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## BEYOND PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS: RESEARCH SUPERVISION FRAMED AS A COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOUR IN ONLINE STRUCTURED DOCTORAL PROGRAMMES

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	This paper explores how online structured doctoral programmes (OSDPs) can sustain more fully the collective dimension of supervision for student emancipation leading to academic success. The paper answers the following research question: What mechanisms, if any, are responsible for successful online supervision leading to student academic success, and under what conditions can this occur? Moreover, what does academic success mean for the different parties involved?
Background	Recent research on online supervision has highlighted that such supervision's effectiveness relies on creating a relationship based on converging personal expectations and preferences, generating a common language between supervisors and supervisees to assure student emancipation for academic success. Further research reveals that creating such a relationship is more challenging in an online environment because of increased student isolation due to distance issues. We, however, contend that this approach is limiting as it fails to consider its collective aspect for enculturation purposes more fully, which is relevant for student emancipation and academic success.
Methodology	The research relies on autoethnography, focusing on the self as a relational subject generating social relations as a basis for collective reflexivity relevant for a successful supervision experience. This paper employs the critical realist paradigm and, more specifically, Archer's reflexivity approach for causal explanations.

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Contribution	This paper discusses how collective reflexivity triggered through social relations impacts student enculturation generating their agency for emancipation, and how such emancipation can have a causal effect on student academic success. However, academic success can differ in meaning depending on the nature of reflexivity that students embrace.
Findings	This study identifies that supervision generates relationships that can be performative or emancipatory in nature, depending on how students engage in a reflexive discourse relevant to their enculturation leading then to emancipation and academic success.
Recommendations for Practitioners	This paper explores the problem of how higher education institutions can support a more collective approach towards online supervision with students relying more fully on their social network for the successful completion of their studies.
Recommendation for Researchers	Researchers should explore and understand interpretive inquiry and qualitative research through the lens of critical realism, primarily through Archer's reflexivity approach. Reflexivity refers to people making choices depending on their internal conversations, impacting how they think and act, and consequently on their agency for social emancipation.
Impact on Society	Such considerations have the potential to widen the discourse regarding the purpose and role of online supervision, which should encourage students to engage with others in collective reflexivity to become critical beings for the emancipation of all parties involved.
Future Research	Future research should consider how OSDPs could help to support a supervisory process encompassing the individual and performative approaches to supervision complying with institutional and economic demands with a more collective and emancipatory approach by focusing on social relations supporting doctoral candidates' emancipation as critical beings.
Keywords	autoethnography, collective reflexivity, corporate agency, critical realism, online supervision

## BACKGROUND AND AIM

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Research on supervision as a professional development area is relatively new and has undergone some recent changes. Alternative models to the traditional “master-apprentice” approach have been triggered by the introduction of structured doctoral programmes based on team supervision and cohort teaching requiring a more formalised approach to supervision (Ambrasat & Tesch, 2017). With the massification and internationalisation of higher education, institutions are providing new forms of doctoral provision, such as professional doctorates, some of which are fully online structured doctoral programmes (OSDPs) and designed for mid-career professionals engaging mostly in part-time studies to advance their career (Armsby & Costley, 2019; Boud & Lee, 2009; Jones, 2018; Lee, 2018; Scott, Brown, Lunt, & Thorne, 2004). By “online professional doctorates”, we refer here to doctoral programmes using digital technology for communication (Dowling & Wilson, 2017) adding, thereby, a layer of complexity to supervision (Hutchings, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

Changing from the traditional “master-apprentice” model with its fuzzy contours towards a more formalised and systematised approach to supervision adds, however, different challenges to the supervision process in terms of the expectations of the parties involved. As pointed out by Meyer, Shanahan and Laugksch (2005) and Metcalfe (2006), doctoral students seem to differ among themselves and with their supervisors in their understanding of what the doctoral research experience involves; this may turn supervision into a prescriptive, opaque and irrational process that affects stu-

dents' completion of their studies (Grant, 1999; Kiley & Mullins, 2005). Fillery et al. (2017) argue that supervisory relationships can be different in form depending on the multiple expectations of the parties concerned, an argument also advanced in earlier research by Kiley and Mullins (2005), who emphasise the different dimensions of the notion of supervision between supervisors and supervisees. Such diverging views on supervision raise two ontological questions: first, what should successful supervision look like, to lead students to academic success? (A question that also involves what success means from the student perspective.) Second, what type of critical beings should supervision produce to turn students into emancipated researchers, rather than mere recipients of institutional agendas concerned with increasing completion rates?

Asking such questions implies exploring more fully the causes, conditions and circumstances under which successful supervision can occur. This paper addresses the following research question: What generative mechanisms, if any, are responsible for successful online supervision leading to student emancipation as researchers and to academic success, and under what conditions can this occur? By mechanisms, we refer here to any action or steps of action that have the necessary power to lead to a change in a particular context (Hartwig, 2007). Searching for mechanisms implies adopting a different research paradigm than those offered by positivist or constructivist perspectives, as mechanisms are not always observable and, consequently, cannot always be tested or described (Sayer, 1992). We adopt the critical realist paradigm and, more specifically, Archer's (2003) reflexivity approach as our theoretical frameworks, as they match the problem under investigation. We use autoethnography as our research method to explore one of the authors' own experience as a supervisee, focusing on the self as a relational subject to explore and to understand what caused her emancipation as a researcher and under what conditions this led to a successful supervision experience. This paper begins with a detailed literature review on supervision, both face-to-face and in OSDPs, followed by the methodological framework. We then explain and discuss the findings. This paper concludes with the theoretical implications that it is hoped will take this discussion on supervision a step further.

