

“Making” a doctoral supervisor

Petra Angervall

Abstract

This paper is based on my reflections on a series of lectures given by me over a period of three years in a course called Supervising doctoral students. The lectures are, to a large extent, based on my own research on higher education policy, academic career, and gender, and highlight various topics concerning gender, power, and supervision. Through Hacking’s (2007) ideas on how research not only contributes to, describes, and analyses different aspects of the world, but also plays a role in how we make up institutions and people, I elaborate on what studies on gender, academic work, and supervision tell us and how we use the stories we tell as researchers. Researchers like me within the field of higher education research know a lot about gender divisions in academic career, but we seldom discuss how we are participating in normalising specific patterns. Can we present these results without also emphasising “gender difference” or gender divisions? The paper discusses how I handle this risk, but also raises issues about what it means to lecture on gender in higher education and includes reflections about my own position and competence as a lecturer.

Keywords: academic lectures; doctoral supervision; gender; supervising practices

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Introduction

Most academic scholars, worldwide, have, at some point in their career, acted as a supervisor for a colleague, student, and/or doctoral candidate. Supervision is an academic practice of core value for academic work, and part of becoming and acting as an academic scholar. A rich ensemble of research has investigated supervision practices to explore conditions and outcomes, pedagogy, or how subject positions involve supervisory encounters (see McAlpine’s (2013) or Nerad’s (2015) work). Bendix Petersen’s study (2014) is occupied with the latter and shows how gender affects supervision practices, as well as the doctoral candidates being supervised.

This paper is based on my reflections on a series of lectures given by me over a period of three years in a course called ‘Supervising doctoral students’. The course is offered to lecturers with a PhD in different disciplinary areas at the University of Borås, Sweden, and is a course (equivalent to approximately 7,5

ECTS¹) that aims to support new doctoral supervisors with an interdisciplinary knowledge base. The course is compulsory for those that in the near future are planning on taking an assignment as a supervisor in doctoral education.

The lectures I give always begin with introducing a set of philosophical questions on what we can know or do, or become responsible for, when we conduct research. What is the story we, as lecturers and academic scholars, tell, and on what basis are we telling this story? The purpose is to create interest, but also to prevent any early skepticism among the participants or students towards the kind of research I do, or regarding why gender research is necessary and important. As a feminist researcher, you learn how to engage people in the topic, even though it may be a little uncomfortable for some. For me it is also important to illustrate that as a social scientist we always create knowledge about the world we observe, but also need to, in parallel, critically examine the images we see. What kind of world are we making up?

When I received the invitation to write a paper based on these lectures, I had difficulties understanding why. The invitation did not include a wish for a didactical approach or reasonings about my lecture style or pedagogical idea. Instead, it expressed an interest in me writing a reflective paper based on my lectures about how power and gender is involved in supervision practices. So, I have used the same approach in this paper as I use in these lectures, where I, in dialogue, explore difficult questions or challenges about power in supervision practices. My main question concerns how we as academic scholars, through research, make up academic institutions, work, career, and gender, and how these classifications are involved in the making or becoming of doctoral supervisors. The paper is an attempt to write as if I am presenting a lecture, but also to some extent, explore what these lectures are about, and include some of the responses I usually get from the course participants.

For some, academic lectures are about presenting facts, truths about the world, methods, or solid ideas that will support students in their studies. Presenting an image of facts or a package of ideas is, however, not my strong side, and I also find it risky. If I present a clear model of facts, classifications of the world or of certain people, I will worry how these classifications might affect people. Will I not, in a sense, ‘make people up’ if I present them as “true” or factual? (Hacking, 2007, p. 288). I would, most likely, be a lousy teacher in subject disciplines that require set descriptions of systems or facts. How do lecturers remember all the details? My lectures tend to concern questions, arguments, ideas, and counter ideas. Most of the ideas I present or elaborate on are my own, even though I obviously got them from someone else at some point. Some of them are also ideas that I just recently read, ideas that remind me of a problem that I would like to discuss or a

