
PARALLELING IN THE SUPERVISION PROCESS

by
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What we will describe occurs, we think, to a greater or lesser extent in all supervision sessions, be they one-to-one supervision, group supervision or team consultancy. Its very simplicity and effectiveness once grasped makes it a very powerful tool for supervisor and supervisee alike.

The concept of paralleling is that the supervisee will do to the supervisor what their client has done to them. Or to quote Harold Searles who was among the first to name this process in 1955 when he wrote about his supervision of trainee therapists "The processes at work currently in the **relationship** between patient and therapist are often reflected in the **relationship** between therapist and supervisor". For example, if I have a client who is very withholding, (who had a mother who was very withholding, who had a mother or father who was very withholding etc), when I present him to my supervisor, I may well do this in a very withholding way. In effect I become my client and attempt to turn my supervisor into me as therapist. This function, which is rarely done consciously, serves two purposes for the supervisee. One is that it is a form of discharge - I'll do to you what has been done to me and

you see how you like it: and the second is that it is an attempt to solve the problem through reenacting it within the here and now relationship. The job of the supervisor is to work with the supervisee with this process rather than becoming submerged by it, by becoming angry with his withholding supervisee just as the supervisee has become angry with his withholding client. The skill is in noticing one's reactions and feeding them back in a non-judgemental way e.g. "I experience the way you are telling me about this client as quite withholding and I am beginning to feel angry. I wonder is this how you felt with your client?" The process is sometimes quite difficult as we are working with the paradox of the supervisee both wanting to deskill the supervisor and at the same time work through their difficulties.

In the following account, we will individually relate some of our experiences of using paralleling.

I (Robin) like using this idea of paralleling in groups because the variety of responses of different members can be used to good effect. I start group supervision where I am the facilitator by asking people to entertain the possibility that we do

to others what has been done to us. I introduce the terms introjection and projection, explaining that if we swallow something without digesting it properly, we may have to vomit it up later. It is usually these cases that are brought to supervision, where some aspect of the client has not been digested. If members of the group can be aware of what they are experiencing, or being asked to swallow, this can be an extremely useful tool for clarifying what is undigested or unintegrated by the supervisee and the client. By using the terms introjection and projection on an easily understood level, I am inviting all the members of the group to trust their here and now reactions as part of the supervision work.

Before going on to particular examples I would like to say how I came to use this concept of paralleling so regularly in groups. I had been aware of it for some time in my one to one work and in relation to the supervision I gave and received; but it was through leading dream groups that I came to see how the unconscious feelings in the dream and dreamer became reenacted and paralleled in the feelings and behaviour of the group members. By encouraging people to pay attention to whatever responses they had in listening to someone else's dream, we were able to work with all the different levels that operate not only in the dream, but the dreamer's relationship to their dream and to the group. For example, a man tells a dream in which he can't find something and

does not know if it is worth finding anyway. The group switches off and as leader I am left trying to 'find' his dream. It is not until after trying to work with the dream for some time that I realize that the group is reflecting his attitude in the dream of not being bothered. By making this explicit the group and the presenter of the dream are able to decide whether to continue working.

Even with many experiences of paralleling, I am still surprised by the force with which it occurs. Recently on a supervision course for therapeutic community members, a new young staff member presented a client with whom she had been having difficulty. After an initial enthusiasm and opening up, the client was either missing her sessions or hardly communicating. As soon as the worker began to resent her client, I found myself switching off. I just did not want to be bothered. However I kept going for about ten minutes asking seemingly appropriate questions until I could stand it no longer. I shared my feelings hesitantly - they just did not seem to fit, and group members seemed very involved. In fact it turned out that the group was split roughly half and half. One half was very involved and the other half had totally switched off too, but like me was trying to appear involved. The presenter was astonished to see how accurately her feelings for her client of both being very involved and identifying with her, and not wanting to know about her, were being mirrored. Besides this process happening in the counselling

relationship, it was also happening in the client's relationship with other people in the hostel and in the presenter's relationship with her boyfriend, where she was withdrawing after an initial strong commitment. In this case she was able to see through her fear of being hurt, and was able to see the parallels for her client and why she had been having so much difficulty. The client was doing to her what she was doing to her boyfriend (and to us in the group), and she both identified with her and was angry with her at the same time. This realisation was thus a rich source for furthering the counselling relationship, and for both presenter and client exploring their ways of relating to other people.

I once decided not to use the paralleling model with one particular presentation. It concerned a male resident in a therapeutic community. The worker presented this resident in such a way that most of the group including me came up with all sorts of strategies as our way of offering help. I commented that we were not focusing on the resident/worker relationship as we usually did, but this was probably one of the times where it was more appropriate to look at different strategies for dealing with a very disruptive resident. (In his presentation, the worker had said that they had a good counselling relationship but it was the resident's behaviour in the community that was the problem). However I began to feel that I was avoiding something and one or two members of the group were

becoming restless, sensing something was wrong. The possibility of a defence against homosexual feelings sprang to mind. This proved to be an important clue. I was avoiding looking at my relationship with the worker by opting for a strategic approach in the same way as he was avoiding looking at his relationship with his resident. The work did not stop with the recognition of the paralleling, but it did stop the flight with which I had been colluding because of my own defences.

