Adopting a Person-Centred Approach in Doctoral Supervision

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13.1 Introduction

In person-centred research, research supervision also needs to be person-centred. Research supervision is part of the research culture and the nature of research supervision acts as an indicator of how person-centred the culture is within a research context. This means that supervisors and novice researchers explore the ontological and epistemological philosophical ideas grounding supervision and the contributors engage in a shared learning process as learners. In person-centred research supervision, any exploration (such as an evaluation) of the relationship processes in the supervision alongside the content of supervision will reveal critically, creative reflection and ultimately, personally meaningful, depth learning. In turn, depth learning is essential for developing maturity in identity and transformation within

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personhood. Both attributes we consider core to the person-centred research experience and growth of personhood. Essentially, the research supervisor is a facilitator of person-centred learning as well as being a co-learner with their own development. The learning space and other conditions necessary for depth learning are held within a person-centred relationship. In particular, building meaningful connections is central to person-centred research supervision. We think of this as a form of vital energy:

> *I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.*
>
> *Brené Brown* [1] (2010)

Learning Outcomes

To consider the contribution of knowing self, perseverance, integrity, self-confidence that can be nurtured through person-centred research supervision (Domain B Personal Effectiveness; personal qualities).

To critique ways of engaging in research supervision (Domain D Engagement Influence and Impact; working with others).

In this chapter, we offer three reflections on person-centred supervision relationships to illuminate the learning outcomes set out above. They are ordered in a way we feel makes sense, however, you can read them in any order or separately.

13.2 Negotiating Rough Terrain

Our first reflective account is drawn from a shared experience between the doctoral candidate (Emma) and research supervisor (Tanya) that illuminates the importance of being and staying connected in the supervisory relationship, whilst negotiating the rough terrain that often characterises the PhD journey. Undertaking person-centred research requires the development of person-centred supervisory processes and relationships in PhD supervision that may look different for each candidate. Some supervisory relationships take place in close proximity with one another, and others involve collaborations across the globe. However, in order for the supervision relationship to be person-centred regardless of the geographical location, key principles of person-centred research are essential [2]. Despite person-centred ways of working, connectivity can be challenging to develop across different contexts, continents and time zones, which was the case for the supervisory relationship recounted here.

The journey for us commenced in 2016 with a supervisory team, comprising Tanya, a researcher from Northern Ireland, and two researchers from Emma's home country, Australia. This particular journey started at a conference in Switzerland in

September 2018. It was the first time after nearly 2 years of interacting across the world through technology that we had both met face to face. Whilst the working relationship had been fruitful thus far, and there was a sense of connectedness and getting to know each other, there was a shared appreciation for the opportunity to meet face to face. Being physically present enabled us to engage in different conversations and provided the opportunity to get a truer sense of person. Emma was planning to undertake a study visit in Northern Ireland after the conference and at the conference dinner Tanya extended an invitation to join a mountain trek with some friends and family during her stay in Northern Ireland. Without understanding the height of the mountain or forecasted weather conditions, Emma enthusiastically accepted the offer to climb the Mourne Mountains.

The morning of the trek arrived, and it was pouring with rain. Each year prior the sun had shone, but this year the conditions were far from ideal (Fig. 13.1). Regardless of the weather, people drove in convoy to the meeting point. Concern was voiced about the level of challenge due to the wind, rain and poor visibility, but all of us were committed to the journey and its significance. The trek began with the mountain nowhere to be seen. The wind was strong and icy and within minutes of walking to the base of the mountain we were soaked from rain and ankle deep in water from streams that had developed. The trek was led by an experienced hiker and scout leader, and the conditions meant there were parts of the journey that had to be walked in single file, at times only able to see a few metres in front. Not long into the trek there was conversation expressing shock in the conditions and concern for the journey ahead. However, comfort was taken in that most of the climbers had experience climbing this mountain before, had prepared well and that the poor weather conditions added a new level of challenge to the experience. It was important for Emma as a novice climber (and researcher) to be attentive to the direction of Tanya as supervisor and also to the needs/conditions of those around us as we climbed.

