

Critical Education

Volume 17 Number 3

August 18, 2026

ISSN 1920-4175

Enacting Supervisory Power Doctoral Students' Lived Experiences through a Freirean–Feminist Lens

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Endashaw, A. A. (2026). Enacting supervisory power: Doctoral students' lived experiences through a Freirean-feminist lens. *Critical Education*, 17(3), 38-55.

<https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v17i3.187293>

Abstract

This study investigates how doctoral students experience and navigate power within supervisory relationships, drawing on a Freirean–feminist lens emphasizing voice, agency, and relational ethics. Situated within Ethiopian higher education, the research explores the emotional, intellectual, and institutional dimensions of power as lived by students. Using a phenomenographic design, nineteen doctoral students from Social Sciences, Humanities and Education participated in in-depth interviews. Findings reveal students encounter power as a pervasive force. While some internalize authority and conform to academic norms, others resist or negotiate supervisory expectations, exercising constrained agency. Participants also envisioned supervision ensuring emotional safety, intellectual autonomy, and democratic engagement. These insights underscore the need to reimagine supervision as a dialogical and empowering practice. Institutional reforms that promote transparency, student voice, and shared authority are essential for fostering transformative doctoral education.



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Introduction

In the evolving landscape of global higher education, doctoral supervision has emerged as a focal point of institutional performance, academic identity, and knowledge production. Universities increasingly frame doctoral completions as indicators of research excellence, international competitiveness, and funding eligibility (Green & Bowden, 2012; Pearson & Brew, 2002). These macro-level imperatives have intensified pressures on supervisors and institutions alike, often transforming supervision into a strategic mechanism for institutional visibility and ranking. Yet beneath these performative demands lies a deeply relational and pedagogical process—one shaped by power, institutional norms, and the lived experiences of doctoral candidates.

There is a power relationship in academic supervision. Academic supervision is not a neutral or purely academic endeavor; it is infused with power, desire, and tension (Hopwood, 2010). Provided that it is soundly managed and used to generate effective outcomes, academic supervision can shape students' research process in positive directions. Transformative academic supervision can facilitate students' smooth transition into independent scholars, whereas supervisory practices that promote the dominance and stiff control of the supervisors over their doctoral candidates jeopardize academic performance, including their independent thinking and intellectual progress. Along this thinking, scholars have classified academic supervision into traditional and collaborative supervisions. Traditional academic supervision often follows a master-apprentice structure, where supervisors wield authority over research direction, access to resources, and disciplinary legitimacy (Gurr, 2001; Grant, 2003; Green, 2005). In contrast, collaborative models emphasize mutual respect, trust, and negotiation, fostering intellectual partnership and shared agency (Green, 2005). The power differential in supervision significantly affects students' autonomy, learning, and identity development (Manathunga, 2007; Morris, 2011). Research suggests that explicit discussions of power—what Porter and Vasquez (1997) term 'power analysis'—can enhance supervisory relationships and support student agency (Szymanski, 2003; Murphy & Wright, 2005). In relation to this, some of the studies in Ethiopia (see Hussein, 2008, 2009, and Tessema, 2006) revealed that engaging students in reflective thinking and independent learning and legitimizing the validity of their knowledge and lived experiences can help cultivate their reflective talents and the capacity to see the world from their own perspectives. The findings of these studies strongly suggest that doctoral supervision can also produce more productive results if the supervisory relationship between supervisors and their candidates becomes transformative and if the relationship focuses on creating conditions for mutual transformative engagement. This happens when the parties involved are equally committed to contribute towards the generation and consolidation of ideas that can influence the learning and growth of others (Gjotterud & Ahmad, 2023). In contrast, an unfair use of power, including supervisors' use of mediated power, results in poor doctoral supervision and may even jeopardize the mental, emotional, psychological and intellectual well-being of the supervisee (Moshtari & Schleper, 2025).

Power in academic supervision is multidimensional and shaped by various structural conditions and dynamic processes. Theoretical frameworks offer ample insight into how power is structured into supervision and operates in different supervisory contexts. Lukes' (1974) three-dimensional view of power—decision-making, agenda-setting, and ideological control—reveals how power functions both overtly and subtly. Foucault's (1998) concept of disciplinary power illuminates how supervision operates through surveillance, normalization, and the internalization

of expectations, rendering students visible yet vulnerable within institutional regimes. These dynamics manifest in everyday supervisory practices—emails, feedback, silence, and institutional rituals—that shape the emotional tone, research direction, and epistemic boundaries of the doctoral journey. Students frequently report uncertainty about supervisory roles, limited access to support, and constrained voice, especially when navigating hierarchical academic cultures (Neumann, 2003; Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2012). These conditions reflect what Fricker (2007) has conceptualized as epistemic injustice, where students' contributions are undervalued due to testimonial and hermeneutical gaps in academic discourse.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers a radical reimaging of supervision as a dialogic, co-constructive process. His concept of *conscientização*—the development of critical consciousness—emphasizes the need to name and transform oppressive structures (Freire, 1970, 1993). Freire insists that “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (1993, p. 70), underscoring the ethical imperative of voice and dialogue in educational spaces. In supervisory relationships, this means rejecting authoritarianism, embracing humility, and fostering spaces where students are heard as whole individuals. Freire's *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (1998) advises educators to listen with empathy, embrace difference, and challenge the banking model of education.

