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IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO GET A PHD: PRODUCING THE “INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER” BY EXTENDING THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

What should be the outcome of the PhD journey? One frequent answer is to produce an independent researcher who, after years of doctoral education and supervision is ready to take on the academic world. In this context, metaphors such as master and apprentice or even parent and child are frequently invoked. However, research in higher education pedagogy has pointed out that, in the context of the neoliberal university, the rather intense supervisory relation can quickly turn oppressive, especially when intersecting with other power asymmetries around class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or physical ability. The aim of this article is to ‘trouble’ the linear notion of the independent researcher by reflecting on the multiple, and often un- or under-recognized, relations that accompany the PhD journey. Drawing on feminist approaches that reconceptualize supervision as a care-practice, we reflect on the question of how the benefits and risks of the traditional supervisory model can be balanced through an embedment of PhD supervision into an extended set of relationships. We challenge the notion of independence as alleged self-sufficiency and instead suggest that independence can successfully be produced through ‘interdependence’. Such shift, we argue, may help to: first, acknowledge the net of care practices already in place and dignify it as a fundamental part of the social infrastructure of doctoral education; second, mediate some problematic tendencies of neoliberal academia and conceptually reconcile the tensions between care and independence in doctoral education.

Keywords: doctoral supervision, PhD education, independence, care

Introduction. The Process and Production of Independence

There is arguably little disagreement that one of the main goals of PhD supervision, besides a good-enough dissertation, is the production of an independent researcher. We here understand independence not as independence from institutional affiliations, but as an ability to make and execute one's own decision on research ideas and implementation. While these are certainly skills to be improved throughout the PhD journey, the focus on independence has also the potential of perpetuating problems in the supervisory relationship: supervisors may use the notion of 'independence' to legitimize neglecting their responsibilities, or they might actually think that the PhD journey is somewhat of a 'survival of the fittest', where students should be –more or less- left to their own devices. Research, in turn, has extensively shown that PhD students disproportionally suffer from feelings of isolation, depression and anxiety (Janta et al 2024; Young et al 2019), which prompts us to rethink the mantra of independence.

In this article we seek to 'trouble' the notion of the independent researcher, that is one of the main official goals for PhDs, by reflecting on the multiple, and often un- or under-recognized, relations that accompany the PhD journey. Specifically, we draw on feminist scholarship to discuss the question of how we may reconceptualize supervision as a care-practice. Feminist perspectives lend themselves to an interrogation of preconceived binaries (e.g. such as between supervisor(s) and supervisee) and a reconsideration of the role emotions play in doctoral education (Dauder & Trejo 2019). They are also productive in fostering a view of PhD candidates, and supervisors, not as atomic individuals disconnected from larger contexts, but as co-determined beings (Monk et al 2003). In the rest of the article, we draw on these contributions, while asking: what modalities of care are required in the supervisory relationship? What can feminist scholarship teach us about supervision?

Independence is a contentious term and that can easily be confused for independence from other people, i.e., a form of alleged self-sufficiency. We propose a conception of independence in which PhDs can only flourish into independent researchers if they are successfully embedded into a caring set of relationships at the workplace. In this article we will discuss what the role of the supervisor is in fostering this environment, and which challenges might occur.

The article is structured as follows: first, we provide a context as to why a rethinking and remodeling of the supervisory relationship is necessary, particularly by drawing on changes in the student body and the rise of neoliberal ideology governing academic work today. Second, we proceed to our discussion of supervision as care-practice, honing in on our research questions. We ponder different modalities and metaphors of the supervisory relationship and the tensions between independence and care, each with their distinct set of challenges and caveats. Third, we debate the way forward. Drawing on these reflections, we propose that in the context of a neoliberalised university and its "anxiety machines" (Hawkins 2019) and an increasing feminization of academic work (Vatansever 2023), both in terms of quantity (i.e. the increasing number of female-identified academic workers) and quality (i.e. the devaluation and precarization of academic work), it would be beneficial to extend our attention not only to the relationship between the PhD student and the supervisors¹, but also include and rethink the role

¹ In Sweden, supervision is generally conducted with a main supervisor and a co-supervisor assigned by the department where the doctoral education takes place. Occasionally, an additional co-supervisor is also involved.

and responsibilities of the extended support networks around the PhD students and supervisors in the process towards independence. Such shift in focus, we argue, may help to: first, acknowledge the net of care practices already in place and dignify it as a fundamental part of the social infrastructure of doctoral education; second, mediate some problematic tendencies of neoliberal academia and conceptually reconcile the tensions between care and independence in doctoral education.

