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Lilja Cajvert is Assistant Professor in Social
Work, Department of Social Work, University of
Gothenburg, Sweden. Correspondence to University
of Gothenburg Department of Social work, P.O. Box
720, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.
E-mail: Lilja.Cajvert@socwork.gu.se

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A MODEL FOR DEALING WITH PARALLEL PROCESSES IN SUPERVISION

LILJA CAJVERT

ABSTRACT

A model for dealing with parallel processes in supervision

Supervision in social work is essential for successful outcomes when working with clients. In social work, unconscious difficulties may arise and similar difficulties may occur in supervision as parallel processes. In this article, the development of a practice-based model of supervision to deal with parallel processes in supervision is described. The model has six phases. In the first phase, the focus is on the supervisor's inner world, his/her own reflections and observations. In the second phase, the supervision situation is "frozen", and the supervisees are invited to join the supervisor in taking a meta-perspective on the current situation of supervision. The focus in the third phase is on the inner world of all the group members as well as the visualization and identification of reflections and feelings that arose during the supervision process. Phase four focuses on the supervisee who presented a case, and in phase five the focus shifts to the common understanding and theorization of the supervision process as well as the definition and identification of possible parallel processes. In the final phase, the supervisee, with the assistance of the supervisor and other members of the group, develops a solution and determines how to proceed with the client in treatment. This article

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uses phenomenological concepts to provide a theoretical framework for the supervision model. Phenomenological reduction is an important approach to examine and to externalize and visualize the inner words of the supervisor and supervisees.

Keywords

Supervision, parallel processes, phenomenology, intersubjectivity

SAMENVATTING

Een model voor het hanteren van parallele processen tijdens supervisie

Om succesvol te zijn in de hulpverlening aan cliënten, is supervisie cruciaal in het sociaal werk. Tijdens de hulpverlening kunnen impliciete moeilijkheden de kop opsteken en soortgelijke moeilijkheden duiken soms ook op tijdens supervisie. Dit worden parallele processen genoemd. Dit artikel beschrijft een op praktijkervaringen gebaseerd model om dergelijke parallele processen expliciet en hanteerbaar te maken gedurende supervisie. Het model bestaat uit zes fasen. In de eerste fase ligt de nadruk op introspectie van de supervisor: zijn of haar persoonlijke reflecties en observaties krijgen aandacht. In de tweede fase wordt de supervisie "stil gezet" en kijken supervisanten en supervisor vanuit een metaperspectief naar de situatie. De innerlijke wereld van de participanten aan de supervisie staat centraal in de derde fase, waarin reflecties en gevoelens van eenieder worden geïdentificeerd en gevisualiseerd. De supervisant die de casus inbrengt staat centraal in fase vier en in fase vijf wordt getracht tot een gezamenlijk begrip en theoretische interpretatie van het supervisieproces en de daarin besloten parallele processen te komen. In de zesde en laatste fase probeert de supervisant, samen met de supervisor en de overige deelnemers, tot een oplossing voor de casus te komen. Een fenomenologisch perspectief wordt gebruikt om dit model van een theoretisch raamwerk te voorzien. Fenomenologische reductie is een belangrijke benadering voor onderzoek en voor introspectie van supervisor en supervisanten.

Trefwoorden

Supervisie, parallele processen, fenomenologie, intersubjectiviteit

INTRODUCTION

Supervision is a tool used to enable professionals to develop their competences. It aims to develop their "professional identity" and their ability to use themselves as instruments when working

with clients (Bernler & Johnsson, 1985; Cajvert, 1998; Gordan, 1998; Hawkins & Shoheit, 2000). Supervision could be defined as a process of learning; while Anderson & Goolishian (1992) argue that the aim of supervision is to generate a creative dialogue during which new knowledge and new understanding will make it possible to look at the work with the client from as many perspectives as possible. Personal values and attitudes should be focused in supervision (Cajvert, 1998); this means focusing on the supervisee in his/her present concrete case work. Van Kessel and Haan (1993) write that the key to learning in supervision is to reflect on one's own experiences during the performance of professional tasks. Supervision is considered to be an ongoing process and an investment in oneself and, as such, a form of life-long learning for professionals (Žorga, 2002). In supervision, the supervisee and the supervisor are engaged in a continuous dialogue from which both parties learn (Cajvert, 1998).