## THEORISING SUPERVISION

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Research on OSDPs seems to acknowledge that there is little or no difference between face-to-face and online supervision in terms of procedures and processes, such as length of study, research ethics and examination standards (Gray & Crosta, 2018). Gray and Crosta (2018), however, argue that the introduction of the online and the professional dimensions into research imposes a new slant on the supervisory process and more pressure on supervisor ability to supervise online students. Supervisors must now be proficient in online communication technologies and the student work environment and overcome additional challenges, such as indirect contact with supervisees, engaging in efficient communication and feedback, and developing trust (Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

Further challenges have been highlighted by Dowling and Wilson (2017) and Hutchings (2017), who emphasise how online learning can increase uncertainty in doctoral student capacities to engage with such technologies; thus, increasing student isolation and the feeling of disengagement from the online community and, simultaneously, undermining student confidence as researchers, straining the timely completion of their studies. Banks, Joyes, and Wellington (2008) emphasise similar challenges for doctoral students engaged in online doctoral studies, despite the approach's potential for flexibility in the supervisory process. Conversely, Maor, Ensor, and Fraser (2015) argue that technological tools can help reduce the sense of disconnectedness for doctoral students and increase their sense of belonging through peer support. The understanding of institutional requirements and remaining connected are further challenges that are highlighted by Gray and Crosta (2018). These challenges create tensions in the supervision relationship between the supervisor(s) and supervisee. Meanwhile, Lee (2008, 2012, 2018) suggests that such tensions also arise from supervisor expectations and preferences about supervision ensuing from their own experiences as doctoral students, leading to different practices, a point also put forward by Kumar and Johnson (2017) and Maor et al. (2016).

To overcome such tensions, Lee (2008, 2012, 2018) proposes a structured supervision framework based on five dimensions – the functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development – to sustain a common language between candidates and supervisors to bridge their divergent expectations and preferences on supervision. Lee (2018) describes the functional approach as performative, as it offers the possibility to measure research progress by setting clear milestones. Enculturation designates belonging to a cohort, a particular discipline and its culture. Critical thinking implies thinking in new ways encouraged by supervisors, and emancipation refers to the supervisor's ability to support the doctoral student in becoming an autonomous researcher. Finally, relationship development concerns friendship, wisdom and agreeing on expectations and need, as well as preventing conflict.

However, does Lee's theoretical framework also apply to supervision in OSDPs? According to Gray and Crosta (2018), there is an overlap between face-to-face and online supervision in three of Lee's dimensions, namely enculturation, emancipation and healthy relationship (p. 3). There is divergence, however, about the meaning of these concepts. Lee (2012, 2018) defines the concept of enculturation as a process introducing the doctoral student into the academic world and its culture; whereas, for Gray and Crosta (2018), enculturation refers more to how the doctoral student engages with the academic world in terms of belonging. Emancipation, for Lee, refers to supervisors supporting students in their transformation; whereas, Gray and Crosta's notion of emancipation refers to the student "becom[ing] a researcher in their own right" (p. 8). Finally, the concept of relationship refers, in Lee's supervision framework, to the idea of mutual respect and agreeing about expectations concerning the research project and new knowledge acquisition. Meanwhile, Gray and Crosta understand the concept of relationship as active engagement of all parties involved, as well as the availability to partake in activities and supporting students during the supervisory process.

Gray and Crosta (2018) regard functional considerations, in terms of regulations, rules and norms, as additional challenges in the online environment due to the distance. They also argue that remaining connected is a further challenge for online supervision as this entails having a sense of belonging, another word for enculturation, which is supported by maintaining a good relationship between the supervisor(s) and the supervisee. They fail, however, to explain what "a good relationship" entails and how it can come to exist, especially in an online setting. Kumar and Johnson (2017) and Hutchings (2017) also reported tensions related to the socialisation process within OSDPs, as students conduct their research at a distance, contributing to their social and academic isolation. Indeed, enculturation in an online environment occurs mainly through online media, whereby students gather information about their educational environment and their supervisors' background through indirect communication channels. Using primarily online media can, therefore, lead to isolation due to weak communication between the supervisors and the students, which challenges the students' sense of belonging. In turn, this issue can affect the quality of the relationship between students and their supervisors, impacting eventually the completion of their studies and, thus, the notion of academic success (Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2010; Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

What stands out from these studies is that they describe the effectiveness of supervision, be it face-to-face or online, primarily from an individual perspective shaped by structural norms and regulations, which impinge on the situations doctoral students encounter. Little, however, is reported about the interplay between supervision as a social structure and doctoral students as human agents to explain what makes supervision effective for student emancipation leading to academic success. Indeed, these studies fail to explore and explain more fully the causes responsible for a successful supervisory relationship and the conditions and circumstances under which this relationship is useful for student emancipation leading to academic success. Moreover, these studies provide little explanation about what emancipation and academic success mean for the different parties involved. Therefore, new insights into the supervisory relationship need to be explored to overcome such gaps (Carr, Galvin, & Hutchings, 2017; Malfroy, 2005; Maor, Ensor, & Fraser, 2016; Todres, 2010), which is what this paper offers by using an explanatory critique based on critical realism.

