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THE SUPERVISOR'S ROLE IN FACILITATING THE DOCTORAL STUDENT'S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In this reflective essay I discuss possible avenues for how the supervisor(s) of a doctoral candidate can contribute to the candidate's identity formation as a researcher, and their socialization into a larger academic context. I discuss the doctoral education as identity work, relational aspects of the supervision process, and finally argue that tenets from the self-determination theory can be used as a guiding framework to understand which factors and drivers are important in the doctoral student's identity development process. I conclude by discussing how such a framework can be useful for a reflective practice in doctoral supervision.

Keywords: supervision, self-determination theory, identity formation

Sammanfattning

I den här reflekterande essän diskuterar jag hur doktorandhandledare kan bidra till en doktorands identitetsskapande som forskare, och deras insocialisering i ett bredare akademiskt sammanhang. Jag diskuterar forskarutbildningen som identitetsarbete, relationella aspekter i handledningsprocessen, och argumenterar slutligen för hur principer från self-determination theory kan användas som ett vägledande ramverk för att förstå vilka faktorer och drivkrafter som är betydelsefulla i doktorandens identitetsskapande. Jag avslutar med att diskutera hur ett sådant ramverk kan vara användbart för en pågående reflekterande praktik i doktorandhandledning.

Nyckelord: handledning, self-determination theory, identitetsskapande

Introduction

“Don’t worry, it’s just a critical evaluation of everything you have done so far” (an associate professor in psychology, sometime circa 2018)

The above words were spoken to me in the corridor of a psychology department in Sweden sometime around 2018. I was a doctoral student at the time, and two senior academics had just been invited to serve as discussants at my half-time seminar. I did not know much about the procedure or what to expect from the half-time seminar, so one of the discussants tried to explain it by issuing the above statement. I am sure that there were no bad intentions at all. Quite the contrary, this was said in good spirits, with a tone of reassurance. Nevertheless, for a doctoral student not knowing what to expect, it could sound like something different entirely.

I have often thought about this statement over the years. Not because of the unintentionally harsh phrasing (said in an encouraging and upbeat way). But rather because it, in its simplicity, highlights something characteristic of academia. Academia can be a ruthless place. It is a vocational world filled to the brim with critical voices, scrutiny, and a unceasing demand to produce and be productive in a constantly changing landscape (for a special issue on the changing nature of academic work, see Marquina & Jones, 2015). At the same time, it is a world of almost endless possibilities to be creative, explore questions of interest, and further general knowledge, as long as you understand how it operates. The latter, in particular, is key for our new academic colleagues, the doctoral students. They are entering a world partly unbeknownst to them, and have to learn how to manage it. Considering that it often is the responsibility of more senior academic colleagues, and more specifically the supervisor, to help initiate the doctoral students into an academic environment, a question arises: How do we help new doctoral students navigate such a complex and demanding landscape? How do we assist them in becoming the independent researchers, teachers, and colleagues that we aspire for them to be? What can supervisors do to assist this process within the framework of the doctoral education, and how can they balance tensions between being present and supportive, while at the same time promoting autonomy, personal development, and growth? In essence, what characterizes a good process and outcome for a doctoral candidate, and what role does the supervisor play in facilitating this process?

The aim of this reflective essay is to discuss possible avenues for how the supervisor(s) of a doctoral candidate can contribute to the candidate’s identity formation as a researcher, and socialization into a larger academic context. Specifically, I will focus on relational aspects, such as how the supervisor’s mentoring approach can assist the doctoral student’s developmental process.

The doctoral education as identity work

Regardless of whether the doctoral candidate enters the doctoral program with the intention of staying in academia or focusing on other future alternatives, their study period does have an impact on their professional identity. Brodin and Lindén (2020) discuss academic socialization as both a process and an outcome. During the process the doctoral student interacts with their environment to learn the norms for behavior, common values, and the intellectual structures of their specific discipline. The outcome is thus the time when the student has developed an academic identity with sufficient “doctoral competence” (Brodin & Lindén, 2020, p. 119). Through the lens of identity development, a good process and outcome

for a doctoral candidate would thus be an inspiring, stimulating, and rewarding socialization process, resulting in a successful identity formation as an independent academic. But how is this achieved?

