The Parallel Process in Psychotherapy Supervision

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An introduction to parallel process interventions is provided by a comprehensive review of the theoretical constructs and empirical studies regarding the use of the parallel process in supervision. Although more direct investigations of the parallel process are needed, we conclude that parallel process interventions within the supervisory relationship can be extremely potent and impactful. Recommendations for the facilitative application of the parallel process in the supervision and training of professional psychologists, as well as case examples, are provided.

The field of professional psychology is currently experiencing a resurgence of interest in issues of training and supervision. This resurgence has been marked by the recent development of theoretical models of the training process (e.g., Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981), as well as empirical investigations of the constructs posited by these models (see reviews by Russell, Crimmings, & Lent, 1984; Worthington, 1987).

A component of training often underemphasized in theoretical conceptualizations and empirical studies is the concept of the parallel process in supervision. Loganbill et al. (1982) and Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) defined the parallel process in the supervisory relationship as a process in which one ascends in supervision certain vestiges of the relationship between the supervisee and his or her client. Those authors believed that it is important for both supervisors and supervisees to recognize and attend to the parallel process in its multiplicity of forms as a potent and dynamic type of intervention in supervision. Indeed, in one of the early reviews of the supervision literature, Schlessinger (1966) noted that of the authors who referred to the phenomenon of the parallel process in supervision, many emphasized the value of this process as a form of communication in supervision and as a rewarding focus for supervisory activity. Thus the purpose of our article is to introduce the reader to the concept of the parallel process in psychotherapy supervision. Literature related to the historical development and use of the parallel process, along with empirical investigations of this concept, is examined. Last, we demonstrate, through case examples, the application of the parallel process as a facilitative intervention in the supervision and training of psychologists.

Theoretical Constructs

The idea of the parallel process in supervision has its origin in the psychoanalytic concept of transference. Analysts involved in supervision observed that the transference of the therapist and the countertransference of the supervisor within the supervisory session appeared to parallel what was happening in the therapy session between client and therapist. One of the first references to parallel processes was made by Searles (1955), who labeled it the reflection process, suggesting that "processes at work currently in the relationship between patient and therapist are often reflected in the relationship between therapist and supervisor" (p. 135). Searles also proposed that these processes be examined in order to assess whether they were chiefly countertransference reactions or genuine reflections of the therapist-patient relationship. Wagner (1957, cited in Doehrman, 1976) specifically described what he termed process centered supervision as focusing on the interaction among client, therapist, and supervisor; that is, the supervisor makes use of what is occurring in both the therapist-client relationship and the therapist-supervisor relationship to enable the trainee to use his or her own experience of emotional difficulties in receiving help from the supervisor to facilitate understanding of the client's situation.

Both Searles (1955) and Hora (1957) stressed the parallel process as an unconscious identification with the client. Hora posited that supervisees involuntarily assume the client's tone and behavior to convey to the supervisor emotions experienced while working with the client. Searles (1955) further hypothesized that unconscious identification might help to explain the "reflection process," stating "It is as if the therapist were unconsciously trying, in this fashion, to tell the supervisor what the therapeutic problem is" (p. 144). He believed that as the supervisory relationship progressed, and as the supervisor and therapist advanced in self-awareness, they became increasingly free of countertransference reactions and thus freer to examine the "therapeutically useful" reflection process. Although Searles stated that the reflection process was significant in its implica-
tions, he suggested that it may constitute only a small portion of the actual supervisor experience. Thus the works of Searles (1955), Hora (1957), and Wagner (1957, cited in Doehrman, 1976) contained early references to related, yet distinct manifestations of the parallel process. All of these early theoreticians stressed the use of the parallel process as an important focus for supervisory activity. Kell and Mueller (1966) and Mueller and Kell (1972) also codified many of the ideas of the early theoreticians in their focus on the relationship aspects of both supervision and psychotherapy.