On its part, feminist supervision theory builds on Freirean principles by foregrounding emotional safety, relational ethics, and epistemic justice. Scholars such as Szymanski (2003), Murphy and Wright (2005), and Mangione et al. (2011) advocate for collaborative, emotionally attuned supervision that validates students as autonomous thinkers and co-creators of knowledge. Central to this approach is the cultivation of emotionally safe spaces, where vulnerability is met with care rather than judgment (Prouty, 2001; Cotterall, 2011). Cotterall emphasizes that fostering critical thinking requires not only analytical rigor but also an environment of trust and emotional safety—conditions often absent in hierarchical supervisory relationships. Shared decision-making empowers students to shape their research direction and supervisory structure (Taylor, 1994; Marecek & Kravetz, 1977), while epistemic justice insists on valuing lived experience and non-dominant knowledge systems as legitimate scholarly contributions—thereby addressing the testimonial and hermeneutical injustices that Fricker (2007) identifies as unforgiving barriers to equitable knowledge production.

However, most studies on academic supervision and power dynamics remain grounded in Western academic traditions, leaving Ethiopian higher education contexts underexplored. In Western settings, doctoral supervision often encourages students to challenge authority, assert independence, and negotiate academic boundaries. By contrast, students in Ethiopian higher learning institutions may perceive supervision through a lens shaped by broader societal hierarchies—where teachers are positioned as authoritative figures and students are expected to show deference and institutional loyalty (Green, 2005). This cultural orientation influences how power is enacted and experienced in supervisory relationships, often reinforcing asymmetries that limit student agency and voice. Unlike Western models that valorize critique and autonomy, Ethiopian supervision practices may prioritize respect, obedience, and relational harmony. Tessema (2006) indicated that Ethiopian higher learning is generally characterized by the dominance of teacher-centered classroom practices, suggesting the asymmetrical relationships between instructors and students. The transmittal model of education, which is typical of the traditional theological education system of Ethiopia, often uplifts instructors and supervisors as primary authorities in knowledge exchange, thereby shaping the structure and flow of supervision,

including patterns of intellectual and relational exchanges. Therefore, any effort to understand problems that encounter supervisory relationships should give due attention to the cultural and institutional expectations and processes that ‘can create detrimental asymmetry between supervisors in a dominant position on the one hand and doctoral candidates whose fate depends on their monitoring and judgment on the other’ (Deyrich, 2023, p. 246). It is, therefore, important to assess factors that constrain quality doctoral supervisions through the lenses of doctoral candidates to generate insights that help promote epistemic justice and foster transformative education in the context of academic supervision. Understanding how doctoral students have experienced supervisory relationships, their coping strategies and beliefs about healthy and constructive relationships can provide useful insights that can serve as inputs when rethinking the structures and processes of supervision. The study is informed by educational and social theories that portray students as transformative agents and the obligation of education and educational practices to support students foster the transformative agency of professionals and practitioners in Ethiopia (Hussein, Bedasa & Mengistu, 2019). Hussein’s other studies (see Hussein, 2006, 2009) suggested that cultivating and strengthening learner voices, positionings and perspectives is key to promoting and fostering the self-awareness and intellectual growth of learners. Doctoral supervision is not exceptional to this.

Ultimately, power in supervision must be interrogated not only as a structural phenomenon but as a relational and ethical practice. Reframing supervision through the lenses of dialogue, equity, and cultural responsiveness opens pathways toward more humane, inclusive, and transformative doctoral education.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do doctoral students perceive and experience power dynamics in supervisory relationships?
2. In what ways do they negotiate, resist, or internalize or adjust themselves to supervisory authority, and how do these interactions reflect broader academic norms?
3. What do they envision as an ideal supervisory relationship, and how do they articulate safety, autonomy, and empowerment within supervisory relationships?

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative research design, underpinned by a phenomenographic approach, to explore doctoral students’ conceptions of power within supervisory relationships. Phenomenography, as articulated by Marton (1986), focuses not on the phenomenon itself but on the variation in how individuals understand and relate to it. This orientation makes it particularly apt for investigating the subjective, relational, and contextually embedded nature of supervisory power.

Unlike phenomenology, which seeks to distill the essence of lived experience, phenomenography aims to map the qualitatively different ways a phenomenon is conceptualized (Marton & Pang, 2008; Larsson & Holmström, 2007). In this study, the focal phenomenon is supervisory power, and the objective is to reveal the diverse meanings, interpretations, and

responses articulated by doctoral students based on their experiences and perspectives about academic supervision. Rather than pursuing a singular experiential truth, the research foregrounds conceptual variation—an epistemological stance that aligns with phenomenography's commitment to understanding difference.

This methodological choice is also consonant with the study's Freirean–feminist theoretical framework, which prioritizes voice, agency, and critical reflection. By capturing the multiplicity of student perspectives, the research seeks to illuminate how supervisory relationships either reproduce or challenge hierarchical academic norms, and how students navigate these dynamics within their institutional contexts.

