

Parallel Process

Ever since I started learning about Transactional Analysis (TA) models in depth, I have been fascinated by Parallel Process. I have an interest in how human beings communicate with each other at all levels, but particularly at the level of unconscious processes: we pass things back and forth without even realising that we are doing it.

The Parallel Process (PP) phenomenon is not a TA concept, but was highlighted by H F Searles in 1955. It has its origin in the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and countertransference, the transference happening when the counsellor, coach, trainer or therapist unconsciously recreates the client's problem and emotions within the supervisory relationship. The supervisor's job is to be on the look-out for this and to encourage the supervisee into the here-and-now in order to recognise it. However, what can happen is that the unaware supervisor can become caught up in the parallel process - and insight and resolution of the issue is not achieved, or is at least delayed.

So, awareness, as ever, is the key.

Trainers, therapists, coaches and counsellors need to be aware of their own issues and to be dealing with them through examination, insight and supervision in order not to get dragged into transference relationships. Focussing on here-and-now functioning and keeping ourselves informed enables us to spot the invitations so that we can surface what is going on in the relationship.

Unconscious processes within one-to-one relationships as well as within teams lead to the possibility of games being played, symbiotic relationships developing and people staying "stuck" in an unhappy place. Fascinatingly, these processes can be "mirrored" along a chain of relationships - awareness helps us to break the link!

Petruska Clarkson (1991) said that Eric Berne "*showed an intuitive understanding of the interdependence of transference and counter-transference*". She talked of the "**interactional field**" we create between us when human beings are interacting, through stimulus response transactions. I see many people give their power away to those who willingly take it through not being aware of the ulterior transactions that pass in the space between people - and our rackets keep us stuck in a closed loop of ineffective behaviour.

Back to the "interactional field" - the space that we co-create with another. Berne (1955, 1977) encouraged therapists to use their **intuition** to sense a client's Child ego states, and Clarkson (op cit) elaborates on this as she identifies:

- What the client brings (pro-active transference)
- What the therapist brings (pro-active counter transference)
- What the therapist reacts to in the client (reactive counter transference)

- What the client reacts to as a result of what the therapist brings (client counter-transference or reactive transference)

Clarkson says that any of these may form the basis for facilitative or destructive psychotherapeutic outcomes. It is in this mix, this “dynamic field” that the potential for parallel process lies.

Sometimes, in my supervision practice, I notice the supervisee behaving in ways that mirror the issue with the client. So if a supervisee says their client is faltering in their progress and is stuck, and I see the supervisee frowning, maybe telling me they don’t know what to do to support the client’s growth (ie they are stuck too) I do my best to avoid also being stuck in the supervision!

The really interesting thing is that this process is **bi-directional** – not just client and therapist/coach, therapist/coach and supervisor but it works in the other direction too (Doehrmann (1976, cited in Moldawsky 1980 p 132). That is, supervisor and therapist/coach and therapist/coach and client (see figure 1)

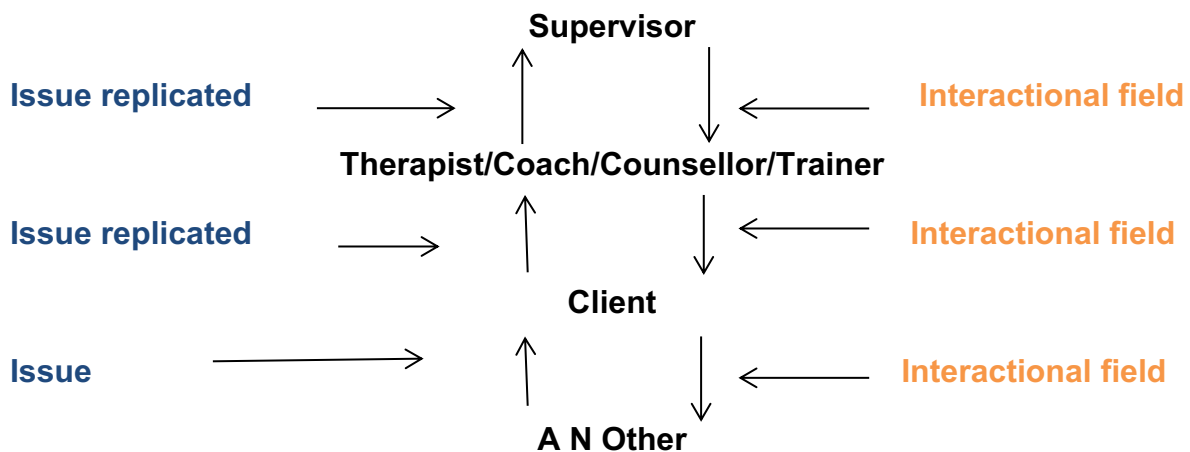


Figure 1

Doehrman points out that the process is not reflective alone – the supervisor can also stir the therapist, who then acts out a positive model with the client. But I would add *only* if the supervisor is aware of what is going on, can the supervisor invite the supervisee into the here-and-now and model positive behaviour, which goes back along the chain. This positive behaviour is then taken back into the coaching/therapy relationship, from which the client will benefit.

We can add another layer to our depth of understanding of this process. Hypnotic inductions occur in our ordinary, everyday lives. Through our inner dialogue, and our dialogue with others, we hypnotise ourselves and others with the language we speak. **Projective identification** – projecting on to others our beliefs and relating to them in such a

way as they alter their behaviour to bring about a self-fulfilling prophecy – keeps us locked into a closed loop of behaviour, feelings and thoughts.

Transactional Analysts understand from our knowledge of script development how we discount ourselves, our reality, other people – contaminations, life positions, rackets etc all serve to keep us stuck in our scripts. In that space between two human beings (Langs, 1976 called it the *bipersonal field*) it does not, for the purposes of understanding parallel process, matter who hypnotises whom, it is more important to understand what we can do about it, so that we do not pass it along the chain.

Clients may be responding to the coach's induced material – ie unconsciously, the coach works with clients who “match” the coach's issues. The therapist (unconsciously) attracts clients who give them an opportunity to work on their own (the therapist's) issues. The same thing can happen further along the chain between the supervisee and supervisor. As practitioners (coach, therapist, supervisor) we attract clients who present problems as if they are aware of the vulnerable areas of the practitioner. These clients, of course, are most useful for the practitioner's growth!

So if we are the practitioner, how do we know if the issue is ours, or the clients? The answer to that is to recognise where in the process can maximum change be achieved - the practitioner has 100% control over themselves so the best place to start is here.

Cleaning up our act enables us to transact cleanly, avoid the transference and game invitations and model positive behaviour.

References

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