

# ANTHROPOLOGICALLY CENTRED SUPERVISION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PERSON-CENTRED PARADIGM OF SOCIAL WORK

**Dace Dolace**

*European Christian Academy (Latvia)*

## Abstract

The article is devoted to the anthropologically centred supervision of social field specialists. The concept of supervision is based on the patristic anthropology of the Church, which is fundamentally person-centred in any professional activity. This approach to supervision is very modern, as it resonates with the current professional paradigm shift from a profession-centred approach to a person/client-centred approach. The article presents quantitative research, with the aim of showing the expediency of person-centred supervision from the attitude of social workers. It analyses the main methodological principles of person-centred (the author uses the term ‘anthropologically centred’) supervision, and their application in supervision: 1) the concept of a person; 2) the term ‘personality development’ or personality transformation; 3) the factor of high-quality communication or reciprocity.

KEY WORDS: anthropologically centred supervision, person-centred approach, client-centred approach, social work, professional identity, Patristic anthropology.

## Anotacija

Straipsnis skirtas socialinės srities specialistų supervizijos raiškai antropologijos kontekste. Supervizijos koncepcija straipsnyje remiasi antropologine patristine tradicija, kuri bet kurioje profesinėje veikloje iš esmės orientuota į asmenį. Toks požiūris į superviziją gana šiuolaikiškas, nes rezonuoja su profesinės paradigmos prieigomis – nuo į profesiją orientuoto požiūrio iki į asmenį / klientą orientuoto požiūrio. Straipsnyje pristatomas kiekybinis tyrimas, kuriuo siekta atskleisti į asmenį orientuotos supervizijos tikslingumą socialinių darbuotojų požiūriu. Analizuojami pagrindiniai į asmenį orientuotos (autorė vartoja terminą *antropologiškai orientuota*) supervizijos metodologiniai principai ir jų taikymas supervizijoje: 1) asmenybės koncepcija; 2) sąvokos *asmenybės ugdyimas* arba *asmenybės transformacija*; 3) kokybiško bendravimo arba abipusiškumo veiksnys.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: antropologiškai orientuota supervizija, į asmenį orientuotas požiūris, į klientą orientuotas požiūris, socialinis darbas, profesinis tapatumas, patristinė antropologija.

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## Introduction

The author of this article has 20 years of supervisory experience in the social work field. It is the author’s conviction that supervision today is a powerful tool that guides and facilitates social workers in the innovative anthropological

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direction of social work: the orientation towards the personality as the meaningful centre of all caring professions.

The principles of supervision implemented by the author are based on patristic anthropology's approach to man. This approach provides for fundamental respect for the personality factor in the caring professions. The author's research interest in the development of personality-oriented supervision in Latvia is consistent with the current paradigm shift in the caring professions: there is a shift from profession-centred work to client-centred professional activity. The concept of supervision is based on the patristic anthropology of the Church, which is fundamentally person-centred in any professional activity. This approach to supervision is very modern, as it resonates with the current professional paradigm shift from a profession-centred approach to a person/client-centred approach.

The profession-centred approach has been the dominant strategy in the caring professions since the beginning of the 20th century. It puts the professional worker in the role of expert, and, in relation to the client, seeks to fulfil its own professional objectives: basically, to diagnose the problem and solve it with the given resources, guiding the client along the specialist's designated routes.

The client/person-centred approach emerges in the context of the institutionalisation of the caring professions at the end of the 20th century, as a dynamic, dialogic and contradictory movement. Its voice is initially heard in the context of therapy: Rogers raises and defines the understanding of working with people as a relational process in which the voice of the client must also be heard. He developed 'client-centred therapy' (CCT), later called the 'person-centred approach' (PCA) (Rogers, 1951; Rogers, 1959; Campbell, 2018).

This innovative approach today is entering all sectors of the caring professions as a condition for the development of the profession in the 21st century.

In health care, patient-centred care and understanding patient values are among the key elements of high-quality care and positive outcomes in treatment (Epstein, Street, 2011; Street, Haidet, 2011).

In the field of education, the person-centred approach seeks to address practical and theoretical issues of the education of pupils with special educational needs (Gray, Woods, 2022), as well as focusing on a general strategy of child-rearing that implements a qualitative 'vertical attachment' in the child-adult relationship (Neufeld, Mate, 2024).

