

Understanding 'team' in team supervision of doctoral students.

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Abstract

Team supervision has become accepted practice in the supervision of doctoral students in social sciences, humanities and education in Australian universities. However there is great diversity of interpretation of 'team' with teams framed in a variety of ways. In a recent qualitative study of cohorts of Australian doctoral students, experienced and early career supervisors, team configuration has been carefully examined, and three main modes identified. By defining these modes into de facto dyad, segmented and collaborative teams, power relationships that typically operate within these discrete forms may be more closely examined. The operation modes of these team forms impacts on available power relationships which has significant influence on the experience of doctoral studies for students, and the learning outcomes for team members, including supervisors. By understanding how power operates in teams, more may be understood by supervisors and doctoral students about structuring their teams to enhance outcomes for all stakeholders. A framework of theories of agentic power, data from semi-structured interviews of experienced supervisors and late stage doctoral students are used to investigate and develop a taxonomy for team supervision. This current paper focuses on defining the three identified modes of teams and tentatively proposes available power relationships in these modes.

Introduction

Framed in neo-liberal paradigms that have come to dominate the discourses of management in higher education in Australia, team supervision of doctoral students has become accepted as good practice. Team supervision has been traditionally practiced in the sciences, but is relatively new in humanities, social sciences and education (Sinclair, 2004). The policy for team supervision is widely seen as driven by risk management and accountability concerns that focuses on the rate and time to completion of doctoral theses (Manathunga, 2012b). The complexity of team supervision and the risks and opportunities afforded by such modes of supervision, raised by Manathunga (2012a) have received inadequate attention. This study excludes cluster or group supervision, focusing on supervisory teams involving individual doctoral students.

The term 'team' is broadly defined in policy documents, relying on statements detailing the position of a principal supervisor who "coordinates the research and leads the supervisory team for each candidate. The principal supervisor is assisted by one or more colleagues (such as an associate supervisor or a supervisory panel) who may have different roles in the supervision process" (DDOGS, 2010, p. 3). It is unclear if the doctoral student is subject to the team or a team member, leaving the positioning of the student unspecified. Interpretation of this policy varies widely across universities, faculties and individual supervisors. Manathunga (2012b) uses the definition of team as the "supervision of one research higher degree (RHD) student by two or more supervisors" (p.42). Her choice of the broad term in her study of the genealogy of the policy for team supervision deliberately allows her to examine all types of supervisory practices. She makes reference to joint supervision, as does Pole (1998). Pole defines joint supervision as meaning two supervisors, and less commonly three or four (p. 264). There is a wide continuum of how joint supervision is performed as practice. Guerin, Green, and Bastalich (2011) define team supervision in their study as "two or more supervisors sharing responsibility for a PhD candidate's progress" (p. 138). The introduction of 'shared responsibility' adds substance to the broad definition. The term 'joint' has utility for describing team supervision, but provides little clarity in discussing pedagogic approaches available at various points along the continuum. The term fails to adequately describe the characteristics of common modes of team supervision and gives little clue to power dynamics within those modes and implies the student is subject to supervision and not a part of the team.

As noted by Guerin, Kerr, and Green (2015) "there is no one correct model of supervision that can be imposed

on doctoral pedagogy. Rather, we should ensure that supervisors are aware of a range of possibilities for combining various elements of good practice relevant to the specific student and project" (p. 116). Nor are teams fixed in a particular operational mode, with adjustments made for such things as personal circumstances, supervisor availability, and stage of thesis. This paper intends to interrogate the various interpretations of 'team' as they are practiced, examining the language used to describe team supervision modes in an attempt to identify and define team types. 'Team' supervision comes in many guises, some where the co-supervisor is rarely engaged or in some instances where the principal supervisor is a mentor to an inexperienced supervisor and has little contact with the student. In these instances 'teams' are little different in reality to the traditional dyadic single supervisor to one student. At the other end of the spectrum are teams that operate in a fully collaborative mode, inclusive of the student. Understanding the various configurations is important because the pedagogies available to supervisors is strongly influenced by the team mode, and students setting out on their journey need to be able to find a match for their study and learning styles. Defining team modes may be useful for supervisory teams in discussing the preferred pedagogy in establishing supervision for the doctoral student and their project.