Weidman et al (2001) point to a four-stage process of identity development, consisting of an *anticipatory stage*, a *formal stage*, an *informal stage*, and a *personal stage*. In essence the process means that the doctoral candidate transitions from an open and searching phase – viewing the supervisor (or other senior academics) as role models – into a more independent or autonomous role, wherein the doctoral student gains a personal footing and manages to become established in the research field. In between these stages are formal and informal interactions with the academic environment and community, interactions which facilitate this shift and contributes to shaping the doctoral student's identity (Brodin & Lindén, 2020). Consequently, this model deals with both the process and outcome, and highlights key aspects such as *competence* and *independence* as core values, which in part are brought out by *mentoring* and interacting with the *community*. The central question from the supervisor's angle becomes: how can these core values be promoted to support the identity development of a doctoral student?

Relational aspects of the supervision process

There are several established building blocks of the doctoral education that are intended to assist in the formation of the doctoral students professional identity. These include completing course work, participating in seminars, conferences, teaching activities, and so forth. Nevertheless, the supervisor relationship remains one of the most formative parts of the doctoral education. Although a shared responsibility lies with both the supervisor and the doctoral student in constructing this relationship, I will here focus on the supervisor's side of relational work.

Areas highlighted in the literature tend to focus on the importance of the supervisor's communication skills, such as *engaging in active listening* as a supervisor, *adopting a coaching rather than information providing approach*, as well as *balancing between providing structure and providing freedom* (Lindén, 2020b; Brodin, 2020). The latter part may be promoted by allowing the doctoral candidate to engage in playful exploration during their work, by asking critical questions to stimulate further thinking, but also by validating and confirming the doctoral student in their thinking to further encourage them to explore intellectually (Brodin, 2020).

In addition to this, a wealth of resources have been developed to assist with the relational aspects of supervision, such as the “*Successful supervision dialogue facilitator*” (Karolinska Institutet, n.d.), which provides a structure for both communication and self-reflection, as well as the *DUT Guide on supervision* (Wichmann-Hansen, 2021), providing tips, such as aligning expectations between the supervisor and the doctoral student early on, and asking constructive questions to further reflection. There is no shortage of practical resources to promote and enhance the relational aspects of the supervision process. But how does this theoretically relate to the doctoral student's identity formation?

Self-determination theory: Attention to psychological needs as a guiding framework

Practical resources on how to enhance the supervisor relational process are excellent, but they must be applied with care and a degree of awareness. Relational work requires a level of understanding of why

these practical actions are advisable. To bolster such understanding, it is often useful to situate the practice in a theoretical model, to ground the process and make actions more deliberate. Drawing on previously identified core concepts such as *competence*, *independence* and *community* derived from Brodin and Lindén (2020), as well as Weidman et al., (2001), the self-determination theory is of particular relevance.

One of the most well-established models for human motivation is the self-determination theory (hereafter SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT was developed in 1985 and has since been the focus of extensive amounts of empirical and theoretical research, transforming it into a versatile framework for understanding drivers behind academic achievement, work motivation, individual well-being, and much more (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The basic tenet of SDT is that motivation is inherently multidimensional, meaning that it can not simply be reduced to a single form. It should rather be understood as distinct types of motivation that exist on a continuum ranging from less autonomous forms (e.g., extrinsic motivation, engaging in actions for external rewards), to more intrinsic forms (e.g., engaging in an activity out of personal interest, joy, or aspiration) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For a visual representation of the different forms of motivation typically described as a part of the self-determined continuum, please see the ovals in figure 1. In terms of the relationship to one's own identity, external motivation is clearly the furthest from the self. Activities are simply engaged in due to the external rewards promised, they have little connection to the self or personal values. Identified motivation, on the other hand, refers to motivation to engage in activities because they are seen as important to the individual, and integrated motivation finds such activities to be aligned with the individual's sense of self. In this way, it is clear that identity is embedded into the motivational framework of SDT.