Client/person-centred social work is an essential dimension of the social system, placing social work in a broader visionary and human perspective, and preventing social work from being trapped in a narrow, limited institutional framework that pushes the human person out of the centre of the profession.

‘The limited model of social work seems to provide a dominant paradigm, which may result in the loss of a humane social work’ (Higgins, 2015; see also Kievišiene, 2020; Washburn, Grossman, 2017; Witkin, 2017; Urponen, 2020).

This article focuses on the analogous transit situation in, because supervision, on one hand, supervision reflects changes and innovations taking place in the profession, and follows the trends in the profession; but on the other hand, supervision has the potential to become a beacon of professional development, an enabler, an educator of social professions in the times of paradigmatic transition.

Supervision also shows a shift towards a person-centred approach, although there is not much research on this. The most important studies based on therapy supervision belong to Patterson (Patterson, 1983; 1997). Talley and Jones integrate person-centred supervision into counsellor education (Talley, Jones, 2019). The collection of articles published in 2004 ‘Freedom to Practice. Person-centred approaches to supervision’ (Tudor, Worrall, 2004) further develops Roger’s concept, stressing that person-centred supervision is firmly rooted in a potentiality model: the supervisor accepts the supervisee as a person in process, and trusts their potential for growth and development. The purpose of person-centred supervision is to facilitate the counsellor’s congruence, and their ability to relate in depth through reflection on the counsellor’s experience of the self in the relationship with clients. Trust, respect, acceptance, empathy and congruence are essential aspects of a collaborative supervision relationship.

In this article the understanding of social work and supervision is grounded in the historical, and at the same time contemporary, concept of social work in the context of the patristic anthropology of the Church.

In the 19th century, Abbot Dr G. Uhlhorn, who is today recognised as a classic of Church social work theory, analysed the principles of social work, and stressed the importance of an ecclesial social work culture in contemporary society (Uhlhorn, 1883). In establishing social work activities with the social outcasts and the poor of that time, the early Church was principally based on the central condition of social mercy (*caritas*): every person who is included, who receives help and support, is of ontological value (Moore, 2008). They are called ‘neighbour’ because they bear the ontological ‘stamp of the image and likeness of God’. For ‘the Triune God is the personalizing Person, and we are the personalized persons who draw from Him the true personal nature of our being’ (Torrance, 1989).

Thus, the paradigm of social work established by the Church is essentially person-centred, and, consequently, it is again relevant in the 21st century.

Precisely because the social work model of the Church is aimed at protecting the anthropological centre of the profession, today the social experience of the

Church is an important resource in the innovative methodology of the caring professions, including adequate supervision.

The aim of the article is to identify and define the role of anthropologically centred supervision in the development of the person-centred social work paradigm in Latvia.

**Methodology.** A quantitative study was chosen for the empirical study, because this article presents it as a pilot study that will be used for further research. The research questionnaire was constructed with several blocks of questions that provide both critical insights and experiences of social workers, which will also serve as a continuation of the qualitative research by creating categories and subcategories. The results are processed by the method of mathematical statistics, and their interpretation is presented in the context of methodological theoretical approaches.

## **1. In search of a supervision order: empirical study in the field of social work supervision**

To implement person-centred supervision for social work specialists, we must first follow the basic principle of this approach: let the voice of the client (i.e. the supervisee) be heard. Currently, one of the most urgent needs in the field of supervision is the study of a complex supervision order, which would help define the strategic tasks of supervision for this time.

A pilot study by the author was carried out between 2022 and 2023 at social work institutions in Latvia. The aim of the empirical study was to outline the general current trends of the supervision request (expectations, needs, order) in general in today's current professional field of social work.

In order to carry out the pilot study approach, a quantitative study with a questionnaire was used to clarify the problems to further this research. A total of 424 social workers participated in the research. The questionnaire consists of two parts: 1) to indicate the main problems in the field of the profession; 2) to reflect on the supervision experience, and outline personal expectations, wishes and needs regarding supervision.