## **METHODOLOGY: SEARCHING FOR CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS**

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There is scope to draw on the critical realist paradigm to search for causal explanations of social interactions within the supervisory process. Critical realists seek explanations of social issues through causal analyses of a deeper reality, rather than by engaging in the description or the testing of events or experiences (Fletcher, 2017). Critical realists support the idea of a stratified reality that contains mechanisms responsible for the effects that we can perceive or experience, directly or indirectly, to obtain knowledge about the world (Barron, 2013; Bhaskar, 2008a). The concept of mechanism refers in our case to what emerges from a relationship to enhance people's agency for social emancipation. However, several mechanisms can be at play behind an experience or event, whereby some mechanisms are, when triggered, experienced and, thus, observable; whereas others remain inexperienced and hidden (Archer, 2003; Hartwig, 2007). Consequently, mechanisms can have a different effect on people's agency and, therefore, also on their emancipation, depending on how existing social structures enable or constrain that agency to unfold (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 2008b; Maxwell, 2012). Social structures refer, in critical realist terms, to both institutional regulations and norms ordering organisational behaviour, as well as relationships that people create among themselves (Elder-Vass, 2010).

Archer (2003) contends that agency is influenced by how people reflect on their life concerns, followed by actions that address these concerns according to their needs, interests and expectations. "Reflexivity" refers here to the normal mental process by which people consider their own social context to make sense of their actions. Archer (2003) distinguishes four modes of individual reflexivity: the autonomous, the communicative, the meta-reflexive and the fractured. She considers autonomous reflexives as self-confident and pragmatic people who decide on performative actions to accommodate their personal interests, thus reducing anxiety about their future life. Communicative reflexives are people who look to others for their life choices to reduce uncertainty and to ensure that they earn consent for their future actions. Meta-reflexives are people who are ideologically motivated and who reflect upon how their actions can impact the broader social context; however, their reflections do not necessarily reduce uncertainty about their future life. Finally, fractured reflexives are people whose reflexivity is impeded by external contingencies suspending any actions they could eventually undertake to change their doubt about unknown situations (Lundgren-Resenterra, 2017). The dominant mode of reflexivity that students embrace in supervision, therefore, matters for their emancipation and academic success, which is what we discuss in the following section by drawing on one of the author's own experience as a supervisee.

### ***AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A METHOD OF INQUIRY***

This study employed autoethnography as a qualitative inquiry approach (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016; Chang, 2008) to explore the experience that one of the authors had as a supervisee with the co-supervisory team operating within an online structured higher education professional doctorate programme (EdD) offered by a United Kingdom research-intensive university. Why resort to autoethnography to do so? Because, the essence of autoethnography relies on critical self-reflection regarding personal experience about the phenomenon investigated to understand the self with one's environment to create evidence for generalisation (Das & Mullik, 2015). The autoethnographic approach concurs on this aspect with the critical realist perspective, as both reach beyond observation and description of experiences or events to bring to the surface, through self-reflection, the relationship of the researcher with her knowledge about the world (Anderson, 2006; Allen-Collinson, 2016; Das & Mullik, 2015; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Woodward, 2019). The autoethnographic approach also coincides with Archer's reflexivity approach, as both methods use reflexivity as a means to enhance the person's agency for their emancipation through social interactions. By choosing to expose one of the authors' personal stories as a supervisee, we wanted to explore the underlying mechanisms that stimulated the student to become a relational subject relevant to academic emancipation and success. We also wanted to explore the causes that made this experience a collective endeavour by situating it

within a wider social context for a broader understanding of such an experience (Denshire, 2013; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 2009; Woodward, 2019).

### ***LIMITATIONS OF CRITICAL REALIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHY***

Autoethnography has been criticised for its idiosyncratic, unethical and adversative nature, as well as its lack of an analytical approach (Delamont, 2007). We, however, argue that autoethnography exceeds the personal by linking lived experiences of individuals to their social context, whereby its critical component attempts to analyse the underlying causes for such an experience reaching, thus, beyond the merely descriptive. Furthermore, voicing the concerns of the less powerful, namely the supervisees, we addressed Delamont's concern regarding the adversative nature of autoethnography. Concerning the ethical aspect, we integrated, with the role of the co-author belonging to the supervision team, an "objective" viewpoint on the study; thus, limiting researcher bias. However, there are limitations to consider when trying to apply our findings to other people in similar or different situations. Mechanisms can differ from one setting to another, and what causes them to be triggered can vary according to the conditions in which they come to exist, implying that their effects are not always experienced and, therefore, not applicable to all cases. While our findings might be interesting to supervisors and supervisees alike, readers need to determine their own connections to make these findings work in their own context. Indeed, for critical realists, variation in outcomes reveal that the same mechanisms can be at play in different situations, or, conversely, that different mechanisms can be triggered in similar circumstances; thus, accounting for divergent experiences of the same event.

### ***DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS***

Data collection was conducted by using personal memories obtained through self-reflection as the primary source to recall meaningful events or moments from the supervisory experience (Chang, 2008). This approach resembles conducting an auto-interview (Crawley, 2012) involving a "dialogue between one's past and present selves, at times actively with others as well, in which memories and understandings about the past are reconstructed anew" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016, p. 69). Therefore, the data collection relied on the researcher's reflexivity as a means to consider what matters to them in terms of needs and expectations about themselves and their immediate environment (Aull Davies, 2008). In this sense, autoethnography is not pursuing truth claims, but it attempts to find in people's perceptions, perceived by critical realists as real objects or events, the underlying mechanisms that impact them and their immediate environment (Archer, 2003, 2012). Such reflections can be collected in different ways because there is no best way to engage with the "field" in autoethnography (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016). For this paper, we focused on selecting three autoethnographic *vignettes* to retell significant moments from one of the authors' experiences as a supervisee to build personal memory data: choosing the supervisors, navigating relationships and gaining in emancipation for academic success. We included Skype reports from online supervisory meetings (one from the beginning and one from the end of the supervision journey) and Student Progress Reports to corroborate such memories and to produce the most accurate descriptions of these events (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, pp. 3-4). The reports are half-year reports written concomitantly by the primary supervisor and the doctoral student detailing the student's progress on the thesis (Powell & Green, 2007).

