The strengths and applications of collaborative autoethnography and phenomenography through methodological fusion in educational research

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THE STRENGTHS AND APPLICATIONS OF COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND PHENOMENOGRAPHY THROUGH METHODOLOGICAL FUSION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Nona Press and Dolene Rossi

Introduction

This chapter reflects on a multidisciplinary, cross-institutional study that examined the ways our conceptions of supervision reflect our actions and influence our expectations as doctoral students and supervisors. The researchers, who were also participants, employed a fusion of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) and phenomenography within the study. Autoethnography (AE) is an evolving multidisciplinary, qualitative research method that blends inward reflection and writing about individual experiences within cultural contexts. Similarly, CAE “focuses on self-interrogation but does so collectively and cooperatively within a team of researchers” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 17). A key feature of phenomenography is its focus on ‘categories of description’ that can reveal referential and structural aspects of the different ways of understanding phenomena of interest. In this study our methodological approach enabled us to examine individual and collective understandings of doctoral supervision and to relate our understandings to the contexts in which doctoral supervision occurs within and beyond our own educational practice. The strategy constituted a relevant, rigorous means of investigating and illustrating the complex interplay between knowledge construction and doctoral relationships within educational research. The results contribute towards a growing body of knowledge and highlights the strengths and applications of methodological fusion within educational contexts.

Background and literature base

Doctoral study has an important role in society and the economy, due, in part, to links between doctoral research studies, (creative) knowledge production, and research to improve
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societies and educational practice (Le Shorn, 2019). An increase in the number of doctoral students (Friedrich-Nel & MacKinnon, 2019), combined with a shrinking market for academic positions (Chen et al., 2015), is changing the landscape of postgraduate study. Owing to reduced employment opportunities (Chen et al., 2015), doctoral candidates require exposure to instruction that develops not only traditional research skills but also leadership, administrative, and interdisciplinary research capabilities, in preparation for both academic and non-academic careers (Aanerud et al., 2006; Boud & Lee, 2009), bolstering calls for change in the practice of doctoral education (Walker et al., 2012).

Supervision by more than one supervisor, throughout doctoral candidature, is currently considered best practice, with a minimum of two supervisors the norm (Robertson, 2017). Research on doctoral supervision is increasing (Bastalich, 2017) and many factors have been acknowledged to influence the conduct of supervision and how collaborative supervisory teams’ function (Hernandez, 2021). Previous research has sought to map the factors that influence how doctoral supervisors understand and enact the supervisor identity (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Guerin et al., 2015; Turner, 2015). An alternate and growing body of literature also offers examples of collaborative reflections by doctoral students and their supervisors on their experiences (Bastalich, 2017; Duffy et al., 2019; Robertson, 2017). While varied, these reflections constitute a valuable contribution, extending understanding of doctoral student–supervisor relationships, the outcome, and the effectiveness of doctoral experiences. Individually and collectively, these lines of enquiry are important as the information derived from them has the potential to enhance supervision experiences and the relationships formed within. However, Bastalich (2017) cautions, when supervision is problematised in this way emphasis is placed on improving supervisory relationships, with little critique of supervisory practice.

For the current study, AE and CAE both constitute evolving multidisciplinary, qualitative research approaches that blend inward reflection and writing about individual and collective experiences within cultural contexts. These characteristics have attracted interest among diverse stakeholders engaged in the provision and pursuit of higher education. Each method positions self-inquiry at centre stage and is recognised as self-focused, researcher-visible, context-conscious, and critically dialogic (Chang et al., 2013). Consequently, each has the potential to contribute towards, challenge, contest, extend and enrich methodological applications and practice within educational research generally and doctoral supervision specifically. However, of the two, CAE affords a level of critical interpersonal dialogue and engagement absent from AE, as participant-researchers work together to interrogate their shared experiences leading to a deeper level of probing, engagement and understanding (Hernandez, 2021).

Another methodology of interest to the present study is phenomenography. There has been an increase in the use of phenomenography within a wide range of disciplines and educational institutions (Tight, 2016). The method can illuminate qualitative differences in how phenomena are experienced as it focuses on variations in understandings of experiences and reveals how variations are structured and how understandings are hierarchised. For these reasons it has risen in popularity among researchers interested in understanding and generating knowledge about first-person events and lived experiences in educational contexts (Stolz, 2020).