Bernard & Goodyear (2009) use the term "supervision as a three-person system" to describe the relationships involved in supervision. Supervision involves two distinct relationships: client-supervisee and supervisee-supervisor, and the person common to both those relationships is the supervisee. He or she serves as a conduit of both information and processes between the dyads.

Parallel processes are described as problems, impasses, feelings, difficulties occurring in two simultaneous relations; supervisee-client and supervisor-supervisee. Parallel processes are unconscious and cannot be recognized or understood in advance. What has occurred between a client and a supervisee may then be transmitted to the supervision session between supervisee and supervisor. Theoretical knowledge does not enable us to avoid them. It is only with hindsight that we can recognize parallel processes (Belin, 1993; Cajvert, 1998, 2009).

Mothersole, in Bernard & Goodyear (2009), observes that although the concept of parallel processes has a long history and is widely used, very little empirical research has been carried out into the existence of parallel processes. "Parallel process often has been presented as a nearly mystical phenomenon". (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009, p. 152–153)

A number of authors define parallel processes from a psychodynamic approach according to which supervisees unconsciously present themselves to their supervisors in the way that their clients have presented themselves to them. During supervision, the supervisee becomes, in a manner of speaking, "his/her client" (Bernler & Johnsson, 1985; Belin, 1993; Cajvert, 1998; Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Supervisors need to be mindful of the range of influences and pressures that exist within the client-supervisee relationship that may be expressed within supervision. Failure to

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take account of such dynamics may lead to ruptures in the working alliance. Parallel processes, if present, "provide useful sources of information regarding the relational patterns associated with their interpersonal conflicts and psychological difficulties" (Falender & Shafranske, 2006, p. 112).

In the 1980s, I worked with methods and techniques stemming from psychodynamic or systemic theories, which is commonly used in therapeutic work and has been adapted for use with supervision to take account of the fact that supervision is a meeting between professionals and not identical to psychotherapeutic treatment. At that time, when there were impasses, difficulties or obstructive atmosphere in a supervision group and for the supervisor, it was the supervisor who interpreted these events as parallel processes and gave a theoretical explanation and guidance in how to work with the client. This approach had different effects in different groups. Groups with a knowledge and understanding of parallel processes were able to understand and accept them, whereas some groups responded negatively and were upset by the psychodynamic interpretation of the process and what was happening in supervision (Cajvert, 1998).

To resolve this issue, a technique or model was needed in which it was not the supervisor who pointed out and interpreted the ongoing group process as a parallel process; rather, the supervisor initiated a dialogue in the supervisory group to identify the processes in the supervision that were expressions of (potential) parallel processes. Thus, the group participated and, together with the supervisor, verbalized the aspects of the therapy and supervision process that could constitute a parallel process.

In such a model, phenomenological concepts may be used to clarify how members of a supervision group express their immediate reactions and perceptions, without preconceived ideas or theoretical explanations about these experiences.

As early as 1907, Husserl (1989) emphasized the importance of immediate experience and proposed that one's own beliefs should be set aside. Phenomenology is a science concerned with phenomena and how something appears (Egidius, 1986). As an approach, it helps us to participate in experiences rather than analyse or define them (Bengtsson, 1988a,b). The focus is on observing immediate experience (Kordeš, 2008).

Phenomenological reduction is crucial in Husserl's phenomenology and the reduction means putting our prior knowledge, present knowledge and understanding of a perceived phenomenon "in brackets" so that we can create a description of a phenomenon we are perceiving (Husserl, 1989;

Kvale, 1997; Kordeš, 2008; Englander & Robinson, 2009). Husserl was critical of hasty answers and solutions. Before we present our solutions and theories, we should first find out how the phenomenon was perceived and talk from the aspect of experience (Bengtsson, 1987). If we use theories as a basis or let ourselves be guided by our beliefs or goals when judging things, without trying to investigate or focus on the observation of immediate experience, there is a risk that we will see nothing else but that which fits with the theory, belief or goal that we had in mind (Bengtsson, 1987).

