Doctoral Supervisors' and Supervisees' Responses to Co-supervision

Abstract

With the increasing demand for doctoral education, co-supervision, understood as the formally agreed supervision of a research student by two or more academics in doctoral programmes, has become common practice in postgraduate circles in the UK. If supervision with one supervisor is complex due to personal, academic, ethical and sometimes cross-cultural issues, having two supervisors makes this process sufficiently challenging in practice to be specifically investigated in research, not least because of the additional communication issues. However, co-supervision is under-explored in the academic literature. In this article we look at the experience of co-supervision as reported by co-supervisors and those supervised by them in a UK University Department within an Arts and Social Sciences Faculty, and aim to contribute to the literature on co-supervision by considering co-supervisors' and their supervisees' perspectives on co-supervision practices. Amid a general welcoming of the practice, with both parties seeing co-supervision entailing learning opportunities - for co-supervisors, learning from colleagues; for the supervisees, learning from two experienced researchers - we report shared and specific concerns of these two groups. Time is a concern for both groups, but in different ways. Particularly interesting is the issue of harmony between the co-supervisors, including in feedback, the desirability of which will be perceived differently within any co-supervisor-supervisee relationship. The need for awareness-raising for co-supervisors as regards what their supervisees may feel but may not articulate may be greater for co-supervision than solo-supervision arrangements, given the additionally complex web of institutional and interpersonal relationships co-supervision entails.

Keywords: *co-supervision, doctoral education, feedback, joint supervision, PhD students, supervision, thesis writing*

Introduction

The growing numbers of students, including international students, pursuing a PhD degree in a UK university (Cree 2012; Hockey 1997; Peelo 2010) has necessitated increasing national, institutional and practitioner attention to supervision. Our observations as a PhD supervisor and PhD supervisee suggest that supervision is also widely acknowledged by PhD students themselves as extremely important in both the quality of their thesis[1] and its timely submission, as well as in the whole PhD process, and it is acknowledged similarly in the literature (Hockey 1997; Wisker 2005). Conversely, deficient supervision has been identified as playing a role in non-completion, as regards both quality of work produced and student motivation (Haksever and Manisali 2000). Our professional experience also suggests that doctoral thesis supervision is a much heavier responsibility in terms of range, depth, time, quality, research and inter-personal skills than undergraduate and Masters (e.g. MA/MSc) dissertation supervision. This extends to the scope of the research project, the demand for originality and contribution to the field (in terms of theory, findings and/or methodology); it is also because a doctoral programme is not devoted solely to the writing of a thesis, but to many research, organisational and 'communicational' skills (Wisker 2005). Usually, it is the PhD degree, rather than any other, which shapes the academic and professional future of the student. Supervision may be particularly important in those PhD programmes which do not involve assessed coursework (hence the involvement of fewer academic staff) than those which do (Acker, Hill and Black 1994). As a form of doctoral level teaching, PhD supervision, which is open to academics in the UK sooner in their careers than in many other European countries, is something to be aspired to (Manathunga 2011), but also to be

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[1] The usual UK terminology is 'thesis' for a PhD and 'dissertation' for an MA.

concerned about; as Lee (2008a: 35) puts it, "doctoral supervision is the peak of the teaching experience for academics. It is a privilege and a responsibility. It is not automatic that we become wonderful supervisors." Indeed it is not, and in this article we illustrate what co-supervisors may not be aware of in terms of their supervisees' concerns, in particular issues related to time and to varying co-supervisor advice and feedback.

What is doctoral supervision?

Supervision (both solo- and co-) is an interesting mixture of the private (it typically takes place in a small office, often with the door closed) and the institutional. It is also likely to be shaped both by national requirements and by those embodied in a given University's documentation, for example a section on 'Supervisors' responsibilities'[2] in Codes of Practice – such that the PhD supervisor should make the student aware of (a) whether they are producing work of an satisfactory or unsatisfactory standard, and (b) relevant conferences, academic societies and research groups. Within this, University Schools/Faculties and Departments will have their own documented and assumed obligations, roles, rights and responsibilities, diversity probably varying with the number of research students in question.

A basic point is that, in the UK at least, PhD students rarely choose their supervisor(s), but rather, when they are notified by the University that their application for PhD study has been successful, they are informed at the same time who their supervisor(s) will be. Whatever the supervisory arrangements put in place, however, a given student will not undertake the PhD journey with advice only from the assigned supervisor(s): in the UK typically at panels along the way other academics will read and approve (or not) samples of his or her doctoral writing. But this in itself does not constitute co-supervision.

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[2] 'Supervisor' is UK terminology, equivalent to the US 'advisor'.

