



Looking for parallels

Phyllis Coulter makes the case for the use of transference and countertransference as a positive and mutual means of improving our practice with young people and helping them and us to thrive

Life is full of echoes and similarities and odd coincidences; look out for them. This was the observation and advice given to me by my grandfather many years ago and I am happy to say I did take this advice and have proved him accurate again and again. Parallels, 'mirrored' events and conversations abound. I want us to think parallels in our work with our young clients and our experiences in supervision, but I also want us to consider that parallels with our client work may also exist in other relationships we are involved in.

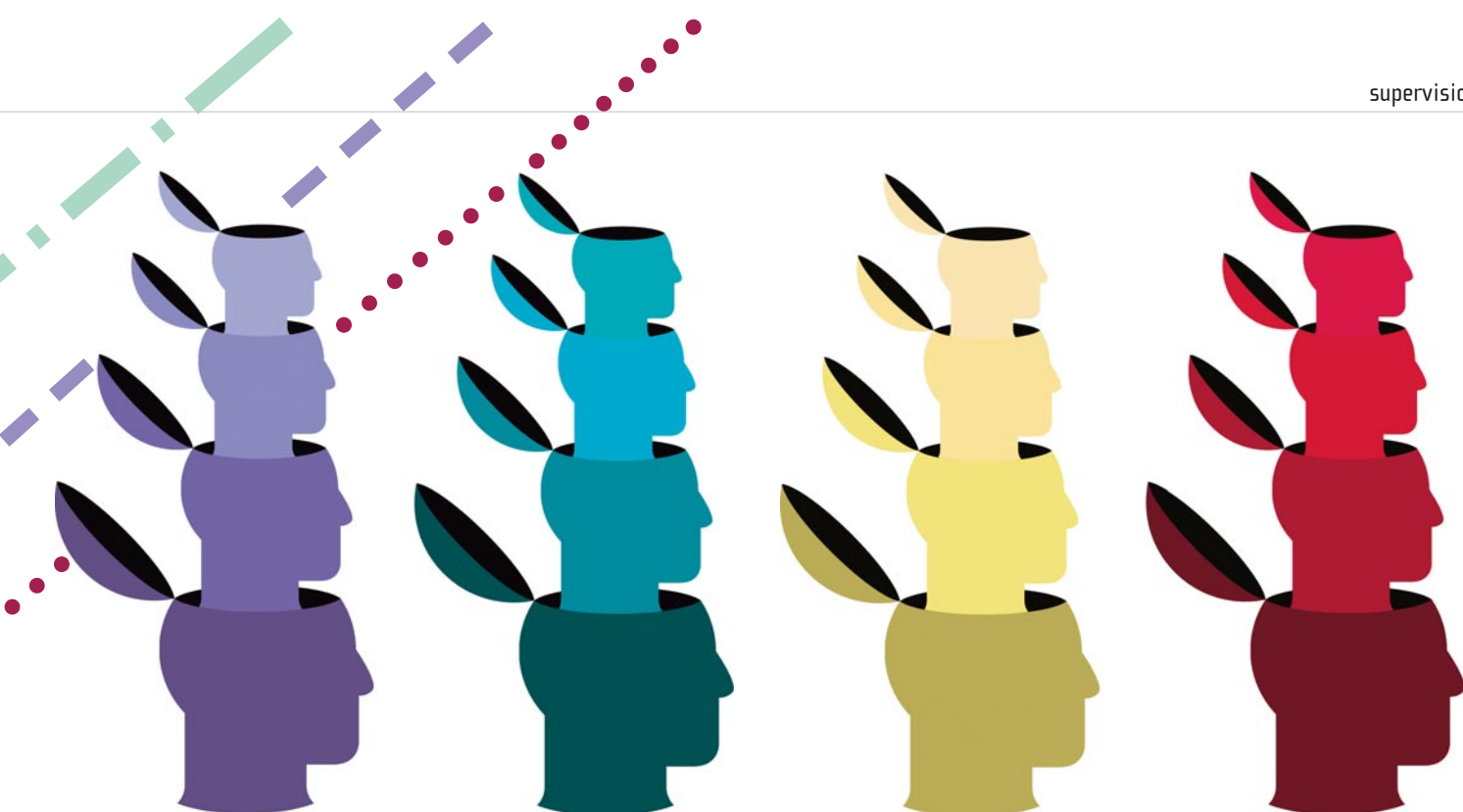
'Parallel process is a form of transference in which the practitioner enacts with a third party (typically a supervisor) dynamics that originally arose with a client.'