The relationship between doctoral students and their supervisor has long been recognised as a power relationship, described traditionally as domination/submission, with the term 'supervisor' implying oversight of an apprentice (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000). Grant (2003), drawing on Foucault, conceptualises power in dyadic supervision as potentially dynamic and productive in supervision. Foucault recognises the nexus of power and knowledge, interpreting greater knowledge as having greater power. This, in a supervisory relationship, establishes the greater knowledge of the supervisor as a means of domination over the student. The supervisor 'instructs' the student. The institutionally determined relationships in traditional dyadic modes is asymmetric, with greater power held by the supervisor.

In tentatively mapping the relationships of power and desire in supervision, Grant presents "a view of supervision as a complex and unstable process, one filled with pleasures and risks" (p. 175). The complexity of relationships in supervision is seen as being a form of teaching with "peculiarly intense and negotiated character, as well as in its requirements for a blend of pedagogical and personal relationship skills" (p. 175). Drawing on her own experiences as a doctoral student, supervisor and academic developer, Grant develops a conceptual 'map' of the relationships between the supervisor (singular), the doctoral student and knowledge. Using two textual sources (a transcript of a supervisory meeting and notes made by both the supervisor and master's student) she uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the power dynamics. Grant conceptualises four layers that are interwoven, creating fields of power, between socially positioned individuals with their own agencies. One field of power pertains to the institutionally prescribed relationships with stable positions, another described as "variable, complex, unstable therefore unpredictable relationships" (p. 183) that includes interpersonal interactions. The graphic image used is a triangle with the supervisor in the superior position, with the student and thesis (knowledge) on the inferior axis. There is interaction between the two fields, as there is between the supervisor, student and knowledge (Grant, 2003, p. 186). The term 'individuals' is used as a move away from seeing the power relationship as oppressive. These individuals "are implicated in mutual power relations that, produced through the workings of identity and their stereotypes, derive meaning from broader life experiences and social positionings" (p. 182).

Grant (2003) emphasises the importance of considering the role of identity and fostering of agency, and the interplay of social interaction between the socially positioned individuals that creates a third layer. Communication in the interactions both on a social and institution level is critically important and may act potentially productively or jeopardise the relationships. A fourth layer, described as the "eruptions of desire" further complicates the relationship. These desires are seen in the "unconscious responses to each other" (p. 185), products of the life experiences and personal characteristics of the individuals. Desire is irrational and adds to the instability of the relationships, juxtaposed with the rational elements of academic research.

Grant's work (Grant, 2003, 2005, 2008) provides a rare and valuable insight into power relationships within dyadic supervision. Her description of the laminations of the highly complex relationships between supervisor, doctoral student and knowledge is a useful tool for examining the increased complexity of team modes of supervision.

Theoretical framing

Power exists only as a performance and is interpreted and understood by individuals and groups. As individuals or groups we may experience actions of others or ourselves, interpreting those actions as having power. In essence "power is inherently relational and characterizes social relations" (Raffnsøe, 2013, p. 250). Historical

conceptions of power have portrayed power as oppressive, as power 'over' which in its benign exercise may be understood as coercion with a subject agreeing to a position of being dominated by another. Agency is in the hands of the oppressor who may allow a limited exercise of agency by the subject. In traditional forms of dyadic supervision this conception of power has resonance, though in practice there are examples of the relationship between supervisor and doctoral student moving towards collaboration in final stages (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000). As a doctoral student exercises greater agency, power increasingly becomes 'power to'. However, more recent understandings of power that operate in democratic societies, casts power as having the potential for more equitable and socially productive outcomes. In this view an individual may use their capacity to assert control and determine outcomes for themselves.