Although phenomenographic research does not prescribe a fixed sample size, Trigwell (2000) suggests that a range of 10 to 20 participants typically allows for sufficient variation in conceptions without compromising data manageability. The diversity of disciplines and stages of study represented in this sample supports the aim of capturing a broad spectrum of supervisory experiences. Nineteen doctoral students participated in the study, drawn from two colleges within an Ethiopian university: the College of Social Sciences and Humanities and the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences. Participants represented three academic programs—Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), the Institute of Peace and Development Studies, and Education—comprising seven, seven, and five students respectively. Four participants had completed their dissertations during the 2023 academic year, while the remaining fifteen were in the final phase of their doctoral work. The sample was selected using purposive and convenience sampling, consistent with phenomenographic methodology (Marton & Booth, 1997), and participation was voluntary, based on students' willingness and availability.

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews—the primary method in phenomenographic inquiry (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997). This method enabled participants to reflect deeply on their supervisory relationships, while allowing the researcher to probe for clarification and elaboration. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure fidelity to participants' voices. The resulting narratives offered rich, nuanced accounts of how students interpret and navigate power within academic contexts, shedding light on both individual agency and structural constraints.

The phenomenological data from in-depth interviews were organized and analyzed using systematic and iterative procedures to expose the essence of the participants' lived experiences (Cope, 2004). This requires careful reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts in order to identify and group essential aspects of the participants' experiences under thematic description. Analysis and interpretation of the meanings which the participants attach to their lived experiences were further strengthened through theoretical concepts and the researcher's interpretative lens.

The researcher's positionality is also an important aspect of the study. In this study, the researcher assumed the positionality of a critical educator who considers doctoral candidates and their voices as sources of knowledge and respects and interprets their subjective experiences. In this study, the researcher tries to strike a delicate balance between the fluid insider and outsider positionality (Yip, 2024), partly because he is studying the experiences of supervision as being carried out in Haramaya University and partly because he considers the relevance of previous knowledge and experiences that the doctoral students had accumulated from their previous educational and professional experiences. In this study, the research participants were considered as legitimate knowers and co-creators of knowledge possessing epistemic dignity rather than

passive providers of raw information and submissive recipients of the directions which the dominant knower provides them. This attitude towards the research participants significantly influenced the way the researcher interpreted the research participants' ways of making sense, particularly his decision to merge his interpretive horizon with that of the research participants. The researcher brought positive views about the role of democratic and transformative relationships in the realm of educational enterprise, including doctoral research and supervision (Beigi, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted a Freirean–feminist lens to examine power, voice, and agency in doctoral supervision. Based on Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy, in this study, supervision is framed as a dialogical, co-constructive process rather than a hierarchical exchange. The study was informed by Freire's concept of *conscientização* that emphasizes critical consciousness and the transformative power of dialogue (Freire, 1970). Freire's later work (1998) deepens this ethic, advocating for listening as openness to difference—a view echoed in Cuenca's (2018) 'art of listening.' Freire (1993, p. 87) also warns against silence in education, urging that “to speak a true word is to transform the world.”

Feminist supervision theory complements this by foregrounding emotional safety, relational ethics, and epistemic justice. Supervision that is carried out with a feminist lens stands firmly against the traditional hierarchical supervisor-supervisee relationships and promotes collaborative and interactive partnerships wherein the supervisor and supervisee are engaged in collaborative decision-making across the research processes through implementing participatory, emancipatory or liberatory research strategies and processes (Moss, 2009). Scholars such as Szymanski (2003, 2005), Prouty (2001), and Mangione et al. (2011) advocate that supervision should acknowledge and respect a feminist epistemology—that is, investigation of epistemology from a feminist perspective and validate students as independent thinkers and co-creators of knowledge. Murphy and Wright (2005) challenge expert-novice hierarchies, while Mahoney et al. (2004) and bell hooks (1994) frame resistance and learning as acts of freedom and identity construction. Together, these frameworks reimagine supervision as collaborative, justice-oriented, and empowering—especially relevant in Ethiopian contexts shaped by hierarchical norms. They entail that we need to consider supervision as a space for critical reflection, voice, and epistemic inclusion. It is believed that creating a collaborative and interactive supervisory environment facilitates not only study progress and its timely completion (Thong, Kumar, Wald & Lim, 2025), but also increases candidates' overall satisfaction (Anttila, Pyhalto & Tikkanen, 2024). It is with this in mind that the current study was conducted.

Discussion of Findings

Thematic analysis indicated under the methodology section above enabled me to generate three superordinate or overarching themes from the participants' reflections, each major theme with several layers of themes. Under this section of the paper, I discuss these themes and their sub-themes by supporting them with the relevant reflections of the coded respondents and conceptual and theoretical frameworks that offer analytically meaningful insights and lend interpretive depth.

