Pedagogisk reflektion

Person-centred supervision for doctoral students – a useful pedagogical approach?

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Introduction

Person-centredness is an important concept in health and social care practice (McCormack & McCance, 2006) and in research within this area (McCormack et al., 2017). In recent decades, there has been an increasing focus on *good care* in Sweden, emphasising the significance of person-centredness (Regeringskansliet, 2022). Within health and social care, person-centredness encapsulates five domains: 1) The prerequisites of the staff (attributes, skills, beliefs, and values), 2) The practice environment (context, supportive systems, shared decision-making, and the physical environment), 3) Person-centred processes (connections between people, engaging authentically, sympathetically, holistically), 4) The outcome (effective person-centred practice, a healthful culture, human flourishing), 5) The macro level (politics, strategies, and policies) (McCance et al., 2021). However, research conducted within health and social care should not only consider these domains, but the research community should also be guided and shaped by these values. The supervision of doctoral students conducting research within this field should also be grounded in these values. Some doctoral programmes in Scotland, Norway and Sweden focus on person-centredness; however, this is an area still under development. Not much has

been written about person-centred supervision of doctoral students, and little research has been conducted.

Through a review of research and literature, the objective for this paper was to investigate what person-centred supervision entails for the doctoral student and the supervisor. Furthermore, the aim was to critically reflect upon person-centred supervision in relation to its usefulness as a pedagogical approach.

Literature was sought through CINAHL, Google Scholar and manual searching, exploring the area of focus. Four articles and two book chapters were found, and the content was thematically analysed.

Results

Five aspects of person-centred supervision were identified in the literature: *Being seen as a person*, *Connectedness*, *Transparency*, *Transformational Learning* and *Becoming a person-centred researcher*.

Being seen as a person

Being seen as a unique person is an essential aspect of person-centred supervision for doctoral students. Radbron et al. (2021) describe the importance of the supervisor embracing the individual working styles of doctoral students and understanding what matters to them and motivates them in their work, not necessarily on a personal level, but in a professional context. This approach helps to clarify values and beliefs for both parties. Additionally, Elliot et al. (2020) state that being seen as a unique person enables the doctoral students to take ownership of their situation, process, and project. They also state that supervisors seeing the whole person of the student is not the same as "being close"; hence, there are still professional boundaries. Nonetheless, there is a social bonding and an understanding and appreciation of each other's preferences and styles. Consequently, person-centred supervision entails seeing a student as a unique person not just another doctoral student or "*a brain on a stick*" (Elliot et al., 2020. p. 58). As a means to support this approach and see the students as unique persons, the students must be given the opportunity to express their wishes and thoughts. For example, Elliot et al. (2020) describe a four-day course

for doctoral students to discuss their wishes and process for the doctoral journey at the beginning of the project. A personal development plan is also suggested as a tool to highlight what each doctoral student wants to gain from the process.

Connectedness

Connectedness is emphasised as a crucial element of person-centred supervision for doctoral students. It involves a relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student that fosters mutual understanding and connection. To be able to connect, people must get to know each other. This can involve informal meetings, as exemplified in Radbron et al. (2021) where the supervisor and student went hiking with a group of researchers. This informal activity and shared experience created a more open atmosphere for discussing and understanding each other's values. Also, as Deuchar (2008) states, the compatibility of both the supervisor's and the students' values and identities may be established by mutual discussion and reflection. Hence, a personal socialisation process may occur. Radbron et al. (2021) emphasise that in person-centred supervision, the supervisor must engage with the students both as individuals and in the context of the project. This involves being present, actively listening to the students, and paying attention to their cues. They highlight that being present as a supervisor includes being physically available to engage in different conversations and thereby get a better sense of each other as persons.

Relationships and dialogue that help the doctoral student feel seen, heard, and safe foster a sense of connectedness. Consequently, it is important to be authentic in the relationship and see the student as part of the team (Radbron et al., 2021; Rennie & Kinsella, 2020). This means getting to know each other as persons by recognising each other's values and how they influence individual ways of working (Heyns et al., 2019; Radbron et al., 2021). Deuchar (2008) demonstrates that openness promotes autonomy, as students feel secure in seeking additional guidance and support when needed. Furthermore, he emphasises that connectedness is a dualistic process, meaning that both the supervisor and the doctoral student contribute to it. It involves the ability for both parties to give and receive feedback, emphasising that they learn together since the supervisor is a co-learner (Radbron et al., 2021). As

Elliot et al. (2020) state, the supervisors are also human beings, hence they also learn from the process. This means, as Radbron et al. (2021) stress, that there needs to be a mutual willingness to learn.