Although memory can be selective and, thus, unreliable, by writing down remembered details of a lived experience, we try to understand and question social and cultural truths and institutional structures to make sense and create meaning from them (Giorgio, 2016, p. 407). As stated by Bochner (2000), self-narrative is not about describing precisely the lived experience, but about making meaning from recalled moments from this experience. This view concurs with the critical realist perspective, implying that all knowledge is fallible due to the stratification of reality and, therefore, objective truth about an event or experience is impossible (Bhaskar, 2008a). That being the case, explanations of such events or experiences transpire in terms of tendencies and not truths (Sayer, 2000). The

choice of the three vignettes, as mentioned above, relies on the fact that they reflect three significant moments in the author's life as a supervisee, which, in her view, impacted the supervision relationship, her emancipation as a researcher and, subsequently, her academic success. To make sense of these recalled moments, we retraced the causes, conditions and circumstances under which the supervision experience came to exist and how supervision as a social structure impacted the agency of the supervisee.

Data analysis was conducted by following the ensuing explanatory analytic model: first, describing significant moments of the supervision experience from the supervisee's viewpoint. Second, using Lee's conceptual framework to understand the causal components underlying online supervision. Third, analysing the underlying mechanisms of these causal components by using Archer's reflexivity approach to find plausible explanations for their effects on a successful online supervision experience. Finally, re-theorising the online supervision process in light of our findings. Notably, the resultant data were not analysed collaboratively by the two authors. However, the secondary author, in her role as a member of the supervisory team, operated here as the gatekeeper of reliability and trustworthiness regarding the study's outcomes.

## **EXPERIENCING SUPERVISION IN AN ONLINE STRUCTURED DOCTORAL PROGRAMME**

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The following narrative draws on one of the authors' personal experiences of supervision as a supervisee, whereby we identify three critical moments reported in the form of *vignettes*. However, these moments are not documented as mere descriptions of what happened to produce an insider perspective for empirical evidence (Anderson, 2006, p. 386), but as "essential features transcending particular details" (Chang, 2008, p. 147) to find in deeper strata of reality the underlying mechanisms that allow us a better understanding of the social world of online supervision for causal explanation (Bhaskar, 2008a, 2008b). Critical realists use rational judgement based on extant theory to identify and explain causal mechanisms responsible for the effects of events, activities or any social phenomena, rather than thick descriptions of such occurrences (Fletcher, 2017). Therefore, we used the analytical-interpretive writing style (Chang, 2008) to link factual data with analysis and theoretical interpretation by connecting our specific case to the broader social context for a better understanding of the phenomenon under study. We used Lee's (2008, 2012, 2018) theoretical framework on supervision and Archer's (2003) reflexivity approach to understand how relationships in online supervision occurred and to learn what effect they had on the student as a relational subject for her emancipation, leading ultimately to academic success. We subsequently looked for the underlying mechanisms responsible for triggering such relationships that led to a successful supervisory experience relevant for student emancipation as a researcher. In doing so, we removed the focus from the individual experience towards structured relations and the actions that followed to search for causal explanations (Porter, 2002) supporting the generalisation of the findings.

### ***CHOOSING THE SUPERVISORS***

My first recollection from the co-supervisory process involves the choice of my supervisors. Indeed, within the online supervision programme I studied, choosing the supervisors represented a critical moment for the doctoral student and consisted of a highly formalised process. This procedure could only begin after having completed the previous nine taught models and after four months from their completion to provide both the students and the supervisors the necessary time for the supervision-matching process. Students were invited to consult a list of available supervisors and their biographical information to find the right match, similar to a speed-dating process.

Another institutional rule was that the student needed to be supervised by two supervisors, one from the university providing the doctoral programme, and one from the institution that delivered the online feature. It was, therefore, rather difficult for doctoral students to understand how to make the

best possible match between one's own needs and expectations and those of the supervisors, and what the latter could provide to and expect from the student by merely reading their résumés without actually meeting them in person. How long would this process last, and what happened if nobody was willing to supervise me? What if my needs did not match those of my supervisors? What if my understanding of supervision was not what it entailed? How would my supervisors help me in getting my proposal accepted and secure ethical approval to advance my research? How much could I rely on their help to get me safely through this doctoral journey?

These were some of the main questions and fears that haunted me while I consulted the different supervisor profiles. Fortunately, during my first Residency, held yearly at the university, I met two tutors with whom I bonded and who seemed to match my needs. One of the supervisors shared the same interests in the theoretical frameworks I was using for my research, while the other had the same cultural background, providing me, in my view, with a cultural safety net to fit into the system. Moreover, both supervisors had the necessary recognised institutional position and knowledge to help me understand the regulations and rules to assure the timely completion of my thesis and academic success. Therefore, I applied for them to be my supervisors, and both accepted.

### ***NAVIGATING RELATIONSHIPS***

As previously highlighted, I had no concrete idea of what to expect from the supervisory process, but I knew beforehand, more intuitively than scientifically, what I was looking for in a supervisor to match my own needs, which were not always clear to me. However, I knew that I needed a person who was willing to engage in an enduring relationship with regular meetings and who could provide timely feedback on my research progress. Moreover, I needed somebody who would have enough faith in my research capacity to allow me the necessary intellectual freedom to engage in independent research, yet who was also the gatekeeper of institutional demands, providing the necessary guidance to assure academic success. Consequently, the relationship I built with both my supervisors was, from the beginning, functional, whereby I felt free to ask any questions related to my studies and to request timely feedback on my research progress to enhance my performativity, which significantly impacted my motivation and dedication towards my studies.