Table**1**

Super-ordinate Themes and sub-themes Generated from Data Analysis

Super-ordinate Themes	Subthemes
Relational Challenges Emanating from Asymmetric Supervisory Relationships	Sub-Theme 1: Hierarchical Control – Supervisor dominates decisions and communication
	Sub-Theme 2: Emotional Vulnerability– Students feel anxious or fearful in interactions
	Sub-Theme 3: Intellectual Marginalization– Student ideas dismissed or undervalued
	Sub-Theme 4: Instrumental Compliance to Asymmetric Power Relationships Constructive Hierarchy – Students perceive the relationship as positive despite recognizing power imbalance
Coping and Self-regulation Mechanisms in the Face of Asymmetric Supervisory Relationships	Sub-Theme 1: Negotiated Agency – Students assert influence through topic selection, persuasion, and intellectual challenge
	Sub-Theme 2: Silencing of Self – Students suppress personal voice to avoid conflict
	Sub-Theme 3: Compliance Culture – Students conform to expectations without critique
Notion of Enabling Supervisory Ecology	Sub-Theme 1: Safety and Trust – Emotional trust and non-judgmental feedback
	Sub-Theme 2: Autonomy and Ownership – Intellectual freedom and sense of ownership
	Sub-Theme 3: Empowerment and Vision – Toward Dialogic, Student-Centered Supervision

Relational Challenges Emanating from Asymmetric Supervisory Relationships

Hierarchical Control. This study strongly suggested that doctoral students experience supervision as a space where supervisory authority is strongly felt yet seldom interrogated. Seventeen out of nineteen described patterns of hierarchical control, including supervisors dominating decisions, imposing research topics, and communicating through directive statements. For instance, R-5 shared, “... he pushes me to receive his idea. I don’t refuse and agree to take it without my belief and trust,” illustrating how students often comply with imposed views despite internal disagreement. R-12 similarly noted, “The supervisor undermines my views without indicating to me a better way,” highlighting the absence of constructive dialogue and the dismissal of student reasoning. One participant (R-1) received emails stating, “You need to do this and that,” exemplifying what Noddings (1984) terms *power-over* interactions. Another student’s (R-14) proposal was rejected after challenging their supervisor’s theoretical stance, illustrating *coercive power* as framed by French and Raven (1959).

R-5 further described the experience of being treated as a subordinate, stating, “I might be considered as a consumer and the supervisor brings things down to be done irrespective of my consent.” This perceived imposition led to withdrawal, hesitation to communicate, and anxiety—consequences that reinforce the emotional and intellectual cost of hierarchical supervision.

From a Freirean perspective, such problems are facets of the banking model of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive recipients rather than co-constructed through dialogue (Freire, 1970). Based on the candidates' reflections, one can conclude that supervisors who impose topics and reject dissent replicate this model, denying students the opportunity to engage as autonomous thinkers. While some students developed *conscientização*—critical awareness—these realizations were often reactive, triggered by conflict rather than cultivated through intentional pedagogy.

Supervision as a Site of Emotional Vulnerability. The study suggested that undemocratic and top-down supervisory practices are sites of emotional vulnerability, where students experience fear, anxiety, and relational discomfort in their supervisory interactions. For instance, R-1 reflected, *“At times, I talked to myself and decided either to change the supervisor or to quit the study. Where to go again? The worse may escalate into the worst,”* conveying a deep sense of emotional exhaustion and anticipatory fear. Similarly, R-4 noted, *“He [the supervisor] addresses me with a tone of voice which may be ‘unwelcoming’ to talk to and share my concerns. And that causes fear,”* highlighting how tone alone can inhibit openness and reinforce psychological distance.

R-7 described an incident where their dissertation title and synopsis were rejected ‘angrily’ by the supervisor—an emotionally charged response that undermined the student’s confidence and sense of safety. These emotionally harsh interactions often led students to self-censor, avoid dissent, and suppress their academic voice. R-14 added, *“My supervisor and I disagreed on a certain theory, and I stood in my position. This disagreement created fear and stress for me and I finally decided to look for another advisor,”* illustrating how intellectual assertiveness, when met with relational rigidity, can provoke emotional distress and rupture supervisory continuity.

This instance of guardedness erodes the level of trust required for intellectual risk-taking and growth. Feminist supervision theorists emphasize the importance of psychological safety and relational openness. Prouty (2001) underscores the role of emotional attunement, while Szymanski (2003) stresses epistemic. When these conditions are missing, supervisees encounter what Prouty calls ‘relational dissonance,’ withdrawing into silence. This is highlighted in R-14’s experiences, where disagreement triggered anxiety rather than negotiation. Szymanski’s call for non-judgmental feedback and mutual respect is significant in this context, attesting to the need for supervisory relationships that harmonize emotional sensitivity, epistemic respect, and dialogic engagement—foundational principles and values in feminist pedagogy that are believed to enhance academic confidence and holistic wellness.

Supervision as an Encounter where Epistemic Injustice is Exercised. This study revealed that several doctoral students experienced epistemic injustice and marginalization of intellectual self-trust. This problem maintains itself through dismissing, overriding and/or undervaluing their thoughts, feelings and perspectives. In connection to this, R-2 shared, *“His order is straightforward—do this, add this, cancel that—so my argument had no place. He did not listen to me, and I was made to implement what he was usually saying,”* illustrating a supervisory approach that silences student reasoning and enforces unilateral decision-making. R-5 similarly recounted, *“Starting from the first day, without my consent, he declined what I proposed and replaced it with his own—setting research questions, objectives, and methodology I should follow,”* reflecting a complete override of intellectual agency.