Intersubjectivity is a condition in which a phenomenon is understood and experienced in the same way by different persons. Semantically, a linguistic expression has intersubjective meaning if all those involved can, in principle, learn and comprehend its meaning and use it in the same way (Nationalencyklopedin, 1992). This phenomenon is important in a supervision session when all participants reach a common understanding and learn what a parallel process is, how it evolves, how it can be detected, and how it can be used in therapeutic work.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODEL

From 1983 to 2010, the supervision model was gradually and systematically developed in interaction with various groups of professionals in Sweden, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Slovenia such as social workers, psychologists, pedagogues, family therapists, and so on. Supervisees came from various organizational backgrounds (centres for social work, schools, health care sector, correctional facilities, supervisor training courses, and other training courses), and different cultural backgrounds.

The development of the model may be divided into a number of stages that were traced within the notes and video excerpts that were kept continuously throughout these years. These notations were used as a basis for my personal reflections and meta-supervision. Evaluation of supervision groups has also contributed to the development of the model.

Below, the development of the model is divided into four distinct stages, although the processes and experiences in these stages overlapped to some extent.

Stage 1: The supervisor's interpretation of a parallel process

Initially, the supervisor was the one who detected, defined and pointed out that processes in the group and between the supervisor and the supervisee were expressions of what was going

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on between the therapist and the client. The supervisor did not spell out her own feelings and difficulties in the ongoing supervision nor how the parallel process was detected. The supervisor defined the process and presented a theoretical explanation usually within a psychodynamic framework. Groups with knowledge and understanding of parallel processes were able to understand and accept them, whereas some groups responded negatively and were upset by the interpretation and theoretical explanation of the process.

Stage 2: Shift and construction of a new method

Such negative responses on the part of supervisees made me consider alternative ways of working in which group members could participate in understanding what exactly was happening in supervision. A method was introduced that entailed the visualization of experiences and the naming of processes and relationships in supervision – *a method of naming and visualization*. When there was an impasse or difficulties that I as supervisor interpreted as a potential expression of a parallel process, the group was asked to describe what was happening in supervision and the supervisor wrote this on the board. At that moment, it became clearer that the processes in supervision were paralleling those of the treatment. It was only by visualizing and naming that many participants realized what parallel processes actually were.

Stage 3: Development of the model through teaching

Supervisees in group training supervision asked me to describe my own internal processes and explain why I did what I did when giving supervision. These questions required an additional focus on identifying and understanding processes within the supervisor and their impact on the work in supervision. To that end, I systematically studied the processes through self-reflection, viewing video recordings of supervisory sessions, reading my own notes as well as group evaluations and meta-supervision. Was there a common thread in the processes that the supervisor could use to explain to others what was happening? This led to an idea that a dialogue with the supervision group should be used to elucidate and articulate feelings and the atmosphere in the group. This entailed further development of the method of visualization and meant that the supervisee should conclude whether a parallel process had in fact arisen or not, while the supervision group and the supervisor served only as instruments in the supervision process.

Stage 4: Phases of the model and a theoretical framework

In preparation for this article, a phenomenological perspective was used to describe different phases of the model. It became apparent that the model consisted of distinct steps that could be articulated as phases as described below and in a brief description of “a supervisee’s case – parallel processes in practice” shown in Appendix A (before the list of references).

PHASES OF THE SUPERVISION MODEL

Phase 1: The supervisor’s inner experience

In this phase, the supervisor identifies a feeling or an impasse – that is a situation where the supervisor experiences difficulties in the relationship with the supervisee or when she cannot find a way to proceed in the supervision process. The supervisor writes the feeling and any immediate reflection in a notebook. If the feeling continues for some time (10–15 minutes), the supervision group should be asked to discuss the case presented in order to clarify it as much as possible – eliciting further discussion by asking: “Do you have any questions? Is there anything you would like to know more about in connection with this case?” Engaging the group in the process gives the supervisor enough space to distance herself for a moment and reflect on her experience and feelings. The “internal supervisor”¹ and questions asked by group members can open new perspectives for the supervisor and/or give an opportunity for new questions and a new way of working in the supervision process.