Beyond institutional arrangements, Moira Peelo (2010), like us, conceptualises supervision as a form of teaching, given the expectation of substantial learning by the supervisee over the process. As suggested above, though, learning goes both ways – for the supervisor, in terms of process as much as academic content. In an influential paper, John Hockey (1997) proposed the term *operational craft* to encompass the combination of supervisory practices, which after conducting interviews with 89 supervisors working in the social sciences he identified as *balancing, foreseeing, timing, critiquing, informing* and *guiding* (see also Acker et al. 1994). Supervisors' understandings may be informed and influenced by practices experienced when they themselves were PhD students (Lee 2007; 2008a, b). However, what *happens* in supervision is highly variable, partly because of the sometime 'private' nature of the supervision experience, and particular supervisor-supervisee situations, each of which will have its own specificities, including changing written and spoken academic (and perhaps social) discourse practices over a given PhD trajectory.

Given the importance of the PhD project and the length of a PhD programme, it is not surprising that aims have been characterised not only as 'educational' but also 'moral' (Cree 2012). Pole (1998) points wryly to an early definition by the National Postgraduate Committee (1995) of supervision as: 'a moral contract which lasts until one of the three - supervisor, student or research undertaking - expires' (266). We would suggest however that while some supervisors accept their supervisory practices as having a moral dimension (for example, to support the student through thick and thin), others see supervision rather as 'professional' (for example, that if there is a problem, this should be dealt with ethically and according to the correct institutional procedures). Supervisees are likely to vary similarly in their expectations. While the research undertaking may 'expire' in the positive sense that it has run its course, resulting in 'submission', a successful viva and graduation, and while neither supervisor nor student are likely to literally expire, what may expire is an originally

healthy relationship between the two. If there are two co-supervisors, there is a further 'moral' dimension in the expectations the two supervisors have of each other.

Doctoral supervision has received increasing attention of late in the academic literature, in particular educational literature. Complementing Hockey (1997), work has been done on the range of supervisory tasks (Haksever and Manisali 2000; Lee 2007, 2008a, b; Murphy, Bain, and Conrad 2007), as well as on supervisor-supervisee relationships (Chapman and Sork 2001; Ives and Rowley 2005; Murphy, Bain, and Conrad 2007; Wegener and Tanggaard 2013) and rather differently in terms of advice on how supervision practices *should* be carried out (Peelo 2010; Phillips and Pugh 2005; Wisker 2005). Methodologically, most work is based on interview data; for example, Cree's (2012) exploration of expectations and experiences of international PhD students of supervision (see also Hein, Lawson, & Rodriguez 2011); sometimes the methodology is case studies, informed by in-depth interviews. The topic is thus largely operationalised in terms of *reported understandings* of the participants in doctoral supervision. Our study is in line with this, reporting perceptions of co-supervision participants, i.e. doctoral supervisors and supervisees who are involved in co-supervisory schemes.

What is doctoral co-supervision?

Co-supervision, in contrast to supervision in general, has been relatively underexplored, a situation which we hope to play a role in redressing. Co-supervision can be broadly understood (including in this paper) as the formally agreed, regular supervision of a research student by two or more academics (Manathunga 2011). Like all supervision, it aims to facilitate effective progress for the student in her or his research project. In its broad sense, in the UK it was explicitly recommended some time ago first by the Council for National

Academic Awards Research (CNAA 1989), which stipulated the appointment of 'supervisory teams' (a concept which as shown is clearly open to different interpretations) for institutions of higher education which were then outside the University sector, and later by the Harris report of postgraduate education in the UK (1996). Martin Harris wrote:

> It will be important for individual institutions, which do not currently meet the conditions for HEFCE research funding in respect of pgr students which we have recommended but which wish to do so, to develop co-supervision and regional co-operative arrangements, to ensure access for those seeking pgr study, particularly on a p-t basis, in their region, and in order that talented supervisors are used effectively (5.39, 57; cited in Pole [1998]).

Clearly, this entails co-supervision not within but across institutions. Pole labels Harris' characterisation of co-supervision a 'safety net', though it could be also described as a 'deficit model'. But is co-supervision only or mainly to be used by low-achieving but aspiring institutions?

More recently, and rather differently, the need for a 'supervisory team' has been explicitly stated in the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)[3], 'the independent body entrusted with monitoring, and advising on, standards and quality in UK higher education'. The QAA for Higher Education Document of 2011[4], 'Indicator 10', proposes that:

> Each research student has a supervisory team containing a main supervisor who is the clearly identified point of contact (17).

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[3] http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en (accessed Aug. 5, 2014).

[4] http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/quality-code-B11.pdf (accessed Jan. 19 2015)

One reason given for having a 'team' is that this 'provides valuable development opportunities for staff, giving them a grounding in the skills required to become an effective research supervisor' (18), which assumes that one supervisor has more expertise and/or experience than the other (what Guerin, Green and Bastalich (2011) call a 'pyramid structure'). Supervisee-centred reasons are that 'Breadth of experience and knowledge across the supervisory team ensures that the student always has access to someone with experience of supporting research students through to successful completion of their programme' and that 'Between them, the supervisors and, where relevant, other members of the supervisory team, ensure that research students receive sufficient support and guidance to facilitate their success' (18). This is particularly relevant, even essential, when the research project is interdisciplinary in nature. And to this we can add that working with a supervisory team can help prepare the student for collaborative research projects later in their career.

