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Negotiated identity: a systematic review of the experiences and perceptions of supervisors of undergraduate academic supervision of the final year research project

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to systematically search and synthesise the literature to explore the experiences of supervisors of the undergraduate academic supervision process. Using a deductive thematic analysis informed by a social identity approach, the current study aimed to synthesise existing research within an overarching theoretical perspective. Findings indicate that supervisors experience undergraduate supervision as one of flux and negotiation. Three themes relating to: (1) supervision as an internal negotiation; (2) supervision as an external negotiation, and (3) supervision as a liminal space, were identified. Findings provide a structure within which supervisors can make sense of their supervisory process.

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Academic identity; academic supervisor; dissertation; social identity; thesis; undergraduate supervision

Introduction

For many disciplines in academia, the final year academic research project represents the culmination of learning for the undergraduate degree (Losse & Nahuis, 2016). This project is often called the cap/touch stone, thesis, or dissertation, and involves an intense period of independent research under the guidance of an academic supervisor (Malcolm, 2020). Understanding the role of the supervisor in this process is fundamental to the successful completion of the project. Recognising this, there has been an increase in published papers focusing on the supervisors' perspectives of the process with a view to supporting supervisors and improving outcomes for students (Van der Marel et al., 2022). Many of these papers approach the topic using a wide range of perspectives such as social constructivist, teaching dilemmas, or, more often, do not come from an explicit theoretical approach. However, Larson et al. (2018) argue that academic developers need to provide targeted measures supporting academics in their role as supervisors. A strong theoretical base can provide universities with a framework through which supervisory supports for academics can be developed. Such frameworks can also be used as a basis for evaluation of existing supports, challenging our assumptions about how any prospective supports should work (Glanz et al., 2002). This strong theoretical base can be achieved through a synthesis of the literature using an overarching theoretical

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approach, and a social identity approach offers one potential avenue to synthesise this literature on academic supervisor identities (Quigley, 2011). Thus, the goal of this review is to synthesise primary literature on supervisory experiences of undergraduate dissertation supervision. To be clear, our focus is on professional supervision experience, as this is a core dimension to many academic roles. There is an extensive literature on mentored undergraduate research more broadly (e.g. Larson et al., 2018) and models of research involvement aside from the dissertation (e.g. Lloyd et al., 2019), which, unlike supervision, are often optional dimensions to academic roles.

Social identity represents the aspect of our identities derived from our social group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We have many different social identities with a different identity becoming salient depending on the social situation. Self-categorisation within a given social identity (Turner et al., 1987) involves three processes of comparative fit, normative fit, and perceiver readiness. Comparative fit reflects how an individual defines themselves as members of a particular category (e.g. 'academics') by comparing similarity to other group members (S. A. Haslam & Turner, 1992). Normative fit arises when there is a match between the expected behaviours and abilities of group members (e.g. grant capture, peer-reviewed publications, academic supervision), and the person (Van Rijswijk et al., 2006). Finally, perceiver readiness captures the extent to which the individual is willing to categorise within a given identity like 'academic', with previous categorisation being a predictor of future identification (C. Haslam et al., 2018). However, while the category descriptor (in this instance 'academic') can be static, the content, norms, and behaviours required to access any given identity is understood to be fluid and constructed through our social interactions. What is expected and accepted as in-group behaviour can be guided by other more stereotypical group members and can differ between contexts [for example, disciplinary norms around publishing peer-reviewed papers or providing academic supervision]. This fluidity may present a difficulty for some researchers to maintain an uncontested identity as an academic, particularly if they perceive their own capabilities and experiences of academic supervision to be limited in comparison to more stereotypical group members (Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010).

The process through which we categorise within a specific social identity has implications for how academics understand their roles as undergraduate supervisors, and for how academics contribute to the socialization of undergraduate students as members of an academic community. Specifically, academic identity is understood as a socially constructed identity whose meaning is derived and modified through social interaction (Quigley, 2011). The process of formulating a supervisor identity is constrained by several factors. First, undergraduate supervision represents an aspect of academic identity that occurs in a 'private realm' (Wiggins et al., 2016, p. 11); and so much of the interaction around supervision occurs only between the supervisor and student, with limited exposure to other 'models' of academic supervision. Secondly, undergraduate supervision represents an aspect of academic identity that is integral to the duties of many academics but has little or no part in their previous training (Roberts & Seaman, 2018a). This context makes it difficult for early-career academics to develop their supervisory skills and, potentially, complicates their access to this 'academic identity', of which supervision is a core part. Thirdly, supervision can be considered a complex aspect of academic identity that straddles both the teaching and research mandates of academic life. In this way, a supervisor identity

might conflict with the salient 'teacher' or 'researcher' identities that an academic might already hold; conversely, the 'supervisor' identity might be a preferred identity as it integrates two often-competing dimensions of academic roles (i.e. teaching and research). Academic supervision is simultaneously instructional, and research based. The social identity approach has been well established as a useful model within which to understand multiple social identities and how these relate to specific behaviours in other contexts (e.g. Bradshaw et al., 2024; McMahon et al., 2024).