Ekstein and Wallerstein (1972) devoted a chapter to the parallel process in their book, *The Teaching and Learning of Psychotherapy.* They viewed the parallel process as a “metaphor in which the patient’s problem in psychotherapy may be used to express the therapist’s problem in supervision—and vice versa” (p. 180). Ekstein and Wallerstein claimed that seeking help (supervision) and helping (psychotherapy) are two aspects of the same procedure and that the similarities are reflected in a parallel process. Those authors also emphasized the personal growth aspects and potential of the supervisory process, stressing that although supervision is not a therapeutic process for the student, it is also not restricted to a simple didactic process of conveying information on theory and technique. In other words, the learning process in supervision involves examination of the affective problems that the student experiences in both the supervision and the therapy relationships that lead to a new and fuller use that the student makes of himself or herself in work with clients.

Doehrman (1976) further explicated the dynamics of the supervisory relationship, noting the issues of power, authority, and evaluation that are typical of the master-apprentice approach to training. Thus she contends that a student reacts to a supervisor in a way similar to how a client might react to a therapist; that is, responses are laden with transference reactions and implications. In addition, Doehrman emphasized the personal growth aspects of the supervisory process, noting that the psychotherapy trainee is not just learning a set of skills removed from the core of his or her identity; rather, he or she is evolving a professional identity that is intimately connected to his or her personal identity. Thus from Doehrman’s viewpoint, it is understandable that students’ reactions to supervisors may be intense, paralleling clients’ transference reactions to therapists.

Ekstein and Wallerstein (1972) and Doehrman (1976) also noted the supervisor’s contribution to the parallel process, which is prompted by “neurotic transference attitudes toward subordinates” (Doehrman, 1976, p. 11). Those authors referred to a “reverse parallelism” that may occur as a result of the supervisor’s lack of supervisory skill and experience, as well as problems resulting from the supervisor’s own unresolved conflicts surrounding his or her role as a teacher.

As previously mentioned, some contemporary developmental models of supervision account for the importance of the parallel process in the various relationships in which it may be acted out. Loganbill et al. (1982) stressed the importance of thoroughly understanding the parallel process as a base for some of the most potent interventions and conceptualizations in supervision. They also stressed the importance for supervisors to possess a knowledge of self and the ability to differentiate their own feelings in order to help supervisees become aware of the parallel process in its various forms.

Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) noted that although the parallel process may occur at any developmental stage, it may be particularly salient with more advanced trainees when one supervisee is also providing supervision to another trainee. For example, Stoltenberg and Delworth described the advanced supervisee as acting out with his or her own supervisee an issue that is relevant in his or her own supervision. In this case, the advanced supervisee deals with issues as he or she thinks his or her own supervisor would; the lower level supervisee in effect plays out the advanced supervisee’s role. This is thus yet another manifestation of the process.

In a summary of the theoretical literature, it is apparent that reference is made to the parallel process in a multitude of forms. Consequently, we would extend Stoltenberg and Delworth’s (1987) definition of the parallel process—in which one ascertains in supervision certain vestiges of the relationship between a supervisee and his or her client—to also include vestiges of the supervisory relationship that may manifest themselves in a reciprocal manner in the therapeutic setting and are not limited to aspects of transference or countertransference. In addition, all the theoreticians previously cited appear to have stressed that effective supervision of psychotherapy trainees involves awareness and understanding of the parallel process forces in therapy and supervision.

**Empirical Studies**

In only two empirical investigations have researchers specifically investigated the role of the parallel process in supervision. Using a case study methodology, Doehrman (1976) studied the occurrence and effects of the parallel process in three advanced trainees and one beginning trainee. Results of qualitative data in the form of open-ended interviews with supervisees and trainees, as well as quantitative data (i.e., interview ratings), revealed

that in every case the therapist developed an intense relationship with the supervisor . . . and that this relationship had demonstrable effects upon the treatment process . . . . Each supervisor was quickly pulled into a transference relationship, and certain key problems of the therapist were awakened and acted out, not only in his relationship with his supervisor but also in his relationships with his patients. (p. 71)

For example, the therapists “played supervisor” with their clients by acting in the same or the opposite way in which they experienced their supervisors as behaving toward them in supervision. Resistance in supervision manifested by trainees served to increase insight into clients’ resistance. When supervisor-trainee transference binds were resolved, trainees reported a greater degree of freedom to act spontaneously, warmly, and interpersonally in the therapist-client relationship. Only the beginning trainee was never able to achieve insight into the transference-countertransference bind in supervision and subsequently terminated his training. Doehrman concluded that if in the other three cases the transference-countertransference bind had not been attended to and resolved, both supervisory and therapeutic processes would have suffered.