While the document also observes that supervision arrangements vary (17), it nevertheless assumes a 'main supervisor' ('an identified single point of contact'), with the 'team' potentially including other supervisors, research staff in the subject, and departmental advisers to postgraduate students, one of whom may be a 'second supervisor'. Any notion of substantial and even equally shared co- or joint supervision[5] with supervisors of equal *supervisory* (if not institutional) status – the situation reported in this paper – however is missing in the document.

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[5] In this paper we refer to 'co-' rather than 'joint' supervision, as this is the usual terminology of the department in question. 'Joint' is common in the literature and we use this adjective when reporting the work of others who use this term. We do not make a conceptual distinction between the two terms. Others refer to 'team supervision', including arrangements with only two supervisors (Manathunga 2011).

An obvious issue with co-supervision is the extra dimension of communication required, including discussion and planning between the co-supervisors, the co-supervisors' provision of oral and written feedback, including to draft chapters, students' perceived needed support being articulated to both co-supervisors, and all three making arrangements to meet and to allocate work. Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh (2005)[6] in *How to Get a PhD* point to a range of potential problems here, including conflicting advice and 'unproductive games' (between supervisors, between supervisee and supervisors). They also warn against fragmentation of supervisor responsibility, and the risk of a lack of a broad research perspective. Their advice is that co-supervised doctoral students 'manage' their co-supervisors by getting agreement on their different areas of responsibility, and by ensuring that both supervisors are kept involved with the progress of the research and informed about each other's comments (see also Guerin et al. 2011).

Co-supervision of doctoral projects is occasionally mentioned in the empirical literature on supervision in general, for example, Trevor Heath (2002) and John Hockey (1997). Some of the 89 supervisors interviewed by Hockey were part of 'supervisory teams'. However, in relation to early ideas about the primary function of co-supervision being 'staff development', Hockey observes that

> features such as pressures on time, and division of supervisory labour … meant that while students were jointly supervised, there was little actual transmission of supervisory craft between supervisors (62).

From a different perspective, after a large scale questionnaire study of doctoral students from different disciplines, Heath (2002) writes that

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[6] The first edition was published in 1987, the fifth in 2010.

> [w]hen a comparison was made of the level of satisfaction with … aspects of supervision between those who had an associate supervisor(s) and those who had a single supervisor, no differences were found (45).

These two observations provide a reminder that while co-supervision has potential benefits for supervisors and/or supervisees, these may be very different potential benefits.

Co-supervision as the actual *focus* of a study is relatively rare, although, it seems, increasing (Manathunga 2011). Typically some of those involved in a set of co-supervision arrangements are interviewed, and recommendations are made. Most broadly, Christopher Pole (1998) looked at the research environment, facilities, culture and milieu and experiences of postgraduate research, and interviewed 300 PhD students within six disciplines in 18 UK universities. He confirmed that joint supervision tended to be 'disciplinary distinctive': much more common in the natural sciences and engineering (where there may be three or more supervisors in a 'team', with each member playing a particular role) than in the arts and social sciences. Where co-supervisory arrangements did exist, the student was likely to have 'only' two co-supervisors and one was likely to be the 'senior partner'. In accordance with Harris, Pole noted that joint supervision 'also acted as a means of providing training in supervision for inexperienced staff' (264) – a point also noted in the later QAA (2011) document. Katja Lahenius and Heini Ikävalko (2012) looked more abstractly at *models* of co-supervision, using the perspectives of co-supervised Finnish PhD students from a range of disciplines. They proposed a three-type model: *complementary, substitutive* and *diversified*, and argue for more opportunities for students to identify additional supervisors themselves (with a view to complementarity and diversification) over their doctoral programme.

The constitution of the supervisory team is a concern in Ives and Rowley's (2005) study of PhD students' *progress and outcomes* in an Australian University. Ives and Rowley concluded that 'there should be two active supervisors as part of the formal supervisory

arrangements' (552), the *active* nature appearing to help both progress and satisfaction. They cite the case of two co-supervised students who did not have problems when one of the supervisors had to be absent, because the remaining supervisor 'was known to the student and already familiar with the student's thesis work' (550). They also recommended, strongly, 'that all three meet together at least every 3 months and that both supervisors receive written work' (552). Note that this does not exclude *some* meetings with one supervisor only, or indeed *some* of the student's work being read by only one supervisor. (Below we show how students' concerns about co-supervision may be related to the nature of meeting arrangements.)

Co-supervision arrangements of course raise issues of power and authority, even before the supervisee comes into the equation. Jacqueline Watts (2010) accordingly looked at role management in team supervision and argues for clarity as regards different supervisory roles, if any, and Catherine Manathunga (2011) considered power relationships between co-supervisors in particular when the co-supervisors have different statuses within the supervisory team. She found that

> supervisors are likely to more carefully regulate their supervisory practice when supervision is conducted in the presence of other colleagues. In a sense, team supervision now ensures that supervisors are watching other supervisors as well as watching the student (49).