William Cornell and Michel Landaiche¹

The above definition highlights my point, because their choice of the word 'typically' says to me that this 'third party' is not tied exclusively to supervision and that the idea is full of potential if we let it percolate. So although we will primarily

focus on the supervisory relationship here, please hold loosely to the concept that what happens in the supervisory space can happen elsewhere as well.

The idea of a parallel process being present in therapeutic relationships and in clinical supervision particularly is not new in the world of therapy. It began with HF Searles in the 1950s and found development in the work of Byrne and Doehrman in the 1960s and 1970s, and others since. As both a supervisor and a supervisee, I am fascinated by this phenomenon and was excited to share my thoughts and questions with others at workshops during the recent CCYP conferences in England. I loved the title of these conferences as soon as I saw it. 'Surviving and Thriving – making a difference into the future.' The main aim at those workshops, and here as I write, is to encourage and enthuse us for our work with children and young people, which at times is very much about surviving. Supervision is often assumed to be the place to find encouragement and enthusiasm for our ongoing work. Yet there are many potential barriers to this being a reality. The existence of a parallel process is one such barrier.



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It is very difficult to talk about supervision without alluding to or highlighting the importance of the relationship. Schulman² describes the relationship as the *crucible* for professional growth, both for the supervisee and the supervisor, while Proctor³ uses the now familiar terms of formative (for education), normative (for administration) and restorative (for support) processes to define the beneficial tenets of supervision when provided in a respectful way. (It is worth noting here that Proctor's thoughts themselves contain parallels and echoes of the much earlier work of John Dawson⁴).

It has to be good to declare the importance of the supervisory relationship, but paralleled with that is the cognisance that within this relationship is the ongoing potential for transference and countertransference, and these phenomena are usually thought of as *covert* behaviours. However, in an effort to see us thriving in this work with children and young people, I want us to think of these elements in a way that avoids criticism of ourselves. In the 1960s, one hundred per cent of the therapists interviewed in Doehrmann's⁵ research had experienced transference and countertransference, and many of these occurrences led to a discovery of a parallel process with client work. So let's use acceptance of this idea as a starting block for creating something *overt* and *positive*.

Acute awareness of process is needed

In supervision, identifying the occurrence of a parallel process and the presence of transference or countertransference requires an acute and continual awareness of one's own issues and the

events that trigger the issues from both supervisor and supervisee. But awareness of oneself is only the first step – *using* this awareness as an intervention in facilitating growth in the counsellor, and thus helping the client, can and perhaps should be made the ultimate goal, so that the discovery of parallels in supervision can begin with a hope of something positive, as opposed to any presupposition that its discovery is akin to being rumbled and landing yourself in big trouble!

In order for the discovery of these elements within the supervisory relationship to remain positive, however, I believe it important that supervisors remain open to *their* emotional responses to the supervisee and be willing to look at the supervisory relationship in the here and now in order to better understand what is going on. This is only possible when there is an explicit *contractual* agreement that the supervisory relationship itself is open for discussion.

I believe strongly that a supervisee should not be confronted in a manner that is authoritarian or judgmental, as this can lead quickly to a reluctance to explore what is going on in the relationship. In fact, as supervision can replicate its issues within the work, and the work can replicate its processes within supervision, there unfolds the opportunity for discussing the supervisory relationship as a surprisingly direct way of uncovering what is occurring in the client-counsellor interaction. The parallel is that the manner in which the supervisor responds to the supervisee's behaviour can provide a working model for intervening with the client because exploring the parallels in a mutually

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respectful environment can instigate a process of learning and planning. And it is obvious, when these parallels are uncovered, that something has to change, because it is also very clear that client issues cannot be resolved by helping systems that simply repeat the same problems⁶. This is why I consider that supervision is most effective when it can provide an experience for counsellors to learn how to use themselves more effectively in the counsellor-client relationship. By discussing the parallel process in supervision, the counsellor will become more aware of how one's self is involved in the therapeutic and supervisory relationships. This knowledge is crucial when working with children and young people

A strongly reflective process

When talking about junior psychiatric staff in hospital settings, Schlessinger⁷ addressed this point succinctly, and I use his thoughts here as a basis for my own. He believed that supervision as a process is strongly reflective of the type of frontline work being done, and of the characteristic needs and difficulties of the clientele. Therefore I am positing that when we are working with children and young people who have been abandoned and have attachment difficulties, for example, our response as counsellors in supervision, especially supervision that emphasises the development of trust and the sharing of feelings, may be somewhat guarded. Counsellors may not be able to verbalise their feelings, but instead communicate them in supervision through their responses to the supervisor. This means, for those of us who supervise, that we have a responsibility to create the necessary components to the relationship that encourages and fosters a trust in us from our supervisee. For us who are supervisees, I think we have the right to search out this type of supervision to support us and indeed help us thrive in the difficult and emotionally demanding work with our young clients.