Phenomenography has been used to explore the supervision of doctoral students (Wright et al., 2007), the learning process of doctoral students (Arvidsson & Franke, 2013) and the experiences of supervisors engaged in doctoral supervision (Bruce & Stoodley, 2013). When the research project reported here was designed (Press et al., 2019) the notion of fusing collaborative autoethnography and phenomenography was developmental, conceived following completion of a doctoral study which utilised a fusion of phenomenology and case study to examine the preparation of students for professional practice (Press, 2017). Recent research
by Dann et al. (2019) lends support for the approach and illustrates the capacity of collaborative autoethnography combined with phenomenography to investigate the impact of doctoral study on university lecturers’ construction of self within a changing higher education context. Similarly, in another study, the fusion of case study and phenomenography was applied when investigating how conceptions and experiences of design shape the development of academic developers’ professional practice (Kek et al., 2016).

Presently, our approach afforded us a means of investigating the problem: “What are the different ways of understanding supervision and what are their implications for the practice of doctoral supervision?” In the study, phenomenography and collaborative autoethnography were ‘fused’ together methodologically, to provide a practical, yet rigorous manner of rendering our conceptions and experiences of doctoral supervision visible to one another, as well as to the readers of this chapter and/or those of future publications concerning this study. When combined, these two methodological approaches elicited and explained our perceived realities in this bounded context and acknowledged that, as participant-researchers, we have both subjective and objective experiences of the phenomenon that were unique and/or in common with one another (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 2008; Yin, 2014).

The content that follows outlines the research design, results and findings of the study, and illustrates how this research contributes towards the evolving knowledge of the two methodological traditions utilised in this single study. The aim is to demonstrate that, when ‘fused’, the two methodologies can present a good ‘fit’ with specific aspects of research while maintaining the integrity of each approach.

**Research design**

As noted previously, collaborative autoethnography and phenomenography embody this research, ‘fused’ together methodologically to interrogate the meanings of doctoral supervision as enacted and experienced by researcher-participants. The idea of methodological fusion serves to not only elicit understanding the phenomenon of interest (Research Question 1) but also capture the enactment and experiences of the phenomenon in accordance with such understanding (Research Question 2).

We also use Stake’s (2008) idea of case study to select the focus of what is to be studied. In this case, the focus is on our understanding and experiences of supervision in our shared context of doctoral supervision. The study was framed by our personal narrative, where we interrogated and reflected upon our subjective views and understandings. It concerned examining our knowledge and experiences of doctoral supervision where critical reflection and reflexivity in this context engendered rigour, procedural transparency and trustworthiness of the research as we engaged in autoethnography as a collaborative endeavour of exploration and learning.

We framed the following research questions to guide the investigation:

1. What do we mean by the idea of doctoral supervision?
2. How, and in what ways, do our conceptions of supervision reflect our actions and influence our expectations as doctoral student and supervisors?

The nature of the first research question is phenomenographic in its orientation, the purpose of which is to reveal the different ways that each of us understands the idea of doctoral supervision. The second research question was framed to anchor the relationship and interaction between phenomenographic and the collaborative autoethnographic methodologies.
As such, the second question builds upon the first, to direct the investigation to deeper critical reflections and reflexivity, as we engage in close observations of social practices and interactions (see Figure 9.1).

### Study participants and research site

The study was undertaken in two multi-campus universities in Australia; the first-named author and two of her supervisors worked at one university and the other worked at the first-named author’s previous university. As the first-named author was undertaking education research in the nursing discipline, the supervisory team consisted of two distinct disciplinary representations. Table 9.1 summarises the personal information as participant-researchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (ID)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Years of experience as a Doctor of Philosophy candidate</th>
<th>Years of experience as a Higher Degree by Research supervisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nona (A1)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolene (A2)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nursing/Midwifery</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coralie (A3)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nursing/Psychology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick (A4)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9.1 Methodological fusion in qualitative inquiry (Press et al., 2019)
Inquiry approaches