Applying a rigorous case study methodology in which multi-
ple measures of process and outcome in both supervision and counseling dyads were used, Friedlander, Siegel, and Brenock (1989) also demonstrated the presence of parallel process phenomena in an intermediate-level trainee and her experienced supervisor. Over the course of eight supervision and counseling sessions, the supervisor–trainee and trainee–client relationships were similarly described as supportive and friendly, with a notable lack of conflict. In addition, verbal communication in both supervisory and counseling relationships was characterized by complementary self-presentational patterns.

Recent empirical investigations of the validity of developmental approaches to supervision, though not specifically directed toward the parallel process, nonetheless provided information relevant to the process. For example, Worthington (1984) used the Supervision Questionnaire (SQ; Worthington & Roehlke, 1979) to study perceptions of supervisory relationships from the viewpoint of trainees. Trainees rated supervisors higher in terms of satisfaction with supervision when they used the supervision relationship more frequently to demonstrate principles of counseling. Worthington and Stern (1985) uncovered three clusters of supervisory behavior that successfully predicted positive evaluations of supervision and the supervisor. In addition to encouraging independence while giving assistance, supervision relationship issues of dealing with supervisee defensiveness and supervisor openness were judged as highly important.

Heppner and Roehlke (1984) confirmed Worthington’s (1984) earlier finding demonstrating that the use by supervisors of the relationship to demonstrate principles of counseling was rated as one of the 10 highest correlations between supervisor behavior and satisfaction with supervision by advanced and intern-level trainees. On the other hand, the SQ item “Focus of supervisory session on relations between supervisor and supervisee” was negatively correlated to ratings of effectiveness by beginning practicum students and interns. Heppner and Roehlke (1984) also focused on trainees’ perceptions of the most important “critical incidents” that occur within supervision during a semester. Beginning and advanced practicum students reported critical incidents related to self-awareness issues, whereas doctoral interns tended to report more critical incidents related to personal issues (i.e., therapy/supervision overlap; transference/countertransference issues affecting therapy).

Data obtained by Reising and Daniels (1983) also suggest that more experienced trainees demonstrate an increase in readiness for a more personal, confrontational relationship with their supervisors. In addition, the results of Rabinowitz, Heppner, and Roehlke (1986) suggested that although students at all levels of training rated the importance of clarifying the supervision relationship highly, intern-level trainees attached greater importance to dealing with issues of transference and countertransference than did less experienced trainees. Last, in a case study of the supervisory process in an advanced trainee, Martin, Goodyear, and Newton (1987) found that the best supervision session identified by both the trainee and her supervisor was characterized by a parallel process involving the recognition and resolution of personal and countertransference issues.

Conclusions

It is apparent that there is a need for more direct investigation of the parallel process in supervision before strong conclusions about its contribution to effective supervision can be made. Nonetheless, the results of Friedlander et al. (1989) document the presence of the parallel process, whereas empirical studies such as those of Doehrman (1976) and Martin et al. (1987) provide support for the value and effectiveness of parallel process interventions within the supervisory relationship as reported by both trainees and supervisors. It is not clear in many of the studies of developmental models that the use of the supervision session to demonstrate principles of counseling, issues of transference and countertransference, or openness and defensiveness were applied in a parallel manner from supervision to the counseling session or vice versa. However, the results of these empirical studies appear to confirm Rabinowitz et al.’s (1986) observation that as trainees become more experienced, their openness to dealing with personal concerns in supervision increases.

