

## Tensions and resistance in team supervision

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### Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

### Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics within PhD supervisory teams in Sweden to understand how non-hierarchical models can act as a form of resistance within higher education. Analysing in-depth interviews with three supervisors and a PhD student from a mid-sized Swedish university, our study investigates the roles and interrelations that influence academic success and help form sound emotional and professional environments. We focus on the tensions between collective supervision and individual ambitions, highlighting how traditional hierarchical structures in academia may be challenged by alternative supervisory approaches. These insights not only contribute to the scant literature on supervisory teams, especially that which includes the PhD student voice, but also suggest how such structures can foster more equitable and supportive educational practices. This research aligns with the conference theme by proposing that restructured supervisory relationships can serve as a conduit for resistance in higher education.

### Full paper

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 additional 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). Furthermore, there is a gap in the research when it comes to studies on the roles and relationships in supervisory teams (Hansson and Schmidt 2023), especially studies that also include the voices of PhD students. Previous research also indicates that relationships among supervisors are often characterised by exclusivity, dependency, and competition (Almlöv and Grubbström 2023), and that members of the supervisory team sometimes monitor each other (Manathunga 2012). These aspects may hinder learning, personal development, and the formation of sound emotional and professional environments.

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 study relies on in-depth interviews with all members of one team – one principal supervisor, two co-supervisors, and one doctoral student. We have chosen to interview them one by one. Each interview lasted for about one hour and the interviews revolved around the following themes: team relationships, self-development, challenges and successes in team supervision, the structure of supervision, and how they perceive their own and others' responsibilities. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. We shared the work of transcribing and coding, but made time to calibrate and discuss while familiarising ourselves with the material. After coding, we identified several interesting findings that we wanted to explore. Throughout the analysis, our focus was on tensions and resistance in team supervision.

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. 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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