Erika Löfström

THE ETHICS OF DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

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CONTENTS

- What’s an ethical dilemma in supervision?

- How might we manage the ethics of supervision?

- Why should we care about ethical aspects in supervision?
Supervision is activity nested in the research community; it is rooted within various contexts of a scholarly community (Pyhältö et al., 2012).

Supervision is one of the central determinants of doctoral experience. It contributes to degree completion, time to candidacy, student well-being and satisfaction, and competence development (Meyer et al., 2005; Case, 2008; Pyhältö et al., 2011).

In the supervisory relationship, PhD students learn disciplinary traditions, practices, cultures, and norms, including ethical codes, norms, and practices of how the research community deals with ethical issues (Kitchener, 1992; Goodyear et al., 1992; Alfredo & Hart, 2011; Löfström, Trotman, Furnari & Shephard, 2015).
WHAT’S AN ETHICAL DILEMMA IN SUPERVISION?

• A situation or circumstance that puts at stake or compromises values that are fundamental

• Not all challenges or problems are primarily ethical in nature, e.g. can be methodological, legal etc.
ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN RESEARCH

*Respect for autonomy*

- Respecting the right of individuals to make choices regarding their own lives

*Doing no harm* (non maleficence)

- Avoiding harm, mostly psychological or social

*Benefiting others* (beneficence),

- Contributing to the well-being of others

*Being just* (justice)

- Being fair and objective, respecting equality

*Being faithful* (fidelity)

- Keeping promises, being honest and truthful

(Kitchener, 1985; Kitchener, 2000)
BREACHES OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND THEIR MANIFESTATION IN PRACTICE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle at stake</th>
<th>Ethical issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding harm</td>
<td>Exploitation and abuse, dual relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beneficence</td>
<td>Lack of competence, inadequacy of support, blurred boundaries of supervisor role</td>
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<td>Respect for autonomy</td>
<td>Intrusion of supervisor views and values, failure to support students’ independence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fidelity</td>
<td>Supervision abandonment, failure to provide supervision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Inequity, unfair treatment</td>
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(Löfström & Pyhältö 2012)
“I don’t feel like telling my supervisor about bigger things because you never know what kind of reaction you get, or whether it is something that’ll influence our relationship in the future. I would feel relieved if I could talk about other things, which would make my work input, or rather lacking input more understandable to the supervisor. But I cannot say that ‘Hey, I’ve decided not to use weekends for this unless I really have to.’”

(Doctoral student)
Interviewer: Do you feel that you have gotten support?

Ph.D. student: Yes, in my work, but not necessarily for my dissertation. The boss saddles me with all sorts of other tasks. It is like the boss always complains that I have done all sorts of jobs that don’t contribute to publications, and to encourage me, the boss takes the blame and says ‘This is all my fault.’ And I’m like, yeah, that helps a lot. (DS)
What the students want from the supervisor is fair treatment. This is tricky because you might yourself think that you are treating them all equally, but that doesn’t automatically mean that you give them all the same tasks and the same amount of work. … It should be related to their skills and capacity, and that is fairness, but they don’t see it that way. They want everything to be exactly the same. That’s a problem because you should treat them in a fair way, but true equality where everything is precisely equally shared is impossible. (Supervisor)
SUPERVISORS AND PHD STUDENTS EXPERIENCE ETHICS DIFFERENTLY

• Differences in expectations of what supervision should focus on.
  • Fit between doctoral students and supervisors perceptions about supervision contributes to student satisfaction with their supervision and studies (Pyhältö, Vekkaila & Keskinen, 2012; 2014).
  • The expectations of supervisors and doctoral students clash in ways that potentially could cause misunderstandings and discouraging experiences, eventually conceptualized as ethical challenges and problems by the PhD student, if not handled adequately early enough (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2017).
### Supervisors and PhD Students Experience Ethics Differently

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ethics Type</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
<th>PhD Students</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-maleficence</td>
<td>29 (53)</td>
<td>17 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficence</td>
<td>12 (21)</td>
<td>35 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>5 (9)</td>
<td>12 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidelity</td>
<td>7 (13)</td>
<td>26 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>12 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>55 (100)</td>
<td>102 (100)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\( \chi^2(4, 42) = 23.375, p < .000 \)

Natural and social sc.  (Löffström & Pyhältö, 2015)
DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS (BENEFICENCE)

