

## **Parallel Process in supervision: ubiquitous phenomenon or occasional distraction?<sup>1</sup>**

### **Steve Page**

#### **Introduction**

In preparing for today I have tried not to make any assumptions about your knowledge of the terms I will use or about the process I am describing, so my apologies if I appear to be stating the obvious to you. If I do say something you don't understand please ask, however if I say something with which you disagree, please note it down and we can discuss it later.

I am delighted to be speaking to a group of practitioners who "use psychodynamic thinking in your practice". Of course my fear is that you already know far more than I do about psychodynamic approaches: hopefully by acknowledging that, I can let it go!

#### **Exercise**

Before I go any further I want to invite you all to undertake an exercise to identify something for you that may, or may not, be linked to parallel process. I don't want to say too much at this stage but rather encourage you to go with my invitation and notice what comes up. You will remain in control of whether or not you share anything that emerges with anyone else here today. So I encourage you to undertake this exercise from a position of openness and curiosity, knowing that you remain in control of what you share.

Make sure you have paper and pen or pencil to hand so that you can note down what emerges. Take a few moments to centre your attention on yourself, follow your breath to really get well focussed and take your attention within. Please think back to your most recent session of being a supervisee, which might be individual or group, it doesn't matter. Remember when it was, who was supervising you. Recall the client work you talked about; just allow those clients to be in your conscious awareness and ask yourself, "what do I experience in supervision that I do not tell my supervisor?" Just notice and note down, without judgement or interpretation, what comes into your awareness as you ask yourself that question "what do I experience in supervision that I do not tell my supervisor?"

Thank you. Let yourself sit with that; I do hope it will give you a reference point within your own experience to think about as I talk about parallel process.

#### **Parallel process - unidirectional**

Parallel process in counselling and supervision is a description of a set of phenomena. It is a description of something that can be observed and appears to have significance. As far as I am aware it was first named, using the term "Reflective Process", by Harold Searles in 1955. For the following two decades it appears that parallel process, or reflective process, was generally considered to be what I now think of as uni-directional, and this is still how it is understood and described regularly, including by Val and I in '*Supervising the Counsellor*', so I want to start by offering you that model.

The starting point is that the counsellor, or therapist (I will tend to use those terms interchangeably) is unconsciously affected by, or identifies with, some aspect of the client's intrapsychic functioning. The therapist then re-enacts this unconscious material with their supervisor in supervision. I have seen in the literature the initial process between client and counsellor described

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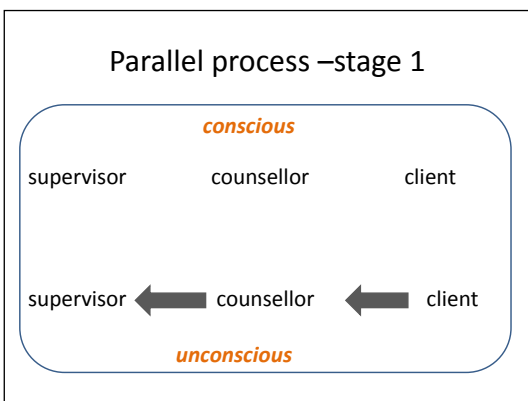
<sup>1</sup> Paper presented to the 2012 AGM of the Scottish Association for Psychodynamic Counselling

as transference and counter-transference, as projection and introjection or as projective identification. I don't want to get caught up in a discussion about what terms to use, so I want to leave it that the client expresses some unconscious material and that the counsellor responds, also unconsciously, to that material, going on to re-enact it in supervision.

In reading around this subject while preparing for this talk, I noticed how some authors imply that there is an unconscious intentionality by the therapist in re-enacting the dynamic process in supervision. Typically they suggest that the intentional motive is in order that the supervisor will then assist them to resolve the unconscious dynamic. Personally I am not convinced by the suggestion that unconscious material is expressed in order to seek resolution; I think that rather smacks of our ego's desire to delude itself that it remains in control. My personal starting point is that unconscious material expresses itself because it is there to be expressed, because it has an energy, a presence if you will, which means it cannot do other than express itself.