R-10 described a coercive dynamic: “*My supervisors repeatedly undermined my ideas and told me to do as he commented, or he would not continue supervising me,*” revealing how intellectual dismissal can escalate into threats, further silencing dissent. R-3 likened certain supervisors to ‘*superpowers,*’ conveying the overwhelming nature of their influence. Such practices contradict the feminist principle of *power-with*—a collaborative approach that values students as co-creators of knowledge (Porter & Vasquez, 1997; Szymanski, 2003). When student contributions are sidelined, supervision becomes a site of epistemic exclusion rather than intellectual partnership. Freire’s (1970) critique of the banking model is also relevant here: supervisors who impose ideas without negotiation replicate a pedagogy of deposit and compliance, rather than one of critical engagement.

These findings call for a reimagining of supervision as a dialogic space, where diverse perspectives are not only welcomed but actively integrated. Intellectual marginalization not only stifles academic growth but also undermines the transformative potential of supervision as a relational and emancipatory practice.

The Availability of Rooms for Constructive Hierarchy. The study indicated that while most doctoral students described supervisory relationships as marked by hierarchical control and limited autonomy, a subset of participants (e.g., R-6, R-13, R-15, and R-18) offered a more nuanced perspective. These students acknowledged the presence of power differentials but interpreted them as constructive rather than oppressive. For instance, R-6 attributed the strength of his research proposal to his supervisor’s rigorous and directive approach, which fostered iterative refinement and academic discipline. Similarly, R-13 emphasized that supervisory authority—whether expressed through warmth or distance—played a pivotal role in ensuring methodological rigor and timely progress. He framed power not as coercive, but as a source of mutual respect and intellectual empowerment, echoing Foucault’s (1998) view of power as a productive force.

R-18 described his supervisory relationship as goal-oriented and collaborative, noting that shared objectives and consistent guidance contributed to project improvement. His account suggests that when authority is exercised with clarity and mutual purpose, it can foster a sense of alignment and reduce relational friction. Another respondent (R-15) highlighted a supervisory style marked by openness and dialogic exchange, where the student was encouraged to select their supervisor, contribute to decision-making, and assert intellectual ownership. This experience aligns with Murphy and Wright’s (2005) model of collaborative supervision, where shared authority fosters autonomy, agency, and meaningful mentorship. In relation to this, Freire (1993) argues that education must be rooted in dialogic engagement, where power is not denied but reconfigured through mutual recognition and critical reflection. In these accounts, supervisory authority did not silence students but instead created conditions for intellectual growth and co-agency. Such relationships reflect Freire’s vision of education as a transformative praxis—where structured guidance, when ethically enacted, becomes a catalyst for empowerment rather than a mechanism of control.

Coping and Self-regulation Mechanisms in the Face of Asymmetric Supervisory Relationships

Strategic Negotiation: Dialogical Openings and Intellectual Assertion. Several participants described moments where they resisted prescriptive supervision and advocated for

their academic choices through respectful dialogue and evidence-based reasoning. R-11, for instance, recounted being pressured to adopt a mixed methods approach but successfully defended a qualitative design, stating: “*He forced me to use a mixed methods approach, but I resisted and convinced him why I should use a qualitative design.*” Similarly, R-13 noted: “*Most of the time, we agree, and he guides me to the right path. But at the beginning, he wanted me to change my original title, but I persuaded him politely.*” These accounts reflect a subtle but significant assertion of agency, where persuasion and methodological justification led to the retention of students’ original research visions.

R-15 added a layer of experiential authority, stating: “I have been conducting research about disability... based on my lived experience, I tried convincing him to see from another angle.” Here, personal narrative becomes a source of epistemic legitimacy, challenging the supervisor’s perspective and expanding the scope of inquiry. R-17 and R-18 further demonstrated intellectual assertion in high-stakes contexts—defending manuscript submissions and study designs through prior publication experience and empirical justification. These interactions reflect not only confidence but a commitment to scholarly rigor and dialogical engagement.

Such strategic negotiations resonate with *Freire’s (1970)* conception of education as dialogical praxis, where knowledge is co-constructed through mutual engagement rather than imposed hierarchically. The students’ narratives embody this ethos, challenging traditional supervision models and fostering reciprocal learning. Feminist supervision theorists such as *Murphy and Wright (2005)* advocate for supervisory relationships that honor student autonomy and disrupt the “expert-novice” binary, while *Grant (2003)* frames resistance as a form of intellectual self-definition rather than defiance. *Manathunga (2007)* adds that intercultural supervision must accommodate experiential and indigenous knowledge systems, as seen in R-15’s lived experience. Meanwhile, *Wisker and Robinson (2012)* emphasize that intellectual autonomy is cultivated through dialogic supervision that encourages students to justify, refine, and defend their ideas.

These converging perspectives reveal that strategic negotiation is not merely a defensive maneuver but a generative practice—anchored in mutual respect, critical dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge.

The Power of Silence and Patience. The findings disclose a troubling pattern of internalized submission within supervisory relationships, where students suppress their voice to avoid conflict, misrepresentation, or institutional repercussions. Rather than engaging in open dialogue, silence becomes a protective strategy—reflecting a climate of epistemic vulnerability and emotional strain. R-1 captures this dynamic with stark clarity: “*There was no room to reject the comments forwarded... In case you reject the comments, you will be misquoted... So, silence is the only strategy.*” This illustrates how disagreement is not only discouraged but potentially punished through distortion or reputational harm.