Modern conceptions of power consider the possibilities of multiple dimensions of power and the exercise of agency by individuals in all its dimensions as capacity building (Haugaard, 2012). Haugaard (2012) describes four dimensions of power. The first dimension, 'power over' is often considered as domination but also contains the possibility of concerted power as the subject exercises agency prescribed in social structures. Haugaard's second dimension entails dispositional power. Dispositional power is the power of structures, the rules or parameters that are embedded in social and political systems. The more deeply embedded these structures, the more normative power they contain, becoming 'taken for granted'. The third power dimension is the discursive relationship between individuals, knowledge and social structures. Individuals have knowledge of 'taken for granted social structures', and knowledge is discursive, open to reinterpretation by the individual. The fourth dimension of power is the capacity of individuals to self-regulate. Within each of these dimensions is 'power to', the capacity for an individual to exercise agency to work towards preferred outcomes. Haugaard argues that 'power over' and 'power to' operate in hand in glove. Within constraints that social structures provide, emancipatory possibilities are increased. For example, the justice system that operates with socially recognised and endorsed rules or laws enshrines freedoms. 'Power with' draws heavily on Bandura's Social-cognitive theories (Bandura, 2000, 2001), particularly on collective agency. Teams with shared beliefs and goals may be seen as exercising collective agency. Bandura (2001) states that: "A group's attainments are the product not only of shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordinative, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions" (p. 75). The outcomes of the group or team is greater than the sum of the individual inputs. The work of the team builds both individual and collective capacity.

The move to team supervision in doctoral studies contexts speaks to the discourse of risk management and accountability, but opens up the possibilities of alternative relationships between supervisors, doctoral students and knowledge making of which the thesis forms the core. There are possibilities to reconceive understandings of power relationships that are mutually constituted, based on trust and respect, that nurture and harvest contested views, utilize emotional investment and foster agency for individuals and the team. Operating in this way, power may be understood as 'power over', 'power to' and 'power with'.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cohort of twelve experienced supervisors, using reputational sampling and snowballing techniques, and ten late stage or recently completed domestic doctoral students. The interviews were conducted face to face where possible or using video enabled Skype and averaged an hour in length. This paper uses data from a small segment of the transcribed interviews that focused on how experienced supervisors understood and practiced 'team' supervision, and some of the data from doctoral students. In compliance with ethical requirements the participants have been given pseudonyms and other identifying information removed. Transcribed data from the interviews were analysed using Nvivo to identify themes.

Findings

The policies of team supervision, with broad requirements for a principal supervisor supported by at least one co-supervisor, allows for multiple interpretations of 'team'. These interpretations impact on the structure and operation of power in the team. It was apparent in the data that there were three identifiable modes of team supervision, ranging from a tactic acknowledgement of the policy that offers little change from the traditional dyadic mode, to the wholehearted embracing of teams as collaborative research modes. Using the language used by experienced supervisors who participated in this study, these modes have been identified as *de facto dyad*, *segmented* and *collaborative* modes.

The policy of team supervision appears to be generally applied, certainly within the participant's universities, but the practices have not changed consistently. There was acknowledgement from the majority of supervisors interviewed that at a number of universities and departments within their universities the actual practice of supervision has not changed from the dyadic model. Dr Howard states that "at P---university in policy there is certainly no more single supervision although de facto there is". Dr Howard, in his responsibility for managing supervising of doctoral students in his faculty found that until recently "some of the students on paper had some kind of backup supervisor from the health faculty but in fact have they been a de facto silent partner". Professor Gleeson readily admits that "many of [my supervisions] have been where the other person has really been in name only in many ways". Professor Sampson reflects on his experience with predominantly international students. He observes that "in theory all the doctoral students have two supervisors on paper, but in practice about 80% of mine have been mostly by single supervision". Professor Duncan explains her experiences saying "I have to say it varies almost with each student. So with some students we are almost at the previous model in other words as the primary supervisor I will just see the student and anybody else who is on the supervisory committee as we call it here has a fairly minimal input into the student as they go along". In practice, some students and supervisors are engaged in dyadic supervision, with the second name largely for administrative purposes.

