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Unraveling the Doctoral Experience: How Supervision Relationship Relates to Research Self-Efficacy and Help-Seeking Behaviors of PhD Students?

Abstract

This communication present original results of a quantitative study conducted in 2023 on 178 PhD students, examining the influence of the supervision relationship in the doctoral work. Psychological variables related to the supervision relationship where examined, as it goes beyond different national contexts.

Doctoral supervision plays a pivotal role in the doctoral journey. It influences overall satisfaction with doctoral education (Dericks et al., 2019; Löffström et al., 2022), career trajectories of doctoral graduates (Scaffidi & Berman, 2011), and the relation to work of PhD students during their thesis (Overall et al., 2011; Pyhältö et al., 2015). On this latter point, Research Self-Efficacy sustains the work of PhD students, as it addresses individuals' confidence in their ability to successfully perform research-related tasks (LivinDi et al., 2021).

Despite the significant role of doctoral supervision relationship, scientific literature highlights persistent challenges with tangible implications. Firstly, there's a gap in understanding the multifaceted nature of supervision. Secondly, the mechanisms by which supervision impacts the Research Self-Efficacy of PhD students remain unclear. Notably, research about Help-Seeking behaviors holds relevance in this framework, since it addresses the proactive role of learners and the relational dynamic in skills development. A positive and trustworthy relationship with the supervisor fosters adaptive strategies for seeking help among learners when confronted with challenges (Do Amaral, 2022).

This study explores the mediating role of Help-Seeking behaviors between the supervision relationship and Research Self-Efficacy of Ph.D. students. Through an online questionnaire completed by 178 PhD students across diverse scientific fields in France, the study unveils a predictive effect of the supervision relationship on the Research Self-Efficacy of PhD students. Mediation analysis shows partial mediation effects of Help- Seeking behaviors, depending on the dimension of supervision and the type of Help-Seeking considered.

Concretely, supervision relationships marked by effective communication, support for the psychological needs of PhD students, and a high level of supervisor involvement in the doctoral work resulted in adaptive Help- Seeking strategies and stronger Research Self-Efficacy among PhD students.

This communication offers original insights on psychological variables at play in the supervision relationship and their role in the work of PhD students. We propose to discuss both scientific and practical implications of the results, and to provide perspectives for enhancing the doctoral supervision relationship in different national contexts (i.e., project of an evidence-based tool aiming to frame the doctoral supervision relationship, conducted by our research-team).

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