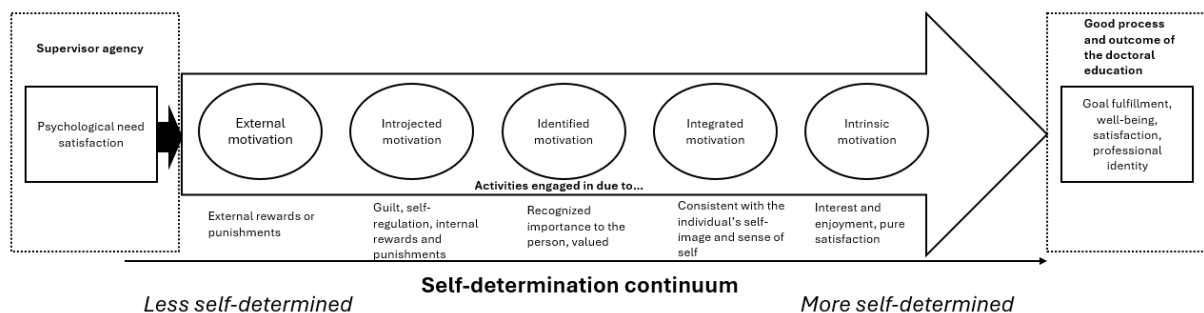


Figure 1. A model of self-determination theory (inspired by Chen & Yang, 2010), put in the context of doctoral education. Solid lines refer to established relationships. Dashed lines refer to hypothetical possibilities.

The model implies that there can be multiple types of motivation present simultaneously, but there is a great deal of research supporting the notion that autonomous forms of motivation are more strongly positively associated with goal achievement, well-being, and satisfaction (Nunes & Proença, 2024). To provide a concrete example, I might carry out my day-to-day work because I enjoy doing research (internally rewarding), but I am also quite fond of receiving a paycheck each month (external reward). However, if we were to explore why I immerse myself more fully in some tasks, it is likely better explained by more self-volitional motivation such as interest in a certain research area (i.e., derived from passion), than the monetary compensation associated with the job (i.e., derived from a transaction). Thus, I may stay late after work one day to finish writing a research paper, or read an interesting article

I just came across, because it is intrinsically rewarding to me, but I might not stay after hours to complete a dozen administrative tasks, which I rather may be doing due to a sense of duty, conscientiousness, or, simply, because I am paid to do so.

The role of psychological need fulfillment in promoting identity development

Over the years, it has been suggested that an individual's autonomous motivation (and in turn, well-being, goal achievement, etc.) can be promoted by fulfilling three basic human needs. These are needs for *competence*, *autonomy*, and *social relatedness* (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Interestingly, these needs closely dovetail the concepts discussed by Brodin and Lindén (2020) and Weidman et al (2001). Within the management literature, this has been operationalized into investigations of whether supervisors use either need-supportive, need-thwarting, or indifferent leadership styles in relation to the psychological needs of their followers, where need-supportive styles are associated with more beneficial outcomes (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023). To be specific, need supportive leadership refers to behaviors such as being understanding of the employees' perspectives (*autonomy support*), recognizing their effort and achievements (*competence support*), and demonstrating care and concern for them (*social relatedness support*) (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023).