Consequently, there is a need to understand how academic supervisory identities are constructed within the literature to inform the development of supports for supervisors as part of their professional development. Understanding identity processes and constructions can support individuals to integrate multiple and potentially competing identity constructions of academic supervision. The social identity approach is one well-established perspective that could contribute to understanding of this complex identity spanning research and teaching dimensions. Therefore, the current study aims to conduct a systematic review of the evidence using a social identity theoretical approach to explore perceptions of academic supervisor identity among undergraduate supervisors. We focus on supervisor perspectives, as we are interested in how supervisors construct their own 'supervisor' identities, rather than the supervisory process itself.

Methods

The systematic search was designed to be both comprehensive and inclusive. We aimed to include peer-reviewed studies with primary data (qualitative or quantitative) relating to supervisor experiences of undergraduate theses (and not other research experiences, e.g. internships). There were no restrictions in regard to year of publication or geographical location. Following Cochrane recommendations (Noyes et al., 2019b), and previous reviews in educational literature (e.g. Li et al., 2022), we restricted the search to empirical papers, as empirical papers capture existing evidence rather than narrative or summary interpretations. Search terms included the concepts of participant (supervisor), setting (undergraduate thesis), and outcome (perspectives or experiences) (see Supplemental Material). As we were interested in both qualitative and quantitative approaches, analysis type was not restricted. In consultation with a search specialist, eight databases were identified: Academic Complete; Australian Education Index; British Education Index; Education Resources Information Center (ERIC); Educational Research Abstracts online (ERA); Higher Education Digest (HERI); Psychinfo, and Web of Science. Searches were conducted within titles, abstracts, keywords, and subject terms. A systematic search identified 2011 potential results. Results were downloaded onto Endnote for screening and data extraction. At this point, 590 duplicates were removed resulting in 1,421 articles eligible for title and abstract screening.

Articles were excluded according to the following criteria:

- Ineligible document type (article was a review, commentary, or opinion piece)
- Duplicate document
- Document is not an empirical study of undergraduate thesis supervision process.
- Ineligible participants
- Ineligible outcome measure

- Not in English

On completion of title and abstract screening, 1,385 titles were excluded. Full-text documents of the remaining 36 studies were downloaded and reviewed using the eligibility criteria outlined above. If studies included both supervisor and student perspectives, or if they were conducted in both undergraduate and postgraduate contexts, only studies that clearly identified separate supervisor data in an undergraduate context were included. If full-text documents were unavailable, text was requested from study authors. If full text was unforthcoming, title was excluded from the review.

On completion of the full-text screening, 12 studies were identified for inclusion. Forward and backward reference searches were conducted on the eligible titles identifying four additional studies. This resulted in 16 studies eligible for data extraction and analysis (see Figure 1).

On completion of the full-text screening, relevant outcomes and study characteristics were extracted. At this stage, a critical appraisal of the quality of each study was conducted using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme CASP critical appraisal tool (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018), an internationally recognised tool to evaluate methodological rigour, as recommended by the Campbell and Cochrane evidence syntheses guidelines (see Supplemental Material). This tool provides information as to the strengths and weaknesses of individual studies; however, no studies are excluded based on their CASP data.