¹ European higher education credit transfer

political issue. Consequently, my lectures are, at least partly, about what I am passionate about and find interesting. Today. I hope others find them interesting too. Then again, to ask questions or present problems you need to understand context, how problems are situated, its variations, and changes. So, obviously I do present facts, and models, to some extent. The intention, nevertheless, is to use them to open for thoughts. In that sense, teaching really catches my attention and forces me to start a kind of intellectual, but also administrative, process (as in categorising ideas). Before I teach, I need to clear my head, organise what I find worthwhile talking about, and tell a story people will understand and, to some extent, enjoy. I also need to enjoy my lecturers if I want them to reflect meaningful things. Students know if we are faking. For me, teaching cannot, should not, and will not ever (only) be a load that academic scholars just take on (Copeland, 2022). For similar reasons, I resist the notion of the teacher as a banker, or a truth teller, who fills her, or his students with knowledge (Freire, 1971). To me teaching is about reflecting on knowledge, sharing ideas, and opening up for new understandings. Teaching is about reading and debating problems, and about making change. Teaching is about listening to other people's views and ideas. Consequently, teaching should be like "horses for courses", even if it often is not, due to how academic scholars tend to be expected to teach in programs and areas not entirely in line with their expertise.

Hacking's (2007) assertion that scientists tend to, in a sense, 'make up the world' reminds me of our responsibilities as researchers and teachers. In his speech from 2007, he elaborated on how research is making up institutions and people. Research is about making up society in parallel with making sense of the world, just as people are objects for scientific inquiry, for teaching and for institutions: 'Sometimes our sciences create kinds of people' (p. 292). This way of thinking is also the starting point of all my lectures regardless of focus area. How are we, you, and I, making up institutions, people, and society, and vice-versa, and what do we need in terms of community, method, and ideas in order to do so? But I also discuss the risks involved, and how we can include them in our thinking and research. What would, for example, be the risk of excluding gender from knowledge about doctoral supervision?

Making an academic institution

I started my undergraduate studies in education science in 1993 and finished 12 years later when I received my doctorate and began my work as a university lecturer. My doctoral thesis was a messy piece of work but raised issues that I still find interesting: gender mainstreaming policy enactment and gender equity initiatives, and how they create discursive turns and interpretations. One of my main findings concerned how context colours state-governed gender mainstreaming

initiatives, and the impact for especially women employees (Angervall, 2005). In 2010, after five years of full-time teaching, I became engaged in a larger research project that involved researching on gender and career in academia. This project opened up the possibility to continue researching academic work and gender, which I still do. In parallel, I joined the Swedish National Higher Education Council to engage in evaluating national gender equity initiatives in Sweden, and a new national center for interdisciplinary gender research at the University of Gothenburg. Since then, I have worked with several projects, engaged as a supervisor for doctoral researchers, and as a mentor and adviser. Together with a few colleagues, I have also started a journal, initiated networks and developmental projects, all of which have challenged me regarding questions on gender, education, and academic career.

From these experiences, I have learned that the university system in Sweden has changed dramatically since the 1990s. Since 1995, policy discourses have increasingly emphasised the importance of international and market investments, public engagement, efficiency, competition, but also widening participation and social justice. We have almost doubled the number of universities, just as we have more than doubled the number of academic staff, the demands of the educational task, and flow of students. Today, Sweden has 17 state-funded universities and 19 university colleges. The state-funded academic institutions are pressured by heavy demands for control and measurements, performing more research, attracting more doctoral researchers, increasing international collaboration, and graduating more students. Researchers call this development a ‘mission stretch’ (Enders & de Boer, 2009).

My own experiences of starting doctoral education in 1997 can serve as one illustration of this development. In the late 1990s, doctoral candidates were able to fund their programs with state funded grants (faculty funding), scholarships, or part time jobs. Time was not at the center, and much depended on what funding opportunities were available. Doctoral education was offering a broad, scientific knowledge base through courses and supervision, and my doctoral supervisor also clarified early in my process that the “PhD journey” in her opinion was independent of institutional demands and control. In her view, I was expected to form my own project, and she thought of herself as an adviser, giving me guidance. She would not have approved of overly detailed study plans, or managers forming goals or demanding outcomes.