A further regulation of supervision within my doctoral programme was that co-supervision was divided into a primary supervisor and a secondary supervisor, whereby the unspoken rule was that the student was supposed to have contact mainly with the primary supervisor and have interaction with the secondary one only when decided concomitantly with the primary supervisor. I remember that the first online meetings with my primary supervisor were rather anxious for me as I had little or no knowledge regarding what I was supposed to say or to ask. Thus, I merely managed to assure that we would have timely meetings of about an hour every three weeks and that I would receive relevant feedback after submitting a follow-up report on my work during that period. However, later, our relationship became less functional and more relational, especially after having attended a conference together, during which our relationship as supervisor and supervisee was suspended and became, for a brief period, a more collegial one. We discussed and exchanged ideas between ourselves and with others regarding our needs and expectations of our academic work.

### ***GAINING IN AUTONOMY AS A RESEARCHER***

This shared experience helped me to reach a further stage in our relationship as it produced a shift from being perceived as the inexperienced student to developing into a “peer colleague” with whom to discuss research matters. I clearly remember the pride I experienced when my supervisor would send me her research projects to exchange and discuss together, which helped me to obtain more insights into how to handle my research project. Although it was difficult for me to provide appropriate feedback on her research, this was a sign for me that my critical thinking was appreciated and that I was gaining in autonomy as a researcher, triggering my emancipation from my supervisors. However, there is only so much time and thought that supervisors can dedicate to their students.



Therefore, what supported me additionally in gaining autonomy as a researcher was the founding of an informal interest group with some of my peer students, supported through social media. We had regular contact almost every fortnight to share our concerns, information, resources and our progress related to our studies, offering each other mutual support and motivation to keep our commitment intact. However, as time passed, the regularity of these meetings declined, but the moral support remained. Knowing that my supervisors were willing to participate in joint presentations at conferences and to co-produce research articles from my findings, and also knowing that peer students were able to learn from my experience and I from theirs, gave me the necessary self-confidence and awareness that I had reached a level of autonomy as a researcher. I felt that I was now on the way to emancipating myself from my supervisors, which was, for me, the necessary proof that I had achieved academic success.

## **REACHING BEYOND PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS**

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We used Lee's (2003) conceptual framework to support data analysis, but we used only three of her structural components – the functional, social (enculturation) and emancipatory – for this purpose. The choice to use only three out of the five dimensions is based on our view that the relational dimension is a “natural necessity” (Bhaskar, 2017; Danermark, Ekström, Jakobson, & Karlsson, 2002) of the supervision process. Without the relationship between supervisors and supervisees, the supervisory process would not exist, and, therefore, all subsequent dimensions would become redundant. Similarly, critical thinking is essential at the doctoral level because the student needs to display intellectual rigour to provide an original contribution to the ongoing conversation of the phenomenon under study and, therefore, we included this into the emancipation domain. However, what seems of particular interest to us regarding supervision in OSPDs was the enculturation process for students' emancipation as researchers, as this represents one of the main challenges in online settings due to its heavily formalised approach and the increased isolation of students from their academic environment. What is of the essence, therefore, is to understand what generates enculturation in the supervision relationship and to define the conditions and circumstances under which this can lead to students' emancipation or not, making supervision either performative or emancipatory. Subsequently, we also explored how performativity and emancipation influence how students perceive academic success.

In our study, the search for causes leading to a successful supervision process took place by reflecting on the nature of the relationship that the doctoral student could establish with the supervisors and peer colleagues and what types of action these relationships would trigger to enhance students' enculturation for their emancipation leading to academic success. Further reflections occurred then on understanding what caused these actions, searching subsequently for the underlying mechanisms responsible for their effects. Therefore, to understand and to explain how supervision can trigger enculturation for student emancipation leading to academic success, we need to search beyond individual expectations and preferences to explore what underlying mechanisms with their causal power can trigger a relationship that is emancipatory in nature rather than merely performative.

## ***NAVIGATING SUPERVISION AS A FUNCTIONAL PROCESS***

The data analysis revealed that, at the beginning of the doctoral journey, the supervisee was heavily dependent on the supervisors' guidance and needed to secure a mutual understanding concerning institutional expectations regarding her proposal and to secure ethical approval for her research project, as she was unclear about the institutional demands. The need to recur to the functional approach suggests that students often are uncertain about their needs and what to expect from supervision increasing, thus, their anxiety and fear about the process (McApline, 2013; Parry, 2008). The questions she raised during the supervision-matching process highlight her confusion regarding her needs and expectations, as well as her need for clear information for her goal-setting. Moreover, recurring to the functional domain helped her to reduce her fears and the anxiety that such an unknown situa-

tion could trigger regarding eventual outcomes, although the uncertainty about what actions should be undertaken to make the supervision journey successful remained intact (Carr et al., 2010). The expression of this functional approach to supervision comes explicitly to the fore in the following quotation from the second vignette:

*I needed a person who was willing to engage in an enduring relationship with regular meetings and who could provide timely feedback on my research progress. Moreover, I also needed [a] gatekeeper of institutional demands providing thus the necessary guidance to assure academic success.*

Further evidence of this functional approach comes from a Skype meeting transcription at the beginning of the supervision relationship, which clearly states that the issues discussed concerned what Lee (2018, p. 880) calls “measuring progress through project management” and the setting of milestones. The transcript states that:

*For the final version of the proposal to be approved, the following sections need to be reviewed: frame of reference, research questions, access issues and ethical issues.*

Moreover, further references to the functional domain are highlighted by the following annotation:

*Tasks agreed to be completed before the next meeting: write a summary to ask for access approval, redraft proposal for acceptance, and work on ethical approval draft.*

The report ends by setting the date and time for these tasks to be completed and for the next meeting.