Supervision in the Context of the Neoliberal University

Discussing what it means to foster the emergence of an independent researcher as a supervisor, in our understanding, also means to critically assess how independence is defined in the current context – namely the context of the neoliberal university. Our conception of the neoliberal university builds on the notion that economic rationalities such as deregulation, privatization, competitiveness and individual responsabilization have not only changed the organizational structures and modes of governing in universities but have also infiltrated -formal and informal- relationships at the workplace: between students, between students and teachers/mentors/supervisors as well as between colleagues (Nørgård et al. 2024; Mountz et al. 2015). We also stress that despite neoliberal discourses around market rationality and hyper-individuality (i.e., the zero-sum game of ‘research excellence’, see O’Regan & Gray 2021), the neoliberal university indeed relies on a vast amount of emotional (speak irrational) labor. It is thus *not* that the process of neoliberalization, as we understand it, excludes emotion or renders human connection unnecessary – it rather exploits these attachments, while, at the same time, rendering them invisible. Butler-Rees (2021), for example, in an exploration of their own positionality a visually impaired PhD student holds that vulnerability is habitually dismissed as weakness in academia and feelings such as anxiety are seldomly addressed on a deeper level. However, as Brunila and Valero (2018) suggest, even if talking about and showing anxiety is delegitimized, it still serves to govern the neoliberal subjects of academia – anxiety frequently pushes both PhD students and their supervisors to ignore personal and professional boundaries and capacities in favor of speedy and successful completion.

Moreover, more often than not, and as multiple studies have shown, the brunt of this devalued labor falls on the shoulders of women, persons of color as well as students and academic staff of working-class backgrounds (Tunguz 2016). This also explains why middle-/upper-class white; cis-men still dominate the top of the academic ladder, despite a general increase of female PhD students, in Sweden and elsewhere (Brodin et al 2020, pp. 33-34 and pp. 130-135). This shows that despite discourses around equal and rational competition, the neoliberal university reproduces and feeds on already-existing inequalities and systems of oppression, mostly notably in the form of racism, sexism, ableism and ageism in their intersection with class (Nästesjö 2024). Together these circumstances -the infiltration of the university by neoliberal logics accompanied by a feminization and precarization of earlier career-stages in academia (Kalm 2019)- have brought afore important questions around how to think about human relations at the workplace, also in terms of supervision.

Hawkins (2019) notes that despite the growing mental health crisis among PhD students (see Wollast et al. 2023), very little attention is paid to the emotional labor supervisors are and/or should be doing in their relationships with PhDs. Several scholars note the difficult balance between (re-)valuing emotive and relational work in the academic workplace, while simultaneously ensuring that this does not lead to a further perpetuation and reification of a gendered division of labor (i.e., where female supervisors or peers or other marginalized groups, do the majority of socially reproductive and pastoral work, carving

out more free time for men to climb the career ladder, see e.g. Kalm 2019). The question we are interested in is thus not so much whether emotions and emotional labor have a place in today's university, but what modalities of this labor need to be applied to ensure an ethically sound supervision process that, at the same time contributes to the 'production' of an independent researcher. We particularly focus on modalities of care and their prospective challenges, as well as on whose shoulders the emotional and care responsibilities to support the PhD process fall upon.

Troubling the 'Independent Researcher': Feminist Supervision metaphors

In light of the above reflections on the effects that the neoliberalization of academia has on the supervisory relationships, the very notion of "independent scholar" needs to be critically scrutinized. Researchers have pointed out that the "production of the autonomous scholar" in postgraduate pedagogic practices has always been based upon paradoxical assumptions, and that the ideas of independence and autonomy are gendered (Johnson et al. 2000). The paradoxes are entrenched in a gendered conception of autonomy and Reason in Western culture, stemming from the Enlightenment project of the "Rational Man". Such project is built on the long-standing dualisms between rationality vs irrationality, subject vs object, as well as autonomy vs dependence. On these intellectual premises, autonomy is achieved by ideally separating from emotions and embodiment, as well as human interdependency, i.e., those characteristics that were typically interpreted as 'feminine' and irrational (ibid.).