Thus it seems likely that parallel process interventions involving personal issues of transference, defensiveness, and so on may best be applied and perhaps better assimilated by advanced trainees. Recall that the only trainee to not benefit from the parallel process in terms of the transference–countertransference bind in Doehrman’s (1976) study was the beginner. These findings are consistent with contemporary developmental models of supervision and training; that is, Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) postulated that beginning trainees lack self-awareness and insight regarding their impact on clients. Beginners demonstrate a strong need for concrete, structured types of interventions in order to reduce anxiety and increase basic counseling skills. As trainees gain experience through counseling and supervision, the insight, self-awareness, and complexity with which they are able to view the counseling process increases. Empirical support for these postulates has also started to accumulate (Russell et al., 1984; Worthington, 1987). Consequently, although we agree with Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) that parallel process interventions may be applicable to trainees of any level, we suggest that if applied to beginners, such interventions be kept simple and concrete and that they relate to issues that have been shown to be more salient for beginners and are readily apparent in both counseling and supervision sessions, such as level of anxiety or self-awareness. Confrontation regarding parallel process issues of transference-countertransference in a beginner who lacks insight and self-awareness may serve only to increase anxiety. We suggest that more intermediate- and advanced-level therapists demonstrate not only an increased readiness but also a greater capacity to fully understand and assimilate more higher level conceptual issues such as transference or countertransference as manifested in a parallel process.

It is also interesting to speculate whether similar guidelines might be applicable to the psychotherapeutic domain. For example, would the application of parallel process interventions concerning complex issues of transference-countertransference in beginning clients raise levels of anxiety that perhaps lead to premature termination? (See Kell & Mueller, 1966, for examples of the use of the parallel process in psychotherapy.)

Although we clearly value the use of parallel process interventions in supervision, our experience as supervisors suggests to us that an overemphasis on the process or on the supervisory relationship in general can be weary for students at any level in their training. Indeed, the finding by Heppner and Roehlke
(1984) of a negative relation between supervisors' effectiveness and the focus of supervisory activity on the relationship supports our observation. As in effective psychotherapy, the timing of parallel process or relationship interventions in supervision can dictate their effectiveness and facilitate insight and understanding on the part of the trainee.

The empirical literature suggests that students at more advanced levels demonstrate a readiness to deal with more personal issues in supervision, as may be manifested in a parallel process. However, the notion of addressing personal or parallel process issues may take on connotations of a supervision/therapy overlap. As a result, supervisors may be reluctant to discuss these issues in supervision for fear of placing themselves in an ethical dilemma concerning the dual role as supervisor and personal therapist for a trainee. We underscore the point that supervision should not be personal therapy and that confusing the boundaries between supervision and personal therapy for a trainee clearly results in a conflicting dual-role relationship prohibited by the Ethical Principles of Psychologists (American Psychological Association, 1981).

Doehrman (1976) provided some excellent guidelines for clarifying these boundaries. She pointed out that in order to explicate the parallel process, a supervisor might engage in such “therapeutic” procedures as encouraging expression of feelings or insight and that such procedures may be experienced as “intensely therapeutic” (p. 79) by trainees. However, Doehrman appropriately suggested that the difference between supervision and personal therapy is one of purpose; that is,

The aim of supervision is the teaching of psychotherapeutic skills, whereas the goal of therapy is to alter the patient's characteristic modes of reacting in order to function more effectively in all areas of his life. In contrast, the student's problems in the supervisory and therapeutic situations are dealt with, but only to the extent that they affect his relationship with his supervisor or his relationships with his patients. (p. 79)

Case Illustrations

We now turn to a couple of case examples from the viewpoints of both supervisor and trainee to demonstrate the application of the parallel process in supervision. Other excellent case illustrations may be found in an article by Moore (1969).

Case 1

Dr. Coleman, an experienced supervisor, had noticed in a beginning-level supervisee a passivity in therapy sessions leading to an inability to conduct or avoidance of any intervention that might be characterized as confrontational. Repeated attempts were then made to demonstrate and model effective confrontation through discussion of particular clients' cases. As a result, the supervisee appeared to demonstrate an intellectual and theoretical understanding of the necessity for confrontational interventions in therapy from the standpoint of clients' welfare. However, it soon became clear that the supervisee continued to avoid the use of confrontation in therapy sessions and that a reluctance to discuss the issue extended to supervisory sessions as well.

