Power Dynamics in PhD Supervision

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The relationship between doctoral candidates and their supervisors is widely recognised as central to the doctoral experience (Kamler & Thomson, 2014; Jones & Blass, 2019). It is also inherently unequal. Supervisors typically have greater disciplinary expertise, institutional authority and influence over feedback, progression, publications, networks and career opportunities.

Power itself is not necessarily negative. Supervisors need to guide, challenge and support developing researchers. However, problems can arise when power is unrecognised, difficult to discuss or exercised without sufficient transparency. Power imbalances between supervisors and doctoral candidates can persist while remaining largely unspoken and unacknowledged (Kitano et al., 2026).

Although Australian doctoral education has moved increasingly towards team supervision, power has not disappeared; it may simply be distributed differently across supervisory teams. Team or co-supervision does not necessarily reduce power imbalances, because supervisory relationships are still shaped by how teams are formed and by intersecting factors such as gender, race, class, age and sexuality (Guerin, 2024). In fact, other newer supervisory arrangements, including industry involvement and professional doctorates, may broaden support but can also introduce additional relational complexity and new sites of power within supervision.

Culture and background can also influence how supervisory authority is experienced. Some candidates may be reluctant to question feedback or openly disagree with supervisors, particularly when previous educational cultures have placed greater emphasis on deference to authority (Xu et al., 2020). Silence can then be misinterpreted as disengagement rather than respect, uncertainty or discomfort (Hu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020).

Power is not always obvious

Power may be visible in decisions about research direction, authorship, access to resources or candidature progression. However, it can also operate in less visible ways.

For example, trust is central to the functioning of supervisory teams (Robertson, 2017a). A candidate who trusts their supervisor may feel able to disagree, admit uncertainty or ask for help. Where trust is weak, the same candidate may remain silent, even when they have concerns.

Robertson (2017b) offers a useful distinction between **"power over", "power with" and "power to"**. Good supervision should progressively support a candidate's "power to" make decisions, develop scholarly judgement and shape their own research trajectory, rather than leaving authority concentrated solely with supervisors.

Supervisory relationships and research projects evolve over time, so expectations, roles and ways of working should be revisited regularly rather than treated as fixed at the beginning of candidature. Ongoing conversations are particularly important as new or unexpected situations arise around issues, such as authorship, research independence and decision-making.

What can supervisors do?

Supervisors can reduce the risks associated with power imbalances by making the relationship more explicit and discussable.

- **Talk about expectations early and revisit them.** Discuss decision-making, feedback, communication, authorship, independence and what happens when people disagree.
- **Invite genuine disagreement.** Saying "you can disagree with me" may not be enough. Ask candidates what they think, what alternatives they see, and whether they interpret an issue differently.
- **Make decisions transparent.** Explain the reasoning behind recommendations about research direction, publication, opportunities and progression.
- **Pay attention to trust.** Consider whether candidates feel safe admitting uncertainty, asking questions or raising concerns.
- **Recognise social and cultural differences.** Do not assume silence means agreement or lack of critical thinking.
- **Use the supervisory team and wider research environment.** Candidates benefit from having multiple sources of expertise, mentoring and support rather than depending on one person.

Candidates can also take steps to make supervisory power more visible and easier to navigate

- **Clarify expectations early.** Ask about communication, feedback, decision-making, authorship, milestones and how disagreements will be handled.
- **Keep a record of key decisions.** Brief notes or follow-up emails can help ensure that agreed actions and responsibilities remain clear.
- **Use the whole supervisory team.** Different supervisors may offer different expertise and perspectives, reducing reliance on one person.
- **Ask questions and seek clarification.** If feedback, expectations or decisions are unclear, asking for the reasoning behind them can help make the supervisory process more transparent.
- **Build support beyond supervision.** Peer networks, mentors, researcher-development staff and HDR services can provide additional perspectives and support.
- **Raise concerns early where possible**. If something does not feel right, seek advice from a trusted person or relevant institutional support before the issue becomes more difficult to resolve.
- **Recognise that disagreement can be part of becoming an independent researcher.** Developing scholarly agency includes learning when and how to question, negotiate and make your own research decisions.

Case Study: Who decides what gets published?

A PhD candidate in molecular biology prepares a paper based on two years of experimental work. Their supervisor suggests changing the focus to better align with the lab's research priorities and adding a senior researcher as a co-author. The candidate is unsure about both decisions but is reluctant to disagree because the supervisor controls access to resources, influences progression and may be an important future referee.

The PhD candidate can:

- **Accept the recommendations** and proceed, even if concerns remain.
- **Ask for the reasoning** behind the change in focus and the proposed authorship.

- **Seek another perspective** from the supervisory team, an HDR coordinator or research integrity adviser.

Key insight: Power can operate through publication decisions, authorship, access to resources and future career opportunities. The aim is not to eliminate power from supervision. It is to make it visible, discussable and accountable, while supporting the candidate's independence and scholarly agency.

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