

## Academic Mental Health

# WHEN SUPERVISION BECOMES A SOURCE OF DISTRESS: A Pilot Study of Academic Mobbing, Anxiety, and Perceived Stress Among Postgraduate Students in Türkiye

SENGUL Pinar<sup>1</sup>, PhD

1: Independent Researcher

**\*Corresponding Author:** SENGUL Pinar, PhD, Independent Researcher.

**Received:** September 20, 2026 — **Accepted:** September 25, 2026 — **Published:** October 01, 2026

**Citation:** SENGUL Pinar. When Supervision Becomes a Source of Distress: A Pilot Study of Academic Mobbing, Anxiety, and Perceived Stress Among Postgraduate Students in Türkiye.

OLCIAS Vol.3, Issue 2.

## ABSTRACT

Academic supervision involves an inherent power asymmetry that can affect degree progress, resources, opportunities, and future careers. This pilot study examined negative supervisory behaviours and psychological outcomes among 10 postgraduate students in Türkiye (six PhD and four master's students). Nine rated a current primary supervisor and one a former primary supervisor. Three participants (30%) explicitly identified systematic bullying or mistreatment, whereas nine (90%) endorsed at least one of 18 negative supervisory behaviours. Behaviour burden was strongly associated with anxiety (Spearman's  $\rho = .874$ ,  $p \approx .001$ ) and positively associated with perceived stress ( $\rho = .638$ ,  $p \approx .047$ ). Associations with cognitive failures ( $\rho = .482$ ,  $p \approx .159$ ) and perceived institutional safety ( $\rho = -.543$ ,  $p \approx .105$ ) were not statistically significant. Participants self-identifying bullying/mistreatment had a median behaviour score of 40/72 versus 3/72 in the remaining participants (exact Mann–Whitney  $p \approx .017$ ). Qualitative responses highlighted dependency, fear of disagreement, costly supervisor change, control over thesis or defence processes, micromanagement, and control of resources or opportunities. Because the sample is extremely small and cross-sectional, these findings cannot estimate prevalence or establish causality. They provide preliminary signals for a larger study of supervisory power, psychological safety, and postgraduate mental health.

**Keywords:** academic bullying, mobbing, postgraduate supervision, anxiety, perceived stress, Türkiye

## INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate supervision is both an educational relationship and a relationship of institutional power. Supervisors may influence research progress, authorship, professional networks, funding, recommendations, resources, and degree completion. This dependence can make conflict or mistreatment difficult to challenge without fear of academic or career consequences.

Academic bullying is generally characterised by repeated hostile, intimidating, humiliating, or harmful conduct within a power structure. A global investigation of academic science documented abusive supervision as an important concern with consequences for individuals and research environments (Moss et al., 2021). More recently, Zheng (2026) analysed 6,356 PhD students from 34 countries and reported that 22.34% experienced bullying; supervisors were the most frequently identified perpetrators among those reporting bullying.

Supervision is also relevant to postgraduate mental health. Research in doctoral students has linked supervisory relationship characteristics with depression, anxiety, and stress (Jackman et al., 2024). Qualitative work has described abusive supervision, micromanagement, intimidation, threats, and coercion among negative mentoring experiences (Moss et al., 2022). In Türkiye, Öztürk and Şahbudak (2017) documented mobbing as an academic workplace concern among research assistants.

An important measurement problem is that students may experience controlling, humiliating, threatening, or obstructive behaviours without calling the experience “bullying” or “mobbing.” The present pilot therefore separated behaviour-based exposure from self-identification. It examined associations between cumulative negative supervisory behaviour and anxiety, perceived stress, cognitive failures, and institutional safety. The study was exploratory and was not designed to estimate prevalence or establish causality.

## METHOD

**Design and participants.** This cross-sectional anonymous pilot included 10 postgraduate students studying in Türkiye: six doctoral students and four master’s students. Nine answered about a current primary supervisor and one about a former primary supervisor.