This research embodies the constructivist tradition of qualitative inquiry, where narratives from interview data were utilised as an evidentiary base to capture our individual conceptions of doctoral supervision and our personal accounts of experiencing this phenomenon. Individual interviews with participant-researchers were conducted through the assistance of a critical friend who conducted individual interviews. The questions were distinctively open-ended and designed to orient the interviewee towards the phenomenon of interest (Marton & Pong, 2005). The interviews were semi-structured in nature, and each interview was conducted in the interviewer’s office or over the telephone. Each interview began with questions about the individual’s background, then moved onto questions about concrete understandings and experiences of doctoral supervision and what these experiences meant to the interviewee. These questions were designed to prompt the interviewees to reflect upon and describe their own understanding of doctoral supervision as experienced, with the interviewees influencing the flow of the interviews based on their interests and the depth of the narratives. Situated within the contextual dimensions of interviewees’ experiences as participant-researchers, the interviews captured responses that provided reflective data.

Each interview lasted for an hour. In total, the interviews generated nearly 17,000 words of transcripts. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Based on a recursive process of inductive analysis, transcripts were read repeatedly and verified by each participant-researcher. Coding and analyses were carried out using Google Docs to facilitate collaborative analyses and interpretation. The first-named author led the process of phenomenographic analysis, which involved: reading and re-reading transcripts before, during and after coding; sorting into groups based on similar themes/ideas as expressed in the experiences; reviewing the groupings; describing the different conceptions of supervision; describing the critical emphasis of each conception; and describing the relationships among the variations. Throughout this process, member checking was employed; each participant-researcher reviewed and validated the identified categories. Iterations occurred as a result of grouping and regrouping themes until descriptions aligned fully with each grouping, and categories of description were formulated.

The participants in this process were involved in reporting the research outcomes published in the 2019 volume on *Traversing the doctorate: Reflections and strategies from students, supervisors and administrators* (Press et al., 2019). The current chapter is authored by the first two co-authors of the previous chapter, but reports on behalf of the other two participant-researchers presently.

Results and discussion

One of the main foci of a phenomenographic study is to reveal the conceptions or different ways of understanding the phenomenon of interest. Such understandings are usually represented in the form of categories of description. Following their revelation, the categories of description are then analysed further to elicit the internal relations among the conceptions. These are known as the outcome space. The categories of description and the outcome space constitute the results of a phenomenographic study (Marton, 1986), which are outlined below, with accompanying evidence that guided the identification of categories of description and the development of the outcome space.

Conceptions of doctoral supervision

From the spoken narrative, the phenomenographic analysis of the participant-researchers’ understanding or conception of doctoral supervision illuminated three qualitatively different
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categories of understanding doctoral supervision. These categories were: *relational endeavour*, *pedagogical commitment*; and *reciprocal growth*. The participant-researchers have had diverse understandings of the phenomenon under investigation that, as the evidence suggests, were influenced by varied experiences as doctoral students themselves. Each category is illustrated with reference to the diverse interpretations that the participants reported of understanding doctoral supervision across all three categories of description. Each conception is accompanied with quotations from the research database, the aim of which is to illuminate the referential and structural aspects identified in the categories of description.

**Conception A: doctoral supervision as a relational endeavour**

Relational endeavour was viewed as the essence of understanding doctoral supervision espoused in Conception A. This conception of supervision emphasised *interpersonal relations* as an important element of the doctoral journey. Within this conception the themes embodied caring and supporting, predicated on meaningful commitment and respectful liaison among all parties in the doctoral supervision landscape. The relationship recognised the whole person as an individual and promoted collaborative and collegial partnerships that enabled the provision of support and encouragement, as well as of continuous guidance. Such relationships highlighted the doctoral supervisory role as acting as a guide, a mentor or a critical friend, whereby developing rapport and providing emotional support were deemed as paramount to such a journey. Conception A brought to bear the dimension of the variation focused on the diverse needs of the candidate, whose doctoral journey requires a supportive and nurturing environment:

A3: Yeah, it’s more of – more mentoring than teaching. Yeah, I mean definitely as supervisors we share our expertise in whatever the area is, … and so I guess there’s some kind of teaching in that respect, but, yeah, it is more mentoring and guiding. … Providing guidance about deadlines and all sorts of stuff, and content, reading what the student produces and all that type of stuff…being engaged in there with the student. … I mean, recognising that the person is not a machine, that they’re human underneath it. … I guess that’s where the relationship that we talked about right at the start is different. … I guess, but more of that peer collegial [relationship].