R-2 intensifies this portrayal of power asymmetry, stating: “Only one way flow of power; he often gives me orders, and my fate was to accept them... I felt powerless and decided to submit myself, bowing down to him.” The language of fate and submission evokes emotional exhaustion and institutional entrapment, where intellectual autonomy is sacrificed for procedural survival. R-5 and R-10 echo similar sentiments. R-5 describes being reduced to a passive consumer of directives: “I don’t refuse and agree to take without my belief and trust.” Meanwhile, R-10 admits to withholding critique despite superior knowledge: “I was often afraid to tell him that he was

wrong... I could not convince him to agree to my ideas.” Here, fear—not incompetence—drives silence, revealing the emotional toll of hierarchical supervision.

These insights align with Freire’s (1998) critique of the domestication of learners, where students internalize dominant ideologies and lose the capacity for critical reflection. In *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, Freire warns that when learners are denied dialogical space, they become “adapted beings” rather than transformative agents. Feminist supervision theory offers a critical perspective on dominant ideology, with Szymanski (2005) noting the need for emotional safety and validation, arguing that supervision must dismantle silencing mechanisms and foster environments where students feel empowered to speak. Grant (2003) similarly critiques the “guru model” of supervision, advocating for relational ethics and mutual vulnerability as foundations for academic growth.

Scholarship on doctoral education further highlights the psychological cost of silencing. Cotterall (2011) observes how supervisory relationships influence students’ academic identity and emphasizes that not being able to get one’s voice heard or legitimized can result in disengagement and diminished self-efficacy. In the context of Ethiopia, where institutional hierarchies may be inflexible, these dynamics are compounded by bureaucratic constraints and cultural norms around authority. Moreover, the concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) is central to the dynamics described. When supervisees’ knowledge is dismissed due to power differentials, they experience *testimonial injustice*, which means being denied credibility, and *hermeneutical injustice*, which means lacking the interpretive resources to make sense of their marginalization. These injustices are not merely interpersonal; they are structural, entrenched in supervisory cultures that honor obedience over critique.

Compliance as a Driver of Adaptive Resilience. The findings reveal a pervasive culture of compliance within doctoral supervision, where students feel compelled to conform rather than challenge. To illustrate, R-4 exemplifies this dynamic: “*If I want to continue with my PhD candidature, I have to be obedient and conform to the norm.*” Here, obedience is not framed as respect but as a survival strategy.

R-7 expands on this, describing a supervisor-dominated culture: “*I believe that I have to place myself in the submissive position... there was no time to misuse my power as a doctoral student.*” The student’s belief in the absence of dialogical culture reflects a normalized power imbalance, where agency is not only denied but conceptually unthinkable. R-9 offers a vivid account of intimidation and self-censorship, beginning with a broader cultural critique: “*The problem is that some supervisors in Ethiopia tend to consider themselves as the ivory tower.*” This signals that the issue is systemic rather than isolated. The student continues: “*He also threatened that I won’t complete my dissertation... I decided I shouldn’t send [my response], because I concluded that my reaction would complicate things.*” This fear of retaliation leads students to suppress legitimate critique, reinforcing a cycle of silence and compliance.

R-16 adds a layer of cultural attunement: “*I know the characters of my advisors... I understand what they hate and dislike.*” Rather than engaging in open dialogue, students learn to navigate supervisory relationships through avoidance and emotional labor—anticipating reactions rather than asserting ideas. These narratives reflect what Freire (1993) warns against: the normalization of silence in educational spaces. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire argues that to speak a true word is to enact transformation, and when speech is suppressed, education becomes a tool

of control rather than liberation. Supervisory silence around power thus functions as a mechanism of compliance, not co-construction.

Feminist supervision theory offers a counter-framework. *Mangione et al. (2011)* advocate for supervisory relationships grounded in reflexivity, collaboration, and authenticity, pressing for transparency in power relations. To legitimate this culture, supervision must be intentionally restructured through transparent role negotiation, dialogical engagement, emotional safety protocols, and institutional training that equips supervisors to recognize and dismantle compliance-based norms. *Prouty (2001)*, in his work on Pre-Therapy, further underscores the importance of emotional attunement and psychological contact, arguing that relational safety is foundational to meaningful engagement.

Notion of Enabling Supervisory Ecology

Despite experiences of hierarchical and emotionally unsafe supervision, students articulated their vision of a healthy supervisory relationship. For them a healthy supervisory relationship is one that is firmly grounded in emotional safety, intellectual autonomy, and empowerment—shifting away from compliance toward dialogical, respectful, and transformative engagement. Their reflections below generally suggested that supervisory activities require re-orientation to create a safe and positive learning environment in which everyone is welcomed and recognized as capable of fulfilling their goals. They entailed in their reflection this situation opens the pathway for transforming their experiences.

Emotional Trust and Non-Judgmental Communication. Students envisioned ideal supervision as a relationship grounded in emotional trust, interpersonal respect, and non-judgmental feedback. Their reflections reveal a longing for supervisory environments that are not only academically supportive but also psychologically safe—spaces where vulnerability is met with care, and intellectual labor is acknowledged with empathy.