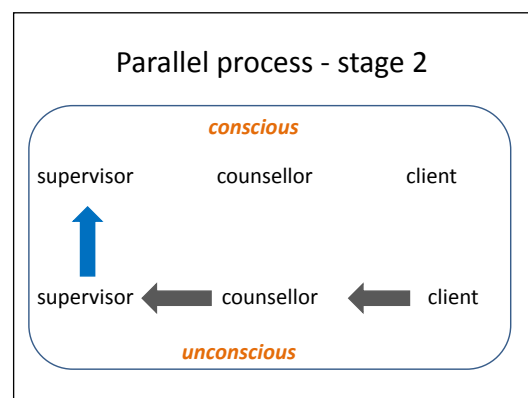
As an aside Peter Hawkins and Robin Shohet (2012) offer a different reason why the therapist would re-enact the unconscious material through the parallel process. They describe it as a kind of spiteful venting from the supervisee to the supervisor "my client made me squirm so I am going to make you squirm and see how you like it". I find that quite appealing as again it is an expression of a psychic energy. I also tend to be drawn by what I think of as shadow material (Page 1999) and this explanation has an appealing shadowy quality to it.

Let me use an example at this point. The client was describing how defeated she felt at work, how whatever she did, she never seems to satisfy her boss. The counsellor drew on his knowledge of what the client had talked about previously and fed back some examples of her successes at work, some of her achievements. However, the client found ways to dismiss these positive challenges,



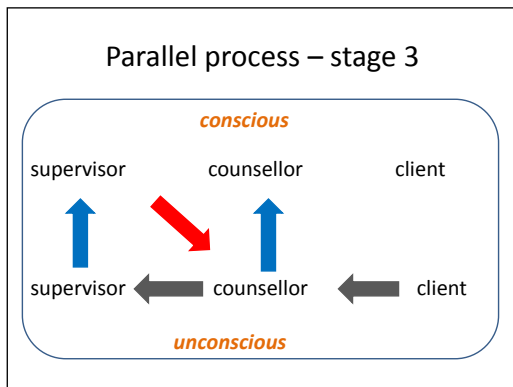
remained quite low in mood and left the session saying she wondered if she might lose her job. The counsellor brought this to supervision, concerned about the way the session had ended. As they discussed what had happened the supervisor noted that he was started to feel a bit low and nonplussed as to how to usefully take this forward with his supervisee. I want to pause there for the moment and just use what we have so far to illustrate the basic principles of parallel process.

There is evidence to suggest that the client is expressing something beneath her words and that this unconscious material has had an effect upon the counsellor – he reacted to it by trying to reassure the client that they were okay in their work and, unsurprisingly, this intervention was ineffective. Reassurance seldom reassures. He then brought this issue to supervision and the supervisor started to have an experience which had characteristics in common with the experience of the counsellor. I am deliberately being tentative as I think this is appropriate to the 'as if' nature of parallel process.



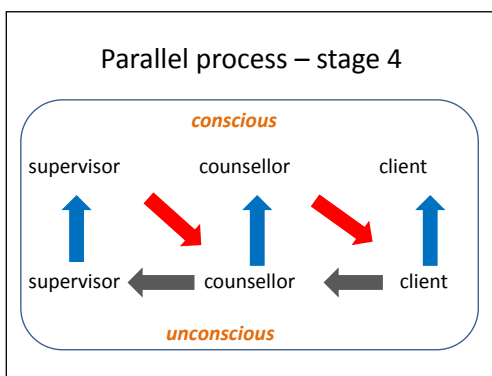
The supervisor noticed what he was feeling, so at that moment what had been unconscious became conscious to the supervisor.

Although humanistic in his own counselling training and modality he knew about parallel process from his supervision training. He paused, paid careful attention and noticed that he also felt a bit exasperated with the counsellor. Drawing on his early co-counselling training he exaggerated what he felt and realised that he wanted to put his hands on the counsellor's shoulders and shake him. He didn't do it, but noted his desire to do so. In this internal process the supervisor has brought a second level of what he was experiencing into his conscious awareness.