Joan ; As a consultant to several different staff teams, I find the concept of paralleling (or mirroring or reflection as it is also called) essential most of the time. Consciously a team may want the consultant to stay out of their process and for him or her to give them a dispassionate and objective view. Unconsciously however they often seem to want her to feel what it is like working there and being part of that particular team. In doing this they hope they can deposit their unwanted bits in her and have her leave, so that she can provide a sort of dustbin function or laxative and they can label her as a useless consultant. This can give temporary relief, but does not deal with the core issues of the staff group and the issues have to come up again or be acted out by the staff group on an unconscious level. In addition to their own unresolved issues, the staff team is reflecting the unresolved issues of their client group, so in not working through their own, they are also not working through their clients' issues with them. The same can be just as true

of the consultant - the unconscious of the team triggers off the unconscious of the consultant - the consultant hopefully recognises this. The task of the consultant is not to stay out of the team's process, even if this were possible, but to experience it without judging and to feed it back to the staff group so that they and she can collaboratively work with it. If they can resolve some of these issues in their own staff group, they will have the means to resolve them with the client group. It is often difficult for a team to move from a position of defending against its own inadequacies, sometimes by attempting to make the consultant inadequate, into a model of sharing responsibility with the consultant in exploring and creating solutions.

Recently I was asked in by an organisation that works with homeless people. Their reason for calling me in was that they thought they could make better use of their worker potential, and were aware that workers were getting burnt out from overwork. They were aware that they needed to take better care of themselves, but on the whole unaware of their resistance to doing that. In employing me who still has issues of taking care of myself even though I have worked on it, there is a danger that I too could work too hard and have to leave. In one of the early sessions I teach the concept of paralleling and by way of illustration feedback my feelings at this point. I notice that I am feeling rushed and having too much to fit in the time we have; I ask if it is like that working

at their houses and several of them nod vigorously. The sessions proceed. I notice that I overwork despite my conscious attempts not to - again a mirror of what they do. Then in one session someone falls asleep. I comment that there seems to be a void in the centre of the group and I keep feeling compelled to fill it. The more I fill it, the more my voice dominates and the more people disappear to the fringes of the group and finally go to sleep. I also remember and share that I had felt tired at the thought of running the session. This turns out to be just like their breakfast meetings where they try to energize and motivate the residents and feel exhausted by it. They also have to prove their worth as a worker just as I was having to prove mine as consultant. We look at how they are pressurising me because of how they pressurise themselves and how their clients pressurise them, and also how I allow myself to be pressurised because of the pressure I put myself under. This sharing gives us room to move. We now have a common experience, are in effect on the same side, as opposed to being in conflict and are now in a position to move onto the next stage which is looking at how we live with and or resolve this issue. Our experience in the worker group will be the model for how it is managed with the client group.

This was certainly true in the following example from my one to one supervision work. I was supervising a social work student on placement to our therapeutic community who was counselling a

resident with whom she was having difficulty. He was a man in his forties who had been in the rehabilitation programme in the house for about seven months and was now to move on to the next stage which was finding himself some voluntary work. He was well able to do this but despite the student making many helpful and supportive suggestions, he 'yes buted' everything she said. In her supervision with me, despite her being a very able student, her response to all my interventions was 'yes but'. I took this issue to my supervisor, in order as I thought, to obtain some useful suggestions with which to help the student. However, despite the fact that I was usually very receptive to supervision, I responded to every suggestion my supervisor made with a 'yes but'. He then commented on how resistant I was sounding and how like the resident in question I was being. This insight immediately rang so true that we were both able to enjoy the unconscious paralleling I had been engaged in and I no longer needed to engage in a resistance game with my supervisor. I shared this with my student who no longer needed to resist me but was able to go back to the client and explore his need to resist. His issues around needing to feel his power by resisting could then be worked on separately from his finding voluntary work and he was able to arrange some voluntary work within the week.

Whether it is with a team, a group or a one to one session, this way of

working focuses on how the relationship between supervisor and supervisee reflects and parallels the supervisee and the client group. By working in this way we are also emphasizing our belief that however disturbed the client, the solution to any stuckness, for supervision purposes, is with the therapist. The supervisor must not collude with making the client the problem any more than they should be colluded with in their own supervision should they seek to make their supervisee the problem. By working in this way we keep the focus on the here and now and remember that we are working with the supervisee's view of the client, not the client himself. In this way of looking at it, it is the supervisee who is being presented, not the client.

Our interests in paralleling are many. By focusing on the here and now and the effect that the presenter is having on us or the group, we have the task of using this information for understanding the therapist/client interaction. Without some focus on paralleling we are leaving much of ourselves out. We could, as mentioned above, be colluding with the supervisee's description of the client unless we were used to monitoring our own reactions carefully and using the here and now of our joint experience. This is not to say that other strategies are not relevant, and in an earlier article, Peter Hawkins has mentioned the different options open to a supervisor. However, our way of working of combining the here and

now (Gestalt) with the relationship (transference and countertransference) obviously suits us. It is sometimes only a starting point, but can provide the necessary relief for work to continue in a more fruitful way. When used in a group, it encourages members to be aware of, trust and use their responses which helps them as therapists. It helps the supervisor not to collude or walk

into any traps set by the supervisee; and if these traps are walked into, it provides a tool for getting out. Its strength is that the supervisee unconsciously reproduces the essence of the session with their client through their relationship with their supervisor, and this offsets any conscious attempts by the supervisee to distort the content of their sessions with their clients.

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