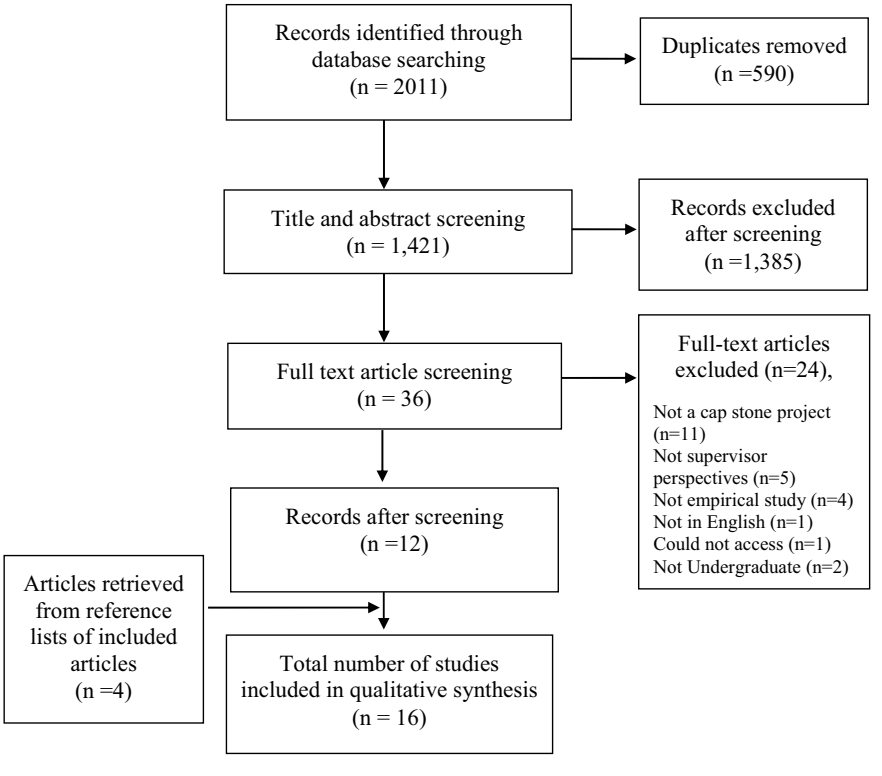

Figure 1. Study selection flow chart.

Data extraction and analysis

This study adopts a data-based convergent synthesis design (Noyes et al., 2019b) guided by a social identity approach (Carroll et al., 2013). This involves using both positivist and interpretive perspectives. Relevant data is extracted from the eligible papers and analysed using a theoretically informed secondary thematic analysis. This approach follows guidelines outlined in Cochrane Systematic Reviews Methods Handbook (Noyes et al., 2019a). The aim of this approach is to provide richer interpretations going beyond the original studies, producing new cumulative knowledge (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). The current synthesis involves six steps. In Step 1, we define the research questions. In Step 2, we identify relevant conceptual theory to approach the analysis, in this case a social identity approach. In Step 3, we systematically identify relevant primary research studies. In Step 4, we extract the relevant data from eligible studies. Following Cochrane Qualitative Implementation Group recommendations, relevant data were identified as any data relating to specific findings or study author interpretation in results and discussion sections. In Step 5, we coded the data guided by the theoretical approach outlined in Step 2. In Step 6, we created new themes through secondary thematic analysis. Themes and alternative interpretations were discussed between study authors. This process has been used in previous reviews (Byrne et al., 2024) and is a recommended evidence synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008: Noyes & Harden, 2022).

Study characteristics such as population, context, methodology, data collection, and data analysis were extracted and presented in a table of characteristics (see Table 1). A data-based convergent thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used to combine perspectives from each study, focusing on individual study findings and study author interpretations contained in the discussion (Noyes et al., 2019b). Studies were read and re-read multiple times to gain an overview of the data. Text within study findings or study author interpretations in the discussion section that reported social identity-related concepts were extracted for analysis; specifically, when authors reported group-based process as explanations for subsequent actions or interpretations. For example, '*as a supervisor I do feel I'm not competent enough and need help*', was included as it captured the sense of incompetence felt by a participant when they categorised themselves within a specific social identity. This follows a similar approach to theoretically driven data-convergent synthesis approaches (Byrne et al., 2024). Extracted passages were read and reread multiple times and then grouped according to similar meanings. Groups were then examined and merged into overarching themes: supervision as an internal conflict; supervision as an external negotiation, and supervision as a liminal space.

Results

On completion of the search and screening processes, 16 studies involving 284 participants from 25 disciplines and 10 different countries were included in this review. Seventy-seven participants were female, 71 were male, and 85 were unspecified. Thirteen studies were qualitative, one study was quantitative, and two were mixed

Table 1. Study characteristics.