Today, doctoral candidates are mainly funded by external research grants or faculty funds, and the contract is always on four years fulltime payment (which, formally, can be divided into different time periods). The doctoral project is controlled and measured every six months, through a nationally mandated

arrangement called the *Individual Study Plan (ISP)*². In this plan the supervisor performance is also measured and controlled by the Director of Studies, or Head of Department, and supervisors are expected to annually report on the progress of the doctoral candidate. A positive outcome of this national arrangement is that doctoral candidates are much more protected than they used to be. In line with the national legislation, doctoral candidates are also always funded for the full duration of their studies, and they can go on parental leave or sick-leave and holidays. They can easily change supervisor or expect departmental support. A more negative outcome is that subject areas, disciplines, or regions with less funding or considered less important find it difficult to fully fund doctoral candidate positions. It is just too expensive. Hence, it is not possible for less wealthy students to take on a doctoral position due to how this contract is constructed. Doctoral work is also becoming like any other job, which at times makes it difficult to fulfil goals or reach certain levels during the process. For example, the doctoral candidate has the right to go on holiday even though there is a deadline that will affect his or her progress.

My point is that if we classify areas in, for example, humanities or social sciences, as less important and valued through how these areas perform or answer to a specific understanding of public good, they will not receive as much research funding as other, more “attractive”, areas do. Lack of funding results in substantially less PhD candidates, which in turn affects the entire research area negatively. The imbalance between what is made into stronger and weaker areas in higher education hence becomes clearer through expensive doctoral contracts, which in turn risk legitimatising other power structures in academia. There is, for example, no doubt that this division also enhances the prevailing gender structure, where men dominate by numbers over women in stronger, more prestigious scientific areas (Swedish Higher Education Authority [UKÄ], 2021).

The reliance on external funding is also a general problem for how we construct knowledge. What is seen as worthwhile knowledge attracts more funding, like, for example, hard facts, easily usable knowledge, or what is easily shared. This results in a university world becoming more and more divided. In parallel, the global mission of increasing welfare and sustainability is also putting pressure on the knowledge economy, which results in mass education, standardised measures of competence and results (Olssen, 2016). Again, the mission stretch becomes evident in how academic workloads are becoming more “loaded” with tasks that did not exist 10 to 15 years ago (Whitchurch et al., 2021).

These sketched divisions exist but are also part of how contemporary research “makes up” institutions and people in higher education today. Several studies of the inside practices of academic institutions also illustrate how the

² The Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) states the necessity of establishing an *Individual Study Plan (ISP)* for all doctoral candidates in Sweden.

mission stretch affects academic work through not only increasing time pressures, lack of resources, and agenda, but also of ideas about what is worthwhile (see, e.g., Ryan, 2012). Heijstra et al. (2017) argue that academic work more than ever is conditioned by time and how time is linked to power. Those who work hard with the so-called “academic housework” (more often women than men) tend to find themselves falling behind in career advancement: ‘more pragmatic for academics to minimize academic housework and merely focus their resources on career advancement activities, which provide the additional benefits that come with seniority such as higher wages and additional status, autonomy, resources and power’ (p. 13).

From this knowledge background, I have learned that supervising practices in Swedish higher education are defined by institutions, just as in most (or even all) western countries, where research work often is seen as competitive work in terms of obtaining merits according to a contract, but also as an individual and vertical journey. In a recent report from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ, 2021), it is clear that most doctoral candidates in Sweden today are in areas where research work is about applied sciences in engineering or natural sciences (including medicine). Consequently, supervising practices are often conducted by those who regularly see research work as a stable career track, or by those who receive external funding, work in teams, and regularly also publish articles, more so than by those who work in solitary, autonomous, and grounded research. Today, the latter group has less funding, and less status and prestige. This makes me think that higher education is not only divided by gender or certain expectations, tasks, areas, or institutions, but also is becoming more divided in terms of growing gaps between those who are doing “right” and those who are doing “wrong”.

