

A Question of Fit – Or How to Find the Right Supervisor for My Dissertation?¹

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I used to think of the term "Doktorvater" as being out of fashion. However, when my colleagues mocked me for defending my "Doktormutter" at an international conference, I realized that the supervisory relationship also involves a strong emotional bond.

The supervisory relationship within the framework of a doctorate is, of course, first of all a professional one. Frequently, supervisors pay their doctoral students because they work as research associates at the chair or in a research project where they can write their doctoral thesis in their spare time. Graduate schools that emulate American PhD-programs regulate the supervisory relationship by contract, too. The supervision agreements are to ensure that the supervisor meets their supervisees (sic) at least twice a year which they even have to confirm in writing. The extent to which this bureaucratization actually increases the quality of supervisory performance is questionable, though. Many doctoral students receive advice and feedback from other sources, and this is a good thing. Supervisors are not omniscient, although some may think they are. The ideal supervisor is theoretically, methodologically and empirically knowledgeable in the field of dissertation. But her/his main function is to accompany the doctoral student and to ensure that s/he completes her/his PhD successfully, if possible, within the period of three to four years. The supervision of the content of the thesis is an essential part of this process but it is by no means the only aspect doctoral supervisors can do.

Why there is no panacea or universal model

So what is a good supervisory relationship? Experience shows that panacea or "one-size-fits-all" models do not exist. Every doctoral student is different and so is the supervisor. Therefore, one should not only choose a supervisor because s/he fits with the chosen topic and has a good scientific reputation. S/he should be suitable to one's own supervisory concept. Of course, this means that the student knows, first of all, which kind of mentoring s/he needs. Secondly, the potential mentor needs to have a concept the student is familiar with, and thirdly, and most importantly, the student has a choice. Who decides against a

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position as a research associate or rejects a scholarship because the professor's support concept does not seem appropriate to his / her own needs? It is much more important to find out as early as possible which kind of doctoral student you are, convey this to your supervisor, and hope that he or she is willing to accommodate your expectations. This is neither naive nor trivial. Of course, professors prefer independent and uncomplicated doctoral students. But they are also idealistic or vain enough to believe that they can play a decisive role for the success of a doctorate. At the same time, the contribution of the supervisor is by no means limited to advice for finding a relevant research question, dealing with theoretical and methodological obstacles, or overcoming difficulties that occur when dealing with empirical findings. Often is equally important to encourage students not to surrender in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems, or to assure them that everything will be fine in the end. The right mix of content and emotional support, however, differs depending on the type of doctoral student.

Self-drivers, top-runners, rough diamonds and imposters

Experience shows that there are very different types of doctoral students. All of them are equally motivated and qualified which should be ensured by an increasingly competitive selection process. Rather, doctoral students differ considerably in terms of self-confidence and their ability to reflect. The *self-drivers* possess both and are in all respects unproblematic but also quite rare. The *top-runners* are highly self-confident and (therefore) reflect little about possible problems and obstacles on their way to their PhD. They present a first draft in impressive time. The comprehensive revisions, which are usually necessary, cannot shatter their self-confidence. Their requirements for support are therefore mainly content-oriented. The rough *diamonds* are brilliant but in need of intensive support. Their high level of reflection and their low self-confidence leaves them unable to live up to their own standards. They understand every small theoretical and methodological trap, and despair of the impossibility of escaping. Advice and encouragement are not sufficient; they must be convinced that they have no fundamental problem or that it is time to be pragmatic. Above all, they must internalize that ultimately it is not theirs to judge whether their work is good or bad. The most difficult cases are the *imposters*. Similar to rough *diamonds*, they often fail to meet their own requirements without, however, reflecting that they are their own biggest obstacles. Instead, they blame external factors – too little time, too bulky empiricism, too little support, strenuous colleagues, stressful partners. And because these problems do not have

anything to do with the dissertation, they also do not talk about them; rather, they convey the impression that everything works fine with their dissertation. The revelation comes – if at all – when the first chapter is due, a conference paper has to be written on their own, or the extension of the contract is due. In these cases, supervision can only help to a certain extent – at best, it can attempt to induce reflexion processes which, however, rarely lead to advances in the doctoral program without professional help.

Those are, of course, ideal-types, which are hard to find in reality. Doctoral students, however, usually fit on particular type more than the other three. Ideally, again, the supervisor would try to adapt her/his style of supervision accordingly. However, such a situational approach has its limits, which are not only related to temporal resources, but also have to do to with the personality of the supervisor.

The wise man of the mountain, the micromanager and the cluck hen

There are also four different ideal-types which focus on the aspects different supervisors emphasize in content and motivation. The classic supervisor resembles the figure of the "*wise man of the mountain*" that enjoys absolute authority in his discipline and among his students. He only discusses the dissertation two or three times, but then his comments are usually ground-breaking. The self-driver and top-runners will listen to them respectfully, take the essentials for themselves, and implement them in their work. The rough diamonds will continue to do exegesis for weeks and months in order to capture the meaning of the stimuli as precisely as possible, whereas the imposters will put them aside as unhelpful if they will slow him or her down. The counter model is the *micromanager*, who supervises every step of the dissertation to be able to intervene early enough. The regularly required progress reports and feedback meetings are annoying and superfluous for self-starters and top-runners. Imposters are forced to face their problems at an early stage. The rough diamonds may run the risk of losing sight of the big picture because they come up with new problems at every intermediate step. They are better supervised by the *Cluck hen*. In contrast to the notion of the term, it does not refer only to female supervisors; male supervisors may pamper their students, too. In addition to the content-related support, cluck hens provide the emotional support to deal with problems which are often related to a lack of self-confidence rather than insurmountable content-related difficulties. The fourth ideal-type can only be described using vulgar language. S/he simply doesn't give a damn.

Make it fit!

While the fourth ideal-type should absolutely be avoided if possible, doctoral students have to communicate their own needs as clearly as possible to the other three types of supervisors. Supervisors are happy to assume that their doctoral students are all self-drivers or top-runners. The wise man of the mountain will not realize for a long time that he is dealing with an imposter or a rough diamond. The micromanager can be very demotivating for self-starters and top-runners. The individualisation of the supervising situation requires a communication process in which the supervisor in particular should adjust to the doctoral students. Doctoral students should articulate their expectations early on. The wise man of the mountain can then descend from his mountain when a crisis in the dissertation process reveals itself between two annual meetings with one of his rough diamonds. The micromanager should curb her or his control over self-starters and show confidence in the rough diamonds. And the cluck hen has to learn to let go and accept that s/he cannot solve the problems of imposters and rough diamonds.

If this communication process fails, it is still possible to find a second supervisor. In the course of the progressive modernization of the German higher education system, this does not necessarily have to be a (German) professor anymore. A complete change of the supervisor should only be considered if everything else has failed.

In order to communicate expectations and needs, it is also important to clarify where to go after the doctorate. A dissertation that aims to qualify for a scientific career is subject to special requirements. The assessment of the suitability for a scientific career is, above all – but not exclusively – based on the supervisor's judgement. To err is human (Pope). Yet, anyone who knows early on that s/he is going to seek a well-paid job in the private sector or public administration can spend less time on attending scientific conferences and writing theoretical essays and do internships or write policy papers instead.