R-1 describes a climate lacking responsiveness and emotional attunement: *“There was no room to complain about late feedback... the file you sent will return to you without any comment written on it.”* This absence of engagement undermines trust and signals disregard for the student’s scholarly effort. R-3 recounts experiences of verbal abuse and epistemic dismissal: *“Some think they are sole decision makers... they dump on you only their interest... few of them abuse you in words and try to demoralize you.”* Such behavior contradicts the ethical foundations of pedagogy, eroding confidence and belonging.

R-7 calls for a cultural shift: *“Supervisors are observed threatening to punish their doctoral students... They should be sympathetic, caring, and encouraging.”* This plea reflects a desire for supervision rooted in compassion rather than control. R-11 envisions a more holistic supervisory role: *“Offer help not only in methodological part but also psychologically... sharing general skills including stress management.”* Here, supervision is framed as a relational and developmental process, attending to both academic and emotional needs. R-14 critiques structural barriers to open communication: *“The top-down ladder places a challenge to talk freely... we exchange emails, but they don’t answer.”* This highlights how institutional hierarchies inhibit dialogue and reinforce emotional distance.

These accounts align with recent scholarship emphasizing the emotional dimension of doctoral supervision. *Han and Xu (2021)* argue that supervisors’ emotional regulation and

responsiveness are critical to fostering a productive supervisory climate. *Leshem and Bitzer (2024)* similarly highlight the role of socio-emotional support in building intellectual rapport and enhancing doctoral well-being. *Cotterall (2011)* underscores that emotional safety is not peripheral but central to doctoral success, shaping students' academic identity and motivation. When supervisors fail to provide timely feedback, acknowledge student contributions, or respond with empathy, they risk creating an environment of psychological disengagement.

A Greater Sense of Autonomy and Ownership. Students envisioned ideal supervision as a space where intellectual freedom and a greater sense of ownership over their doctoral journey are respected and actively cultivated. Their reflections reveal frustration with imposed decisions, rigid expectations, and limited agency.

R-2's account captures the emotional and epistemic cost of exclusion from key decisions: "I must have chosen my own supervisor/s, but it was done by the department head without my consent... If the topic of the dissertation had been of my interest, it could have been more beautiful." This lack of autonomy is not merely procedural—it is pedagogical, shaping how students engage with their research and perceive their scholarly legitimacy. Hopwood (2010) argues that supervision is infused with power, desire, and tension, and when students are denied choice, they are also denied voice.

Traditional models such as the master-apprentice structure (*Gurr, 2001; Grant, 2003*) often position supervisors as gatekeepers of disciplinary legitimacy, leaving little room for intellectual assertion. R-5 critiques this dynamic directly: "*Research supervision should not uphold an authoritative-subordinate relationship... as such a relationship is a source of power abuse.*" This reflection echoes *Lukes' (1974)* three-dimensional view of power, where ideological control—subtle and internalized—shapes students' beliefs about what is permissible or possible within academic relationships.

Students also called for supervisory relationships that promote independent work and respect boundaries. R-6 emphasized the need for autonomy in research execution, while R-8 observed: "*Most advisors... are very dogmatic, rigid, and suppress their advisees.*" These accounts reflect how *Foucault's (1998)* notion of disciplinary power operates through everyday practices—feedback, silence, and institutional rituals—that constrain voice and reinforce compliance.

The absence of student choice in supervisor selection (R-11) and topic determination (R-15) further illustrates the lack of shared decision-making, a core principle in feminist supervision theory. Scholars such as *Murphy and Wright (2005)* and *Mangione et al. (2011)* advocate for collaborative models that validate students as co-creators of knowledge. When students are denied this role, they experience what *Fricker (2007)* terms epistemic injustice—being wronged in their capacity as knowers, either through testimonial dismissal or hermeneutical exclusion.

While Western academic traditions increasingly encourage students to challenge authority and negotiate academic boundaries (*Manathunga, 2007; Morris, 2011*), the Ethiopian context presents distinct challenges. As *Green (2005)* notes, supervision is often shaped by societal hierarchies that prioritize respect, obedience, and relational harmony. R-2's and R-15's reflections suggest that imposed decisions are not just inconvenient—they are epistemically and emotionally disempowering.

Freire's (1970, 1993) concept of *conscientização*—the development of critical consciousness—offers a radical reimagining of supervision as a dialogic, co-constructive process. For students to reclaim ownership, supervision must move beyond the banking model and embrace shared authority, humility, and voice. As Freire insists, “*to speak a true word is to transform the world*”—and in the context of doctoral supervision, this means enabling students to speak, choose, and create freely.

Empowerment-focused Supervision. Empowerment-focused supervision is used here to refer to a transformative, relational and responsive supervision that aims at enhancing the confidence, creativity and self-regulation of doctoral students. It is an important aspect of empowering education, which, based on Ira Shor, can be defined as a student-centred and critical-progressive educational processes that primarily aim at giving students agency and empowering and validating learning experiences (Shor, 1992). Despite hierarchical and emotionally unsafe experiences, students articulated a hopeful vision of supervision—centered on emotional safety, intellectual autonomy, and empowerment, and moving beyond compliance toward dialogical and transformative engagement.