How to “make up people” in academic career

Higher education is, as described above, a fluid system of structures, social relationships, interests, aims, and resources which we as academic scholars need to try to understand, and constantly debate over. One reason is of course that we ourselves are making this system work, in how we are (at least partly) involved in *social reproduction* in terms of the particular kinds of students and doctoral researchers we foster. Whether the academy is a system of (social) structures based on neoliberal ideas, conservative structures, market interests, line management, meritocracy, heterarchy, or gender regimes, it influences the everyday work of researchers, teachers, students, and doctoral candidates, and their supervisors (administrators, leaders, HR staff, and head of finance). My point: to fully understand doctoral supervision and the role of the doctorate, the conditions the doctoral candidates operate within, and the various practices and interactions this is

comprised of, we need to understand the complex context in which research education is conducted (Manathunga, 2010).

Nerad (2015) illustrates how the context of the academy influences doctoral researcher practices, when she states:

A general tradition exists at research universities for faculty to pass down their accumulated expertise, be it a certain school of thought, or a certain research method, or to carry on the laboratory or research centre to his or her students, like a father passing on to “son” or “daughter” their specific accumulated expertise (...) Through talking with students- the distress or guilt that students felt towards the end of graduate school when some students were tacitly chosen as the heirs of the professor’s expertise, and some were not. (...) and also, feelings of failure. (p. 27)

Nerad’s point is that doctoral researchers are always in the hands of their supervisors and subjected to how eager their supervisors are to ‘pass down’ ideas, assignments and norms and interests. Supervisors are in turn in the hands of their departments, what is expected of them and why, and their collegium³ and the workplace culture. Hacking (2007) would argue that supervisors make up doctoral candidates in light of their own experiences, context, and goals, just as the making of doctoral candidates is fluid, in constant change, even though parts of the structures or rules are more stable and recognisable. I guess this image is only fully recognisable for some areas, disciplines, and cultures. There are areas where the doctoral candidate is more part of a full team, or works with several research leaders, or even lacks supervision altogether.

Some of the doctoral candidates in my own research studies highlighted how they understand what makes someone successful in an academic career. Ruth, one of the candidates, said in an interview:

Researchers understand that you must look as if you are successful. You need to work a lot with others, produce a lot, even if the research often only duplicates previous texts. The only thing that is changing is who you collaborate with and if you work with different people, you can use the same text again and again. Successful researchers are also awfully good at socialising (...) Sometimes they appear to be a bit like rock-stars. At least those up at the very top. Being successful is about how you act and knowing what is expected from “above”. If you play your cards right, you are rewarded.

³ Research and teaching staff at the department in which you work.

Ruth is describing a couple of rules she has come across and that she understands as generally accepted if you want to succeed in academic career. You must look as if you are successful, she says, and you must be very good at socialising. In several studies, it is also clear that academic scholars need to focus more on research work than teaching if the intention is to advance in career. This pattern is also gendered (Doerr, 2022; Heijstra et al., 2017).

Similar patterns emerge in statistics, where numbers point to a clear division in higher education world-wide between research and teaching staff, not only in what these groups do, but also how they are rewarded and given status (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Barrett & Barrett, 2011). Several research studies show that even though women in general outnumber men in higher education today, men are still more often on high status research and leadership positions (Petersen, 2017). Gender also matters in career development more broadly. Studies as well as statistics show how men tend to act in high status subject disciplines, such as in science or engineering, whereas women are more often part of subject disciplines such as social sciences, humanities, or education (UKÄ, 2021). In the latter research areas, researchers have substantially less time in their employment to do research (UKÄ, 2021).