Dr. Coleman then hypothesized that perhaps a deeper issue was responsible for the supervisee’s reluctance to use confrontational, one not related to a simple inability or lack of knowledge of how to effectively apply confrontational interventions as seen in many beginning therapists. Thus in the next supervisory session, he again raised the issue of the supervisee’s avoidance of confrontation in both therapy and supervisory sessions. This time, however, Dr. Coleman framed the process of discussing this issue in supervision as a confrontation by the supervisor directed toward the supervisee. Of course, this “confrontation” was applied in an empathetic, understanding, information-seeking manner. The ensuing discussion revealed that the supervisee viewed confrontation in past life experiences as negative and anxiety producing and therefore something to be avoided at all costs. However, the supervisee soon realized that Dr. Coleman was not confronting in a negative manner and that she was not experiencing any extreme anxiety but was learning something important that served to increase her self-awareness. Dr. Coleman then, in a simple and concrete manner, made clear the parallel between what the supervisee was experiencing and how clients might experience similar reactions through confrontation. Thus as Schmidt (1979) suggested, working through trainees' feelings has the added modeling effect of showing them how to work through similar emotions in clients. The result in this case was less passivity and avoidance of issues on the part of the supervisee in supervisory sessions, which extended to the facilitative use of confrontational interventions in sessions with clients.

Case 2

An example of parallel processing from the supervisee’s perspective can be illustrated by the following case study. Tom, a doctoral practicum student, was working with Melissa, a college student who had been dealing with a recent sexual abuse incident and a subsequent suicide attempt. Tom reported to his supervisor that he felt he was making progress with Melissa, as manifested by her willingness to report her experiences to him, although he did express some reservations about her lack of emotional expression over such a traumatic event. In listening to a tape of his session with Melissa, Tom’s supervisor observed and commented to Tom that his voice sounded “seductive” with Melissa. Tom was hesitant to accept such an interpretation, although he did not express his hesitancy directly to his supervisor. He asked for clarification, feeling that his responses were merely expressions of empathy for Melissa.

In the weeks following, Tom reported little progress in his work with Melissa. Four weeks later, during supervision, Tom’s supervisor pointed out that he was using the same “seductive, soft, gentle” voice during the supervisory session and questioned Tom about this behavior. Tom struggled with the observation of his supervisor but concluded that his behavior during the supervisory sessions was motivated by his desire to gain the respect and liking of his supervisor, regardless of how he really felt about his supervisor’s recommendations. Tom’s supervisor suggested that perhaps he was also attempting to get Melissa to like him in this same manner at the expense of therapeutic effectiveness. Tom began to see that his behavior, which he had thought was empathic, was in fact counterproductive in his work with Melissa because he was unwilling to deal with difficult issues for fear that Melissa would not like him and leave therapy. He subsequently took some risks in approaching and
staying with difficult issues, allowing Melissa to examine many negative feelings, some even directed toward him. Tom reported greater progress with Melissa, who seemed to work harder in the later sessions. The case was terminated at the end of the school semester; Melissa reported satisfaction and a reduction in her anger and depression. Tom felt that this experience in supervision was critical for him in his work with Melissa because of the impact of perceiving the parallels between his behavior as a counselor and as a supervisee. Because of his experience in supervision, Tom became more adept at separating his needs from his client’s needs.

Summary

In sum, similarly to Loganbill et al. (1982), we believe that the parallel process in supervision in its various manifestations can be the focus for some of the most potent and impactful interventions within the supervisory relationship. Consequently, we suggest that supervisors pay close attention to the process in order to facilitate effective supervision, as well as personal and professional growth in psychotherapy trainees. However, because of a lack of investigations into the parallel process, much about its impact on supervisors and trainees, or why it is often viewed as an important focus in supervision, remains unknown. We recommend more systematic investigation into the various aspects of the process. Although traditional empirical methodology may offer an important view of the effectiveness of the parallel process, we believe that case study and phenomenological approaches (e.g., Polkinghorne, in press) may also offer an equally valid and yet different viewpoint, perhaps providing an explanation of why the process may be effective, from both supervisors’ and trainees’ perspectives. As a result, we recommend that investigators interested in the study of the parallel process approach this issue from a variety of methodological approaches, and our hope is that this article may stimulate interest in the further investigation of the process. Only with this type of exploration can we more fully understand and apply the fascinating phenomenon of the parallel process in supervision and training.

References


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