Fig. 13.1 Photograph taken on the day of the climb by Emma. Image used with permission of Emma Radbron

On reflection, the principle of attentiveness and dialogue outlined by Jacobs et al. [2] was very evident in this experience as both of us had to be attentive to self, others and the context in which we were climbing. Dialogue about the situation and our shared reflections led to a level of connectivity that took us both by surprise. Parts of the journey had been spent walking with/behind different people, some spent in discussion and others in silent reflection. During the climb we talked about many different things that revealed what mattered to each of us in our lives, making explicit values and beliefs that were shared. This resonates with the understanding of being as persons as described by McCormack [3] and in particular 'being in relation'. This emphasised the importance of relationships and the interpersonal processes that enable the development of relationships and 'being with self', reflecting our fundamental human need to be recognised and respected for who we are as a person. Emma continues:

> *As we had been walking up the mountain, we had both been individually reflecting on the parallels between climbing a mountain and completing a PhD. We discussed how like climbing a mountain, the journey to complete a doctorate can be challenging with unpredictable conditions. The importance of walking the journey in close proximity with others and the need for trust and openness between researcher, supervisor/s and those who had undertaken the journey before became apparent. The reality that it is important to prepare well, pack light and take breaks to refuel. Whilst difficult to see the way forward sometimes, there are varied gradients along the way. Going at your own pace and looking at the next step in front of you is helpful for progressing in the journey, but pausing to look up and appreciate where you've come from is equally valuable. When we shared these insights with one another we were astounded by the synergy in our thinking and reflection. Climbing a mountain together under such conditions created the perfect experience to recognise the metaphor between the journey and undertaking my doctorate. It emphasised that this experience had fostered connectivity between us as candidate and supervisor through efforts to connect with oneself (critical reflection), other persons (attentiveness and dialogue) and context.*

During the descent, the weather cleared, and the beauty of the mountain was visible behind us. Areas that could only be imagined before were now able to be visualised and experienced. This brought greater insight to, and appreciation for, the journey. Shared experiences out of the norm, mean the relationship between those who connect in this way never goes back to what it was before. We found that connecting through this physically and mentally challenging experience certainly took our supervision relationship to new heights and opened up a trust for new possibilities.

13.3 Principles for Person-centred Supervision

In this second section, Camilla Anker-Hansen and Brendan McCormack have chosen to use five principles for person-centred research', originally developed by McCormack [4] and further elaborated by van Dulmen et al. [5]

13.3.1 Informed Flexibility'

In the supervision team, we paid attention to facilitating an engaged relationship with an open dialogue characterised by authenticity and sensitivity to 'life challenges'. The unexpected often occurs, and when challenges arose, both professional and personal, we focused on adopting the person-centred process of engaging authentically in order to figure out the best response to the particular challenges, whilst remaining focused on the work to be done. Camilla reflects,

> *I always had a certainty and confidence that there was flexibility in the changes that occurred in the wake of the unexpected. Knowing this created the foundation for a positive, trusting relationship.*

At the heart of this way of working was the time we spent in creating connections as persons. Getting to know the person is at the core of being person-centred and this is no less the case in a supervision relationship. Indeed, the importance of knowing persons has been reflected in other supervision literature, such as clinical supervision by Mackay et al. [6]. Knowing our values and how these manifested in our ways of working was central to bringing informed flexibility to life. This enabled each member of the team to be authentic in expressing how we felt, what we expected to happen and what support and help we could offer. So, in essence, the flexibility and understanding of changes along the way were based on mutual understandings among the team.