A number of universities also have panel arrangements for supervision. These panels are composed of the primary supervisor, co-supervisors and advisors. Advisors act as potential resources for the student, and for advisors their roles on panels is not acknowledged in their workload. It is effectively a 'goodwill' position. As Professor Purcell explains "people can be advisors and that means that they're not taking on the same. They're more like resource people. They're not committed to the actual end point as an obligation. And officially anyway they don't have to read drafts and stuff like that". Panels may appear to support the policy of team supervision, however, as Professor Dobell makes clear this is not necessarily the case. He says: "I know parts of the university they have the panel requirement but really one really very primary supervisor is more common and others sign up and look let me know if I can help". Professor Purcell comments that "you say to [students] who's on your panel or you say to someone are you and they just go blank because essentially they're operating as sole supervisor even though they're not meant to be. There's a piece of paperwork with names on it". Team supervision is a policy that provides the potential resources of two or more supervisors or supervisor/s and panel but these resources are not always accessed by or accessible to the student.

The phrases used most frequently to describe teams of these types are "on paper" and "de facto". They are 'teams' formed as an administrative procedure and operate effectively without significant input from other supervisors or advisors. A common variation on the de facto dyad is a senior and highly experienced academic who takes an administrative role as principal supervisor, who mentors a novice supervisor. The novice supervisor takes full responsibility for conducting the work of supervision with the student under the watchful eye of the principal supervisor. The principal supervisor has little or no sustained contact with the student. This structure may suit some students, some student's topics and some supervisors. In terms of a definition this structure might be termed a *de facto dyad*, where the student effectively has one active supervisor and another who is "a bit like being a spring waiting to uncoil". These 'on paper' supervisors are available to the student in the event the main supervisor is unavailable for an extended period of time, or no longer available.

De facto dyad teams might be defined as teams where a single supervisor engages continuously with the doctoral student and their project, but there is a tenuous link between all supervisors and student either interpersonally or intellectually.

Expertise in particular aspects of a student's topic is an often cited reason for team framing. Professor Emerson makes this point explaining his experience of team supervision, saying "I've been in ones where I've had two associate supervisors with three of us involved. Usually that's been deliberately structured because of the areas of expertise". Expertise is also cited as a consideration for students in identifying supervisory teams. Fiona states the reason for her initial team "It was a matter of expertise. So the person in the school had expertise in supervising PhD by publication in the past and the person in the research centre had a quantitative background". Sally had identified her primary supervisor and says: "I knew I was really happy working with Harry but I knew that I needed additional expertise from someone who knew a little bit more about the theory side and [topic area]". Identifying supervisors according to expertise appears to configure teams in two ways. Supervisors with a specific area of expertise might engage with the supervision for that specific stage of the thesis, a particular chapter for example, or engage throughout the entire thesis project, with greater or lesser input according to stage. Engaging supervisors specifically for their expertise may frame teams in different ways particularly for cross, multi and trans-disciplinary projects. However the framing does not necessarily determine the pedagogy of the team supervision, with a number of pedagogies available for various framings.

Supervisors who engage only for specific stages are discussed by many of the supervisors and doctoral students. Professor Emerson describes this type of team, saying:

the other sort of team [...] is the one where its more partitioned labour. [...]I don't understand the stats so you do that and I'll believe that's right and its covered and I'll do this bit. So from the candidates point of view that team has provided the range of support required but to me it's not really been provided co-laboratively. It's been done in a more segmented way.

Professor Emerson makes the point that supervisors with defined areas of responsibility are providing a service to the student and the team, making the team functional by ensuring that the student has the necessary expert advice. He explains this point "there's still a principal supervisor overseeing everything and saying look go and see X and talk to him about the problem with analysis or stats or whatever and you would accept that judgement was correct and that was the best guidance for the candidate". Professor Burnley also discusses his involvement on some supervisory teams. He says "there's a couple of students I'm involved [...]. Well I'm not [an expert in that field]. I can help in these ways. So I would define my contribution as 20%, an involvement of this kind". This is also reflected in Professor Sampson's comment, "some people say my collaboration is agreeing on the topic and then reading the final product. I'm co-supervisor that's all I should be doing. I'll leave it to the principal. In this case expertise may be in more general skills such as reading final drafts.

