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**To cite this article:** Freya Wood & Lesley Dougan (27 Apr 2026): Attuning to the student: a relational partnership between research supervisor and student on a person-centered master's degree program, Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies, DOI: [10.1080/14779757.2026.2658503](https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2026.2658503)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2026.2658503>



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Published online: 27 Apr 2026.



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# Attuning to the student: a relational partnership between research supervisor and student on a person-centered master's degree program

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a co-constructed dialogue between a master's student and their research supervisor, exploring the transformative impact of their research supervisory relationship on completing meaningful research. Framed through the lens of Person-Centered Theory (PCT), the dialogue captures the relational quality of their collaboration, one rooted in trust, authenticity, and mutual respect. Rather than following a traditional academic structure, the paper adopts a narrative format to honour the emotional and intellectual depth of their shared journey. The relationship is likened to a piece of art: the core conditions of PCT form the frame, while the canvas is textured with adaptive, responsive dialogue. Key themes include psychological safety, flexible yet clear boundaries, space for emotional and intellectual risk-taking, and the freedom to be fully oneself. These conditions fostered creativity, clarity, and sustained momentum in the research process. Ultimately, the paper offers a gentle invitation for research supervisors and students to reflect on the power of relational practice within academia particularly when research carries emotional weight. When the supervisory relationship is grounded in person-centered values and viewed as central rather than secondary, it becomes a facilitative force that bridges the personal and professional, enabling research that is both rigorous and deeply human.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 July 2025

Accepted 7 April 2026

## KEYWORDS

Supervisory relationship; student research experience; collaborative supervision; personal research; person centred conditions in academia

## Introduction

Within person-centered theory (PCT), it is widely accepted that the core of meaningful therapeutic experiences lies in the quality of the relationship between therapist and client (Rogers, 1959). This relationship provides a foundation for navigating personal challenges, facilitating a movement toward greater self-integration and reduced internal conflict (Rogers, 1967). It is worth considering how such relational dynamics may extend beyond therapy into other collaborative contexts where trust,

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safety, and mutual respect are vital, such as academic research supervision (Thomas et al., 2024). Traditionally, the student-researcher relationship is positioned within a hierarchical structure, with the research supervisor viewed as the expert guiding the novice student (Thomas et al., 2024). However, when a student engages in deeply personal research, particularly within a person-centered framework, the supervisory relationship has the potential to become a space of dialogue, co-construction, and mutual learning (Lee, 2008). This paper explores how a research supervisory relationship grounded in person-centered values supported a student's personal and academic development during a master's program in Counseling and Psychotherapy Practices at Liverpool John Moores University. Drawing on a narrative approach, it aims to illustrate the relational authenticity that made this collaboration not only academically productive but personally meaningful.

### ***Nature and purpose of relationship***

A therapeutic relationship is established through mutual respect, empathy, and a nonjudgmental attitude (Opland & Torrico, 2024). It is not formed by chance, but is a deliberately constructed alliance built on trust, perceived safety, and honesty. Arguably it is unlike friendships or romantic relationships, it is governed by clear professional and ethical boundaries. Recognizing how such relational principles extend beyond therapy invites reflection on other contexts, such as education, where trust, collaboration, and boundaries are equally essential for meaningful engagement.

A commonality across relationships like client to therapist, teacher to learner, and research supervisor to student is the necessity of mutual engagement (Boud & Lee, 2005). Success depends on several factors, most notably a shared responsibility for maintaining open, respectful, and responsive communication. This suggests a collaborative dynamic, even when power imbalances are present (Hodza, 2007).

The term *supervisory relationship* can be ambiguous, as supervision occurs in various domains between manager and employee, therapist and supervisee, or tutor and student. In academic contexts, particularly in postgraduate research, the research supervisory relationship plays a critical role in shaping both process and outcome (UK Council for Graduate Education [UK], 2025).

Rogers (1959) emphasized that although therapeutic relationships are grounded in universal conditions, such as, empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, clients are unique individuals whose subjectivity must be respected (Levitt & Brodley, 2005). This principle equally applies to student research, which is often highly personal and must be approached accordingly within research supervision.

Unlike the therapeutic relationship, academic research supervision often involves multiple and overlapping roles, including teacher, mentor, peer, educator, learner, and professional colleague (Toh et al., 2022). These roles serve to uphold academic rigor while also supporting the development of meaningful but also accurate research. Although research supervision may appear structured, often scaffolded to guide the research process, it also holds space for the personal and professional growth of the student (Haley et al., 2023). In this sense, the purpose of the research supervisory relationship can differ from that of therapy: it is not solely to facilitate personal insight, but to integrate scholarly guidance with relational support, allowing both the research and the researcher to develop.

### ***Personal research and the role of research supervision***

'Personal research' is considered as an inquiry rooted in the researcher's lived experience, identity, or values (Boud & Griffin, 1987). Such research is often reflexive, emotionally resonant, and deeply meaningful, calling into question not only the subject matter but also the researcher's sense of self (Finlay, 2002). Given its personal nature, the research supervisor plays a critical role in fostering relational safety, creating a space where vulnerability, authenticity, and self-inquiry can be expressed without fear of judgment (Wisker, 2012). This involves balancing scholarly precision with empathic and reflexive support. For example, while it is appropriate to critique the research design or methodological choices, care must be taken not to invalidate the personal narrative or 'story' the researcher is constructing, as this is perhaps central to the research's relevance and emotional significance (Pendleton et al., 1984). In this paper, the research holds personal resonance for the student, who identifies as an *adult orphan* and has chosen to explore how bereavement therapy intersects with their experience of grief for others who align with the adult orphan description. While the study is not framed as an autoethnography, the student's lived experience informs a heightened sensitivity to potential gaps in therapeutic understanding and support for this often-overlooked demographic (Etherington, 2004).