The preliminary conclusions from the research results were deduced, on which the discussion about the conditions of person-oriented supervision will be based, and are as following:

1. Common critical issues and professional difficulties in the process of social work encountered by respondents:
  - 1) The experience of social system administrations ignoring the attitude in making reforms and decisions that are difficult to implement. Ignoring

- employees' opinions lowers the employee's sense of value and sense of belonging);
- 2) the complexity of social cases, and the lack of resources and unproductive inter-institutional cooperation, create a sense of hopelessness and helplessness for the employee;
  - 3) the requirement of the administration for quick results in working with a person, without considering the anthropological specifics of social work; a feeling of diminishing human value (both employee and client) in the social institution;
  - 4) critically increasing the workload (in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war; in the financial crisis situation when social services were tasked with the calculation and allocation of housing allowances for residents). Employees do not know how to act in a situation of excessive workload, how to preserve their health and personality;
  - 5) loss of motivation, doubts about the meaning of the work and one's professional identity, alienation from the self.
2. Findings on supervision experiences and preferences for supervision:
- 1) 65% of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the mandatory solving of social cases in supervision sessions, justifying it by various reasons: if the employee does not have a problematic case, the supervisor tells them to take an old case; issues related to cases are dealt with on the spot in work meetings, and they are no longer relevant in supervisions; such supervisions often have an examining atmosphere;
  - 2) 70% of the respondents indicate that the supervisor allows them to discuss only work problems; other topics related to the personality (such as bereavement, divorce or illness) are not a topic of supervision, although it is the main issue for the employee. Employees believe that the boundaries of supervision should be expanded to help the employee stabilise his inner world;
  - 3) 44% of respondents indicate a traumatic experience when a supervisor, a psychologist by profession, has performed a ruthless psychological intervention on a supervised person. Such an experience reduced the desire of the participants in the supervision to talk about themselves, thereby concealing important personal issues that also affect the work;
  - 4) respondents expressed wishes regarding supervision: to get answers to so-called existential questions about the meaning of one's work and life, especially in stressful situations; to protect and strengthen their personality; to express their experiences and internal conflicts in order to find a solution to them; to understand themselves; to receive support in dif-

difficulties, mistakes and failures; to strengthen self-confidence and self-worth; to overcome fear; to strengthen employee solidarity.

- 5) answers related to the desire to better understand clients in supervision in order to be able to help them, accept them and motivate them should be highlighted separately. A total of 24% of employees think like this: they believe supervision is a space where we can communicate in a client-oriented manner.

### Conclusions of the empirical study

1. The study shows that the currently dominant corpus in social work supervision is traditionally focused on professional activity, emphasising the question 'what to do?' in certain work situations. In task-oriented or activity-oriented supervision, employees cannot fully reflect and become aware of themselves. The research shows growing employee dissatisfaction with the formal boundaries of supervision, as well as confusion about attempts to make supervision attractive with various activities (drawing, dancing, colouring mandalas, etc).
2. The anthropological 'order' for supervision is most clearly presented in the first part of the study: analysing their professional work difficulties, employees indicate an acute need for a sense of professional identity, self-confidence, personal strength, and an understanding of the meaning of their work in professionally critical situations.
3. The research shows sporadically the need and desire of employees for client-centred thinking, which does not see the client as an object of social work, but as a mutual cooperation partner, a personality.
4. The research allows us to see that social work supervision is currently a field where the signs of a paradigm shift are appearing: manifestations of a crisis in the profession-centred approach to give way to human-centred professional activity and supervision can be detected.

## 2. Discussion on the conditions of person-centred supervision

This article focuses on three key methodological concepts of the person-centred approach:

- 1) an understanding of the person or the concept of the person;
- 2) the phenomenon of personality development or personality transformation;
- 3) the factor of high-quality communication or reciprocity.

The concept of the person. The pilot study has clearly shown the acute need among the respondents (specialists in the social field) for self-understanding,

restoration and an improvement of their personal value. The research shows that mostly external conditions (the social system, and also customer awareness and lifestyle) cannot be changed in a given situation, so the centre of employee activity shifts to internal processes of personal identity and the professional identity.

The necessary conceptual basis for these self-awareness processes in supervision is personality theory or the human concept. In the supervision of a person-centred approach, the authors basically focus on a psycho-somatic-social understanding of personality.

The author of the article develops and practises an anthropological model of supervision, in which the understanding of personality is based on the holistic model of the patristic anthropology of the Church. It sees a person as a unique and unrepeatable personality that structurally embodies the elements of bodily, psychic, social and spiritual life. The Eastern Church Fathers describe the ontological similarity of man to the person of God. To St Gregory of Nyssa, the human being is exceptional, being created in the image of God. Humanity is theomorphic both in having self-awareness and free will, the latter giving each individual existential power, because to Gregory, in disregarding God, one negates one's own existence. (Gregory of Nyssa, 1958).