Transparency

Transparency and clear ways of working are essential for person-centred supervision for doctoral students (Radbron et al., 2021) and for the supervisor to help and challenge the student throughout the learning process (Rennie & Kinsella, 2020). Radbron et al. (2021) state the importance of everyone being engaged and participating in the supervision and the importance of structuring the process of the supervision, since for the supervision to occur in a safe space, there is a need for structure. Therefore, clarifying the ways of working is important. Also, when the supervision is transparent, the doctoral student should be comfortable with asking for changes in the supervision if needed. Being transparent and thereby able to negotiate and manage roles as well as personal and supervisory styles may guide the relationship and help determine when the focus should be on the person or on the project (Halse & Bansel, 2012).

Transparency and being recognised as an individual are described as ways to help doctoral students feel less fearful of judgement, making them comfortable enough to request changes (Elliot et al., 2020; Radbron et al., 2021). Moreover, the structure and transparency of the supervision can help doctoral students bridge the formal and the hidden curricula (Elliot et al., 2020). Doctoral students need to be able to trust and communicate well with their supervisor (Deuchar, 2008; Radbron et al., 2021) as this increases motivation (Rennie & Kinsella, 2020). For students to feel that they can speak freely and feel trust requires that the supervisors are non-judgemental (Radbron et al., 2021). Respect for the personhood of the student, accepting the individual right to self-determination, mutual respect, and understanding permeate the relationship (Heyns et al., 2019). Hence, transparency is essential for the project, the student, and the supervisor to be productive and grow (Radbron et al., 2021).

Transformational learning

Another aspect of person-centred supervision is the transformation of the doctoral student, the transformation within personhood, meaning self-knowledge and development. Transformational learning involves doctoral students becoming more effective and evolving in their roles as researchers (Radbron et al., 2021). To achieve transformational learning, the supervisor must build in space for reflection on the supervision, and an opportunity to share these reflections. By doing so, the supervisor and the doctoral student can develop the supervision continuously, so it is meaningful for both (Radbron et al., 2021). Also, there must be an openness for creativity and reflexivity since it provides space for ideas to flourish (Heyns et al., 2019; Rennie & Kinsella, 2020). To foster the students in flourishing and transforming through learning, the supervisor must attend to both the intellectual and emotional processes and needs of the doctoral student alongside the research requirements (Halse & Bansel, 2012). When the supervision involves a process of high challenge and high support, it allows maximum learning for the student. This, in turn, places demand on the supervisor to create optimal conditions for the student to engage in transformational learning and requires fostering an effective culture that supports such learning (Radbron et al., 2021). Such a learning culture, as exemplified within person-centered supervision, is described by Heyns et al. (2019) as a culture of empowerment.

Moreover, Rennie and Kinsella (2020) highlight the importance of communicative learning; to be able to discuss, have dialogues, and reflect as an essential way to make sense of literature, experiences, and data. This perspective aligns with Radbron et al. (2020), who note that one of the biggest challenges faced by doctoral students is developing confidence in their own voice, both orally and in written texts. Also, Rennie and Kinsella (2020) state that trust and effective communication facilitate transformational learning and Radbron et al. (2021) describe that mutual trust, respect, and obligation are essential for the transformational learning process. They emphasise that learning is a two-way process, and it can be challenging for the supervisor. However, they also highlight that recognising that challenges are a natural part of a healthy learning process helps facilitate that process.