Bridge over troubled water

During our workshops at the CCYP conferences, I encouraged the participants to listen to *Bridge over Troubled Water* by Simon and Garfunkel whilst looking at a transcript of the lyrics. Our task was to retrospectively identify any statements in the song that were relevant to how our clients may have felt or acted toward us; we paralleled that with marking those statements that directly applied to how we may have felt or acted toward our supervisors at some time in the past. Many of the same lines were marked, but what was fascinating was that when thinking about our most recent clients (simply for ease of reference), some of the statements from these lyrics were occurring simultaneously: our clients' needs were mirroring our own or vice versa. The

*When you're weary
Feeling small
When tears are in your eyes
I will dry them all*

*I'm on your side
When times get rough
And friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down*

*When you're down and out
When you're on the street
When evening falls so hard
I will comfort you*

*I'll take your part
When darkness comes
And pain is all around
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down*

*Sail on Silver Girl
Sail on by
Your time has come to shine
All your dreams are on their way*

*See how they shine
If you need a friend
I'm sailing right behind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind*

Paul Simon, 1969; Columbia Records.



overwhelming consensus from the groups was that the better their needs were met and discussed in supervision, the better equipped they felt to support their young clients.

Several years ago, I read an article in this very magazine that impacted me greatly and I have pondered on it many times since. The author was Penny Leake, and among the wealth of wise words in that article were these: 'Child therapists are constantly having to swallow down the fire of children's pain, and that needs to be assuaged in supervision, and by other replenishing activities, if it is not to become toxic to the therapist.'⁸

Just as their own pain becomes toxic for our clients, so it (and our own pain) can become toxic for us as counsellors, and that is a parallel that will derail our therapeutic efficacy like no other. If supervision can assuage our resulting pain effectively, then we can return to the work with our young clients with replenished capacity for it.

In an interesting aside, Penny Leake herself came to one of my workshops at the London conference with no idea she would be quoted! Those of us present were treated to a poignant response at the use of her words many years after she had written them. Parallels abounded as we mutually encouraged each other and shared similar case loads and normalised each other's reactions to certain situations.

Validating watchfully

One of things I shared is that when I validate a young client in a genuine way, I frequently notice that the effect is tangible, and that even though little or nothing has changed in their circumstances, very often their creativity will increase. I attempt this with my supervisees as well when I become aware of the possibility of a parallel with supervision and client work, and often, noticing and validating something in their work or attitude has freed them up enough to enable them to locate themselves in the interaction between them and me, and this can really serve to facilitate their readjustment to the realities of the client's needs.

Nonetheless, sometimes it is me who needs to readjust to the realities of my supervisee's needs! Recently, for example, a supervisee presented a case of safeguarding and disclosure of a young client, and I immediately swung into formative mode – declaring the proper lines of enquiry and information gathering, vociferously demanding details and eliciting assurances from the supervisee as to the validity of her account (all acceptable in the proper place). However, when I came up for air I noticed a stunned expression on this otherwise animated and engaged counsellor that thankfully stopped me in my tracks. I took my tone down four notches and reflected with my supervisee that I had gone into a purely overseer's role and had missed her emotional needs and reactions

entirely. After my profuse apologies and a glass of water, my supervisee realised this was exactly what had happened in the counselling room with her young client – and she, by personally experiencing my behaviour, could empathise with this young, frightened girl in a newly profound way. The outcome of our shared confessions was an internally reprimanded supervisor and a counsellor readjusted and refocused on the current needs of her client, and the result in the coming weeks was a thriving relationship despite very difficult surrounding circumstances.

I encourage you to turn toward any uncovered parallels surrounding your client work and welcome them as opportunities to thrive in your ongoing development and efficacy as a therapist. I hope that your experience in supervision will afford you the same haven that you probably are for your young clients, and that in some way we will remove the negative connotations from our universally present parallel processes.

I say again: parallels, 'mirrored' events and conversations abound; maybe now you will begin to look out for them too. ■

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References

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