After a pause of a few seconds while he processed all this, he asked the counsellor to imagine what he would have liked to have said to the client if he wasn't being a well behaved counsellor? "I wanted to shout at her – this guy doesn't deserve having you working for him, why do you let him treat you like this?" The counsellor heard himself and started to recognise what was going on: what had been unconscious in him until that moment rose into his consciousness.

Once the counsellor had brought his underlying anger into the supervisory space, it became relatively straightforward to consider how this anger and frustration might reflect that of the client, the anger she didn't feel able to express towards her boss. They then moved on to explore the protective aspect of the counsellor's unconscious response to the client; the very protectiveness which may have initially masked the counsellor's own frustration with the client. He wanted to stand up for her but didn't recognise that response in himself until invited to speak from a non-counsellor place. Out of this the counsellor and supervisor started to explore a rich vein of material relating to the counsellor's fatherly counter-transference towards the client and the client's transference which was evoking this response.



Just pause a moment and notice what is happening between supervisor and supervisee: they are relaxing, they have resolved the unconscious material which had been creating tension in their interaction. This can happen. But what about the client? The value of this material only bears fruit as it informs the work with the client. With his increased awareness the counsellor was able to create space for the client to bring into her consciousness the transference material which had started all this off. She thereby has access to a different way of understanding her responses to and relationship with her boss.

### Parallel process is a means not an end

What I want to make sure you appreciate from this example is that in my view what matters is not that the supervisor and their supervisee identify something they describe in terms of parallel process, but that in doing so and going on to explore that hypothesis they find new understandings. Possibly the counsellor resolves or relinquishes some difficult feelings and when they come to form the bridge between the supervision session and the counselling they have learnt something useful which informs how the counsellor then takes forward their work with their client.

This is very important, so I am going to say it another way around to emphasise my point: recognising parallel process is only of value if doing so is ultimately in the service of the client.

## Levels of unconscious material

I want to shift tack slightly and consider for a few moments the levels of material which may be present in parallel process. I came across a useful exposition of this in *'The Supervisory Relationship'* by Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea and Joan Sarnat.

The first level of material which may express itself through parallel process is the transference counter-transference material that is known, and acknowledged. For example years ago I worked in a consulting room which had chairs in it and also a pile of beanbags. I had one client who liked to pile up three or four beanbags and snuggle down into them for her sessions. She said that it felt very soothing and she likened it to being on her mother's lap when she was small. My supervisor happened to work in a room with three empty chairs. I generally sat in one that was quite firm and a supportive shape but sometimes, when I talked about this client in supervision, I would deliberately move across into a big soft armchair filled with cushions as I felt it put me more in touch with her and I found this comforting.

The second level is unconscious: relatively straightforward to access, but is unconscious until it emerges. For example, a counsellor noted that his client seemed to be in an unusually good mood and when he asked her she blushed and laughed. She then admitted that she had recently been promoted, but when he asked the question she had realised she was reluctant to tell him because she feared it might prompt him to put his fees up. It was the time of year when the counsellor did review his fees and he explained that but said that he used the published rate of inflation as his benchmark and he would put everyone's fees up by the same amount, regardless of their financial situation. As a consequence of this exchange, the counsellor decided that he wanted to explore the issue of fees in supervision, however he noted that he also had some reluctance to do so as he did not want this to prompt his supervisor to review her fees!

The third level is where the client's unconscious material is much more deeply situated, perhaps because it is preverbal or because the associated pain is particularly acute. An example of this from my own work was a client I worked with many years ago. He was a very guarded 17 year old, bright intellectually but very wary of any emotional interaction with others. I noticed that sometimes during our counselling I would find myself feeling uncomfortable and that my stomach regularly rumbled during the session. I thought it was the timing of his appointment, which was usually late in the afternoon so I started to see him shortly after I had eaten my evening meal. However I still had a rumbling gut, at which point I took it to supervision, once again. After a few minutes of discussing this client in supervision my supervisor commented, in quite a light-hearted way, that he fancied a cup of tea and a biscuit. I was furious; I felt he was making fun of me, or my client I wasn't sure which and I told him so in no uncertain terms. He looked really shocked, the colour drained from his face and he apologised. I immediately started to feel really distressed and confused – I apologised for being angry and I welled up with tears. At that my supervisor reached across, laid a hand gently on my wrist and said 'It's okay, take a moment, I think what just happened between us is really important for your client'.