'Team supervision' thus offers a more transparent and visible form of supervision than solo-supervision, and this 'mutual surveillance' is the other side of the coin of co-supervisors learning from each other. It may however have undesirable consequences as far as (a few) supervisees are concerned, as we show below.

Other studies largely concerned supervisees. Tom Bourner and Mark Hughes (1991) report on an early informal case study of MPhil co-supervision written by the supervisee (after graduation) and one of his three co-supervisors. Basically a celebration of successful

collaboration, Bourner and Hughes see Philips and Pugh's (1987) above-mentioned 'problems with co-supervision' as being more than counterbalanced by several merits which act to the advantage of the supervisee: 'greater expertise', both the supervisee and co-supervisors being able to get a second opinion, dependency avoidance (for the supervisee), and 'insurance' (e.g. against what happens when a solo supervisor leaves or retires). We return to several of these points. Following on from the studies of Watts (2010) and Manathunga (2011, 2012), Cally Guerin and colleagues (2011) using case studies considered the management of a 'team' of supervisors from the supervisee perspective, arguing that this presents a valuable opportunity for the supervisee as 'project manager': 'active co-ordinator and management of supervision resources' (152).

In the last paper we reference here, Guerin and Green (2013) focussed on a particular issue arising from Guerin *et al.* (2011), that of supervisor diversity of opinion in feedback, too much of which can be frustrating for the student, especially for the international student, a topic on which our own respondents had a lot to say.

Our aim in this study is to explore and understand doctoral supervision arrangements involving two academic staff members in terms of the responses of a range of co-supervisors who are of equal supervisory status, a 'horizontal team' (Watts 2010), which is normal practice in the context, and of the responses of their supervisees. We report findings from a study of doctoral co-supervision in a single Department within an arts and social sciences Faculty in a UK University in which one of us (Jane Sunderland) used to work as a co-supervisor and the other (Pamela Olmos-Lopez) is at the time of writing being supervised. We were but no longer are in a co-supervisory relationship. The wider study was designed to explore what co-supervisors and their supervisees saw as rationales for co-supervision, its strengths and weaknesses, and what they liked and disliked. This paper focuses on these 'likes and dislikes'. While we have some sympathy for Harris' 'safety net' model, we ourselves see

co-supervision as potentially much more positive than this rather 'deficit' characterisation, *potentially* benefitting both supervisee and her/his co-supervisors, a stance supported by many of our respondents, though for different reasons.

This study: Methodology

The Department for this study currently (2015) has 34 full-time members of academic staff, almost all of whom are involved in PhD supervision. Large numbers of doctoral students are also registered at any one time: at the time of our data collection (Spring 2013), the total number of PhD candidates registered in the Department's two doctoral programmes[7] was 140 (75 full-time students and 65 part-time students). 29 students were being co-supervised.

We took as our potential sample these 29 supervisees and *all* members of academic staff of the Department who at the time of writing were potential PhD supervisors (33). As members of the Department, we were known to most of these people. We designed two questionnaires; one for co-supervisors and one for supervisees (available upon request). Both were broadly divided into the same three main Parts, A, B and C. Likes and dislikes, the focus of this study, with perceived rationales for co-supervision, were explored in Part B. (Part A concerned largely 'factual' information, for example about whether meetings usually involved both supervisors, and preferences; Part C asked about on-line co-supervision.) The questionnaires included both closed and open items (see also Abiddin & West [2007] and Frame & Allen [2002] for similar questionnaire content as regards solo supervision). They were anonymous, although respondents willing to be interviewed were asked to give their

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[7] i.e. the 'PhD by Thesis Only', and the 'PhD in Applied Linguistics by Thesis and Coursework'

contact details, which would eventually be deleted. The questionnaire was piloted on two co-supervisors and two co-supervisees. One request and three 'friendly reminders' in the event resulted in 18 completed supervisor questionnaires, and 26 completed supervisee questionnaires. Both groups represented the majority of staff/students involved in co-supervision in the Department. (See also Olmos-López and Sunderland [2013], in which we report some initial work on this study.)

The Part B items concerning 'likes and dislikes' were, for co-supervisors:

(8) What do you like about co-supervision? (please include what you see as benefits here)

(9) What do you dislike about co-supervision? (please include what you see as potential disadvantages here).

and for supervisees:

(8) Assuming that there are things you like and things you dislike about co-supervision,

(a) What do you like about co-supervision? What do you see as its benefits?

(b) What do you dislike about co-supervision?

(c) What can go wrong?

(9) In particular, does the advice and guidance given by one supervisor tend to be compatible with that of the other? Please give details and/or examples.

Question 9 was added to the student questionnaire after it had been piloted, as pilot responses showed the notion of incompatible feedback from the two supervisors to be an issue. We kept these questions open-ended to allow different possible responses. Responses were listed and quantified through frequency counts, and we conflated what we saw as similar and identical ones.