“Basically, I was told to go ahead and do things, go places whenever I asked ‘can I do like this, may I do like that’. But nothing particularly personal, like ‘how are you doing?’ Very rarely. I don’t even remember that the supervisors would have asked, ‘How are you hanging in there?’ You have to say so yourself if you have too much work; it depends on you. You have to say it. So not that kind of understanding and support. It depends on the supervisor. My supervisors were not very interested in students’ personal lives [slight laughter]. It would not have taken that much from the supervisor to ask once in a while, ‘how’s it going?’ Nothing more. But it was like there was no time for that. … What I had hoped for from the supervisors is that they would have engaged more in what I was really doing and be more interested in that”. (DS4)
“Some expect you to know everything. Some expect, quite realistically, guidelines and setting timetables. Some expect friendship, and that’s a critical, difficult thing. I don’t even have time to be a friend! And that possibly causes feelings of unfair treatment and all sorts of nasty things…So like if someone comes in and cries, for instance about difficulties in their private life, however cruel it may sound, after a week I have to say that this belongs to other institutions, and I will not listen to it for years, because it is unreasonable that someone forms this kind of therapy relationship with me….Being a therapist and a close friend to your supervisee just isn’t appropriate”. (S3)
We are taught to question things, and that’s good. Knowledge is cumulative and the field doesn’t develop unless we draw upon others’ work and find something to critique. And that’s the dilemma. It would be great to be able truly to have a discussion with my supervisor. But it isn’t like that. My supervisor will say, ‘No, no, no, that’s not how it goes!’ This is a problem in my opinion. (Doctoral student)

The doctoral student receives from others, but simultaneously also preserves or develops his or her own perspectives, which at best deviate in interesting ways from the supervisor’s ideas. So it is difficult because you never know when you might have pushed an idea too strongly and prevented the doctoral students from developing their own idea. And there is the opposite: when you should have been more forceful and not leave it up to the student to decide. (Supervisor)
LET’S PRACTICE APPLICATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES!

In groups of 4-5 people

Look at the case (or alternatively choose a case from a group member) and identify possible ethical principles being at stake in the case

– respect for autonomy
– doing no harm (non maleficence)
– benefiting others (beneficence)
– being just (justice)
– being faithful (fidelity)
WHOM DOES THE SITUATION CONCERN?

In your group, identify

- Who are the stakeholders? Why them?
- What are the responsibilities and rights of the stakeholders?
- What to do?
ETHICAL ANALYSIS: A TOOL FOR SOLVING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

1. Recognising the ethical issue at hand
2. Identification of the stakeholders
3. Responsibilities and rights of the stakeholders
4. What are the possible courses of action? What are their implications?
5. Recognising one’s own positionality and motives

(Mustajoki & Mustajoki 2017; Löfström, Kyllönen, Pitkänen, Cekanauskaite, Lukaseviciene & Gefenas, 2019)
HOW TO DEAL WITH ETHICAL DILEMMAS AS A SUPERVISOR?

• Recognise the ethical issue
  o Which fundamental value/principle does the situation jeopardize?

• Understand different perspectives and expectations
  o How might the situation look like from the PhD students perspective? What do students expect/need? How does that fit with the structure and support offered? What are the responsibilities of different parties?

• Look for solutions, but understand how individual supervision practices relate to structures and traditions in academic communities

• Find colleagues with whom you can discuss the issue and reflect on your own practice
HOW DO THE ETHICS MATTER?

• We know from prior research that both emotions and dynamics in the educational environment are important factors in the study experience (e.g. Pekrun, Goetz, & Frenzel, 2007; Golde, 2005; Pyhältö, Vekkaila, & Keskinen, 2012).

• Ethics of supervision contribute to the Ph.D. students’ experiences, and most importantly, they do so in different ways (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2019):
  – supporting or breaching certain ethical principles contribute through an affective domain (autonomy, beneficence)
  – while some through the perceived person-learning environment fit (non-maleficence, fidelity, justice)
SUPERVISION ETHICS – ULTIMATELY A BALANCING ACT

• Authority and distance, but being approachable, while maintaining a necessary distance
• Cultivating a relationship, but not too deep and private
• Considering what is in the interest of the team or group of doctoral students, while attending to individual needs
• Direct instruction when needed, while letting the doctoral students develop as independent thinker
References


Löfström, E., & Pyhältö, K. (2015). “I don’t even have time to be their friend!” Ethical dilemmas in PhD supervision in hard sciences. International Journal of Science Education 37, 2721–2739.

References


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