Women researchers are active in less specialised but also less rewarded fields in comparison to men, which results in access to “currency” of less value (Healey & Davies, 2019; Kandiko Howson et al., 2018). Studies also illustrate how men PhD candidates more often than women PhD candidates are co-authoring with their supervisors, which gives them an advantage in terms of output and impact (Lindahl et al., 2021). In summary, those academic scholars who move and act as successful and build the “right” merits in their career tend to be men. Researchers who move more horizontally and locally, and publish in national, less high prestige journals and do the academic housework (Heijstra et al., 2017) tend to be women. This group also engages comparatively more in teaching work (Guarino & Borden, 2017).

These research findings tell us that academic work is divided and valued based on gender, or even that gender is part of how we have structured and talk about academia. But to understand these divisions in career as well as “gender differences” related to understandings of institutions, work, life, and all kinds of relationships, you also need to see and accept the classifications they are based on and generate. Right? Would that also impact on the normalisation of these patterns, and their functions in society? Probably, but we also know what happens if we do not conduct research on gender, and the consequences of not highlighting gender divisions or gender conditions in society, just as we know what happens to LGBT

workers, or people who identify as transsexual or non-binary in countries where these questions or identities are not accepted.

Numerous studies highlight various divisions of academic labour work by describing and analysing them through terms like ‘flying under the radar’ (Doerr, 2022), ‘care-giving academics’ (Winslow & Davis, 2016), ‘academic family’ (Guarino & Borden, 2016), ‘academic housewives’ (Angervall & Beach, 2017), ‘micro inequities’ (Aiston & Fo, 2021) and ‘academic zombies’ (Ryan, 2012). All of these terms highlight risks in academic career, and what it means to go against the idea of academic meritocracy, and success in career. Most of them also explicitly ask why divisions tend to be based on a certain gender order, or regime (see Doerr, 2022).

Doerr (2022) uses the term ‘flying under the radar’ to illustrate how women navigate in academic career and the problems they encounter. For women, flying under the radar is a strategy to avoid conflicts, pressure, competition, or unjust comparisons. In Aiston and Fo’s (2021) study, the authors discuss how ‘small events’ (p. 144) which can be hard to observe or verify keep academic women silent. Several women in their study describe how they are silenced due to how they feel steered or guarded by comments, or jokes about femininity during work hours. In one of the interviews, a female professor states: ‘it’s almost because I’m a woman and I have more responsibility in the lab, he didn’t feel happy about it and so he just would say or do certain things trying to put me down (Alicia)’ (p. 149).

The term ‘academic housewives’, which Angervall and Beach (2017) among others use, aims to illustrate how certain staff groups (most often women) often take on caring responsibilities and support work, more so than other groups. Even though care in many respects is productive in how it produces a positive response in the doctoral candidates and students, it also implies extra workload, which adds to the teaching, research, and administrative burdens, and therefore adds to the fatigue of those engaging in caring practices (Castelao-Huerta, 2023). Still, care can be about showing emotions in an academic culture where research is often seen as objective and carefree. For that reason, caring practices can also build ‘safe academic spaces’ for those (often women) engaging in it, which otherwise can be difficult to find considering how universities are performatively built (Castelao-Huerta, 2023).

Final reflections: Making could mean unmaking

Academia is an institution that in many ways differs from other institutions. This is evident when you look more closely into academic structures, positions, career trajectories, recruitment, meritocracy, and decision making (see Henningson, 2023), and its main task of producing and presenting knowledge. In comparison to

people in other institutions, academic scholars tend to protect the autonomy and value of knowledge-based decisions, which is a strong basis for this particular system and also connected to the idea of a blind peer review system (Henningsson, 2023). However, the academic system also differs between continents and nations, and things move, change, and develop. During certain times and contexts, we are or have been expected to work in certain ways and promote certain values and so forth. This is why we need to understand science as something we ‘make up’ in particular times, just as we make up people in certain ways and for certain reasons. Hacking’s (2007) point is that: ‘People are moving targets. They are objects for science, for teaching, for institutions. (...) Sometimes our sciences create kinds of people that in a certain sense did not exist before’ (p. 285).