For the second stage of the project, we interviewed co-supervisors and supervisees about their responses in order to garner more in-depth participant understandings. Four supervisees (Supervisee Interviewees A-D) and four co-supervisors (Co-supervisor Interviewees A-D), who had indicated on the questionnaire that they would be willing to be interviewed, were selected. The four supervisees were chosen according to their expressed strength of liking or disliking of co-supervision (two 'extreme likers' and two 'extreme dislikers'). The four co-supervisors were simply those who had co-supervised the greatest number of students over their academic careers. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed broadly. They were analysed in terms of comments which illustrated or amplified the questionnaire data.

Much of the data elicited by questionnaires and interviews constitutes what are probably best called 'reported understandings' (see Block 1998), or sometime 'reported recall' (Lee 2008). While we took as broadly factual what was said about *practices,* for example, who typically constitutes a supervisory meeting (in Part A of the questionnaire), the notion of 'reported understandings' is likely to apply to the participants' responses to questions about likes and dislikes.

Analysis

The basics

All 18 supervisors who completed the questionnaire had experienced co-supervision, with 16 co-supervising at the time of completion. Most had more experience of solo-supervision than co-supervision (this was true of 13, with only three having more experience of co-supervision, and two equal experience of each). The most experienced respondent had co-supervised seven times and the least experienced only once. The mode for current co-supervision arrangements was three supervisees.

Responses to Part A of the questionnaire pointed to a wealth and diversity of experience of co-supervision. Of the 26 supervisee respondents, 24 had two co-supervisors, with one participant affirming she originally had three, and one claiming that in theory he was co-supervised, but this had never been put into practice. So while co-supervision in this Department is a common practice, it is less common for PhD students as a whole (20.7% of all PhD students) than for staff, who are all expected to supervise (solo or co-) up to six 'full time equivalent' doctoral students at any one time. Most co-supervision was on a 50:50 basis – in contrast to the QAA's indication that a 'supervisory team' should have a 'main supervisor' (17), although this could refer to authority rather than time spent. In our experience, 50:50 means that institutional responsibilities, such as the appointment of an External Examiner, and the duty of care, are shared, allocated through professional negotiation, and there is no such thing as a 'Main' or 'Associate' supervisor, even if the co-supervisors are, say, a Lecturer and a Professor. Across different institutions, however, these roles will vary (Lee 2008b; for some examples see Guerin *et al*. 2011). As regards arrangements for meetings, a salient set of responses in Part A indicated that in actual practice 17 supervisees most frequently met both co-supervisors together, although their preferences varied. Meeting all together was preferred by proportionately more supervisees than by co-supervisors.

Below, we report on co-supervisors' and supervisees' responses to the Part B questionnaire items and associated interview prompts about likes and dislikes surrounding co-supervision. The observations that follow refer to the questionnaire responses, unless an interview response is specified.

Likes and dislikes surrounding co-supervision

Co-supervisors

Aside from one member of staff who responded 'Nothing' to the question 'What do you like about co-supervision?', the remaining 15 respondents who were currently co-supervising came up with something positive. The dominant 'like' was 'learning from other colleagues' (both about the topic area and supervisory practices), which runs contrary to Hockey's (1997) finding that 'there was little transmission of supervisory craft practice' (62). Co-supervisors' positive experiences were exemplified in the interviews with: 'I've learnt a lot from co-supervising … by also watching people treat difficult situations' (Supervisor Interviewee C), and 'you can see that similar strategies are used across students, so … that you know x or y is a good idea to do' (Supervisor Interviewee D). There were mentions that the discussion was 'richer' (i.e. including different perspectives) and 'more lively', and indeed that there was more of it, that the student benefitted from the shared expertise, and also that co-supervision made addressing problems easier if and when these arose.

There were, however, several 'dislikes', although interpersonal differences or problems from power differentials between the co-supervisors (Phillips and Pugh 2000, Delamont Atkinson and Parry 2004, Manathunga 2012) did not feature as such (although these were suggested by the co-supervisees). Co-supervisors rather frequently referred to the greater amount of work co-supervision seemed to entail: co-supervising on a 50:50 basis did not seem to mean half the work of supervising a student on a 100% basis, although the amount of 'teaching credit' received for 50:50 co-supervision seemed to assume that it did. Supervisor Interviewee C claimed that co-supervisors still had to read every chapter 'so that I can make the thing coherent'. Co-supervisor Interviewee B relatedly conceded what while spread of supervisor expertise was sometimes necessary, it 'is not sustainable, I mean not in terms of mass, it has to be limited'. Relatedly, many co-supervisors talked about how co-supervision gave an unfair advantage to supervisees. To quote Co-supervisor Interviewee B again: 'other students who don't get co-supervision … might not get the same quantity of feedback',

something that could apply to both spoken and written feedback. This potential inequity was not mentioned by any supervisees.