13.3.2 Mutuality

Camilla reflects,

> *As a novice to the person-centred perspective, it was of great value for me to understand how Brendan transformed the principles of person-centredness into practice and to identify the connection between life and learning. In practice, this meant that I was met with a deep understanding of me as a unique person, not just another PhD student.*

The challenge in any doctoral supervision relationship is ensuring progression of work set within the rules and boundaries of the programme and the individual working style of the candidate. Values are critical to this balance. Working with the person's beliefs and values is a key person-centred process, and this process needs to be given due consideration in establishing ways of working in the supervision team. Even though we came to know each other well in the team and what our individual and collective values were, we still encountered 'road blocks' associated with misunderstanding expectations, working with English as a second language and differing perceptions of 'the right thing to do'. It would have been easy to apply technical, procedural and departmental rules to these situations, but instead we chose to work with the 'moments of crisis' [7] in order to understand and be understood. Becoming a person-centred researcher is not just the objective of the candidate in a doctoral

supervision relationship, as this state of becoming is something that all researchers concerned with person-centredness need to be attentive to. We continuously strived to understand and be understood and this was achieved through a mutual willingness to learn through our relationship while working with the perceptions and understandings of each other.

13.3.3 Transparency

In any supervision relationship, and especially in doctoral supervision, the giving and receiving of feedback is a foundational practice, but is possibly one of the most challenging to achieve in a way that is acceptable to all team members. As the literature suggests, one of the biggest challenges a doctoral candidate experiences is 'confidence in their own voice' [8]. In doctoral work, that voice is both the verbal expression of subject and methodological knowledge and the written word. Doctoral supervisors need to establish clear ways of working that focus on how feedback is given and received. It is our contention that it is in the process of giving and receiving feedback that all five of the person-centred processes come into play (i.e. working with beliefs and values; engaging authentically; sharing decision-making; being sympathetically present; and, providing holistic care). Being transparent about our 'intentions and motivations for action' is critical to working with these processes and ensuring the feedback is experienced as productive and growthful. As Camilla reflects,

> *Confidence has been one of the cornerstones of our supervision relationship, without which the other conditions would have lost their value. This has laid the foundation for being explicit and clear about my own understanding of complex feedback, suggestions and discussions.*

13.3.4 Sympathetic Presence

For many supervisors, how they approach supervision is based on their experience of being supervised as a doctoral candidate themselves. Despite this experience sometimes being many years previously, the impact of the experience lives on as something very real in supervision practice. Evidence suggests that many of the resulting practices are not conducive to supervising, i.e. how we experienced supervision as a doctoral candidate is not always transferable into how we supervise others [9]. Indeed, it can be detrimental to the relationship [10]. In most countries, supervision training and development are an explicit and required part of doctoral programmes and there are different ways of helping supervisors learn and develop 'relationship-specific' methods. It is proposed that moving towards person-centred research supervision practice may enhance the research environment, as healthful relationships between supervisors and postgraduate students may lead to increased postgraduate research outcomes [10]. Camilla reflects:

How did a person-centred supervision relationship arise and function? I think models and theories are effective resources to help stay focused; however, ultimately, how they are implemented in practice, affecting how the relationship is unfolding is the primary issue. To me it was crucial to obtain development support during processes that were incredibly demanding and challenging on so many levels. It was reassuring to have a safe space where I could share premature thoughts and ideas, which were discussed, challenged, deconstructed, reconstructed, sometimes rejected and other times further developed.

Brendan considers that being sympathetically present rejects the idea that we can know another's experience because of our own previous experience (such as how I might have been supervised). Instead, the work of supervisors is to come to know the particular situation of the doctoral candidate and pay attention to the 'cues' that they may be giving in response to different experiences and situations. Engaging in reflective authentic questioning is critical to this way of being in supervision and as Titchen et al. [11] have previously articulated 'listening with soft eyes' is so important—essentially being non-judgemental. When Camilla experienced doubt, she was encouraged to expand her ways of knowing through high challenge with high support, and ultimately, she was challenged to learn and grow as a person-centred researcher.