Study No.	Authors, Year. Country	Participants	Measures	Type of Analysis	Main Findings
1	Agricola et al. (2021) Holland	7 undergraduate supervisors	Multi-case study design. Videoed supervision meetings followed by simulated recall interviews	Deductive content analysis Boeije	In-the-moment decisions supervisors made had a strong focus on student learning. Supervisors often asked questions to empower students or to increase student understanding. These supervising strategies seemed to be adapted to students' needs, as the latter had positive perceptions when their control increased or when they received stimuli to think for themselves
2	Boikhutso et al. (2013) Botswana	8 lecturers and 10 final year students of social studies and religious education as part of the Diploma in Primary Education	Interviews and focus groups	Content/ thematic analysis	Supervisors and student teachers at undergraduate level experience a large array of problems related to re-search capacity. The students, for example, lacked presentation skills, which has resulted in failure to present original work. There is also evidence of relatively inadequate supervisory skills by college lecturers. The study concludes by calling for both supervisors and their supervisees to consider undergraduate research as a two-way process, which requires expertise and adequate skills
3	Bowyer and Akpinar (2022) Finland and Australia	7 students, 4 academics	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis	Research-based learning is challenging and rewarding for developing student work readiness and professional identity. Findings also identify the central role supervisors have in managing the research-based learning process.
4	Brewer et al. (2012) UK	108 students and 62 lecturers (online surveys) 13 lecturers (personal communication)	Online surveys and personal communication	Thematic analysis Braun & Clarke, (2006)	Research project is viewed as a collaborative process. Differences in student and supervisor rating of role, skill development, mentorship, research community membership, and satisfaction. Students were more satisfied if they believed that their project was student (as opposed to supervisor) led and that it advanced knowledge in the subject area.
5	Cehrs, et al. (2020) UK	66 faculty members supervision final year research project.	Postal survey (quantitative)	Kruskal – Wallis	Faculty had an overall positive view of the project. Faculty's perception of the project was influenced by their role at the college, their focused species, and their opinion on the time spent supervising.
6	Derounian (2011) UK	14 students and 14 staff members across a variety of different disciplines. 3 international specialists	Survey and follow up interviews	Unspecified	The research highlights the perceived importance of the staff – student relationship to all stages of dissertation production.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Study No.	Authors, Year. Country	Participants	Measures	Type of Analysis	Main Findings
7	Frith (2020) UK	11 supervisors	Qualitative questionnaire	Thematic analysis Braun & Clarke, (2006)	Three dilemmas were identified regarding 'taking ownership', 'driving supervision' and 'challenging and encouraging'. Underpinning these was a tension between an ideal model of supervision and the need for flexibility.
8	Al-Doubi et al. (2019) Saudi Arabia	3 teachers at an Applied Linguistics Department	Interviews/ questionnaires	Thematic analysis	The level of experience affected the supervision process in relation to the supervisors' perceptions as well as the process of supervision and the feedback provided
9	Malcolm (2020) UK	20 final year dissertation supervisors	Interviews	Grounded theory	Supervisors construct supervision as a multi-stage process. Individual practices enable them to maintain initial control of the dissertation, to extend supervisee autonomy at a central stage, and to distance supervisors further from the written output at a final stage. This study questions the context where the supervisor is also an evaluator of work they may have shaped substantially, or as a pedagogic approach to developing research skills.
10a	Nangimah, et al. (2023a) Sweden and Indonesia	14 thesis supervisors	Multi case study	Thematic analysis Braun & Clarke, (2006)	Supervisors expressed dealing with (a)symmetrical relationships with students and colleagues, dealing with different supervision roles, and managing priorities relating to intellectual development and instrumental goals. However, these dimensions of supervision were described differently in the three contexts. The Swedish supervisors expressed concerns about having weak authority; Indonesian private supervisors described frustrated attempts to form a closer relationship with the students; Indonesian public supervisors reacted to students trying to become too familiar. Furthermore, supervisors in the three contexts had to take different unwanted roles in supervision.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Study No.	Authors, Year. Country	Participants	Measures	Type of Analysis	Main Findings
10b	Nangimah, et al. (2023b) Sweden and Indonesia	14 thesis supervisors 25 students	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis Braun & Clarke, (2006)	Swedish and Indonesian supervisors had different feedback provision priorities. Swedish supervisors described prioritizing content focused feedback to facilitate students' socialization into academic writing. Indonesian supervisors expressed balancing content- and form-focused feedback with a greater emphasis on qualifying as English teachers. Despite these differences, supervisors in both contexts tended to isolate academic language use from discipline-specific values and practices.
11	Razali et al. (2020) Malaysia	8 (4 supervisor-student pairs)	Individual semi-structured interviews at 4 different time points	Thematic analysis Corbin & Strauss	Findings indicated that undergraduate supervision was perceived and practiced as a traditional, supervisor-centric process.
12	Reguant et al. (2018) Spain	12 academic supervisors with at least 2 years' experience of supervision	Interviews	Hermeneutical content Cohen et al	The analysis suggested that supervisors understand the research competencies within a broad frame of their teaching, and even within their personal roles, which range from motivating, raising awareness of what has been learnt during the degree course, explaining specific concepts or processes, right through to the academic supervisors' own learning process.
13	Roberts, et al. (2018a) Australia	Unspecified number of supervisors and students	Semi structured interviews	Thematic analysis Braun & Clarke, (2006)	Supervision can be conceptualised as a negotiated practice between supervisor and students. That is, both students and supervisors contribute to the experience of 'good' supervision.
14	Stappenbelt & Basu (2019) Australia	122 students and 25 academic staff in an engineering department (quantitative) 7 staff members (qualitative)	Survey and follow up interview	Unspecified	Poor alignment between student and university expectations regarding undergraduate thesis responsibilities The learning that is intended to result from the undergraduate thesis is devalued when research outcomes are prioritised over research process.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Study No.	Authors, Year. Country	Participants	Measures	Type of Analysis	Main Findings
15	Todd et al. (2006) UK	8 staff members of a social science department	Interviews	Unspecified	Dissertation regarded as being of particular educational value within the context of degree-level study. This was seen to arise from its unique status in the course as the most sustained and in-depth piece of work that the students undertake on their degree, involving self-directed, independent study. Students need support and encouragement in order to gain the confidence needed to complete their dissertations. However, Supervisors and students experience waves of 'cosmos' and 'chaos'.
16	Wiggins et al. (2016) UK	20 final-year dissertation supervisors	Interviews	Thematic analysis Braun & Clarke, (2006)	Three main themes were identified: the quantitative culture in psychology teaching, supervisors' expertise, and the supervision process. Supervisors noted that students were typically constrained in their choice of methodology due to limited qualitative methods teaching, lack of training and guidance for supervisors, and concerns about the risks of demanding qualitative projects. Supervisors reported staying within their comfort zone, electing where possible to supervise only the methods that they use themselves