**Measures.** Participants completed a study-specific 18-item negative supervisory behaviour inventory. Frequency ratings were summed to produce a 0–72 exposure score; higher scores indicated greater behavioural burden. Items addressed experiences including belittling or humiliation, fear in communication or disagreement, supervisor control over resources or opportunities, dependence on supervisory approval, and the perceived cost of changing supervisor. Because this was a pilot instrument, it should be regarded as an exploratory exposure index rather than a validated diagnostic measure of mobbing.

Participants separately indicated whether they considered their experience systematic bullying or mistreatment. Anxiety was assessed with the Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006). Perceived stress was assessed with the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983). Cognitive failures were assessed with the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ; Broadbent et al., 1982). Exploratory items assessed perceived institutional safety, and open-ended responses addressed dependency and barriers to responding to mistreatment.

**Analysis.** Spearman rank correlations examined associations between behavioural exposure and outcome measures. An exact Mann–Whitney comparison contrasted behaviour scores between participants who did and did not self-identify systematic bullying/mistreatment. Qualitative responses were reviewed descriptively for recurrent themes. Given  $n = 10$ , inferential statistics are treated as preliminary signals.

**Ethics and consent.** SUBMISSION CHECK: The actual ethics approval or exemption, consent procedure, recruitment wording, and data-protection statement must be inserted from the study documentation before submission. These details have deliberately not been invented in this manuscript.

## RESULTS

Three participants (30%) identified systematic bullying or mistreatment, while nine (90%) endorsed at least one negative supervisory behaviour. The most common experiences were dependence of career/progress on supervisor approval (6/10), fear or tension in communication (6/10), and perceiving supervisor change as costly or difficult (6/10). Five participants reported fear of consequences for disagreement; five reported supervisor control over resources or opportunities; and four reported belittling or humiliation.

The median negative-behaviour score was 40/72 among participants self-identifying bullying/mistreatment and 3/72 among the other participants. The groups showed complete rank separation in this pilot dataset; the exact Mann–Whitney comparison yielded  $p \approx .017$ , with a rank-biserial estimate of 1.00. This effect estimate is unstable because the groups contained only three and seven participants.

Negative supervisory behaviour burden was strongly associated with GAD-7 anxiety ( $\rho = .874$ ,  $p \approx .001$ ) and positively associated with perceived stress ( $\rho = .638$ ,  $p \approx .047$ ). The association with cognitive failures was positive but not statistically significant ( $\rho = .482$ ,  $p \approx .159$ ), while institutional safety showed a negative, non-significant association ( $\rho = -.543$ ,  $p \approx .105$ ). Median anxiety was 21 in the self-identified bullying/mistreatment group versus 10 in the remaining participants; median perceived stress was 27 versus 20.

Qualitative responses highlighted supervisory dependency, fear of disagreement, the perceived cost of changing supervisor, control over thesis or defence timing, micromanagement, and control over resources or opportunities. Confidential reporting and independent institutional channels were proposed as possible safeguards.

## DISCUSSION

The pilot produced two notable signals. First, concrete negative behaviours were reported more often than participants explicitly labelled their experience bullying or mistreatment. This discrepancy may partly reflect the difference between isolated difficult interactions and repeated bullying. It may also reflect normalisation, uncertainty about definitions, or reluctance to adopt a stigmatised label while dependent on a supervisor. Larger studies should therefore retain both behaviour-based and self-label approaches.

Second, greater behavioural exposure was associated with higher anxiety and perceived stress. This pattern is consistent with broader evidence connecting supervisory relationships with doctoral mental health (Jackman et al., 2024) and with studies describing the psychological and professional consequences of academic bullying (Moss et al., 2021; Zheng, 2026). However, the present cross-sectional data cannot determine direction. Negative supervision may contribute to distress, distress may affect perceptions of interactions, or both may reflect other contextual factors.