13.3.5 Negotiation

Participation is a key factor in all research, despite the dominant methodological focus. Of course, the research design determines the extent to 'how' participation is facilitated, managed, enabled or controlled. In a doctoral supervision relationship, active participation is critical to successful supervision. This can be as procedural as ensuring that regular meetings are set, that candidates produce work in advance and that supervisors read that work and come prepared to actively engage in constructive dialogue. However, it also relates to the quality of the relationships in the supervision team. In hierarchical models of supervision, the 'lead supervisor/principal supervisor' controls the agenda and tends to be less conducive to person-centred ways of working. We experienced team supervision as our ways of working, ensuring that all voices are equal and all inputs relevant. Such a culture encourages and enables active participation and engagement. It is through these ways of working that the team enabled Camilla to transition to being a doctoral candidate as she reflects here,

A particular challenge I experienced during the PhD process was shifting from a professional identity as a clinical leader to an academic identity, the process of becoming a person-centred researcher. I was unsure of how to situate myself in the text, how visible my own person could be and whether there really was any space for creativity. Being brought up in a tradition leaning to the positivist side and attempting to deviate from it was a real struggle. While wrestling with identities, the support from monthly supervision sessions was of immense importance. At times it felt like my perspectives were fluid, but this was always met with a curiosity to explore and clarify my thoughts and values at that moment and to negotiate the way forward.

If we were to summarise the essence of our experiences of supervision from a person-centred perspective, we would suggest it can be summarised as a sense of being connected, supported, accepted and inspired, while together embracing the core values of person-centredness. In addition, we did not lose sight of the time-bound research outcomes [10].

13.4 High Challenge and High Support

In their contribution Karen Rennie and Jan Dewing reflect on the dynamics of high challenge/high support as a two-way street or process within person-centred research supervision to demonstrate the shared learning process that sits implicitly within supervision and which both the supervisor and candidate engage in.

A core question accompanying us throughout the whole doctoral supervision relationship is: *What makes our research supervision person-centred?* Related or secondary questions at this time and pertinent to this chapter are:

1. How does high challenge and high support, as a methodological principle for transformational learning, work within person-centred research supervision?
2. What does high challenge/high support look and feel like for each of us in this supervisory relationship?
3. What does high challenge, high support achieve?

High support and challenge sit within facilitation of the doctoral learning experience in which the novice researcher (the doctoral candidate) becomes more effective and evolves their sense of motivation, autonomy and connectedness. Evidence shows candidates to be heavily dependent on the support that they receive from a supervisor or supervisory team [12]. Further, Severinsson [13] suggests that a relationship in which the doctoral researcher can trust and communicate well with their supervisor is necessary for transformational learning. The quality of our research supervision is dependent on mutual trust, respect and obligation. The demands on person-centred supervisors to offer the best conditions to enable candidates to engage with transformational learning are substantial. With a focus on high challenge, high support, we will now share how we feel our doctoral candidate–supervision relationship has been person-centred and enables transformation (Fig. 13.2).

Our starting point as persons committed to being person-centred and doing person-centred research was to co-construct a person-centred supervisory relationship, one that over time would possibly continue after the doctoral programme had ended. Through clarifying our ways of working we set out the aim very early on that we wanted our supervisions sessions to be provocative, understanding, (re)assuring, stimulating and ultimately contribute to transformation. To achieve all these things, we were conscious of the fact that we needed to work in a way that offers a combination of high challenge and high support [14, 15]. High challenge/high support is a principle which includes several methods and is regularly used in person-centred initiatives such as practice development [15].