methods. Supervisors participating in the studies had a wide range of supervisory experience ranging from new (1–2 years) to 22+ years (see Table 2).

Findings

Throughout the dataset, supervisors described a supervisory process as one of negotiation and flux. Supervisory identity was constructed in terms of roles, abilities, experiences, expectations, and change. Supervisors spoke about waves of cosmos and chaos (Todd et al., 2006). Taking an identity perspective to the analysis allows us to understand the role of different constructions of supervision had upon the undergraduate supervisors involved. Three themes relating to: (1) supervision as an internal negotiation; (2) supervision as an external negotiation, and (3) supervision as a liminal space, were identified, and are discussed below.

Theme 1. Supervision as an internal negotiation

This theme captures how an individual's ability to access a supervisor identity can be contested depending on how the identity is internally constructed. Whilst academic identity is a very heterogeneous construct (Quigley, 2011) incorporating both teaching and research aspects, different constructions of the identity can result in individuals internally contesting their legitimacy to this identity.

Boikhutso et al. (2013, p. 43) identify how Ms. Greg, anticipating a degree of criticism surrounding their own supervisory capabilities, negotiates the threat posed by potential inadequate evaluation of their supervisory ability: *'We do have adequate skills, yes, we have done research but it is not a guarantee that we have the required skills to supervise'*, Here we see how Ms Greg separates out supervision from their academic research based identity linking adequate skills with research experience. Using the term 'we', Ms Greg speaks for the wider social group and is emphasising that this is a natural and universal situation and not restricted to any individual limitation.

Although Ms Greg and colleagues draw on their research abilities or other areas of strength to compensate for potential limitations in supervision, not all researchers have such resources available. For example, Boikhutso et al. (2013) found that researchers spoke about being undermined by the supervision and did not understand how they were going to engage in the process emphasising their own lack of research experience. Similarly, in Wiggins et al. (2016, p. 6) we can see how Sally struggles to cope with the threat internalising the potential criticism (p. 6) '*They thought I would be a better person'*. Wiggins et al. (2016) also comment on how this can undermine supervisors' ability to feel '*legitimate*' in the role. For example, Boikhutso et al. (2013, p. 43) argue that lecturers are somewhat unwilling to embrace the role of supervisor due in part to the perceived lack of necessary skills: '*I do not have the skills . . . I cannot tell whether (the student) is correct . . . I cannot even demonstrate'*. Wiggins et al. (2016, p. 9) speak of specific aspects of when the supervisor feels they lack the knowledge to support the students as supervisors feeling like they have been '*thrown in at the deep end*', and '*the blind leading the blind', 'I feel like I am making it up'*.

Table 2. Descriptive information of included studies.