The qualitative findings underline the importance of power asymmetry. A postgraduate student may be encouraged to communicate concerns directly while simultaneously believing that the supervisor controls degree progress, resources, recommendations, or opportunities. Direct confrontation is therefore not structurally neutral. Recent work on dependency and vulnerability in doctoral supervision similarly emphasises how supervisory power can magnify the consequences of conflict (Joxe, 2026).

Academic rigor must also be distinguished from harmful supervision. Critical feedback, high standards, disagreement, and rejection of weak work are legitimate components of research training. Concern arises when power is exercised through repeated humiliation, intimidation, retaliation fears, obstruction, coercive control, or conditions that make reasonable disagreement unsafe.

Possible institutional safeguards include meaningful access to secondary supervisors or independent postgraduate tutors, confidential reporting outside the supervisory chain, behaviourally specific definitions of unacceptable conduct, anti-retaliation protections, and workable procedures for changing supervisors. These mechanisms can protect both students and supervisors by distinguishing harmful patterns from ordinary academic disagreement.

The Turkish context deserves further study. Existing Turkish research has examined mobbing among academic employees (Öztürk & Şahbudak, 2017), but postgraduate supervision crosses educational and employment boundaries. Larger research could examine discipline, institutional type, funding dependence, employment status, degree stage, supervisory structure, and access to independent support.

## LIMITATIONS

This pilot has substantial limitations. The sample contained only 10 participants, so percentages cannot be interpreted as prevalence estimates. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference, and non-probability recruitment may introduce selection bias. The 18-item behaviour inventory was study-specific and has not undergone psychometric validation. All variables were self-reported. The study was not powered for inferential hypothesis testing, subgroup comparisons involved only three self-identified cases, and the qualitative component was brief. A definitive study should use a substantially larger preregistered sample, psychometrically evaluated measures, longitudinal assessment where feasible, and a pre-specified analysis plan.

## CONCLUSION

In this 10-participant pilot, negative supervisory behaviours were more frequently endorsed than the explicit label of systematic bullying or mistreatment. Greater behavioural exposure was associated with higher anxiety and perceived stress, while qualitative responses emphasized dependency, fear of disagreement, costly supervisor change, and supervisory control over progression or opportunities. These findings neither estimate prevalence nor establish causality. They identify a coherent signal worth testing at scale: postgraduate mental health may be intertwined with the power structure of supervision.

## REFERENCES

- Broadbent, D. E., Cooper, P. F., FitzGerald, P., & Parkes, K. R. (1982). The cognitive failures questionnaire (CFQ) and its correlates. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 21(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8260.1982.tb01421.x>
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 24(4), 385–396. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2136404>
- Jackman, P. C., et al. (2024). The supervisory relationship as a predictor of mental health outcomes in doctoral students in the United Kingdom. *PLOS ONE*.
- Joxe, L. (2026). Dependency, vulnerability and bullying in university: Doctorate supervision through the lens of care. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v37i02.5734>
- Moss, S. E., et al. (2021). STEM the bullying: An empirical investigation of abusive supervision in academic science. *EClinicalMedicine*, 40, 101121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2021.101121>
- Moss, S. E., et al. (2022). The dark side of development: A systems characterization of the negative mentoring experiences of doctoral students. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*.
- Öztürk, M., & Şahbudak, E. (2017). İşyerinde psikolojik taciz (mobbing) ve iş doyumu: Cumhuriyet Üniversitesindeki araştırma görevlileri üzerine bir çalışma. *Sosyoloji Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 20(2), 200–228. <https://doi.org/10.18490/sosars.345512>
- Spitzer, R. L., Kroenke, K., Williams, J. B. W., & Löwe, B. (2006). A brief measure for assessing generalised anxiety disorder: The GAD-7. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 166(10), 1092–1097. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archinte.166.10.1092>
- Zheng, L. (2026). The arduous journey: Experiences and consequences of bullying and discrimination for PhD students from 34 countries. *British Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.70168>