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Exploring supervision experiences of international women biology PhD candidates: interstitial spaces of formal and informal support

The globalization of higher education has led to an increasingly diverse student body, bringing forth unique opportunities and challenges in academic supervision (Kidman et al., 2017; Pinto, 2020). While formal supervision and academic guidance play pivotal roles in shaping academic trajectories and skill development, research also points towards supervision as a site of power imbalances, contributing to feelings of unbelonging and shown to be affected by gender biases, racial stereotypes, and cultural misunderstandings, rooted in, among others, academic, subject, and geographic socio-cultural (mis)understandings (Elliot & Kobayashi, 2018; Wisker & Fosslund, 2023). Sweden is a particularly interesting site for critical explorations of academic practices as it is (rather falsely) perceived to be one of the most gender-equal countries (Martinsson et al., 2016) that has (supposedly) transgressed racism (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014) and where celebrated academic discourses are strongly built on the goal of internationalization (Silander & Pietliä, 2023).

Recognizing multifaceted encounters in doctoral journeys, our research focuses on juxtaposing formal supervision and informal network support in conjunction with culture and intersecting identity axes such as gender, class, and ethnicity. In this pilot study, we delve into the nuanced experiences of two distinct cohorts of current and former international women biology doctoral candidates. We conducted individual semi-structured interviews with all participants, capturing their lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of supervision.

Subsequently, a focus group interview was conducted with each group in which participants collectively made sense of shared and diverging experiences. Paying attention to participants'

narratives and experiences, our analysis nuances how intersecting identity productions and cultural dimensions are understood to contribute to shaping these experiences.

Using a Foucauldian discourse analytical framework, we identified multiple culturally-informed tensions in formal supervision and informal network support as a crucial factor for perseverance. Participants highlighted among others the significance of peer mentorship, community building, and emotional support in navigating the complexities of academic life abroad. Informal networks often served as a buffer against systemic challenges, offering safe spaces for sharing experiences, strategies, and resources.

Juxtaposing formal and informal support mechanisms across various identity axes, this study highlights the need for more holistic approaches to supervision that acknowledges and addresses intersecting challenges faced by diverse doctoral candidates and points towards a need for alternative ways of training supervisors. As the global academic community continues to evolve, understanding these dynamics becomes imperative for fostering inclusive, supportive, and empowering supervisory environments conducive to the success and well-being of all doctoral candidates.

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