### ***The space between: a dialogue of trust, support, and research supervision***

The following e-mail excerpts offer a glimpse into 'the space between,' the ongoing dialogue that supported, held, and guided the research journey. Shared here as one form of communication among many, they aim to capture the relational depth and collaborative spirit of a research supervisory partnership rooted in trust, mutual respect, and person-centered values. In doing so, they reflect how a research supervisory relationship can evolve into something far more meaningful than a traditional academic exchange, especially when the research topic holds deep personal significance.

*\*\*The beginnings of the research project and the ethical approval process\*\**

Research Supervisor Reflections on the Early Stages of the Research Journey:

Before submitting the ethics application, the student completed a mandatory online module. Despite having a solid understanding of research ethics, a previous experience with a different online assessment left them doubting their ability to complete it successfully. Their research, grounded in personal experience, carried immense emotional significance. As their research supervisor, I held space for both the personal and professional aspects of the process, ready to respond if the ethics panel's feedback showed a lack of nuance or understanding. However, the application was so thorough and clearly communicated that it was approved without any amendments. In the early stages, the student expressed a need to be doing something productive while waiting for a response, a natural reaction, especially given this was their first time navigating the research approval process.

Freya: I am sorry for inconveniencing you!

Lesley: Freya, it is no trouble at all. Please be assured you have not inconvenienced us (it's our job).

Freya: Please when you have a moment, can you check the document I have attached to this e-mail? This week will be hectic with enrollment I can imagine, so I don't mind if it takes you longer to get back to me . . .

Lesley: Freya This action plan looks excellent.

Freya: I don't want the ethical board to think I am incompetent ethically

Lesley: We will need to speak to someone to find an alternative way of you completing the training

Freya: I apologize for being 'awkward' and adding a job to your list.

Lesley: Hi Freya, I have come up with a possible solution . . . I suggest that you complete this in LJMU with me next to you to discuss the options so you have time to consider your answers

Freya: I'm concerned about the ethical panel's evaluation; I do not think it will pass their standards. If they perceive the study as unethical I will feel like I have failed at something so important.

Lesley: It is important that you don't see the feedback from the ethics panel as a pass/fail.

Freya: After submitting my ethics application, what should I do during the two-week waiting period?

Lesley: Read!

*\*\*Finding out that I met ethical approval . . . \*\**


Research Supervisor Reflections on the Early Stages of the Research Journey:

Despite having submitted a thorough and well-considered ethics application, the student was convinced it would be returned with required amendments. My initial response aimed to gently challenge this assumption and help her stay connected to the momentum they had already built. When approval was granted without changes, the relief was soon followed by a new concern would she be able to recruit enough participants? We had early discussions around contingency plans, including what the project could look like if only two participants were recruited, ensuring the process could continue regardless of the outcome.

Freya: Wow! That is great! I was not holding out on much hope, believing it would not be approved.

Lesley: Now you can look to start the recruitment process – looking for participants.

Freya: This level of efficiency could really sort our country out :) . . . Thanks Lesley! Much appreciated.

Lesley: You are most welcome, Freya – congratulations again 

Freya: The strangest of things has happened, Lesley. Since meeting you yesterday, 3 people got in touch last night and I have arranged their interviews for next week.

Lesley: Hi Freya, that is amazing news!

Freya: Hi Lesley, I have finished a draft of my literature review. I remember you saying you did not mind having a look over it for me. Is it best I e-mail it to you to do in your own time or do you find it is better going over it together in a tutorial?

Lesley: Reply - \*link to booking a tutorial\*

*\*\*Presenting at Keele University\*\**

Lesley: Plus, if it is in person, and if I can make it, I will happily come to Keele to cheerlead

Freya: I could not think of a better person to cheerlead 😊 I will keep you in the loop

*\*\*Collaboration Experience\*\**

Freya: That said, I've been mindful not to take up too much of your time, especially as you're so close to completing your Doctorate – and rightly so, that should be your main priority. I am worried about asking you to collaborate with me on the publication because of your Doctorate duties, I would hate for it to impact something as important as this.

Lesley: Please do not think you are taking too much of my time; that is my role, and I am delighted to collaborate with you on the journal article!

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the research supervisory relationship through the lens of Person-Centered Theory reveals the profound impact of relational depth in academic contexts, particularly when engaging with personally meaningful research. The dialogue shared in this paper offers more than a simple recounting of process; it captures the essence of co-creation, trust, and shared vulnerability within a space that intentionally blurred the line between academic rigor and emotional authenticity. It was not a one-directional experience of guidance, but a collaborative journey, one that allowed the student to feel deeply held, yet professionally challenged (Manathunga, 2007).

What made this research supervision distinct was not the absence of structure, but the flexible use of boundaries to cultivate safety, creativity, and growth (Benmore, 2014). There was an unspoken permission to bring the whole self into the process, and in doing so, the research was enriched, academically and personally. While research supervision may often be framed around outcomes and deliverables, this experience speaks to the transformative potential of a relationship built on empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. When research supervision is understood as a relational practice, not just a procedural necessity, it has the power to support research that is not only academically robust, but deeply human. Using e-mail snippets showing just one vehicle of communication of many it hopefully meets the aim in trying to offer a snapshot of relationship that is beyond just academia and just a job role to provide. A glimpse into a relationship that extends beyond the confines of academia or traditional job roles can fuel positive research

discussions, encouraging both students and supervisors to embrace research as a relational and transformative journey.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributors

**Freya Wood** is a person with autism, a person centred therapist, lecturer, and PhD student at Liverpool John Moores University. She currently teaches on the MSc Person Centred programme at the Metanoia Institute.

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