Over the next few months I worked slowly and carefully with the client, who had told me from the outset that he remembered very little of his childhood except that he had been brought up in care. We spent a lot of time exploring his feelings about himself and towards other people he came into contact with. He gradually developed an emotional language and became more willing to express his feelings.

As the months passed and his self-confidence grew, he decided to ask his social worker if she could tell him anything about his past. His social worker arranged to come and see him with me.

What emerged that is relevant to parallel process was that he learnt that he and his younger sister had been abandoned by their mother, when he was quite a young child. They had eventually been discovered by neighbours, when he was seen taking scraps of food out of bins, to feed them both. When they were found they were sufficiently malnourished to be hospitalised for over a fortnight before being placed in foster care. Following this revelation I no longer felt hungry when we met.

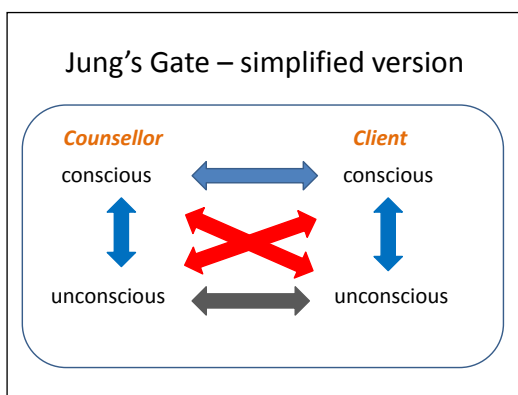
### Attention switch

I want to move on to a more complex understanding of parallel process, but before I do, given that last example, which still knots my stomach a little thirty years on, I want to have a brief attention switch first. So, let's do a bit of science for a few minutes. In 1996 a group of neuroscientists, led by Giacomo Rizzolatti, published results of their research at the University of Parma. They had isolated cells in monkey's brains that were activated when the monkey picked up a nut and also, most significantly, when the monkey observed another monkey pick up a nut. The cells were given the name 'mirror neurones'. Further research has followed and similar mirror neurones exist in human brains. It has been suggested that empathic responses and counter-transference responses may be explainable scientifically through the mechanism of these mirror neurones. It seems equally possible that this same mechanism provide a scientific explanation of the phenomenon of parallel process.

Okay, that's enough relaxing time – I hope you have all enjoyed my demonstration of the value of an attention switch after exploring something moving and perhaps a little disturbing. I think it is an important supervisory skill – when you and your supervisee have explored some client work that is particularly deep, moving or disturbing, it can be very helpful to do an attention switch before you go on to the next piece of work they have to present.

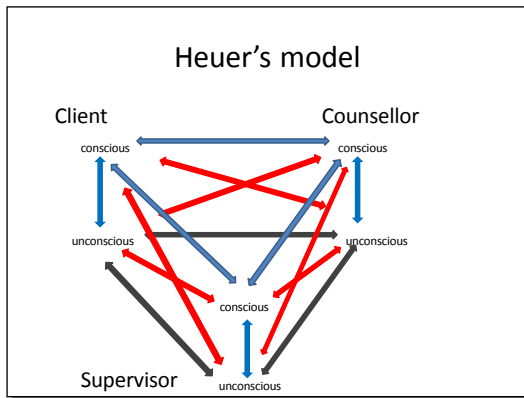
### Systemic resonance model

I want to go beyond the uni-directional version of parallel process, which has, in my mind at least, evolved into a more relational model. It becomes far more interesting, and in my view plausible, once we take on board that the therapist is not an empty vessel but a human being with their own inner material and that the client and therapist are in a relationship, with all the dynamic complexities that can entail. The therapist will have worked through some of that material in their own therapy and be relatively familiar with it, but it is still available to be re-activated. There may also be other, unconscious, material still unknown and unrecognised.



To open up this more relational model I will to draw on some rather elegant writing by Gottfried Heuer; it comes from a chapter he wrote for a Book entitled '*Vision and Supervision*', edited by Dale Mathers. Heuer's chapter is entitled '*Spooky action at a distance: parallel processes in Jungian analysis and supervision*'. He turned to Jung's description (Collected Works, Vol 16) of the transference processes which both analyst and analysand bring into the analytic relationship, for which Jung produced his 'gate' diagram. Let me show you my simplified version, which I think is more manageable for our purposes.