**Conception B: doctoral supervision as a pedagogical commitment**

In Conception B, doctoral supervision was understood and experienced as a pedagogical commitment. Providing *educational guidance* was viewed as critical with reference to guiding the candidate’s learning and development as a whole person while engaging in learning about the research process and all its complexities. This view aligns with the candidate and supervisors’ constructivist perspective, augmenting self-efficacy while stimulating the candidate’s thinking and ideas. The dimension of variation in Conception B highlighted the focus on the candidate as a learner positioned at the centre of the experience, to facilitate the holistic and scaffolded development as an autonomous researcher:

A2: Like somebody learning how to ride a bike, where you have your hands on the back of the bike, and then you let them go and catch them when they fall off. … For me, my supervision tends to be more scaffold[ing], so, you know, talking around topics, helping the student find their way and … asking questions, and being more of a guide than by dominance. … I view the PhD journey as a personal, individual journey. The person who
is doing the PhD, it’s their journey and it’s my job as supervisor to guide them through the processes and helping them get what they want out of that.

A1: You’re given the opportunity to grow with guidance. You’re given the opportunity to interact with your community environment with the kind of tools that will allow you to grow. ... But they’re there to guide me, to challenge me, to question me. ... Because in this relationship feedback is the most important [element], coupled with guidance.

Conception C: doctoral supervision as reciprocal growth

Doctoral supervision in this category was understood as reciprocal growth. In assisting the development of the candidate towards becoming and being a legitimate member of the research guild, processes facilitate the reciprocal nature of the relationship so that both parties are exposed to new ideas and learning possibilities. Hence, this conception of doctoral supervision emphasised the mutual learning opportunities pertaining to the cognitive and social dimensions of the doctoral journey. Traversing the learning-to-research and/or teaching-to-research landscapes are deemed reciprocal or mutually constituted, whereby taking part and sharing professional insights between supervisor and students, students and supervisor and supervisor and-supervisor transpires into reciprocal learning within a community of researchers. In this way of conceiving doctoral supervision, the dimension of variation accentuated the focus on continuous growth while working together collaboratively as a team:

A4: There are formal responsibilities for students and supervisors that we need to be very conscious of, and that sense of reciprocity and trust. ... When it works well, there is a mutuality of interest and interests between the student and the supervisors. ... It does have an element of that sharing knowledge and assisting. And I guess relating to that is I learn so much; I learn new ideas. ... For most people I think it’s there, that sense that “We’re in this together”. ... So for me that’s predicated among other values on reciprocity – that we’re there to share, to learn from one another and so on...

A2: I haven’t yet been involved with a student and not learned something that helps. ... I’m a bit of a fanatic for learning, and learning things that can be applied in other contexts.

Understandings of doctoral supervision and their relationships

The research data showed some researcher-participants demonstrated more than one conception of doctoral supervision. In phenomenography, this is referred to as “inter-contextual shifts” (Marton & Pong, 2005, p. 344), referring to the shifts from one understanding of the phenomenon to another as participants responded to different questions. When intra-contextual shifts occur, it is difficult to ascribe a specific conception to a particular participant (Marton & Pong, 2005). On this note the referential and structural aspects of the identified conceptions emerged in the analysis and are outlined in Table 9.2.

The finding from the analysis of the relationships among the categories of description showed similarities and differences. It is evident that the increasingly comprehensive understanding of doctoral supervision is hierarchical in nature and embodies different aspects of the practices identified in the doctoral supervisory context as reported by participant-researchers. The categories of description encapsulate internal relations that make up the outcome space. It provides a means to identify variations on understandings of doctoral supervision in a holistic fashion. In phenomenographic study this relates to the structural relationships among the categories of description (see Table 9.2).
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In our previous publication (Press et al., 2019), the relationships of the categories of descriptions were reported as follows.

Understanding doctoral supervision as a relational endeavour (Conception A) had logical connections with Conceptions B and C. Participants subscribing to Conception B focused intently on the educational aspects of the doctoral journey. Their pedagogical pursuit was to assist the candidate to progress in the doctoral journey as a learned researcher and, to do so, participants subscribing to Conception B drew upon aspects of Conception A, recognising that the interpersonal dimension equally plays a part in developing a whole person. Thus, it was possible for participants with Conception B as their primary conception to focus likewise on Conception A. On the other hand, participants who ascribed to Conception A as their primary focus may potentially focus on pastoral care and various functional aspects of the doctoral journey – for example, by supporting the candidate to meet her or his obligations at certain points during the candidature. Participants who emphasised Conception C expressed their understanding of Conceptions B and A as foundational and as working in combination with other aspects of the doctoral journey.

