

Montreal Supervisors' Conference – 13-14 June 2019

Working with the parallel process in group supervision to inform what is happening in the organisational system

In supervision sessions we are working with those issues that the coach/client chooses to bring into the room. The coach invites us to explore what might be happening to their client, to themselves, and between the two of them. Sometimes we stay solely with that which our client reports.

At the same time, the way in which the coach engages with the supervisor, both in terms of content and at a relational level, may reflect what is happening within the overall client system. This may provide enlightening evidence of a “parallel process” (Searles 1955), which once identified, may generate additional options for how the coach and their client move forward. This exploration is further enhanced within group supervision when co-supervisees share their diverse perspectives and insights.

In this experiential supervision demonstration, I will work with a small group of volunteers (e.g. 4-5 people) to explore a client situation which one participant from within this small group is happy to present. The other participants will share their diverse reactions/responses to the coach/client/organisational situation and offer the issue-holder optional perspectives.

During the plenary at the end, there will be time to draw the learning from both the demonstration participants and those observing. Here we will reflect on the actual group process itself and how this may have replicated any phenomena or patterns that may have existed within the client system. We will then explore the significance and value that these insights give us. We will have an opportunity to consider how the supervisor may help their coach/clients to notice and work with the parallel process when it arises within a specific session or over a series of coaching sessions.

Parallel Process

This term has emerged from the psychodynamic and psychotherapeutic fields of practice. Originally described by Searles (1955) it refers to what may be happening unconsciously in one relationship as a possible manifestation of other relationships that are connected e.g. what may be happening between the coach and supervisor is a “mirror” for what might be happening between the coach and their coachee or between the coachee and their organisational system. At the same time, it is not the catch-all when there may be difficulties in the relationship between coach and supervisor. Sometimes, this is just how it is and has nothing to do with what may be happening beyond the room.

To work with this process, either in groups or individually, both coach and supervisor need to contract to work openly with their own relationship and be willing to share the impact they may have on each other. At times, what may arise between the two is purely confined to their individual differences in terms of knowledge, personal experiences or emotional sensitivity. For instance, as a supervisor I may react strongly to something that the coach says or vice versa because the exchange triggers our personal “judge” and we may want to defend ourselves or justify our point of view. This would not be an instance of the “parallel process”.

On the other hand, the exchange may be a mirror for what is happening in the coach/coachee relationship i.e. parallel process. At this stage, we need to agree to pause and consider the impact that the exchange is having on each of us and think about whether it reflects what may be happening in the client/coach relationship.

An example of parallel process occurred for me as a young supervisor. My coach was highly experienced and ambivalent about the need for supervision. For the first three of our sessions she arrived late and would flaunt her qualifications and it felt as if she was testing me. I didn't have enough experience to challenge or explore this pattern with her at the time. However, later when we looked back at the early phase of our work together, she was able to acknowledge that at the time of starting our work together, she was engaged in a high-profile, global assignment and her coachees were "top talent executives" who were ambivalent about the value and relevance of coaching and she herself was feeling tested as a professional coach.

So, how do we as supervisors and coaches notice and identify possible parallel process? Often as supervisor, our reaction to the coach may be a physical sensation that "arises out of nowhere" or an image comes to mind as we listen to the coach describing their issue or client case that may not appear to have any bearing on the narrative. Here, we might pause and offer what is happening to us as supervisor and invite the coach to respond and together we reflect on its relevance in the client system. If it resonates with what is happening in the client system, then this may be an instance of parallel process. However, if the coach does not see any connection, then we can acknowledge that this may be something from our past that has been awakened and continue to explore together.

References & Further Reading

- Searles, H.F. (1955) "The informational value of the supervisor's emotional experience" in *Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects* London Hogarth Press
- Jacobs, Michael (1996) "Parallel Process – confirmation and critique" *Psychodynamic Counselling* 2 February 1996
- Doehrman, M.J. (1976) "Parallel Process in Supervision and Psychotherapy" *Bulletin of The Menninger Clinic* 40, 1-104
- Samuels, Andrew (1989) "The Plural Psyche" London Routledge

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Alison is an accredited Executive Coach at Master Practitioner level with EMCC and an accredited Executive Coaching Supervisor with APECS. Working globally as a coaching supervisor with individuals and groups of both internal and external executive coaches, she co-creates working agreements to explore their practice, their client work and their ongoing professional wellbeing. As an Executive Director, Alison supervises supervisors-in-training at CSA (Coaching Supervision Academy). She completed her DProf in Coaching Supervision at Middlesex University in 2014. She is particularly interested in the relational phenomena that arise in supervision and how this can inform the supervisee about their own process with their client relationships as well as what may be occurring with their individual coachee and the organizational client systems in which the work is being delivered.