Logistical problems of arranging face-to-face meetings for three busy people were raised, as were communication problems, in terms both of different understandings of what was to be done, and what was seen in terms of written messages. Co-supervisor Interviewee D also talked about the supervisee playing off the co-supervisors against each other: they had discovered that the student 'was having more meetings with both of us than we were … aware of'. Three co-supervisors also pointed to situations in which one supervisor was seen as pulling their weight more than the other (a 'moral' dimension of supervision). Tensions from conflicting ideas of how to proceed, resulting in confusion for the student, were also identified, for example when to submit the thesis – and this was something mentioned also by the supervisees.

Supervisees

While two supervisees gave no answer to the question of what they liked about co-supervision, the remaining 24 in different words acknowledged the richness of feedback they received, seeing co-supervision as an advantage in particular if their work was read by two experts in the area. However, not all 24 felt entirely positive. Questionnaire Respondent 16 wrote:

> I feel it sometimes an extra burden to work on two domains. Second, I find correcting two supervisors' comments and remarks more stressful. To be frank, I am sometimes jealous of those who have only one supervisor. I assume it is easier.

In response to the question 'What do you dislike about co-supervision?', 11 supervisees explicitly said 'nothing'. Time was also an issue for fewer supervisees than co-supervisors, although six supervisees' dislikes related *mostly* to time: three referred to the time needed to

arrange meetings for the three parties in the co-supervision team, two regarded trying to balance the time spent with each supervisor a problem, and one pointed to the time needed to tell one co-supervisor what was agreed with or said by the other: 'It takes time to always report on meetings to update the supervisor who wasn't there' (Questionnaire Respondent 2), and

> It can be time-consuming and challenging especially if the approaches, viewpoints and demands of the supervisors largely differ. This not only about the supervisors' character but also about the discipline they belong to. (Questionnaire Respondent 1)

Another dislike was conflicting feedback, something which may stem from differences in co-supervisors' epistemological or methodological approaches, or even their style of academic writing (see also Guerin et al. 2011; Lee 2008b). Several supervisees were concerned about this, as actually or potentially impacting negatively on their progress and research development:

> If they have different stands on one question which I'm interested in and plan to go deeper, I'll be confused, not sure whose words to follow (Questionnaire Respondent 7)

> When the supervisors do not agree on one aspect and have different opinions. The possible clash might have a huge impact to the students work and progress (Questionnaire Respondent 24)

> They might hold two totally different points of view, and you are uncertain which way is the better) to go (Questionnaire Respondent 3)

Conflicting advice is of course a communication issue, and is related to how meetings are arranged, i.e. with the supervisors together or separately. The latter can cause problems. Questionnaire Respondent 20 ominously observes: 'Things can go wrong when you do not see each other together'. Questionnaire Respondent 15 expresses this well:

I imagine if you are seeing people at different times, you may get conflicting advice about the way to approach something - which may be confusing/problematic. You would have to be meticulous about keeping records so that the other supervisor was aware of the details about what discussed.

Conflicting advice, and a feeling that one is being pushed in different directions, may bring with it internal or interpersonal as well as intellectual complications: 'the supervisee may be concerned about seeming to prefer one to the other' (Questionnaire Respondent 6). And again:

When feedback is not compatible and when the supervisors have two completely different viewpoints about a certain area/methodology. I would feel torn: wanting to please both supervisors (Questionnaire Respondent 9)

On the other hand, and interestingly, supervisees may feel that conflicting but useful feedback might be being avoided artificially and unhelpfully if the co-supervisors do not express their real position towards a topic. This could be because both are more concerned to (appear to) agree with each other in the interests of harmony and consistency, one or other co-supervisor may fear to be shown up. This was expressed by only two supervisees (though see also Questionnaire Respondent 4 below), but strongly. Questionnaire Respondent 12 wrote:

Both supervisors felt observed by each other and then none of them dare to give me exact directions or explicit pieces of advice. It was as if each of them was afraid of telling me exactly which way to follow because his/her colleague may think that was not the right way to guide a student..... I needed explicit advice and none of them would do so because of feeling observed by his/her colleague. I do not think they became aware of this as it took me sometime I become aware of this myself.

Supervisee Interviewee D (a different person) similarly said: 'It seems they are so respectful to each other that none says what they really think of the work', adding

It seems everything is fixed, everything is fine. I was expecting discussion; learn from both of them as they are experts, but no. There is absolutely no discussion or criticism to each other. It is all too superficial, they agree with each other all the time. I mean, if I write something, and give it to them for reviewing, one reviews it and gives comments ... and the other just agrees on those comments.

There are many possible reasons for this state of affairs (see Manathunga 2012, and also below). However, while this might be the experience, and a negative one, of just these two co-supervisees, their comments provide a timely reminder that PhD students should be able to (and often can) deal with epistemological and methodological differences in their co-supervisors. As Questionnaire Respondent 4 said: 'I don't think conflict of opinions itself is wrong. I can decide which opinion to take and it's good to know there are some different opinions'.