Heuer adds to this the supervisory component and immediately the complexity becomes apparent. The way he describes this, which I really like, is not in terms of a linear progression, of transference evoking counter-transference, hopefully leading to recognition and resolution. Rather



he talks of a series of potential resonances within the overall relational system of client, therapist and supervisor. Resonance being the process whereby a vibration in one object evokes a vibration in another object: a process used in some musical instruments to create depth of sound as a vibrating string will stimulate sound from another string with very similar tuning.

Let me try and explain this model through another example.

In supervision, when the counsellor is discussing work with a specific client, the supervisor makes a remark which the counsellor experiences as uncharacteristically sharp and he is a little taken aback. He says this to his supervisor who acknowledges that she was feeling mildly critical of his unusually ponderous delivery around this client. So they discuss it, even wondering if it might have any bearing on the counselling with this or any other client, but reach no conclusion.

In the next session with the client he discussed in supervision, the counsellor notes that he is finding it hard to concentrate as his client is droning on about a relatively inconsequential interaction at work. He remembers the supervision and smiles to himself. His client spots the smile, stops abruptly and says – “are you laughing at me?”

In this example the client has not yet revealed that he was shamed and hurt by some harsh criticism by his mother at family gatherings. He is fearful of being criticised by his counsellor just as he is fearful of being criticised by anyone of significance to him, although this is so much part of his experience that he is not conscious of it. As a direct result of the supervisor's action, the client's hypersensitivity to feeling criticised has now emerged. It can be argued that it has been present in all levels of the triad of client, counsellor and supervisor for some time and it happened to emerge first into awareness in the supervisory relationship. I think we can understand this example in a number of different ways. I like to think of it as a dynamic that resonated within the system until it emerged, was recognised and then worked with.

It is possible that this only emerged because the supervisor has a latent critical streak, which most of the time she masks well, or possibly this was uncharacteristic behaviour by the supervisor, summoned as counter-transference by the projection of the transference from the client by the counsellor. The fact is that either of these options exist precisely because it is an interactive system and therefore causal effect is unclear. We cannot be sure what is action and what is reaction. If it helps, you might think about this as the emergence of the fourth dimension of parallel process, in which time is flexible.

### Shadow material

One of the sobering implications of accepting what I am calling a “systemic resonance model” of parallel process is that it becomes undeniably possible for unconscious material to travel from the supervisor through the therapist to the client. When this works to the benefit of the client we might think of it as good role modelling; the supervisor models a way of being or intervening that the counsellor uses to the benefit of the client. However, the same pathway is also available for destructive dynamics, which can cause harm. We might think of this as the shadow side of role modelling. I came across an example which could be understood in this way quite recently, although I didn't have the opportunity to explore what had happened in any great depth. A

counsellor (and supervisor) described how her supervisor had fallen asleep a number of times during supervision. She was clearly incensed by what she considered totally inappropriate behaviour on his part. When asked she confirmed that she had never challenged him, but changed supervisor when the opportunity arose. She then went on to say how determined she was that she would never emulate this behaviour. When asked what she thought might happen if she had a very boring client, she laughed and said funnily enough that she did, but she reassured us that it was fine, she did a lot of energetic movement work with him so here was no danger she could fall asleep. On reflection it seemed to me that her determination not be like her supervisor seemed to be resulting in her imposing a way of working on her client that was designed to meet her needs, not those of her client.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Parallel process is a model. It can assist us to explore and make sense of what is happening, but it is a model, it is a simplification of a far more complex reality: a model of reality, not reality itself.

To work at this level requires both courage and humility. The courage to listen to our hunches, to say what may feel uncomfortable, particularly in supervision. The humility to appreciate that our hunches may be wrong, they may say more about us than about our client or supervisee.

Finally, parallel process is just one perspective, which can illuminate supervision and because it is intriguing and can be fun to play with can also be beguiling. I find the best way to ensure I am keeping my feet on the ground is to apply the litmus test – is this serving the client?

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