In the context of doctoral supervision, SDT has been applied to the study of voluntary career preparation programs (Strong & Sekayi, 2018), factors influencing autonomous or controlled forms of motivation (Bakker et al., 2024), and (mis)alignment of expectations in the mentoring process between supervisor and doctoral candidate (Janssen et al., 2021), to name a few examples. Although SDT has been increasingly integrated into the doctoral student literature, it has predominately focused on doctoral student motivation, while sparse focus has been put on identity formation. However, a recent study found fulfillment of the psychological needs according to SDT to be positively related to socialization outcomes over time, showing that the model can be useful for understanding identity shaping processes (Clasing-Manquian et al., 2024). In the study, the authors argue that the identity development process hinges upon how the doctoral student internalize their socialization experiences, which integrates SDT into Weidman et al's (2001) socialization model. In other words, to understand the socialization process and the subsequent identity formation as an outcome, we must understand the link between them, which in part can be explained via psychological need satisfaction. To take an example: if a doctoral candidate is engaged in an academic environment (*the socialization process*), and in this environment feel connected to and that they are cared for by their peers (*relatedness*), understand how to achieve their goals (*competence*), and are free to govern their path towards it (*autonomy*), then they may be more likely to integrate academic values with their sense of self, and over time identify as independent, competent scholars in the academic community (*identity formation*).

How do we make use of a guiding framework?

So, what does this framework add, and how can we make good use of it in the doctoral supervision process? I would like to make three brief points. First, SDT can serve as a framework to understand the importance of, and the functional mechanisms in, the relational aspects presented in the literature. Providing adequate freedom (*autonomy support*), reinforcing and encouraging new ideas (*competence support*), and showing interpersonal care (*relational support*), can all be identified as components of the model and thus be put in a larger theoretical context. Second, however, it should be noted that this model

is not exhaustive, nor intended to be a perfect description of steps to take that always will result in favorable outcomes. I want to stress that it is rather intended to be seen as a thinking tool, or theoretical aid, that can help structure and highlight concepts important to continuously reflect upon in the supervision process. Third, doctoral education is a complex topic that contains informal elements, which ultimately means that there are many aspects of it that we cannot control. When we cannot control something, we tend to try to formalize it through structures. This can be seen through the increased professionalization and regulation of doctoral education, mandatory checkpoints, ISPs, etc. However, the relational aspects are more difficult to formalize, even though we see attempts in the form of dialogue facilitator tools or supervision guides. Helpful as these resources may be, they attempt to hedge for a future that we cannot foresee, to give us the illusion of control. Checklists and dialogue tools can only take us so far, and ultimately, we will have to rely on our judgement in each specific supervision situation. Here, a model is not necessarily going to be a crutch to lean on, but interacting with models of supervision is in itself an important part of a constant reflective practice that could also help equip supervisors for the more informal aspects of their work. Moreover, if we intend for doctoral candidates to become independent academics, it lies in the nature of things that we act as role models and lead by example by being reflective practitioners.

Conclusions

The aim of this essay was to discuss possible avenues for how a supervisor can contribute to a doctoral candidate's identity formation as a researcher, and their socialization into a larger academic context. In particular, by focusing on relational aspects such as mentoring/supervision style, I have suggested that SDT can be applied as a framework in the doctoral education context and discussed how basic need satisfaction can contribute to doctoral student's socialization processes and subsequent identity formation as independent academics. By being aware of how need supportive supervision can be beneficial, and which empirical support it rests on, value can be added both in the direct supervision relationship, but also in the continuous process of thinking about one's own supervision behavior. I wish to avoid regurgitating normative conclusions (e.g., "*just be supportive!*") that are both unspecific and unhelpful. Rather, I would like to see this essay as an invitation to a continued reflexive practice about doctoral supervision (cf. Lindén, 2020a), informed by theoretical perspectives that can help as thinking tools in the reflection process. The point is not so much to answer the question whether or not a supervisor should be supportive, or find out which model that will be the "correct" one for supervision. The point is rather to encourage thinking about *how* and *when* a supervisor can be supportive in ways that actually help, while drawing on accumulated knowledge and theories that can assist in the practical supervision work. There is never going to be a single answer to the question of how to best help facilitate a doctoral student's identity development. Nor need there be. Supervision, just like socialization, is not a "*one size fits all*" model. It is a continuously developmental process that demands recurrent reflection, since the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship is in constant motion. Consequently, we have to learn how to move with it, and by continuously reflecting on our practice with the support of empirical and theoretical models, we are better equipped to do so.

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