As regards dislikes in relation to the question 'What can go wrong?', two supervisees pointed to issues relating to interpersonal relationships between co-supervisors: 'I think it is very delicate if the supervisors do not like each other' (Supervisee Interviewee B), and

... a situation where I could tell that they do not agree at a personal level could really worry me. I have seen this happen in a different institution and I know this can be very detrimental to a student's progress. (Questionnaire Respondent 25)

What the supervisee sees as interpersonal may of course actually be related to institutional power (Manathunga 2012). And there is also the inevitable issue of comparison – here, in relation to availability, but also more widely:

Comparison between the two supervisors was inevitable and if one is available at all times and the other isn't, as students, we start to have preference for the more available person. (Questionnaire Respondent 12)

Also in terms of what can go wrong, eight supervisees pointed to lack of coordination, communication and/or poor involvement of one or the other co-supervisor (or both) in their project. For example:

> Lack of coordination between the two supervisors, the feeling that one does not need to pull their weight because they assume that the other will step in.... Lack of commitment and 'affiliation' – this is not 'my student' – this is only my student 50%, so s/he counts less than 100% supervisees ... rapport and continuity might suffer (Questionnaire Respondent 2).

Three supervisees noted the possibility of simultaneous retirement, sabbaticals or sickness of both co-supervisors ('If both resign at the same time', Questionnaire Respondent 21) - unlikely, given that retirements and sabbaticals are planned for. Questionnaire Respondent 7 was a little more realistic:

> If one of them is busy while the other is sick, I'll have no meeting in a long time, though two supervisors should have meant much more chances to meet than only having one supervisor.

but was something of a lone voice. It would however be ironic if co-supervisors felt they could *only* see their co-supervisees together.

Discussion

Doctoral co-supervision is clearly more than just a 'safety net' for institutions; it carries advantages noted by both co-supervisors and supervisees. While it may not always happen, 'richer discussion' when all parties meet together is clearly of benefit to all participants – echoing Lahenius and Ikävalko's (2012) positively evaluated *complementary* and *diversified* models of co-supervision. For co-supervisors, the frequently-mentioned 'learning from other colleagues' – about academic content as well as supervisory practices -

was something they reportedly *liked*, rather than seeing it as merely a suitable form of professional development. This extended to the more experienced colleague learning from the less experienced one. These advantages, however, were tempered by identified disadvantages. For the co-supervisors, most salient was workload: although co-supervision, formally (say) on a 50:50 basis, is associated with 50% of the 'teaching credit' for full, solo supervision, the actual workload (in terms of face-to-face meetings and reading drafts) is reportedly almost always more than this. Any administrative 'solution' in terms of increasing the teaching credit would simply formalise the entailed inequity (identified by several co-supervisors) as far as *solo-supervisees* are concerned. And while the *ideal* might be – and arguably is - co-supervision as normative, if 50:50 co-supervision is always more time-consuming in total, this would be extremely difficult in Departments with large numbers of research students within research-led Universities. The two issues of principle and practicalities should not however become blurred: the first is whether co-supervision (potentially for all) is something that should be aimed for, and the second is, if so, what would be needed in terms of institutional support here, and can this be provided?

Supervisees were on the whole more positive about co-supervision than were their co-supervisors, although they also appeared more sensitive to management and communication issues, and things that could go wrong here, than their co-supervisors. For co-supervisors, the question of not sacrificing healthy intellectual disagreement, while trying to maintain levels of consistency, harmony and avoiding sending confusing messages about the supervisee's research and thesis-writing, is clearly a tricky balancing act. Guerin and Green (2013) ask

> why is ... disagreement between supervisors so unsettling to research students? After all, we know that there are always discussions and debates in academic life, that the intellectual life of disciplines thrives on knowledge being rigorously critiqued and contested (327).

They address this in terms of power within the supervisory group and the supervisee's concern about 'failure to acquire the cultural capital needed for progression in this environment' (328), and recommend 'agency in more active management of the power relations between all members of the supervisory team' (329), and clarity around whether, when there is a 'principle supervisor', s/he is a 'final arbiter' (331). They also propose, constructively, that 'critique of supervisors' diverse feedback should be welcomed as an indication of a student's growing agency and autonomy as a fully fledged researcher' (329).

While co-supervisors may be more concerned with supervisor workload and supervisee equity, supervisees with issues of communication (including but going beyond academic feedback), we argue that this is not a case of greater awareness needed equally by both parties of the other's perspectives. Supervisees, each of whom can be seen as a single 'case' of (co-)supervision over their particular doctoral programme, may not be aware of the 'big picture' of doctoral (co-)supervision within a given Department; there is no reason why they should be. Institutional issues such as supervisors' 'teaching credits' for doctoral supervision are simply not their concern. Supervisors, on the other hand, are entrusted and paid to supervise, and are likely to have more than one doctoral supervisee at any given point in time, and many more over their academic career. This arguably behoves co-supervisors to be aware of doctoral students' possible concerns, even though these concerns may obtain in the context of a likely general contentment with their co-supervision.