The terms used to describe this team type are "partitioned labour" or "segmented", and may be seen as team supervision with clearly defined responsibilities that focus on a specific content area or skill. A useful term may be *segmented team supervision*. In this mode *segmented team supervision*, as Professor Emerson explains, differs from more collaborative teams in that the supervisor's engagement is episodic rather than continuous throughout candidature. Supervisors are called upon at specific periods for specific functions.

A variation of segmented teams is described by Professor Gleeson. His university has an agreement with another university. He says:

with the R--- University there is an agreement whereby the student starts at the R--- University. Does their thesis proposal and their ethics there then comes to S--- University for a year. So it's a sort of a team situation whereby it's a bit like ... wherever the student is that supervisor takes over the baton.

These types of agreements operate between national and international universities. Under these agreements students commence at one university, progress to another to complete another stage of doctoral thesis development or for fixed periods of time, before returning to their home university to complete their thesis. While there may be reporting procedures and possibly informal contact between supervisors at the two universities, there is little collaboration around the students work. Effectively these teams operate in a similar way to the de facto dyad teams, where the student accesses an alternate supervisor for a period of time. This type of team, where the baton is passed, might be termed *relay* or *tag teams*. They differ from other segmented teams in that this is a predetermined arrangement that the student accepts as part of their application into the program.

Segmentation may also occur in circumstances where a doctoral student finds their supervisors are unable to work well together, and it becomes necessary to manage them separately. This is the situation experienced by Annette. Her two supervisors "clearly didn't like each other". Her project was part of a larger funded program so there was no real capacity to change supervisors. The intention in setting up the team had been for the supervisors to work together with the student, however this became untenable. It is preferable but not always possible, according to Dr Howard to "avoid a point of ending up in kind of two dyads because the relationship there between the two supervisors isn't working". Both supervisors offered different perspectives which were of value to Annette, and worked with her throughout the project, but not together. This would suggest that segmented team supervision may also have continuous engagement with the student and the project, but there is little interpersonal or intellectual contact between the supervisors. Segmentation may also be a deliberate strategy used by the student to get diverse perspectives, taking on the responsibility of making sense of these perspectives independently.

Segmented team supervision may be defined as episodic or partitioned engagement with the doctoral student and the project that has weak links between supervisors. There are clearly defined responsibilities that focus on a specific content area or skill.

A number of supervisors were very clear about their understanding of the term *collaborative team supervision*.

Professor Daniels offers a clear definition, saying: “collaborative supervision means everybody in the same room or the same virtual space to discuss the thesis and the work”. Professor Emerson states that “collaborative really means co-labouring which means working together”. These two definitions put a focus on the nature of the task and engagement of the team members on that task. However, Professor Sampson approaches the definition from a different perspective. He suggests that it might be possible to “define collaboration as kind of negotiated power relationships. Don’t have to be equal but they have to be complimentary otherwise it breaks down”. This would suggest that the interpersonal relationships are also crucial elements to understanding collaborative team supervision. Professor Emerson expands his definition, saying:

if it’s a genuine team endeavour people I suppose the intention is to try and be better than the sum of the parts. So you’re trying to say not only does this person have this quality, this one this and this one this, but together when we interact often with the candidate there is something even better that comes out of it. That to me would be a good collaborative team.

This clearly indicates that it is not simply the expertise that people bring to the team, but the interaction that builds the capacity of the team. This sense of collaborative enterprise is also clear in Professor Daniels comments. She remarks: “there has to be everybody gaining a sense of getting something out it. That’s it’s an exciting experience for everybody and that you know the data is really interesting, that there’s new understanding”. Professor Daniels adds to this stating that: “the team has to be a cohesive team even if there are different views within that team there has to be a flexibility and understanding of working together collaboratively and that means challenging ideas as part of that”. The complexity of collaborative team supervision is evident in a later statement by Professor Daniels. “It’s incredibly complex and it’s built on a whole lot of contexts, a whole lot of relationships and trust and knowledge and willingness and capacity to negotiate and explore ideas in a very sort of safe place”. Mutual trust and respect between all team members is crucial to the cohesion of the team.