St Maximus Confessor, an anthropologist of the sixth and seventh centuries, bases his human concept on the ontological freedom and will of man (Maximus Confessor, 1985). These positions will become fundamentally important in the question of human possibilities of inner metamorphosis.

Personality development as an anthropological transformation of the personality. In the new person-centred paradigm, supervision is defined as continuous personality development (Tudor, Worrall, 2007, 169).

However, only in the 21st century has the concept of 'personal development' won a place in the professional and ethical standards of the caring professions, becoming a mandatory part of professional competence. The BACP's (2002, 3) Ethical Framework puts this in the following terms:

The principle of self-respect means that the practitioner appropriately applies all mentioned principles as entitlements for the self. This includes seeking opportunities for personal development as required. There is an ethical responsibility to use supervision for appropriate personal and professional support and development.

However, the 'Latvian code of ethics for social workers' (2022) does not use this concept of 'personal development'. The document defines the social worker's responsibilities towards the client, the institution, and society, but in relation to himself, he emphasises the obligation to continuously educate himself. Referring

to the supervisory functions, the code states: '5.1.8. Attend supervisions and reflect on your practice, promoting the efficiency of your work.'

The social field of Latvia is characterised by such a discourse, which excludes the personality factor outside parentheses, and it also dominates in supervision. However, the international ECVision document developed by European supervisors, 'Supervision and coaching in Europe' (2015), in section 18 'Quality Development', clearly declares the inseparability of professional development from personal development:

Supervision is a continuous purposeful process of keeping up one's own professional skills and abilities. This includes taking care of one's own personal and professional development, and contributing to the professional community.

Effective person-centred social work and supervision demand a commitment to an ongoing process of personal development. It is absolutely, completely crucial for professional work. Issues and concerns that arise in the 'personal' areas of a person's life will necessarily manifest in professional areas too. Thus, personal becomes professional, and 'professional is personal [...] the professional domain sits within the personal domain' (Tudor, Worrall, 2007, 171).

Personal development should be seen in a much broader context than the concept of psychotherapy. The author agrees with the statement that in a person-centred approach, personality growth cannot be left to the vagaries of individual therapy (Mearns, 1994; Merry, 1999)

The following statements are often heard in the field of supervision, that there is no place for personal development problems in supervision, because solving them is the task of psychotherapy, and supervision is not psychotherapy. With the separation of supervision from psychotherapy, all large anthropological categories that have long belonged to the mother of sciences, theology, philosophy and pedagogy, are pushed out of supervision. This makes supervision flat, limited, and non-human. Today, supervision should develop in the interdisciplinary bed of human sciences as an anthropocentric phenomenon.

In the context of the given study, the concept of personal development is clarified in the patristic anthropological paradigm as the transformative growth of the personality in its wholeness, respectively, integrating the ontological spiritual potential of the personality. In the theological discourse, it also refers to the restoration of the personality in the likeness of God (*similitudo Dei*). Patristic anthropology, delving deeper into this notion, explores its implications and significance for human identity and the scope of relationships. The concept of *similitudo Dei* attributes to a person the capacity of the spiritual mind (*nous*), moral awareness, and meaningful relationships, both social and ecclesial. However, a true likeness to



God is not something fixed or fully realised at the moment of creation, but rather a dynamic process that unfolds throughout human history.

An important aspect affecting the existential situations of social workers in the profession is the absence of personal self-worth in situations of social pressure and limitation. Church anthropology describes these states as a pathological distancing from one's true identity, which is an unnatural temporary state for man. St Maximus Confessor describes it as 'passivity', when a person has stopped using his God-given potential, freedom and will. Returning to 'activity', making existential decisions, transforming the personality, is a synergistic process to which a person is called individually and personally (Maximus Confessor, 1985, 47f).

Transformative tasks of social work supervision envisage helping the employee realise his personal and professional identity through ontological freedom, which is possible even in the most paradoxical seemingly hopeless situations. For more on the process and levels of transformative supervision, see Dolace (2021).

Qualitative communication or reciprocity. In this regard, the famous doctor Gabor Mate's statement in the introduction to the monograph 'Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More than Peers' (Neufeld, Mate, 2024, 6) is conceptual: our focus is not on what parents should do but on who they need to be for their children [...] The modern obsession with upbringing as a set of skills to be followed along lines recommended by experts is really the result of lost intuitions and of a lost relationship which previous generations took for granted.