As an academic lecturer, it can be worrying to think that my research always is involved in making up academic institutions, work, or ideas that I am in parallel supposed to produce valid knowledge about. However, the more experience I gain, the more I realise that by critically examining what I want with my research, or what research do, I actually, at least partly, can act as my own quality guarantee. So, when I point to gender structures or gender identity issues in my research, I am aware that I partly make these issues up, but also that I make them visible and open for different interpretations. Through my research I have become aware of how deeply gender is intertwined with and defined in relation to the academic structure, to binaries between research and care, success, and low promotability (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Uhly et al., 2017). Gender becomes a signifier for certain tasks, such as caretaking, or prestige. Gender impacts on how we understand knowledge, and create strategies, values, and legitimacy. Gender is part of how we supervise doctoral students (Grant, 2023). But I also know that my research opens for counter actions, disbelief, and current debates on fake facts, or political sanctions.

Doctoral candidates are taken on due to specific expectations and values and become part of a system that represents certain ideals. Women doctoral candidates, for example, tend to focus on different disciplinary pathways than men in HE (UKÄ, 2021). However, when we say that science makes up people, we could as well claim that science has the potential to unmake people. As critical researchers, engaged in criticality, we can make, unmake, and remake. We have the possibility and also a responsibility to reflect on the classifications we use to understand the world. By highlighting how women are treated, or their pathways in academic institutions, they might dare to choose another direction. We need to be cautious about what we, as researchers, supervisors, and doctoral candidates, present, discuss, and research, but also what happens if we do not engage in the making and unmaking of things. Am I promoting certain ideas or making assumptions that favour specific interests? What side of things am I arguing for, and why?

During my lectures, I often get very different responses from those present. In general, I am met with a lot of questions, especially from those representing disciplines other than those within social sciences. What is true, false, or facts are often discussed, just as what is political, personal, emotional, and biased. I welcome and enjoy the debate, even though my role and position has changed over the years. Today, I engage in it as a full professor, not as a woman lecturer. My gender is basically less present nowadays due to my position as a professor; early career academics (to a large extent) must listen to me because I am a professor. Sometimes I wonder whether that is why some colleagues or scholars become more and more eager to challenge my thoughts? Is my presence provoking, or am I making this up?

In the courses, where I do my lectures, however, it is still mostly early career men from areas where facts, truths, and objective measures are still taken for granted. I have also had many women participants that have made contact, either directly after I finish a lecture or through email, and shared emotional stories or gratitude.

As Freire (1971) states in *Pedagogy for the Oppressed*, we can, through (research) education, open for new paths. This is also why we need to understand the power relationships we are part of as researchers and supervisors, whether we need to inform study plans, report to academic line managers, or pressure yet another time schedule. Let us not forget that.

Finally, there is nothing revolutionary or new in the descriptions or reflections I present. I hope they remind us of the importance of understanding the images and discourses early career researchers are faced with or become part of, and how they illustrate contemporary ideas about higher education and academic career. How do we, as experienced researchers and supervisors, guide our doctoral candidates in a system in which the above sketched power structures and values are at the nexus of their journey? How do we take gender into account, not only on an individual scale but as interwoven with performance and expectations of success (Angervall & Beach, 2017; Kandiko Howson et al., 2018)? So, when course participants are eager to get “hands on” advice on how to supervise at a doctoral level, I answer that we first need to talk about context. We need to address how we, as researchers, and supervisors, tend to make up people, practices, and academic institutions, or why we think about academic institutions the way we do. These questions are often met with slight suspicion or surprise, even though I am convinced they open for reflections that are core when talking about doctoral supervision.

Author biography

Petra Angervall is a full professor at University of Borås since 2018. She has supervised several doctoral candidates in both Swedish and international research schools. She is also one of the founders of the Swedish national research school SPETS (Studies on Professional Education and Training for Society). Her research mainly concerns higher education policy and gender. Petra is currently leading the research group *Higher education, politics and praxis*.

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