Recommendations for practice and for further research

These responses do not point, we suggest, to the need for absolute consistency of supervision or co-supervision practices within a given Department, even (or perhaps especially) in the interests of 'fairness'. Rather, as with but rather differently from solo supervision, there is a need for principled flexibility and sensitivity to individual needs

(Bitusikova 2009). There are good educational and moral grounds for arguing that as supervisees have different intellectual and psychological needs, these require different professional responses, even though this may mean a (necessarily) co-supervised doctoral student receiving more input/feedback than a solo-supervised one. This also acknowledges the need for negotiation between all parties, at the start of the supervisee's doctoral programme, to ensure that the 'team' is a productive one, as well as during it. This may involve the establishment of 'ground rules' in the case of disagreement between the co-supervisors, and the role of the supervisee here: we should take seriously Guerin et al.'s (2011) 'clearest finding', i.e. that "team arrangements, when they are successful, demand significant skill and proactive management from students" (151). In turn, more institutional support and training for co-supervisors may also be needed. (See also Manathunga (2011) on the pedagogical implications of doctoral team supervision.)

Any institutional training for supervisors should not assume solo supervision, and discussion of co-supervision should highlight issues of communication, not forgetting the question of whether and when what may be healthy academic disagreement should be sacrificed in the interests of (a possibly unfruitful) harmony (see also Pearson and Brew 2002). A particularly fruitful topic for research might be just *how* co-supervision is itself used for supervisor training, given that this is one reason for the practice.

This study has focussed on face-to-face doctoral co-supervision. However, and perhaps increasingly, much doctoral supervision in general and co-supervision in particular is done on-line, fully or partially. Online co-supervision usefully enables meetings even when the two supervisors (and perhaps the supervisee) are at different points on the globe, but in turn raises further communication issues, and may then also repay analysis.

As questionnaire and interview data on co-supervision are limited, diary studies of two co-supervisors and their supervisee would provide further elicited data. However, and as

practices cannot be assumed from reported understandings, we agree with Anne Lee (2008a) that naturally-occurring data would also be very useful (see also Li and Seale 2007), and that a complementary, observational study of co-supervision practices could be very enlightening. We also agree with Ruth Kane, Susan Sandretto and Chris Heath (2002) that research examining 'only what university teachers say about their practice and does not directly observe what they do is at risk of telling half the story' (177); the same may be true of research on doctoral supervision. Observational work on doctoral supervision as a naturally-occurring speech event is lacking, but could bring to light aspects of the process which interviewees and questionnaire respondents are unaware of, unwilling to report, or consider unimportant. While observing face-to-face co-supervision meetings in small, already crowded offices, and recording them, may pose an ethical and investigative challenge, it would very probably, and usefully, supplement the little we still know about actual co-supervisory practice.

Despite the obvious discursive nature of supervision, relevant academic work has not on the whole been discursively-oriented, although academic spoken discourse itself has witnessed a burgeoning of articles (Recski 2005; Simpson et al. 2002; Swales 2001, 2004), and the 'supervision meeting' is clearly a genre of academic spoken discourse (Swales 2004). The discourse of *co*-supervision raises a host of further discursive issues which have been highlighted by our data. Here, Manathunga (2012: 33) proposes analysing dominance, turn taking, turn length, repairs and hesitations, tentativeness and laughter as a way to identify "some of the displays of power ... of [co]supervisors and students". This might be usefully further related to the notion of supervision characteristically as a literacy practice (Street 1993) of 'talk around the text', one the supervisee has written, or 'talk about texts' (Moss 1996), perhaps one she is reading (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Jaffe 2003), co-supervision constituting a three-faceted conversation.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how doctoral co-supervision is not just 'usual' supervision which happens to involve one other person, but a rather different, and established, institutional and educational practice. Something which seems not to be considered in the literature is however the pattern of supervision across a Department or wider institution. If co-supervision is not automatic or even the default arrangement, any Departmental or other institutional decisions about co-supervision need to consider its relationship with solo-supervision, and issues of actual or perceived inequity as regards co-supervisors and supervisees.

Our findings, like those of others, point to co-supervision as a complex web of institutional and interpersonal relationships imbued with power but also opportunities with considerable diversity across individual co-supervision arrangements. Accordingly, although we – like most of our respondents, and indeed other writers on doctoral co-supervision - are broadly in favour of supervision in principle, we have shown how it is impossible to generalise about its benefits or otherwise without considering the relevant contingencies. Here we concur with Watts (2010), who also sees co-supervision as offering 'considerable added value', 'provided that any disagreements within the team are carefully managed and not allowed to be disruptive of the student's progress' (338-339). As co-supervision shows no sign of going away in the social sciences – indeed, the opposite may be the case, and for good reasons – it accordingly merits further investigation, but also institutional support, both of which we hope this paper will stimulate.

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