These relationships illuminate the “outcome space” that emerged in this phenomenographic investigation, as represented in autoethnographic and collaborative autoethnographic narrative. The analysis of such narrative brought to bear the qualitatively different ways of understanding and experiencing doctoral supervision and with emphasis on descriptions facilitated the examination of relationships and variations of such descriptions. The categories of description that transpired in the analysis are logically and hierarchically related to one another, as illustrated in Figure 9.2.

**Findings on the outcome space**

Across the categories of description, Conception A Relational Endeavour was a foundational conception. The relationship of Conception A Relational Endeavour and Conception B Pedagogical Commitment embodies the focus on the *holistic development* of the candidate. Understanding doctoral supervision from this perspective suggests that the supervisors promoted positive and productive relationships with their doctoral students that included concerns for the total wellbeing of the candidate whilst engaged in a thought-provoking and stimulating academic discourse. Evidence suggests this facilitated the building of the candidate’s capacity to develop not only personal agency but also collective agency (Bandura, 2009) with appropriate support mechanisms within the doctoral supervisory team. This critical variation is illustrated in the pictorial representation of the outcome space in Figure 9.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of description</th>
<th>Referential aspect</th>
<th>Structural aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conception A Relational endeavour</td>
<td>Supervision is related to interpersonal relations.</td>
<td>The focus is on the candidate’s diverse needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception B Pedagogical commitment</td>
<td>Supervision is related to educational guidance.</td>
<td>The focus is on the candidate as a learner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception C</td>
<td>Supervision is related to mutual learning opportunities.</td>
<td>The focus is on continuous growth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The critical variation between understanding doctoral supervision as a Pedagogical commitment (Conception B) and understanding doctoral supervision as a Reciprocal growth (Conception C) yielded a critical variation focused on the self-actualisation of actors that form part of the doctoral journey for the candidate and supervisors (see Figure 9.2). In their respective contexts, the candidate and supervisors were engaged fully in a relationship that had the potential to become as fundamental to the personal development of the candidate as to that of the self-actualising supervisors. The doctoral supervisory collaboration enabled the supervisors to likewise open up the process of actualising the candidate’s potentialities (cf. Maslow, 1970) and be who they want to be. Mutual motivational drives of the supervisors and the candidate are likely to result in the quality of the relationship that yielded possibilities for self-actualisation.

**Conceptions of supervision reflect actions and influence expectations**

For the supervisors, enacting their role encompassed “relational agency” as foundational to the doctoral supervision sense of community. The idea of relational agency relates to one’s capacity to work with others … [it] involves recognising that another person may be a resource and that work needs to be done to elicit, recognise and negotiate the use of that resource in order to align oneself in joint action on the object

*(Edwards, 2005, p. 168)*

This forms part of the essence of the three categories of description reported here, particularly Conception A – relational endeavour and as A4 pointed out:

There is that sense of relationality [in doctoral supervision]. That we are not simply enacting quite restricted roles. … There has to be a recognition of people’s expertise, multiple forms of expertise and recognition of that … and finding ways of collaborating.
It is evident in this research that expectations of relationships reflect supervisory actions and are influential in putting into practice ways of doctoral supervision, enacted in a manner that it builds capacity to seek and give help when engaging with resources and each other. Here, reciprocity is highlighted and embodies reciprocal growth (Conception C). As A2 experienced, “in assisting someone on their journey, I always learn something.” Similarly, A4 explained, so for me that’s predicated among other values of reciprocity that we’re there to share, to learn from one another … hopefully, then, students will see that that’s what their supervisors are doing, and there is a sense that we are working together. But, often, the really good doctorates are where the supervisors have done more than the bare minimum of the role.