As a reaction to the paradoxes and tensions of the Enlightenment project of the independent scholar, feminist pedagogic practices have on the other hand embraced complexity as the bulk of the multiple identities and emotional dimensions of subjectivity. Moving away from the role of "father of autonomy" or "master" and embracing positionalities that are closer to motherhood and sisterhood entails a new image of the scholar that overcomes idealized and problematic dualisms. However, such effort is neither easy nor unproblematic. Indeed, the fully emotionally involved supervisor is a fantasy just as the one of the Enlightenment Master (Berlant 1997, Johnson et al 2000), which its own drawbacks. In this case, the risks regard principally overloading women with additional emotional labor and burnout risks: "the feminist graduate student supervisor, endlessly responding to her students' needs and demands, certainly needs to be questioned too as an unsatisfactory alternative to the 'master' Tutor" (Johnson et al. p.144). The boundaries, hierarchies and relationality involved in different styles of supervisory relationships have been codified through several metaphors in the higher education literature. Different metaphors entail different views of what it means to become an independent researcher and how to get there. We here recall some notable ones. The most traditional model of postgraduate supervision, which we anticipated above, is the one of *Master and apprentice*, a model centered around a hierarchy of power entailing a progressive transfer of knowledge from the supervisor to the supervisee. Connected to this hierarchical constellation but including stronger emphasis on the pastoral components of supervision (Hockey 1994), many have compared the supervision process to *parenthood*. In this view, the supervisor accompanies the students towards independence and autonomy through what Manathunga (2005) called "compassionate rigour", including both empathy and support as well as rigorous feedback. Although with different proportions of hard and soft components, both the apprenticeship and the parenthood metaphors entail a clear maintenance of the power hierarchies between the two parties in the supervision relation. In fact, it is a widespread assumption that friendships in the context of supervision are a bad idea. In general, it is thought that to deal with the hierarchical power relations in academia, good supervisory relationships should be "friendly" at most, but always wary of maintaining the ideal boundaries between private, personal, professional spheres (Hockey 1994;

Brodin et al 2020, pp. 71-83). Many agree that the “power dynamic between supervisor and student makes friendship difficult” (Ives and Rowley 2005, p. 536), and as such, this type of relationship should be avoided (Manderson 1996). Others admit that although not recommendable, after years of close collaborations, friendships between supervisors and students might become unavoidable (Lee 2008).

Contrary to this view, many scholars emphasized the social role of supervision in a more horizontal relationship, stating the importance of developing relationships that respond to the student as a whole person as more successful approaches to supervision. Bartlett and Mercer (1999) reflect on their formative relationship as supervisor and student stemming from feminist methodologies, which they defined as “a productive and supportive friendship” (p. 367). To counteract traditional “heroic stories” of supervision centered around hierarchical metaphors of power (master-apprentice, parent-teenager...), they formulate three metaphors to describe the mutuality and relational involvement of the process to make an “independent researcher”. The metaphors stemming from their experiences aim to demonstrate that “it is possible to successfully base this particular relationship on concepts of collaboration, community and, most importantly, companionship” (p.371). The first metaphor is about *creating in the kitchen*. The supervisors and the PhD student bring their ingredients to the table, and through a reflective assessment of resources, possibilities and ambitions, they set the goals for the process. Such an approach, they argue, contributes increasing confidence in the student to acquire independence through supportive interactions, as well as seeing the final examiner as someone invited to a convivial share of the product, rather than an external surveyor. Secondly, they compare the PhD process to *Digging in the garden* (a metaphor also used in learning theories, e.g. Fox 1983), where the PhD student cultivates her own garden with the advice of an experienced neighbor, expert of techniques, soil, climate conditions and so on. Like gardening, the PhD process is an open-ended process, and this approach would help the student cultivate possibilities for their future career as an independent researcher. Finally, they compare supervisor and supervisee to companions embarking in *bushwalking*, to encapsulate the dynamic power relations in which the supervisor and supervisee carry different kinds of knowledge and resources at different times in the walk, in a constant interchange throughout the expedition.

Also from a feminist perspective, Fannin and Perrier (2019) propose that *midwifery and doula care* offer insightful ways for rethinking the theory and practice of supervision. Like the pregnant woman is the ‘expert’ on her own body and on the process of being pregnant and giving birth, similarly the goal of supervision should be supporting the student’s “direct relation to the intellectual, embodied and emotional process of completing the PhD” (p. 136), rather than the product (thesis) itself. Like in Bartlett and Mercer (1999), the ethos is on *accompaniment*. Fannin and Perrier (2019) maintain that ‘with-woman’-inspired accompaniment/supervision can trouble the fetishization of outputs in the neoliberal university. Importantly, accompaniment metaphors take a step further from metaphors of sisterhood and motherhood and their implications and re-value the importance of the (feminized) care tasks (Stephens, 2012).

In many respects, the PhD supervision process is “more private than any other scene of teaching and learning” (Johnson et al. 2000, p.135), or at least, this is the way it typically is interpreted, even in the most feminist approaches explored above. Yet, we wonder, is there not a risk that, just like in the fantasies of the independent researcher and the fully-emotionally engaged supervisor, we are putting excessive emphasis on the individuality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship itself? To make an “independent” researcher, we aim to suggest in our discussion, takes a village.