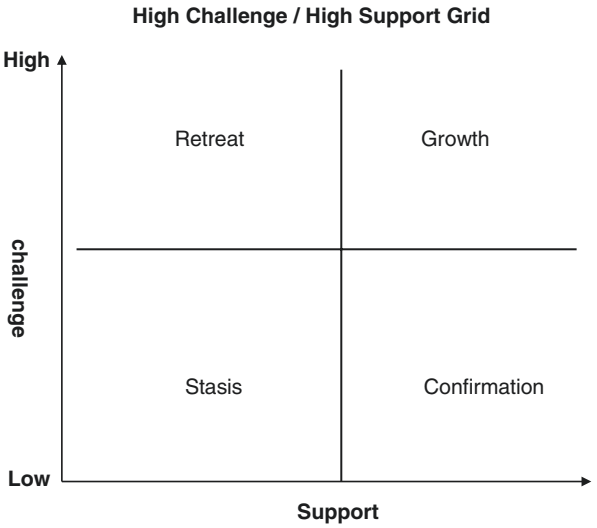

Fig. 13.2 High challenge/high support grid. Effective challenge is non-aggressive, non-combative and deeply supportive with the intended outcome of enabling learning. Adapted from "Anne Brockbank, Ian McGill (2004)". The Action Learning Handbook. Powerful Techniques for Education, Professional Development and Training. ISBN 9780203416334, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

We could not assume high support; high challenge was present just because we had talked about it and included it in a learning contract. We both recognised that we needed to build in space to the supervision sessions for reflection on our experience. Karen took the lead for evaluating each of her supervision sessions and we both separately reflected on specific aspects of the relationship and the relationship as a whole; sharing our reflections through haiku poems on a regular basis.

We believe that high challenge and high support contribute to having an effective culture that includes the potential for transformational learning. However, we also suggest that practising high support and high challenge needs a person-centred culture in which to operate and be effective. We created a process where at the end of every formal supervision meeting, we each individually reflected on the session and noticed what stood out or seemed significant to us. We shared what this was and the main emotion we experienced. We rated and plotted high challenge/high support on a quadrant graph (Fig. 13.2).

Our aim was to always strive to be in the upper right quadrant where the combination of high challenge and high support was most evident. This allowed us to regularly discover what aspects of the doctoral and/or supervisory process were experienced as challenging and supportive (or not). With this insight, we continue or revise how we approach our supervision sessions and how we connect with one another. We saw this as attending to our 'micro-culture'. What we feel is an important point to make is that this culture was not purely for the benefits of the doctoral candidate. In our experience, high challenge/high support is a two-way street in which the supervisor must also be open to being challenged in a supportive way. For example, when Karen was initially exploring her philosophical underpinnings and her ontological perspectives of what is a person, we both engaged in a critical conversation where we were challenging each other's position of personhood. Reflecting on this conversation, Karen recalls she talked about this discussion feeling like an

enjoyable tennis match, where we were aiming critical questions back and forth with one another. Karen also challenged Jan at times where Karen felt the process of getting feedback was not what she needed to develop her thinking and research. Due to the fact that there was a high challenge/high supportive culture in the team, Karen felt comfortable approaching Jan with the challenge of reviewing how feedback was given. Over time, the nature of the support and challenge has evolved as Karen progressed through her doctoral programme and becames more independent. We feel that our doctoral–supervisory relationship has reached a level where high challenge is a common occurrence and a core principle, and we both have an understanding that challenge is a healthy process that aims to stimulate discussions and thinking and transform both the candidate and the supervisor. We move almost effortlessly back and forth between candidate and supervisor and being colleagues. More importantly, the experience of giving and receiving high challenge is also embedded in a person-centred relationship and is most often experienced as encouragement, trustfulness and kindness.

13.5 Conclusion

Person-centred, creative and learning focused research supervision enables novice nurse researchers to learn how to become competent researchers as set out in the Vitae Researcher Development Framework [16]. Person-centred research supervision is embedded in a person-centred relationship. The persons involved attend to the relationship process by learning together, drawing in theoretical ideas and models to help shape the process and to reflect on it, evaluate it with the subsequent learning put back into enhancing the relationship further. We believe these are vital presses in developing transformational doctoral learning.

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