The evidence suggests the embodiment of enacting doctoral supervision is considered not only in terms of knowledge or skills development by the candidate, but also in terms of what kind of person or what kind of research practitioner an aspirant to the research guild should become. For that matter, what the candidate will need to be able to do and who they will need to be to navigate their future lives, and to manage a career as a researcher in a complex world. Thus, an emphasis not just on epistemology (knowing) but also on praxis (doing) and ontological considerations (being) (Barnacle, 2005; Barnett, 2015; Kemmis & Trede, 2010). Conception B – Pedagogical Commitment – lends support to epistemological, praxis and ontological dimensions of the candidates supervisory experiences, as A1 explained:

It's an enculturation ... you're given the opportunity to grow with guidance. ... So, there’s always this kind of a supportive community for me, and it’s also the language that they use, and I develop. ... you really are being enculturated in the discipline as a researcher and as an educationist, with the sense that you belong and be who you want to be.

Such enculturation embodies identity formation and autonomy, influenced by the environment and supervisory transactions, and where the social dimension of the experience is also evident: “The supervisors’ style will drive the experience, I believe. … But autonomy is really profound. … If you didn’t do the work, that’s your fault” [A1].

The role of ontology in developing the candidate is evident here and offers a means for higher education to move forward in acknowledging and understanding the ontological implications of doctoral learning. Due to space restriction, this aspect will be unpacked deeply in future publications. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that, until recently, the ontological aspects of the doctoral students’ development had the tendency to be secondary or subordinate to epistemological matters in doctoral education. Yet the integration of knowing, doing and being (Dall’Alba, 2018), without privileging one over another, is, in many respects, essential for one’s holistic development and self-actualisation. A sentiment reflected in the outcome space, illustrated in this study.

**Conclusion**

Engaging in this collaborative research endeavour has enriched our sense of accountability and also of transparency as individual researchers and collectively as a research team. In this qualitative research, our inquiry is necessarily framed by personal narratives where we reflect upon our understanding of the phenomenon of interest and where we think deeply and reflexively as each question is interrogated. Such interrogation concerns our experiences of
this phenomenon pertaining to various personal and institutional expectations and constraints. In reflecting upon our subjective views and understanding, it facilitates critical reflexivity as we engage in autoethnography as a collaborative journey of exploration and learning.

It is important to note that we are mindful of a possible concern highlighted by Chang et al. (2013) that “... a study of one’s self lacks the possibility of demonstrating researcher accountability during the research process because the researcher is also the participant” (p. 21). We experienced the enactment of this research as a phenomenographic and collaborative autoethnographic inquiry, akin to participating in a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). We attended to collaborative activities as a team, such as refining the research design, formulating questions, and enacting decision-making processes concerning analytical procedures, which rendered such activities transparent and members mutually accountable. By attending to research matters as a team, particularly concerning data collection, analysis and interpretation, and reporting of results and findings, such tasks facilitated constant dialogue, reflection, and reflexivity (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As participant-researchers, the need to be critically dialogic, self-focused and researcher-visible, among others, is an essential aspect of the research processes in our collaborative study (Kenny et al., 2016).

The categories of description and hierarchical illustration of conceptions of supervision in this study may prove useful to doctoral supervisors seeking ways to frame/re-frame their own supervisory context and practices. The results demonstrate the criticality of recognising different conceptions of supervision, in which no one conception is privileged over another. Rather, it was found that each conceptual category brought to bear an integral role in understanding, performing, and evaluating doctoral supervision and its impact and outcomes. We see the results discussed here, in response to the two research questions outlined above, as enriching our current understandings of specific conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches. These can be useful in discerning the diverse experiences of doctoral students and their supervisors. Recognising the interplay among these interconnected elements is of utmost importance in enhancing and enriching such experiences. We see also the methodological fusion (see also Press, 2017) employed in the study as an appropriate and rigorous way of unpacking that interplay.

The fusion of phenomenography and collaborative autoethnography, or a fusion of other methodological traditions for that matter, could be potentially useful in inquiring into doctoral supervision in diverse academic disciplines. Such a fusion could present an in-depth exploration of doctoral supervision, and all its complexities, about which there is a potential dearth of knowledge. At this point, a cautionary note is warranted. When considering the use of methodological fusion, reflect upon likely tensions between the underlying ontology of each methodology – alignment, consistency or corresponding philosophical orientations must be apparent. Similarly, the researcher/s’ research focus and approaches must align with philosophical perspectives about research (cf. Annells, 2006).

We believe that the innovative research strategy applied in this research may be of use to others who may want to inquire into their own doctoral supervisory practices and/or teaching and learning.

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