes the supervisor as equally excited and engaged as the student in learning from the doctoral project. While such intellectual excitement is a laudable characteristic of a supervisor, there is a risk that this disposition and approach to the supervision process leads to role ambiguity. After all, small rudders steer large boats, and the smallest thing can lead the student off course. As straying and testing new grounds are part of the creative process, the detached guidance of the supervisor is needed to separate the wheat from the chaff. The project-oriented supervision closely resembles the apprenticeship model and makes the teacher-student relationship explicitly hierarchical. Yet this type of supervision and emulation of practice is not suited for all disciplines as it is closely connected to delivering specific results or specific products.

In sum, a clear teacher-student relationship where the student defers to the meta-theoretical and methodological knowledge of the supervisor will enable the doctoral student to learn the craft of science. Explicit status hierarchies lead to unambiguous role expectations and breed less conflict (Gould 2003). Whereas this indeed puts a certain burden on the student to develop certain characters and virtues, the responsibility of the supervisor to teach, guide, and mentor is an even heavier duty to bear.

Culture and academic culture

Another aspect of supervision relates to culture, especially foreign culture, and the anxiety one can experience as an international doctoral student. One reason for my own submission to the demands of my supervisor potentially had to do with me being in a foreign land, with my wife and my children, exposed to different authorities, and with limited economic resources. This possibly made me more susceptible to the demands of authority. This can be extended to how gender, culture, class, and race might affect one’s feelings of vulnerability as well as concrete intersections of discrimination (Lindén 2021: 79). This problem is further accentuated by the growing internationalization of higher education and increasing numbers of foreign students (SCB 2022). Moreover, in surveying the psycho-social environment of doctoral students, the Swedish labour union ST found that students struggled with overtime (25%), lack of sleep (20%), no time for vacation (20%), and experienced a situation where they could not think about anything else but the doctoral thesis (45 %) (ST 2021).

Even so, from my own personal experience, the deprivation I experienced in Hong Kong as a doctoral student was necessary to realize that I needed, in a sense, to be “taken care of” as a student. The opposite situation, a situation where I would have felt secure, at home, would hypothetically have produced more resistance and arrogance in me and sustained my rejection of authority. It is my conviction that in an environment where I would have been allowed to “go my own way,” as in student-oriented supervision, I would have perished – echoing the famous academic mantra of “publish or perish,” meaning I would not have managed to publish nor gain university employment.

Spinning forth on the “publish or perish” theme, publication pressure is a key source of doctoral student anxiety. Global academic competition gives rise to pressures that produce functionally equivalent researchers that emulate American academic practices to maximize quantitative output in terms of publications, which is the key metric for successful mobility within the knowledge networks of academia (Babones and Aberg, 2019). These pressures are not always easy to bear, especially if you desire a career within academia, yet it further reinforces the theoretical authority of the supervisor. The supervisor is many times already playing the academic game effectively, and there are clear incentives to learn from the supervisor and accept his or her guidance when it comes to publishing. Yet we should be aware of the risk that supervision can become “characterized unwittingly and far too extensively by an ambition for the ‘Other’ (the doctoral student) to assimilate (adopt) a certain (dominant) way of thinking or behaving” (Lindén 2021: 80). That is why, yet again, the supervisor should primarily be concerned with the meta-theoretical training and the methodological toolbox, teaching the student how to produce a systematic, logically coherent dissertation, not molding the student into a particular substantive theoretical worldview.

Related to the problem of labor market pressures, doctoral students might feel the need to engage in activities and networking outside of academia. Whereas this in many ways is normal and expected, there is the risk that it interferes with the doctoral studies. Given the pressure to finish on time, the student can find themselves in a situation where shouldering too many responsibilities can affect the quality of the dissertation. It is therefore important that the supervisor is a good listener and displays understanding of the situation the student is in, yet still emphasizing the importance of finishing the dissertation on time and reminding the student of not getting too distracted by other tasks and responsibilities.

Concluding remarks

In this essay I have argued for a hierarchical teacher-student relationship where the student defers to the meta-theoretical and methodological knowledge of the supervisor. I have argued for explicit status hierarchies as they lead to unambiguous role expectations, and I have defined the supervisor-student relationship in terms of virtue, rather than power. Throughout the essay I have assumed a good working relationship, but it can certainly be the case that the supervisor displays several shortcomings that prevent this from occurring. These can be shortcomings in supervision expertise, in responsibility and integrity, or in respect for the individual (Lindén 2021: 108). It is therefore important that the supervisor takes the role seriously by always being well-structured and intentional in the learning process, by coming well-prepared to supervision meetings and having read the student’s manuscript in detail, and by consciously cultivating good virtues. Yet I view potential shortcomings as exceptions, not the rule. Even so, if shortcomings of the supervisor become so stifling that they negatively affect the relationship and make it unworkable, a change of supervisor is indeed an alternative, as well as turning to a

Åberg, H.S. John

supportive institutional environment of formal student rights. After all, it should be virtues, not vices, that characterize the relationship.

References

- Babones, Salvatore, and John H. S. Åberg. "Globalization and the Rise of Integrated World Society: Deterritorialization, Structural Power, and the Endogenization of International Society." *International Theory* 11, no. 3 (2019): 293–317.
- Brodin, Eva. "Development of critical, creative, and independent thinking." In *Doctoral Supervision: In Theory and Practice*, edited by Eva Brodin, Jitka Lindén, Anders Sonesson, and Åsa Lindberg-Sand, 165-204, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2021.
- Brodin, Eva and Lindén, Jitka. "Doctoral student socialization and academic integrity." In *Doctoral Supervision: In Theory and Practice*, edited by Eva Brodin, Jitka Lindén, Anders Sonesson, and Åsa Lindberg-Sand, 119-164, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2021.
- Christie, Michael, and Ramon Garrote Jurado. "Using Communicative Action Theory to Analyse Relationships Between Supervisors and PhD Students in a Technical University in Sweden." *Högre Utbildning* 3, no. 3 (2013): 187–97.
- Gould, Roger V. *Collision of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Lang, Jr, Anthony F. *International Political Theory*. London: Palgrave, 2015.
- Lindén, Jitka, "Introduction". In *Doctoral Supervision: In Theory and Practice*, edited by Eva Brodin, Jitka Lindén, Anders Sonesson, and Åsa Lindberg-Sand, 9-24, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2021.
- Lindén, Jitka, "Professional Approach". In *Doctoral Supervision: In Theory and Practice*, edited by Eva Brodin, Jitka Lindén, Anders Sonesson, and Åsa Lindberg-Sand, 67-84, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2021.
- Lindén, Jitka, "Supervision Problems". In *Doctoral Supervision: In Theory and Practice*, edited by Eva Brodin, Jitka Lindén, Anders Sonesson, and Åsa Lindberg-Sand, 85-114, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2021.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame Press, 2007.
- Ringmar, Erik. *Befria universiteten!: om akademisk frihet och statlig styrning*. Timbro, 2019.
- SCB. "Universitet och högskolor. Internationell studentmobilitet i högskolan 2021/2022", 2022, <https://www.scb.se/publikation/45732>
- ST, Hur Mår Doktoranden, 2021, <https://st.org/press-och-opinion/rapporter/2021-hur-mar-doktoranden>
- Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- Young, Kevin L. "Progress, Pluralism and Science: Moving from Alienated to Engaged Pluralism." *Review of International Political Economy* 28, no. 2 (2020): 406–20.