Discipline	Applied Linguistics	3
	Business	1
	Business, Law, Accounting & Finance, Psychology, Sports Studies	1
	Culinary Arts, Chemistry, Marketing, Mathematics	1
	Education	1
	English Studies	1
	English Studies for Education	1
	Engineering	1
	Geography, Environment, Sports	1
	Health	1
	Psychology	3
	Social Sciences/Religious	1
	Social Studies	1
	Veterinary	1
Country	Australia	2
	Australia, Finland	1
	Botswana	1
	Holland	1
	Indonesia	1
	Malaysia	1
	Saudi Arabia	1
	Spain	1
	Sweden	1
	UK	7
Gender	Female	75
	Male	56
	Unspecified	153
Methodology	Qualitative	13
	Quantitative	1
	Mixed methods	2
Range of Supervisory experience		1–22^{+} years

Taken together, feelings of inadequacy can lead to a profound sense of isolation (Frith, 2020) as researchers feel unable to access social support. Individuals who feel less connection to a group will perceive, seek, and accept less support from others than if they feel more secure in their identification (S. A. Haslam et al., 2012). This is captured by Jane, who describes how she was reluctant in reaching out to help as it could identify her as inexperienced or the '*New kid on the block*', who *'do[es]n't want to look like an idiot'* and as not part of the established academic community (Wiggins et al., 2016, p. 10).

Theme 2. Supervision as an external negotiation

One of the defining features of the supervisory process appears to be its vagueness and lack of transparency (Malcolm, 2020). Consequently, theme two captures how supervisors can find themselves negotiating with themselves, the student, and the faculty as to the nature of supervisor they are going to be.

Razali et al. (2020) outline how the identity of a supervisor and the supervisory relationship can be constructed in three different ways, traditional, techno-scientific, or psy-supervision. A traditional supervisory relationship may be defined as one where supervisor is acting as an expert and has a very asymmetrical power structure. A techno-scientific approach emphasises the researcher as a technical expert, and the supervision focuses on the building of students' technical skills. Finally, the psy-supervision relationship is one where the power

imbalance is more evenly distributed and based on dialogue and collaboration. Roberts and Seaman (2018a) add to these potential identity constructions by orienting toward building trusting, supportive relationships and adding pastoral care, while Reguant et al. (2018, p. 119) outlined a role that 'went far beyond teaching content'. In this respect, good supervision was equated to pastoral qualities such as being a shepherd, guiding, directing but also protecting. Similarly, Polly spoke about not wanting to '*mess up*' their students' education (Wiggins et al., 2016).

Additionally, students and supervisors enter with expectations as to how the relationship is structured (Derounian, 2011; Roberts & Seaman, 2018b). Consequently, while supervisors may construct a unique supervisor identity, within each supervisory pairing, students retain a level of control how the process will proceed. This potential mismatch of expectations can be addressed through the creation of a learning agreement outlining expectations (Stappenbelt & Basu, 2019). Whilst this is a negotiated process with a distinct power imbalance normally in favour of the supervisor (Malcolm, 2020), the nature of the supervisor identity available to each lecture is constrained by the expertise and abilities of both the student and supervisor in any given pairing (Todd et al., 2006). For example, supervisors can construct their supervisory identity as one of the experts in content and methodology but are then challenged by students arguing to proceed outside of this specific expertise (Todd et al., 2006). Consequently, while supervisors can speak about how they '*put*' students on certain paths and outline what they are expecting (Malcolm, 2020), students may take control of the process and lead the relationship away from a supervisor-centric space (Razali et al., 2020).

The final aspect of this negotiated identity is that between the supervisor and the university itself. Some supervisors spoke about how they were unaware and reluctant to engage in the process at all. Specifically, whilst the allocation of students was mostly outside of the control of either supervisor or student, in some circumstances supervisors sought clarification as to whether this was a part of their role in the first place. This can reflect how the supervision of students is seen as an implicit aspect of academic identity, where on a faculty level it is taken for granted that staff have the capabilities and willingness to engage with this process. As we have seen in the first theme, this implicit expectation and construction of the academic identity can be at odds to those constructed by the individuals themselves.

Additionally, supervisors spoke about the dichotomy between process and product. There was confusion surrounding whether they were aiming to create good scientists (Roberts & Seaman, 2018a) or whether the aim was the final product and grade. Stappenbelt and Basu (2019) point out that whilst some universities have clearly defined guidelines for staff engaged in the supervision process, many have little or no guidance, leaving the process to be negotiated by the individual student – staff pairings. As the supervisory role straddles several standpoints, there are potentially conflicting aspects to the identity. Supervisors in the data set note that they are confused owing to the potentially contradictory nature of some aspects of the identity. For example, Malcolm (2020) speaks about the separation between evaluator and teacher – specifically, about achieving a balance where they support the student but also maintain sufficient distance from the student so they can judge and grade the work.