Here the author has outlined a paradigm shift in pedagogy, social work, etc, in human professions. The primary 'What do I do?' retreats in the face of essential questions of self-identity: 'Who am I?' and 'Who am I to the other person?' It is revealed here that in the future the efficiency of the work will be determined not by the skills of methods and the instructions of experts, but by the quality of mutual relations. The quality of the relationship is determined by the dialogue and reciprocity of the personalities, and not by the hierarchical subject-object (giver-receiver) relationship.

In social work supervisions, a typical problem is facing the client as a 'stranger' who is not available for communication, or, as workers say, 'not motivated to improve'. Transforming a 'stranger' into a 'closer/neighbour' is essentially a turning point (*metanoia*) in the employee's own consciousness and personality, instead of trying to transform the client. The respect for the client postulated by ethical codes is often an abstraction because real respect arises in the event of the internal transformation of the employee, which opens the states of humility, confession, mercy (*caritas*), understanding, and love towards the so-called client. Thus, the elevation of the other person to an equal status of ontological personality takes place.

Regarding supervision, supervision becomes more effective to the extent that it embraces and attends to the whole of the person of the social specialist. In this sense, ‘the supervisory relationship is an existential encounter at least as much as a professional contract’ (Thorne, 2002, 20). Spence (2006, 3) argues that this is primarily effected through love.

Here, the author can agree, based not on a psychological interpretation of love, but on a patristic theological one, which postulates the love inherent in man as a love similar to the Trinitarian Person of God, characterised by the principle of *ekstasis* (Greek *ek-stasis*, ‘being outside, a condition outside’): God in love freely releases from Himself in existence the Son (*Logos*) and the Holy Spirit. God’s ontological freedom is in fact that God transcends, overcomes his necessary nature, comes out of his self-sufficient, monadic existence, and gives birth and life to another Person and creates a human being after his divine image and likeness. Patristic theology formulates the cosmos not as a necessity but as the product of freedom and love. Therefore, love is an act of community realised freely. Love is ontologically realised freedom: coming out of one’s own person (out of self-sufficiency, isolation egoism) in order to create a life, to create a community with another person (Zizioulas, 1985).

This is the conceptual setting of an innovative supervision model, and its dynamic centre is the personality of the supervisor. The patristic universal law of communication is at work here:

‘Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands will be saved around you’ (St Seraphim of Sarov).

Changes in the practitioner’s personality and attitude initiate changes in the other person. These anthropological regularities have a parallel character: the supervision reciprocity model can promote the supervisee’s development of reciprocity in practice in relation to the client. Subsequently, the possibilities of personality transformation in supervision depend on the supervisor’s ability to realise reciprocity, that is, to grow beyond the limits of his egoism to understand the pain, concerns and needs of his supervisees for self-esteem and the fulfilment of the meaning of work.

## Conclusions

1. The research reveals that a profession-centred approach to social work and supervision prevails in the social field in Latvia, which in practice appears as the displacement of the importance of the personality factor from institutionalised social work. The imbalance between ‘professional development’ and ‘personality development’ is indicated by employees’ testimonies of

burn-out, low self-esteem, and the loss of the meaning of the work. In task-oriented or activity-oriented supervision, employees cannot fully reflect and become aware of themselves.

2. The paradigm of social work established by the Church is essentially person-centred, and consequently, in the 21st century, in the context of the paradigm shift, it is again relevant. Precisely because the social work model of the Church is aimed at protecting the anthropological centre of the profession, the social experience of the Church today is an important resource in the innovative methodology of the caring professions, including supervision.
3. Supervision today is a unique and necessary tool to orient a person towards personal development and anthropological transformation (while emphasising that, firstly, supervision is not psychotherapy, and secondly, personal development does not replace professional development, but interacts with it). Supervision can achieve the rehabilitative goals of the personality if the following anthropological principles (which gain depth in the patristic human concept paradigm) are implemented: reciprocity as love and solidarity in the attitude towards another person; continuing internal personal growth, taking into account the ontological potential of human freedom and will (the likeness to God); and the responsibility of the supervisor to be the dynamic centre of the transformation of the personship of the supervisee. Changes in the practitioner's personality initiate changes in the other person.

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**Dace Dolace** – associate professor, master of Humanities (Theology), master of Humanities (Philology), European Christian Academy, Latvia.

E-mail: [kursi@kra.lv](mailto:kursi@kra.lv)