Here, the supervision relationship becomes performative in nature because, through goal-setting and by measuring her progress through record-keeping, the student not only secured the personal advancement of her work but also complied with institutional expectations (Fillery-Travis, 2014; Kiley and Mullins, 2005; Lin, 2001; McApline, 2013; Meyer et al., 2005). The functional approach at the beginning of the doctoral journey concurs with Archer’s (2003) notion of communicative reflexives, referring to people who adapt their actions to institutional expectations and who share their intentions with others to ensure that they earn their consent for future actions. By doing so, they try to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety concerning supervision but remain dependent on their supervisors to do so, reducing, thus, their agency for emancipation. For communicative reflexives, academic success reflects these people’s capacity to adapt to institutional demands set primarily by their supervisors to earn their degree rather than to gain in agency for their emancipation as researchers.

### ***NAVIGATING SUPERVISION AS A SOCIAL PROCESS***

The story reveals that, as time passed, the supervisee needed a more relational collaboration with her supervisors, overlapping with Lee’s concept of enculturation. This notion of socialisation comes to the fore clearly in the following quotation from the second vignette:

*However, after a while, our relationship became less functional and more relational, especially after having attended together different conferences [...] where we would discuss and exchange ideas among ourselves and with others.*

The engagement with significant “others” supports the idea of enculturation as a socialising process helping students to overcome their academic and social isolation (Hutchings, 2017) as well as their uncertainty and fears induced by an unknown academic environment. This idea concurs with Carr et al.’s (2010) views that peer support enhances student confidence and a sense of belonging while reducing the fears and anxiety of the unknown parts of the supervision journey. The following quotation indicates how peer support was necessary for the student to sustain her motivation and to overcome uncertainty and fears about supervision issues by sharing information, reflections and other social goods for the benefit of the whole group.

*We would have regular contact through social media every fortnight to share our concerns, information, resources and our progress related to our studies, giving each other mutual support and motivation to keep our*

*commitment intact. However, as time passed, the regularity of these meetings declined, but the moral support remained intact.*

However, such informal interest groups work only insofar as their members interacted actively and durably together, helping them to support and maintain over time the necessary motivation and commitment for their studies. Similarly, Gray and Crosta (2018) suggest that such interactions with supervisors and “others” need to be enduring in time to support student enculturation into the academic world by generating a sense of belonging, which is an even more significant challenge within OSPDs due to isolation from the academic setting. However, such constant support from supervisors would not have been possible due to the increased workload and the number of students they have to supervise, as well as the nature of the online features that makes constant support from supervisors more challenging (Kumar & Johnson, 2017; McAlpine, 2013).

Carr et al. (2010) emphasise how interacting with peer students can enhance value clarification for the student’s emancipation as a researcher. By participating in epistemological debates with peer students, the supervisee engaged in a meta-reflexive thinking process about knowledge production and value assimilation. Archer (2003) refers to meta-reflexives as people who participate in high-level deliberations about themselves and their immediate social environment to engage in actions pursuing ideational goals remaining, however, uncertain about what pragmatic choices to make about their future lives. Meta-reflexives engage, therefore, in interactions with others to debate their concerns collectively, thereby reducing their uncertainty about what future actions to undertake. Archer (2013) describes the sharing of interests with others and the willingness to tackle them together as “collective reflexivity”. Collective reflexivity refers to individual internal deliberations that people share among themselves to direct their actions according to their interests and expectations to enhance the human emancipation of all parties involved. Collective reflexivity is not to be mistaken with group thinking, as such reflections remain personal and, thus, individual. However, by sharing these reflections with others, they become collective, as the considerations of other individuals are considered to take purposeful actions (Archer, 2003). We argue that meta-reflexives understand academic success as the expression of increased agency induced by social interactions, leading them to become emancipated beings who make motivated choices that reduce their anxiety concerning their future lives.

### ***NAVIGATING SUPERVISION AS AN EMANCIPATORY PROCESS***

Lee (2018, p. 881) refers to emancipation as the “core value of enabling the candidate to become autonomous”, whereby the notion of autonomous refers, for her, to the expression of “personal transformation” supported by “the supervisor’s intent to develop others in whatever direction they choose”. The following quotation from one of the Student Progress Reports seems to capture quite clearly this concept of emancipation:

*Writing a thesis represents for me a rather daunting process because it entails to include uncertainty about how things unfold during data collection, analysis, and how to proceed to report findings worthwhile defending. However, with my supervisor’s constant guidance and goodwill, I have found the necessary resources to step beyond such difficulties and to continue analysing and writing about findings even though the big picture is not yet apparent to me. I feel like I am making constant progress towards my thesis completion with my supervisor’s invaluable help.*

Lee’s idea of emancipation overlaps with Archer’s (2003) concept of autonomous reflexives. For Archer, such people engage in inner conversations to accommodate their personal concerns for performativity reasons. For autonomous reflexives, academic success primarily denotes the completion of their studies in terms of product for personal satisfaction or career advancement.

However, Lee’s (2018) concept of emancipation contrasts with Gray and Crosta’s (2018, p. 8), who explain their notion as being “the development of student independence so that they become a researcher in their own right”, coinciding more with Archer’s concept of meta-reflexivity.