Theme 3. Supervision as a liminal space

The final theme draws on the previous two and captures how the supervisory process can be understood as a liminal or transitional space. The supervision has a definitive start and end, between which the process of the supervision exists. This can be experienced on several levels, including the transition of the student, staff, the student – staff relationship, and the project itself.

Throughout the dataset, supervisors use an array of metaphors to describe their role and the process of supervision, the most consistent of which is that of a journey. For example, Malcolm (2020) speaks of a *'path'* and a *'road'* the student and supervisor take, with the student occupying the traveller role and the supervisor acting as a gatekeeper or guide putting them onto one road or another depending on the ability of the student. Todd et al. (2006) describe it as a journey where the supervisor occupies the role of guide. Equally, Roberts and Seaman (2018a, p. 33) speak of the research journey. One of the key aspects of the process is the move from student to independent researcher; '*You start off teaching them . . . but . . . if that stays the whole way they're not ever gonna be a good scientist*'.

Similarly, the project itself can be considered as a transition between one existence and another. Keeping with the journey motif, Malcolm (2020) described how the project progresses as a multistage process, passing through staging points in its journey. As the project develops, supervisors speak about the changing, or evolving relationship between the supervisee and the supervisor. At the early stages, the supervisor can be seen as taking much more of a lead role, slowly dropping off as the project proceeds. The role the supervisor takes changes going from an instructor and developer assisting in the structural and functional aspects of the project in the early stages slowly relinquishing control and ownership towards the culmination of the project. In this way supervisors can distance themselves from a role defined by the construction of guidance and support, to one of evaluation and judgement.

The final aspect of transition is that of the supervisor themselves, as they progress through their early career and into an established academic, developing in skill, confidence, and expertise.

Discussion

Academic supervision is a complex and context-dependent endeavour (Larson et al., 2018). Academic developers are in a unique position to provide support across disciplines and situations, and whilst academic practice and development are central for supervision relations, supervisory identity is also an important factor. Throughout the studies reviewed in the current study, supervisors spoke about the supervisory process as a transitory place where they experience waves of cosmos and chaos (Todd et al., 2006). Their experiences are marked by internal and external negotiation surrounding expectations and evaluations around what it means to be a good supervisor. These findings are supported by three themes: (1) supervision as an internal conflict; (2) supervision as external negotiation, and (3) supervision as a liminal space. These findings have practical as well as theoretical implications.

The unique contribution of this study is that it provides an overarching theoretical approach from which we can understand potential issues for academics in engaging with

the supervisory process. One of the features across the included studies is the lack of a consistent theoretical approach, which may hinder the development of targeted support for supervisors, and, consequently, better quality supervision for students. Theory and scientific evidence are crucial in the development of any effective intervention (Glanz et al., 2002). Using a theoretical base enables policymakers to identify potential mechanisms through which positive outcomes can be achieved (Bos et al., 2008). Furthermore, without a theoretically based understanding of the phenomenon, policymakers are unable to identify, and for that matter evaluate, the outcomes of their interventions (Glanz et al., 2002). The current study provides one potential theoretical approach to build evidence-based supports for those involved and to guide academic developers in its inclusion in frameworks for supervisory support.

Specifically, previous studies emphasise how academic identity can be understood as a constructed social identity (Quigley, 2011). From a social identity perspective, the ability of an individual to categorise and identify as a member of a particular identity will vary depending on the values, beliefs, and norms associated with the identity. Equally, individuals who have limited access to sites on enactment will find it more difficult to identify (Hopkins et al., 2023). Findings from this study highlight how this can be problematic for early career academic staff with little supervisory experience and for academics whose strengths lie away from research-based activities. Supervisors with alternative constructions of supervisory identity can encounter difficulty during the process when confronted with alternative constructions created by other members of staff or the students in their care.

