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Coffee, “Small Favors”, and Power: **Where Should Doctoral Supervision Draw the Line? Evidence from Paired Surveys in Russia**

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Introduction: Framing the Problem

Doctoral education as a liminal space

Opaque rules, uncertain trajectories, and a strong need for guides and mentors (Håkansson Lindqvist, 2018; Breier et al., 2020; Galimberti, 2023)

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Duality of supervision I

Aligned expectations and strong supervision lead to satisfaction and better
doctoral outcomes

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dropout risk

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Duality of supervision II

The supervisor as a figure of power:

Gatekeeping and guidance through liminality (Galimberti, 2023)

vs.

Potential abuse of power and coercive practices (Allen et al., 2021)

Literature Review and Main Gap

What do we already know?

Forms of supervisory power and abuse that have been studied:

- Sexual harassment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020)
- Financial dependence (Moss & Mahmoudi, 2021)
- Sleep deprivation (Allen et al., 2021)
- Disputed authorship and data practices (Cheng & Leung, 2022)

Research mostly targets clearly negative phenomena

Literature Review and Main Gap

What should we study instead?

- (1) The literature focuses on formal supervision, but what happens in the grey zone of everyday practice?
- (2) We know more about abuse than about *which* doctoral students and *which* supervisors find such practices acceptable
- (3) Direct and clearly negative forms are well known, but more *subtle* forms of informality remain underexplored

Why the Russian Case Matters

High dependence on the supervisor

The single-supervisor model dominates; co-supervision is rare [Terentev & Kuznetsov, 2024]; only 32% receive support beyond the supervisor [Zhuchkova et al., 2023]

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High hierarchy inside and outside academia

High power distance, even compared with similar countries

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High requirements within a short timeframe

Dissertation, qualifying exams, and 2-3 required publications [Bekova et al., 2022]

This makes supervision more intensive and consequential

Data

2 surveys at 6 Russian universities
(2018/2019)

- *Doctoral students* (N = 991)
- ***Their*** supervisors (N = 209)

2 universities in Moscow, 4 in other regions

Sample

- Doctoral students: 51% men
- Year of study: 36% Year 1; 30% Year 2; 22% Year 3; 12% Year 4
- Field: 28% eng./tech.; 26% social sci.; 24% math/nat. sci.; 14% humanities; 8% education
- Supervisors had supervised 10 doctoral students on average, and 3 current students at the time of the survey.

Methods

Two bipolar 5-point items

1 = full agreement with the left pole

5 = full agreement with the right pole

| | |
|---|--|
| "Only formal relationships with the supervisor are acceptable" | " Friendly relationships with the supervisor are acceptable, including discussion beyond academic work" |
| "A supervisor may assign only dissertation-related tasks" | "A supervisor may also assign non-dissertation tasks" |

Doctoral students (N=991):

Informal relationships: **M=3.42** (neutral / slight acceptance)

Non-dissertation tasks: **M=3.04** (near neutral)

Supervisors (N=209):

Informal relationships: **M=3.45** (slight acceptance)

Non-dissertation tasks: **M=2.21** (lean against)

Analytical strategy

- Non-parametric tests for between-group comparisons
 - Mann-Whitney U for binary variables, Kruskal-Wallis H for 3+ categories
 - Spearman for ordinal and numeric associations among supervisors
- Separate analyses for doctoral students and supervisors

Results (Doctoral Students)

Informal relationships

- Higher among men ($p=.022$) and **among those planning to stay in the university sector** ($p<.001$).
- Higher when the supervisor was chosen because of positive prior collaboration ($p=.037$), reputation and influence ($p=.04$), professional connections ($p=.01$), and topic expertise ($p=.01$).

No differences:

- (1) field
- (2) study mode
- (3) funding type
- (4) academic career motive

Non-dissertation tasks

- **More acceptable in math and natural sciences than in social sciences** (pairwise $p=.004$).
- Acceptance is higher among those with academic career motives ($p=.03$) and among those who chose the supervisor because of positive prior collaboration ($p=.01$).

No differences:

- (1) sex
- (2) study mode
- (3) funding type
- (4) reputation, connections, or topic expertise

Results (Supervisors)

Informal relationships

- Supervisors with higher supervisory performance are less likely to accept informal relationships ($r_s = -.172$, $p = .013$).
- No differences:
 - (1) total number supervised
 - (2) successful defences

Non-dissertation tasks

- Acceptance rises with the number supervised ($r_s = .144$, $p = .038$) and with the number of successful defences ($r_s = .141$, $p = .042$).
- No differences:
 - (1) supervisory performance

Discussion

Academic socialization: doctoral students with stronger academic plans are more likely to normalize informality

Two possible readings: (1) reverse causality or
(2) internalization of academic norms

Positional power

High-performing supervisors may involve doctoral students more intensively in projects, blurring the boundary between training and extra tasks

What Next?

(1) These interpretations need qualitative validation

Are we seeing reverse causality or the internalization of academic norms?

(2) We need to assess the effects of these relationships

When is informality supportive, and when does it become exploitative?

(3) This should lead to policy recommendations

But only after a broader and more contextual analysis

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