Becoming a person-centred researcher

The outcome of person-centred supervision is not only to produce research conducted in a person-centred way or to focus on person-centredness but also that the doctoral student transforms and becomes a person-centred researcher (Radbron et al., 2021). The doctoral process involves both identity formation and knowledge generation (Halse & Bansel, 2012). According to Radbron et al. (2021), students wrestle with identity as they work to understand themselves and gain insight into their identities as researchers and, according to Rennie and Kinsella (2020), insight into their personal and professional ontology. The process of exploration, reflection, and understanding of oneself and one's philosophical viewpoint is needed to become a person-centred researcher. Reflexivity is particularly emphasised as a means to transform personal experiences into public and accountable knowledge. Furthermore, bringing the *me* into the research journey and being authentic enables doctoral students to make decisions aligned with their values and beliefs (Rennie & Kinsella, 2020). Person-centred supervision is a process with space for creativity and offers the opportunity to explore various ways of knowing, philosophical underpinnings and ontological perspectives (Radbron et al., 2021). According to Heyns et al. (2019) and Radbron et al. (2021), person-centred supervision improves the research environment, leading to continuous improvement for both doctoral students and supervisors by fostering healthy relationships between them, ultimately enhancing research outcomes.

Reflection

This review of research and literature shows key aspects of person-centred supervision. The aspects *Being seen as a person, Connectedness* and *Transparency* are related to the interaction between the doctoral student and the supervisor. The aspects *Transformational learning* and *Becoming a person-centred researcher* are more closely related to the culture of the research community and the socialisation of the doctoral students to become independent. Additionally, these aspects provide insight into the values of person-centredness, which are prioritized in both practice and research within health and social care.

The question of whether person-centred supervision is a useful pedagogical approach may depend on the specific aims of the supervision. The approach is valued for its flexibility, allowing supervisors to integrate person-centred supervision with project-centred supervision and thereby address both the needs of the doctoral student and the requirements of the project. When the goal is for doctoral students to become person-centred researchers, the supervision style is considered to be a useful socialisation process (Radbron et al., 2021; Rennie & Kinsella, 2020).

In person-centred supervision there appears to be an emphasis on reflexivity for both the doctoral student as well as the supervisor. The relationship between reflexivity and learning can be illustrated by the theory of loop learning (McGuire et al., 2008; Romme & van Witteloostuijn, 1999). Being open, aware, reflective, and engaging in discussion can lead to changes in one's perspectives and norms. Triple-loop learning involves making "three loops" (doing, thinking, and being) in your learning. It emphasises not only changes in how a person acts and thinks but also the transformation into the person (researcher) they aspire to be. This may reflect on the norms of the culture in a learning and research environment (Kalonaityté, 2014).

If we as supervisors engage in a single loop, we can change how we act, which can be about how we approach the doctoral students, how we apply standards, and whether we promote inclusivity in our teaching and supervision. By a double loop, we can transform our way of thinking. It concerns how we think, what we consider important, what captures our attention and what we overlook. Finally, by engaging in a triple-loop learning process, we can change the norms that exist, i.e. our way of being. This transformation can pertain to the norms within our learning and research environments, as well as the teaching methods and philosophies of science that guide our educational practices. The concept emphasises that both the supervisor and the doctoral student require triple-loop learning to foster personal transformation and shifts in established norms. Hence, person-centred supervision is a useful pedagogical approach when aiming for these specific outcomes.

In person-centred supervision, there also appears to be an emphasis on the connectedness and relationship between the supervisor and the

doctoral student. Aspelin (2018; 2020) describes the importance of the relationship between teachers and school students and how this relationship may contribute to the learning process. Similarly to the results of this review study, he describes three main competencies the teacher (e.g., the supervisor) must have, namely: communicative competencies (verbal and nonverbal); differentiation competence (regulation of the degree of closeness and distance in the meeting with the student); and socio-emotional competence (being sensitive to emotional signals in interaction with the student). Consequently, the relationship is important, and person-centred supervision can be a useful pedagogical approach when wanting to contribute to the doctoral students' learning process and overall well-being during their time as doctoral students.

Another aspect that makes person-centred supervision a useful pedagogical approach for supervising doctoral students is that the focus is on both the doctoral student and the research project. However, it is also challenging and places high demands on the supervisor to focus not only on the research practice but also on the student's development into a person-centred researcher. Nevertheless, if the underlying values of person-centred supervision are applied as a flexible framework for supervision, that framework can be tailored to meet the specific needs of individual doctoral students. This flexibility supports and facilitates their process toward becoming person-centred researchers. In this way, person-centred supervision proves to be beneficial as a teaching method and hence it is useful as a pedagogical approach.

Declaration of use of AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly to improve the readability and language. Thereafter, the manuscript was proofread. The author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.

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