Discussion: “It takes a village” - Extending the Supervisory Relationship

For our discussion we draw on the feminist metaphors that associate supervision with parenting, friendship and accompaniment. Our use of these metaphors, however, should not suggest that we subscribe to the exclusive pastoral model of supervision. What we would rather suggest is to extend and ‘loosen up’ the rather intense dyad of supervisor-PhD student relationship, and to include the dimension of an *extended community* into the production of the independent researcher. This is arguably already, to some extent, practice in a lot of academic contexts including Sweden, where supervisors typically work in a team with one or even two other co-supervisors, and where PhDs present their progress at seminars at different stages getting feedback from senior and junior colleagues. Departing from a relational understanding of independence and the need for ethical modes of care, we see this as a very positive step towards the production of successful and confident PhDs.

We would like to suggest an interpretation of supervision as a community effort, exemplified in the metaphor of *the village*. Recent research has for example shown that collective supervision early in the PhD process fosters successful and timely completion (Agné & Mörkenstam 2018). This can have multiple benefits that go beyond advancing the quality of the thesis through peer review or feedback: firstly, one-on-one supervisory relationships are marked by a distinctive intensity (Johnson et al. 2000). This can certainly have positive effects, such as accelerated learning and discussion, enhanced feelings of support and time to foster trust. However, this intensity can also be intimidating, particularly intimidating for students from non-academic backgrounds, women and other marginalized groups. Lee (1998), for example, describes how two female students she interviewed had been subject to sexual harassment by a supervisor who insistent on sharing very personal details and generating emotional (and, most likely, sexual) responses from them. While this was an extreme case, and maintaining that it is certainly necessary and often fruitful to have one-on-one supervision time, having an established research environment, even if not physically present at every occasion, can be a way to make PhDs feel more secure and lift responsibility for flagging inappropriate behavior off their shoulders. Manathunga (2005) has also described this as “turning the light on a private space” that can even appear socially claustrophobic. In that sense other people can function as crucial infrastructure (see AbdouMaliq Simone’s notion of ‘people as infrastructure’, 2004). The PhD students’ community can provide invaluable mutual support in the rather isolating process of thesis writing, both from an intellectual and social perspectives.

Secondly, one of the most important supervisory roles is to socialize PhDs into the academic environment (Brodin et al 200, pp. 119- 163): we suggest that this is not possible without said ‘village’. A more collectivist understanding of the process would not only benefit students but also provide supervisors with additional resources to fall back on. This is thus also a way for supervisors to navigate the increasingly competitive and harsh academic environment.

In connection to this, it is important to note that changing supervisors is a right of the PhD student and that this happens rather frequently. Although a change in supervisor can be sometimes necessary and beneficial for the process as a whole, it is often experienced as a difficult and emotionally challenging step for the student and the supervisors alike (Wisker & Robinson 2012). This difficulty is fostered, we could say, by a system that puts the exclusivity of the supervisory relationship at the center of the process, and that can easily become a matter of personal ego and pride. Interpreting the process as a community endeavor could take the edge off the insider/outsider relationship and smoothen an eventual change in supervision.

Our suggestion of the village, in fact, also goes beyond other researchers or peers: for example, while not usually perceived that way, other institutions in the university, such as the library are an important infrastructure to draw on for successful completion. Other examples of institutional actors beyond the supervisor are the PhD student's union and doctoral boards, as well as psychological health support (PhD students in Sweden can refer to Student help service and occupational health service, for instance). These services go well beyond the competence and responsibility of the individual supervisors but can be a fundamental support especially in the context of the neoliberal academia and its implication for emotional wellbeing.

Finally, departing in the consideration of the PhD as a whole person, rather than as an apprentice with an intellectual goal, we can include non-academic and non-institutional members in “the village”. At the end of the day, it is often the relation to “other” parts, and most noticeably family members such as children, partners, parents, and so on, that can interfere and, importantly, support the progress of the thesis writing. A holistic understanding of the PhD student cannot disregard these parts in the long process of becoming a researcher. We think this particularly apt in the context of Sweden, and more specifically in the context of Malmö University where we are based: as the average age of PhD students is 38 with women taking a lead, we advocate for perceiving of PhD students biological and chosen families to be seen as part of the village. This also means that without some understanding of the wider –not only professional but social and personal- context the PhD is embedded in, ethical guidance through the PhD process is not possible.

In conclusion, we maintain that in order to navigate the emotional and intellectual paradoxes of the PhD process in contemporary neoliberal academia, we need to draw on feminist approaches to supervision that consider the PhD student as a whole person in need of intellectual and social support. Still, in order to overcome the challenges that an idealized image of a fully empathetic, always available supervisor figure would entail, we claim that we need to envision a less ego-centric, collectivist while still case-sensitive approach to supervision. Such supportive nets are already in place, in different degrees of formality. We argue that we need to acknowledge them also conceptually, as a fundamental infrastructure in the journey to getting a PhD. We need to acknowledge that independence is always relational, and this is true not only for the PhD student, but for the supervisors as well. Facing the limits to independence forces us to rethink the supervisory relationship and embrace the idea that it takes a village to make an independent researcher.

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