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Tensions and resistance in team supervision

This paper comes out of a larger project in which we want to explore and understand the dynamics within supervisory teams and between PhD students and supervisors. For several years now, all PhD students in Sweden must have a supervisory team consisting of a main supervisor and at least one co-supervisor. To date, there are few studies on how the relationships and work within such supervisory teams function in a Swedish context (Brodin and Sonesson 2022). Yet, international research has shown that supervisors are crucial factors for PhD students' success (Raffing, Jensen and Tønnesen 2017). Previous research also indicates that relationships among supervisors are often characterized by exclusivity, dependency, and competition (Almlöv and Grubbström 2023), aspects that hinder learning, personal development, and the formation of sound emotional and professional environments. There is a gap in the research when it comes to studies on the roles and relationships in supervisory teams, especially studies that also include the voices of PhD students. Through this project, we hope to deepen the understanding of relationships and roles in supervisory teams, and based on our results, propose activities that benefit the learning, personal development, and formation of sound emotional and professional environments of PhD students and supervisors.

Our proposed paper will present preliminary findings from our first set of interviews in the project, carried out at a mid-sized broad-based university in central Sweden. We analyse individual in-depth interviews with three supervisors and one PhD student from the same team. Two of the supervisors were involved from the beginning of the PhD student's project, and one joined after the mid-term review. The student successfully completed their PhD last year.

The paper seeks to clarify role assignments and perceptions of contributions, which have previously

been shown to be ambiguous (Grossman and Crowther 2015; Wald et al. 2023) and variably interpreted by new supervisors (Amundsen and McAlpine 2011). So far, we have seen that there are a number of tensions that emerge when studying the team, including a tension between maintaining a joint supervisory approach and individual career advancement, which remains a taboo subject within academia. Additionally, the analysis probes the implications of non-hierarchical structures – as a means of resistance to the hierarchical relationship between main supervisor and co-supervisor built into the Swedish system – on the PhD student's experience.

Our findings contribute to the limited body of research on supervisory teams in Sweden, providing insights that could inform future support structures.

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