Compounding this, the current study identifies how the supervisory process occupies a liminal space, and so is one in flux. It is influenced by the university context, the individual supervisor, the student, and the supervisor – student relationship itself. Consequently, the supervisor identity is frequently evolving and developing, as the same supervisor can adopt different approaches and constructions depending on the demands of the situation (Hopkins et al., 2023). Findings from the current study emphasised how supervisors, particularly early-career supervisors, adopted a fixed supervisor identity potentially undermining their ability to adapt to the unique constraints of each supervisory interaction. These constructions were often created in isolation and based on their own limited experiences of being supervised. Perceptions of inadequacy coupled with lack of meaningful identification also ensures that supervisors most in need of support may be unwilling to seek it, as they view it as a threat to their claim for in-group membership. In contrast, constructing undergraduate supervision as one in continual development enables early-career academics to identify as an academic supervisor without extensive previous enactment or expertise, since supervision provides alternative identity constructions, and opportunities for professional development. Providing mentoring opportunities, tangible guidelines, and different types of training, can support supervisors by emphasising the diversity and fluidity of the supervisor identity. There is potential for academic developers to incorporate such opportunities into their conversations with academics and to create space to discuss supervisory identity in a meaningful and supportive manner.

Although our focus was on academic supervision, there is conceptual overlap between supervision and mentoring (Lunsford et al., 2017). Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Larson et al., 2018), supervision typically refers to

formal oversight of the student's engagement with a research project, the scope of which is prescribed in an agreed curriculum. In contrast, mentorship is broader, can occur within, or external to, academic supervision, can involve fostering a student's personal as well as professional development, and, unlike supervision, does not usually involve an explicit evaluative element. Manathunga (2007) cautions against framing supervision as mentorship, as to do so can erode the power imbalance inherent in supervision practices (that are less salient in mentorship arrangements). In our synthesis, there is evidence that at least some supervisors shift from supervision into a mentoring role; for example, some supervisors described pastoral care (Roberts & Seaman, 2018a), and Malcolm's (2020) study described different aspects of supervisor identities relating to mentorship and evaluation (i.e. of the dissertation). There was some tension between supervision and mentorship, as supervisors struggled to make sense of their supervisory role; was it to create good scientists (Roberts & Seaman, 2018a) (a goal more aligned with mentorship), or to support generation of a strong final product (a goal more clearly aligned with supervision). Clearly, the distinction between supervision and mentorship is not clearcut and may contribute to the vagueness surrounding the role of supervisor and the supervision process. Therefore, professional development opportunities for supervisors should facilitate discussion of these blurred lines between supervisory and mentor roles. Discussing the qualities of supervision and of mentorship as these relate to the learning outcomes of the undergraduate dissertation could support supervisors in reflecting on their role, and in offering an equitable quality of experience for students.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the construction and enactment of the supervisor identity, there are limitations. Firstly, we chose to analyse the data within a social identity perspective; this is one of the many potential approaches to the data that may have enhanced our understanding of academic supervision in different ways. Equally, using a prescribed theoretical approach can lead to '*false-start*' (Booth & France, 2024) as well as '*squeezing*', where the researcher selects an inappropriate theoretical approach or attempts to force data into pre-existing categories. Secondly, the data have been screened, extracted, and interpreted from a White, western perspective; other analysts might draw different interpretations from the data. Thirdly, a quarter of the eligible studies were identified through hand searches of the reference lists rather than through the electronic search itself. This possibly reflects the difficulty in identifying comprehensive search terms within the time constraints of a given research project, or a weakness in the search strategy that resulted in the exclusion of relevant studies. However, a comprehensive piloting strategy was used in consultation with a search expert. Additionally, papers identified through this approach were mainly qualitative in design. Qualitative papers are recognised to be particularly difficult to capture using electronic searches alone, and so reference searching is accepted as an integral aspect of the search strategy. Additionally, a number of studies identified through the systematic search were comparable to expectations when compared to a recent review (Van der Marel et al., 2022) of a similar topic. Fourth, we restricted eligibility to papers written in English, and may have excluded papers with culturally variable constructions of supervisor identity. Finally, supervisor perspectives offer only one side of the supervisory relationship. It was beyond the scope here to include student perspectives, but these would be a valuable focus for future research.

Despite these limitations, this study adds to the current literature by synthesising available evidence on supervisor perceptions of the supervisory process from the social identity perspective. Previous research argues for more training and supportive measures for academics in their role as academic supervisors (Roberts & Seaman, 2018a). Theoretically driven initiatives provide the platform to create testable hypothesis to ensure supports act in the way they were intended to do (Glanz et al., 2002). Using a particular theoretical perspective in this way can facilitate targeted interventions to improve the experience for supervisors and students alike and guide academic developers in their design of such targeted support. Future studies can draw on this perspective to assess how supervisor identity is relevant for the experience of the supervisory process for both student and supervisor alike.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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***Studies captured through the systematic search of the literature are indicated with an asterisk**

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