Students expressed aspirations for supervisory relationships grounded in mutual respect, shared responsibility, and dialogic engagement. Their reflections reveal a desire to move beyond autocratic academic cultures toward models that recognize students as epistemic partners and whole individuals. R-7 offers a direct critique of prevailing norms in Ethiopia: “*Teachers are powerful, and their ideas are taken for granted. We don't question because we fear them... Be open to one another and listen to our students.*” This statement reflects the broader cultural orientation described by Green (2005), where hierarchical teacher-student relationships discourage critique and reinforce asymmetries that limit student agency.

R-10 articulates a vision of dialogic supervision: “The supervisor–student interaction is a dialogical one... There is an established balance between the supervisory support provided for the research process and the care for the emotional aspects of the doctoral student.” This aligns with Freire's (1993) conception of education as a co-constructive process, where dialogue is not merely a method but an ethical imperative. Freire's notion of *conscientização*—the development of critical consciousness—calls for supervisory spaces that enable students to name and transform oppressive structures through voice and reflection.

R-5 emphasizes democratic accountability: “*Supervisor and supervisee are both equally held accountable and responsible for the research work.*” This challenges the master-apprentice model (Gurr, 2001; Grant, 2003), which often positions supervisors as sole authorities. Instead, it echoes collaborative models that foster shared agency and intellectual partnership (Green, 2005). R-11 and R-14 underscore the need for reciprocal learning and open communication: “*An advisor is not there only to give but also to learn from his students,*” and “*The supervisee should not be seen as only a recipient... the supervisor can also learn from.*” These reflections resonate with feminist supervision theory, which foregrounds relational ethics, emotional attunement, and shared authority (Szymanski, 2003; Murphy & Wright, 2005; Mangione et al., 2011). Prouty (2001) and Cotterall (2011) emphasize that emotionally safe environments—where vulnerability is met with care—are essential for intellectual growth and identity development.

The students' call for liberal, dialogic environments also reflects a rejection of Foucault's (1998) disciplinary power, which operates through surveillance, normalization, and the internalization of expectations. R-14's critique— “*This has to be replaced by a platform of free*

interaction... ”—signals a desire to dismantle these mechanisms and replace them with spaces of epistemic justice and mutual respect. This vision also addresses the testimonial and hermeneutical injustices identified by *Fricker (2007)*, where students’ voices are dismissed or their experiences rendered unintelligible within dominant academic frameworks. By advocating for supervision that is dialogic, student-centered, and emotionally attuned, participants envision a model that repairs these injustices and affirms their scholarly legitimacy.

Concluding Remarks

This study examined doctoral candidates’ lived experiences and reflections on the nature and impacts of patterns of doctoral supervision and supervisory relationships within Ethiopian higher education, highlighting how institutional hierarchies, cultural norms, and supervisory practices influence students’ experiences of agency, voice, and intellectual development. Drawing on Freirean pedagogy and feminist supervision theory, the analysis identified three key dimensions shaping students’ perspectives: emotional safety and trust, intellectual autonomy and ownership, and dialogic, student-centered engagement.

Given the fact that supervision is a site where power is enacted and contested, the nature of relationships built around supervision can have either a detrimental or a transformative outcome. Positively-oriented supervisions primarily promote candidates’ knowledge, experiences and perspectives as credible, relevant and trustworthy whereas negatively-oriented supervisions maintain the epistemic domination of supervisors. In other words, supervisory practices and process that uphold dominant-subordinate relationships creates the condition for epistemic injustice. The PhD candidates’ reflections suggested that taking two mutually reinforcing measures can help transform unhealthy and undemocratic supervisory relationships. These are upholding the epistemic dignity of candidates and considering them as learners that have intellectual and moral agency. The second is the importance of weaving epistemic humility into the very fabric of how the supervisors carryout their supervisory and other intellectual responsibilities.

From this point of view, the practical implications of the findings of the study should be pointed out here. The findings directly or indirectly suggest the importance of adapting interactive, relational and collaborative supervisor-supervisee relationships. The study calls for humanization of doctoral supervision. Supervisors should aim to earn respect through the support they offer and the empathy they show to their candidates rather than through the willpower and fears they impose. The doctoral candidates involved in this study subtly indicated that such supervisory relationships create a supportive and transformative learning environment that fosters profound personal and professional growth. Instead of considering themselves as controllers of knowledge, supervisors need to consider their candidates as co-creators of knowledge and active agents in the process of creating and co-creating a transformative thinking and learning environment. The implication for post-graduate program leadership is that regular awareness-building training and consultative platforms should be arranged to improve supervisory practices and promote supervisory approaches and behaviors that cultivate collegiality and supportive relationships between supervisors and their candidates. Supervisors need awareness about the communication behaviors and reactions that cultivate positivity and negativity, particularly the debilitating effects of supervisory approaches that affect the candidates’ emotional, psychological and intellectual journey. This calls for transforming supervisory approaches and practices that potentially bring about detrimental effects on candidates’ educational outcomes, dignity and personal and professional aspirations.

Acknowledgements

The author sincerely acknowledges the anonymous reviewers of the journal for their critical and constructive comments. The author immensely benefited from their critiques. He also appreciates the participants of the study for their reflections and determination to share their experiences and perspectives.

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