The following quotation from the Student Progress Reports supports this view:

*M. has made excellent progress on the thesis stage. She has presented her thesis proposal during a workshop at a University, with discussion occurring in this context with PhD students, ..., and others. We also engaged with each other during the ... conference last month in ..., which we both attended.* (Supervisor)

What stands out here is that the sharing of concerns about the doctoral journey with others enhances student agency in terms of increased confidence, limiting fear and anxiety, increasing thereby the sense of belonging to the same scholarly community (Carr et al., 2010). Increased self-confidence, in turn, helps students to enhance their autonomy from supervisors leading eventually to their emancipation as researchers, which is necessary for academic success. Enculturation is, therefore, not only relevant to the student's personal transformation but also to increase their sense of belonging to an academic community that supports their agency for emancipation as researchers.

Further evidence of the student's emancipation as a researcher needing fewer directions from supervisors is highlighted in the Skype meeting report from the end of the supervision journey. The report mainly discusses technical aspects of thesis writing, such as the structure of the chapters, commenting on tables and figures, and explications of conceptual frameworks, denoting here again a functional aspect of the supervision relationship, implying a detachment from the supervisors' help to conduct research work. This functional approach at the end of the supervision process suggests that the supervisee engaged in an autonomous mode of reflexivity, whereby academic success relates here primarily to the student's own decision-making about her studies. However, returning to this functional relationship with supervisors was only possible because of the support from peer students helping the supervisee to increase her agency representing here the emancipatory power to become a researcher "in [her] own right" (Gray & Crosta, 2018, p. 8).

Of note here is that the same person can engage in different modes of reflexivity according to their needs and expectations, which can vary over time. However, what our study brought to the fore is that social relations triggering collective reflexivity is the mechanism responsible for student enculturation, enabling her to increase her agency for emancipation as a researcher. Indeed, by sharing needs, concerns and expectations with other students, she reached the necessary self-awareness and self-confidence to enhance her autonomy from her supervisors, allowing academic success.

## DISCUSSION

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This study identified that supervision generates relationships that can be performative or emancipatory in nature, depending on the mode(s) of reflexivity students adopt during supervision, whereby the reflexivity they assume also impinges on the meaning they attribute to academic success. Lee's (2008, 2012, 2018) structural framework suggests that by covering its five components, supervision becomes highly performative as the student will experience a successful supervision practice that leads to academic success. Lee's views on supervision presuppose an individual process induced by supervisors and based on empirical regularity with fixed, repetitive structures regardless of the changing needs of students over time. Lee's conceptual framework suggests, therefore, the existence of constant conjunction between the five domains of her framework and the students' academic success making supervision primarily a performative and individual process. However, Lee fails to acknowledge that enculturation doesn't occur in a vacuum (Gray & Crosta, 2018) and that students, therefore, engage in social relations to share their expectations and needs, making supervision a collective yet transformative endeavour for their emancipation as researchers (Donati & Archer, 2015).

By "collective transformative process", we refer here to individuals who engage in social relations by sharing their personal needs and expectations with others, which in turn trigger collective reflexivity to improve the emancipation of all parties involved (Donati, 2016). However, such social relations are more challenging to establish in an online environment due to distance issues (Gray & Crosta, 2018). By embracing this collective dimension, students engage in a reflexivity process that exceeds the individual and embraces the social, triggering their capacity as relational subjects to engage in

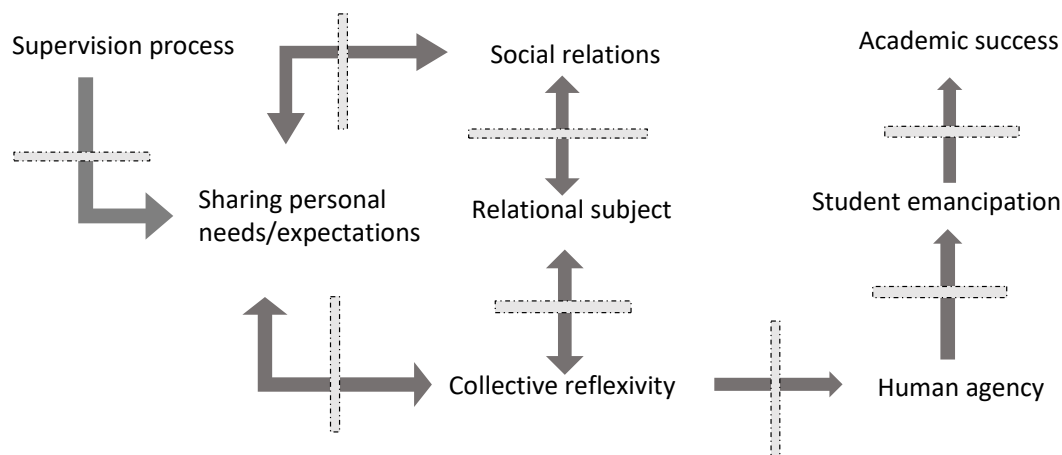
higher-level reflections (Donati, 2016) relevant for their emancipation as researchers. We, therefore, argue that the underlying mechanism responsible for student emancipation leading to academic success is reflexive and relational in nature rather than structural and functional, and can only emerge through collective reflexivity generated by social relations. However, in this case, academic success takes on a different connotation, namely that of the student's increased capacity to engage in interactions with others to enhance their self-confidence to make independent choices about their studies and this despite uncertain circumstances.