The foundational principles of collaborative team supervision are in essence principles of “social justice and transparency” according to Professor Daniels. The team is developed and designed together, with respect for the unique contribution of each member. These teams meet usually together physically or virtually to discuss the work around and on the thesis project. Professor Bartlett explains that there is a focus on “regular full and open communication”. Each team member brings complimentary skills and capacities and a willingness to share and challenge ideas. Relationships and interactions in the teams are built on trust and respect, power relationships are negotiated, building a safe environment for the collaboration. Dr Howard describes collaborative modes of supervision as “always kind of unstable but not precarious just because it’s responsive and students change and our relationships change”. The instability makes this mode adaptive. The collaboration is intended to endure for the period of candidature and often beyond.

Collaborative teams may be framed as intra, cross, multi and trans-disciplinary. Funded project teams may also involve multiple universities, and or industry collaborations. The framing of collaborative teams has some impact on collaborative teams, especially where expertise across a number of disciplines is required, but the underlying principles of collaborative work remain consistent.

Discussion

In the findings, there was no evidence to suggest that Grant’s (2003) description of the layers and fields of power differed substantially between team supervision and traditional dyadic supervision. However, in segmented and particularly in collaborative modes, the model becomes increasingly multidimensional, while retaining the same layers.

De facto dyad teams, where the co-supervisor exists for administrative purposes and as insurance for continuity of supervision in the event of the primary supervisor becoming unavailable, differ little from the dyadic model examined and mapped by Grant (2003). With the primary supervisor retaining the dominant position in supervision, power may be understood as ‘power over’, and the extent for doctoral students to exercise their agency in this relationship, as ‘power to’. The exercise of these forms of power will vary considerably, depending on the negotiation of power in this relationship.

Grant’s model may also be applicable to some extent in segmented team supervision. Where a number of supervisors take limited and defined responsibility such as for a stage (as in tag teams) or for specific content of the thesis, but there is a predominant primary supervisor and the links between the supervisors is weak, the

model may be replicated as segments. These additional segments could be represented as smaller triangles, intersecting at the thesis node. The links to the primary supervisor and the doctoral student are generally weak, but during specific episodes may strengthen. This modelling needs to be seen as relatively plastic. In some cases the segmentation may be partial, with relatively strong links between a co-supervisor and doctoral student, but with weak links to the principal supervisor. Replicating Gant's model also suggests that 'power over' and 'power to' remain as the power forms being exercised. Segmentation may increase the student's opportunity and capacity to exercise 'power to' as they negotiate and integrate advice from additional sources.

In collaborative modes however, significant adaptation of Grant's model is necessary. These teams explicitly include the student. While roles are clearly defined (principal, co-supervisor, doctoral student), the focus on knowledge making which is of value to each team member, renders these positions less hierarchical. The triangular representation is no longer useful with its positions of hierarchy. Conceptually a multilayered disc becomes a more useful representation. There are strong unifying links between each team member, links that intersect at the core (the thesis), but also around the body of disciplinary knowledge that surrounds and buffers the thesis. Developing shared understandings of expectations and agreed protocols, collaborative teams utilize collective agency which fosters the agency of individuals and the team itself. It creates the environment that fosters 'power to' and 'power with'.

Conclusion

There is great latitude in the interpretation of 'team' in team supervision, and justly so. Supervision for an individual doctoral student is adapted to the student's learning needs, the nature of their project, the policy requirements of the faculty of department, in negotiation with the supervisors. As Guerin et al. (2015) point out, one interpretation of supervision cannot match all students or supervisors. However, in the conversations between supervisors and students at the outset of the doctorate, having a clear understanding of the preferred mode of team supervision may enhance the supervision experience. There is a wide spectrum of team modes (Guerin et al., 2011), from the highly dyadic, through segmented teams to the highly collaborative teams. Parallel to this continuum is a spectrum of power, from strong 'power over' and weaker 'power to' matching the highly directive forms of dyadic supervision, with diminishing 'power over' and increasing 'power to' as the agency of the doctoral student increases, to 'power with' of highly collaborative modes. Team modes are not fixed at any point of the continuum, with movement in response to particular contexts such as the stage of thesis development, personal circumstances or supervisor availability. As the mode of supervision fluctuates, so too does the level and type of agency available to individuals and teams.

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