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Entanglement: New Co-Supervisors' Emotional Support in Doctoral Supervision

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Abstract: Doctoral co-supervisors are vital persons on the doctoral supervision endeavour. They contribute with different ideas, opinions, and expertise. However, their roles are not always clearly defined; their tasks are not allocated and divided, especially when they are new. Thus far, new co-supervisors' involvement in their students' emotional support is not fully explored and has yet to be understood. Therefore, the present study aims to explore co-supervisors' episodes of lasting emotional unease after emotionally supporting their doctoral students. A qualitative study with twenty-five in-depth interviews was carried out with Swedish and co-supervisors. This study found evidence that doctoral students turn to their co-supervisors with not only minor concerns, but also personal difficulties of rather severe nature. The present results highlight the difficult and complex nature of co-supervision; the study should be of value to practitioners wishing to train future doctoral co-supervisors.

Paper: Doctoral co-supervisors are vital persons on the doctoral supervision endeavour. They contribute with expertise, ideas and opinions about research (Grossman & Crowther, 2015). Additionally, they offer emotional support characterised by for example "empathy, trust, listening, caring, esteem" (Peltonen et al., 2017, p 159). However, the co-supervisor's role is not always clearly negotiated (Maritz & Prinsloo, 2019). New co-supervisors, for the most part, start to supervise with sparse experience in doctoral supervision and hardly any initial support for the growth into their role. They learn by doing supervision (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; McAlpine, Amundsen and Turner, 2014). In many cases, however, a senior principal supervisor acts as mentor for inexperienced colleagues (Andrew, Richards and Fletcher, 2020; Watts, 2010). More and more, in order to support supervisors, universities even offer days or weeks of supervision training (Manathunga, 2005). In order to learn how to co-supervise, the novices might also lean on and trust in previous supervision experiences as doctoral students, whether the experiences were good or bad (Whittington, Barnes & Lee 2021; Lee, 2008; Halse, 2011). They need to be prepared for different types of support, both intellectual, instrumental, social and emotional.

Recent studies have shown that co-supervisors face many challenges, such as their unclear roles, heavy workload or lack of recognition (Spooner Lane et al, 2007; Olmos-López & Sunderland, 2017;

Turner, 2015). Another challenge for new co-supervisors is to handle emotional support. Given the global pandemic, the need for emotional support among doctoral students might even increase and one strategy doctoral students use to manage the pandemic is to seek out emotional support (Kee, 2021). Usually, doctoral students find informal support by turning to family and friends (Weise, Aguayo–González and Castelló, 2020), or use the formal non-academic support (Waight & Giordano, 2018). However, emotional support is also part of the supervision work and supervisors recognise and deal with students' emotions (Doloriert, Sambrook and Stewart, 2012).

Up to now, the particular challenges of new co-supervisors have not been fully explored. Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to explore co-supervisors' experiences of offering emotional support. In order to explore this, a qualitative study with twenty-five in-depth interviews was undertaken. New co-supervisors at two research-intense Swedish universities were asked to participate, and all but one accepted the invitation. Eligibility criteria required individuals to have received basic training in doctoral supervision without having supervised any PhD students to completion. Ethical considerations were taken into account when collecting the interview material. The following themes were included in the interview guide i) relationships with doctoral students and other supervisors, ii) the co-supervisory role, iii) social and emotional support, and iv) co-supervisors' needs. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thereafter analysed thematically by developing codes and subcodes (Braun & Clark, 2019).

This study found evidence that the doctoral co-supervisors often seem to have a close contact with their doctoral students. They either work together on a daily basis, have common age or background, speak the same language, or have the role of a colleague instead of a boss – a role the main supervisor might have in the team. Consequently, it seems that co-supervisors are involved in social and emotional support. The PhD students contact their co-supervisors with not only smaller problems but also personal difficulties and concerns of rather severe nature. Surprisingly often, co-supervisors support students having panic disorder, suicidal thoughts, and depression or experiencing family tragedies. Even if a main supervisor recognizes and is involved in emotional support, a co-supervisor might be the first to hear the story. They engage in the doctoral students both intellectually as well as emotionally and find co-supervision rewarding. However, in the present study, new inexperienced co-supervisors feel entangled having both the role as a colleague and as a co-supervisor, and develop feelings of unease lasting for several days, weeks or even months.

The present results highlight the difficult and complex nature of co-supervision. These findings have therefore significant implications for the understanding of co-supervisor's work and challenges. Different types of support need to be designed and tailored (Mc Alpine et al., 2017; Peltonen et al., 2017). I hope that this study might be of value to practitioners wishing to prepare doctoral supervisors in dealing with emotional support in a sustainable way, especially in the training of new co-supervisors.

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