In our study, collective reflexivity triggered through social relations represents the mediatory mechanism through which the supervisee enhanced her social emancipation, leading to a successful supervision experience and, thus, to academic success. Her interpretation of academic success represents the way she could engage with others in discussions about her studies, leading her to become more self-confident and autonomous as a researcher. Indeed, the support from supervisors and peer students was an essential condition to increase the student's agency, helping her to gain emancipatory power as a researcher. This viewpoint is also advanced by Dericks, Thompson, Roberts and Phua (2019) and supported in earlier research by Carr et al. (2010) and by Kumar and Johnson (2017). Their studies highlight that supervisor support combined with peer networking is more significant for student motivation for them to remain engaged in their studies and, consequently, for their emancipation as autonomous researchers.

This collective dimension to enculturation diverges from Lee's framework as it has not been considered more fully, despite the empirical evidence of its efficiency. We, therefore, contend that supervision should acknowledge the enculturation dimension more fully, and this especially in OSPDs as it represents the most important aspect for students' emancipation leading to academic success. Moreover, we also contend that supervision should be considered more as a collective effort in which each member invests something personal in the supervision relationship, causing the emergence of a new collective entity producing practices with a broader scope than the immediate personal gratification of earning a doctoral title (Hutching, 2017; McAlpine, 2013; Parry, 2008). The addition of this collective dimension to supervision confers on it a social aspect that supports the building of trusting relationships between group members. These relationships have the necessary power to trigger collective reflexivity, followed by purposeful actions for the social emancipation of all group members.

### ***SUMMARY OF UNDERLYING MECHANISMS IMPACTING SUPERVISION***

To answer our research question concerning what mechanisms underlie the online supervisory process, and under what conditions it becomes a successful experience for student emancipation leading to academic success, we now summarise the mechanisms. In our study, the enculturation aspect revealed itself to be the most important yet challenging aspect for the student's emancipation as a researcher leading to academic success. Indeed, the student's sharing of her needs and expectations with her supervisors and her peer students generated social relations that represent the *condition* under which collective reflexivity followed by purposeful actions were triggered to overcome shared fears, anxiety and isolation regarding supervision. Collective reflexivity constitutes here the *key mechanism* through which social relations have the emergent properties and causal powers to impact human agency for the emancipation of all group members, leading to the academic success of all parties involved. Meanwhile, the *circumstances* under which academic success can occur relate to the structure of supervision (its rules and norms and regulations) and how such a structure enables or constrains agency for emancipation to occur, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Mechanisms mediating the impact of supervision on student emancipation and success (adapted from Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019)**

The arrows represent the supervisee’s actions for her emancipation as a doctoral student, which ultimately led her to academic success. The dotted lines represent the structures (rules, norms, regulations, etc.) of the supervision process that can enable or constrain such emancipation from occurring in the student’s desired way, impacting whether academic success can be obtained.

## CONCLUSION

Supervision, especially in OSPDs, relies significantly on a successful relationship between the supervisor(s) and supervisee based on mutual needs and expectations. However, such a relationship can lead to a more functional or emancipatory supervision journey, depending on the student’s capacity for enculturation impinging on their emancipation as researchers. Lee (2008, 2012, 2018) created a five-dimensional conceptual framework to ensure that doctoral students have a successful experience leading to academic success. Lee’s conceptual framework suggests that there is a direct correlation between these five dimensions and academic success reducing supervision to mere structural aspects regardless of students’ needs. Our study revealed, however, that academic success depended on the student’s capacity for socialisation (enculturation) to enhance her human agency for emancipation as a researcher. The triggering of human agency depended, moreover, on the student’s ability to share her needs and expectations with significant others, generating enduring social relations. Social relations can, however, be enabled or constrained by structural aspects, such as norms and regulations related to online supervision, impacting the students’ agency for emancipation as a researcher and, consequently, how they come to understand academic success. The study also highlighted that different modes of reflexivity could be triggered in supervision, depending on the student’s ability to handle uncertainty in an online environment, especially when isolated from others due to distance issues. Therefore, we can argue that reflexivity as an underlying mechanism, can have different effects on the student’s agency for emancipation and, consequently, on their understanding of academic success, making each supervision experience unique.

Our study indicated that an emancipatory online supervision relationship could be established by enhancing the enculturation aspect of supervision. Enculturation occurred through the sharing of concerns, need, and expectations about supervision with others, engaging the members involved in collective reflexive deliberations followed by purposeful actions for social emancipation (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019). Our understanding of emancipation refers here to the student’s capacity to become a critical being (Barnett, 1997) who has a say in how to address her needs, expectations and concerns by engaging in collective reflexivity with others. Collective reflexivity triggered by social relations becomes, therefore, the necessary underlying mechanism through which doctoral students

can obtain a better understanding of their needs and expectations for knowledge acquisition, as it triggers a higher awareness of the social and academic environment in which they act, representing the necessary condition for student emancipation and academic success. However, our study also highlighted how the triggering of such social relations is much more difficult in an online environment in which isolation and detachment from supervisors and peer students can constrain such relationships or even prevent them from occurring. In cases in which social relations are constrained or not realised, supervisees tend to recur to performative relationships based on a merely functional approach to supervision, thus impacting their emancipatory power as agents and, consequently, also their academic success.

Such considerations raise the fundamental question of how higher education institutions can support a supervisory process that pays more attention to enculturation helping students to become agents not only for their personal growth but also critical beings concerned with their emancipation as members of the wider society. Supervision should, therefore, not only be conceived in relation to performative aspects acquired for student personal growth and academic advancement. It should also be viewed as a way to focus on the candidates as relational subjects, triggering collective reflexivity through the socialisation process acting as a catalyst for actions leading to the emancipation of all parties involved.

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