

## When the relationship with his thesis director turns into a nightmare

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Ghost directors, supervisors who are too pressing or not present enough, encouraging or discouraging, harassment... the relationship established by a doctoral student with his or her research director can have the final say on the experience of the thesis. And in the end, on its success. While it is difficult to quantify the extent of these conflict situations, the relationship with the supervisor appears in third place on the sources of malaise, showed a study among 1700 doctoral students conducted by Pascale Haag, lecturer in psychology at the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS)

Five young researchers have agreed to testify for *Le Monde* about the stormy relations they have had with their thesis supervisor.

All asked to remain anonymous so as not to burn themselves out for the rest of their careers. In the academic world, "it is almost a declaration of war to talk about your problems with your research director, even internally" says one of the doctoral students.

Between the student and his or her supervisor, a relationship of interdependence is forged. But the director is in a position of strength and can sometimes abuse it, observes Alexandre Hobeika, vice-president of the confederation of young researchers. It is impossible for the PhD student to do without his tutor for many steps: access to resources, review of articles, until his contract is renewed each year. There are so many moments of tension when the director does not carry them out within the necessary time limits.

### "You'll see, you'll cry"

Lucie, a doctoral student in philosophy in Paris, has only seen her director six times in four years, Mai'a, a researcher in psychology, had to wait more than six months for her director to sign the estimate allowing her to obtain a desk and a computer. "I quickly realized that I couldn't do anything without him," she sighs. This lack of supervision also worries doctoral students about the "post-thesis", which requires the creation of a network. "The competition is tough," says Lucie. Those who have a director who opens doors for them and helps them publish articles in parallel with their thesis have a clear advantage. »

Others, on the other hand, regret the excessive "presence" of the supervisor. "You'll see, you'll cry. I make all the women I work with cry," Claire, now a teacher-researcher, was told by her thesis director during their first meeting in

so he didn't let go," says the former Earth Sciences PhD student.

When the day comes when she has to submit her manuscript to external reviewers to obtain permission to defend her thesis, her director calls her into his office: "He told me that the whole team agreed that the manuscript was average"

But when the young woman doctoral student, exhausted and confused, asks the question to the members of the laboratory, all of them fall from the sky: they had never made such judgments before.

In the report, submitted a few weeks later, she discovered a shower of praise: "It was the first time I had been told that I was doing a good job ". On the day of the defense, organized without the help of her supervisor, Claire was even awarded the jury's congratulations. Without further ado, its director will only let go: "I really thought you were going to wallow in questions »

Tasks that do not fall within the scope of his thesis, registrations for conferences that he only discovers the day before, pressures to travel to the United States... It is in his very role as a young researcher that Antoine did not feel respected by his two co-directors. "They only saw me as a resource, of which they could do what they wanted, without ever accompanying me in the questions specifically related to my thesis," denounces the doctoral student in engineering sciences, who had been on sick leave for several months for anxiety and depression.

The doctoral student's still unclear status favours this type of drift: he is no longer a real student but not yet totally professional. The lack of funding, and therefore of a doctoral contract (difficult to obtain, particularly in the human and social sciences), can be an aggravating factor.

### **A taboo word**

However, there are safeguards to prevent abuses. First, the doctoral schools, the first point of contact to which PhD students can turn. Secondly, the monitoring committees, which have been required since 2016 to meet in the second year of their thesis to ensure the advancement and good working conditions of doctoral students. "But when they decide to speak, it is often too late and the situation is already well established," notes the Confederation of Young Researchers.

Especially since talking is not always enough. Emilie, a doctoral student in the social sciences, eventually asked to change research directors "after more than a year of a toxic relationship and a well-established depressive state," she says.

problem: its research director is very influential in his doctoral school.

As for the researchers Emilie asked for, "they explained to me each time how dangerous it would be for them to interfere in this story," she says. All decisions in research, whether for funding or career advancement, are voted by peers; difficult in this context to speak out against colleagues.

In this environment where "egos can express themselves freely without ever being reframed", the harassed doctoral student Claire plagues, "a form of taboo has taken root", observes Franck Dolif-Perros, vice-president of the doctoral students' association Les Cartésiens. "There is a culture of self-made man within the research: the valued image of the doctoral student who does not need help. Talking about his problems is like highlighting his addiction," he points out.

For Alexandre Hobeika, many doctoral schools are in the end "empty shells, with few means to act, although the situation varies greatly according to the disciplines".

The five doctoral students who testified often ran into a wall. "I thought I was being supported, but when I talked about moral harassment, everyone froze, as if in a panic," says Antoine, who in July approached his doctoral school to change direction. As it becomes urgent for him to find a new manager to be able to sign his re-enrolment,

"I am told on the phone that no one is forcing me to re-register and that I can leave, he reports, stunned.

While affirming that cases of conflict constitute "a minority", Thomas Coudreau, director of the college of doctoral schools, acknowledges the weaknesses of their control system. "They still lack skills," he says moral or sexual, it can be learned. »

Emilie doesn't believe in it. The doctoral student lost 10kg in the battle and could only find another director if she started from scratch on a new thesis topic. "The world of research is like the king's court," she says. If anyone annoys the sovereign, he is no longer allowed to enter."

Alice Raybaud