This approach, which focuses on the investigation of feelings and reflections, may be associated with phenomenology, which advocates investigating experiences with a focus on specific parts of the experience and specific activity without engaging in theoretical speculations. An investigative perspective is a first-person perspective, “which means that the investigator perceives his/her experience through systematic introspection” (Kordeš, 2008, p. 63).

Phase 2: “Freezing” the situation – here and now

When engaging the supervision group does not help to resolve feelings and difficulties, in effect blocking the supervision process and dialogue with the supervisee, then the supervisor may “freeze” the situation, for example by addressing all members of the group with the following words: “We can now stop here. Let us freeze this situation between supervisor and supervisee.

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Let us all take a meta-position. Say, without analysing, interpreting or guessing, how you perceived this conversation. Share your experience, your perception of the conversation, and the feelings and thoughts that occurred to you while you were listening. What would you say was happening?"

In accordance with the idea of phenomenological bracketing in supervision, the supervisor may point out the importance of each member of the group isolating his/her feelings and thoughts, like a pure phenomenon, and expressing his/her experience with specific and clear words. This freezing phase is the beginning of the externalization process – naming of own feelings and thoughts.

When we express ourselves with words, listen to ourselves and others, and write on the board, we use more than one sense at the same time. We not only hear what others say, but what we say becomes visible to everyone. Due to the importance of the "freezing" of the supervision process as well as phenomenological reduction, this is a stand-alone phase, although it could be linked with the third phase.

Phase 3: Visualization and identification of the subjective perception of the supervision process

In this phase, the externalization process continues and each member of the group, including the supervisor, reports his/her feelings and thoughts without interpreting or explaining them. The supervisor writes everything that each member says on the board so it will be visible to everyone. It is important that everybody reports his/her feelings and thoughts without the supervisor's influence or guidelines. Once all members have reported their feelings and thoughts, the supervisor reports her own feelings and thoughts. The role of the supervisor in this phase is to help each member to identify his/her feelings and thoughts through dialogue.

According to Husserl, bracketing our theoretical knowledge and convictions involves the following:

the rule: do not explain; describe! This is the most important methodological guideline for phenomenological investigation. This instruction may seem simple at first glance, but its implementation is complex and requires good reflection skills and readiness to only describe perception and experience without placing them somehow in a theoretical framework or clarifying them. (Kordeš, 2008, p. 51)

Kordeš goes on to write about phenomenological dialogue, which is relevant to this phase and is important for the supervisor's attitude. According to him, phenomenological dialogue means that the investigator does not direct the conversation in a desired direction. It is important to maintain

an “unknowing” position. The more we free ourselves from our ideas and attitudes, the more space will be created for new knowledge. Questions are only props that we use to show that we are present and interested. One could say that phenomenological dialogue is a phenomenological technique of self-investigation, or “the true investigator is the one who responds, the person asking questions being merely a support in exploration of his/her perceptual space” (Kordeš, 2008, p. 72).

Phase 4: Back to the supervisee

In this phase the supervisor addresses the supervisee who has presented the case and asks him/her to observe all the notes on the board. The focus now returns to the supervisee. “Now look at all the remarks on the board and say which of them, in your opinion, best describe the feelings and reflections of your client?” The supervisor circles the remarks that the supervisee identifies as characteristic of his/her client in one colour, then asks questions such as: “Which of the remarks would be characteristic of you in your work with this client? Which of the feelings or thoughts do you recognize in yourself? You can choose remarks that are already circled.” When the supervisee identifies the remarks matching his/her feelings, the supervisor circles these in a second colour, and, if something has already been circled, another circle is drawn around it in the same colour. Then the supervisor asks “Which of these remarks, including those that are already circled, match the description of your relationship with the client?” These are in a third colour, and if any remarks are already circled, another circle is drawn around them in the third colour. Thus, some remarks are circled in one colour, some in two, and some in three, while others may not be circled at all.

During this phase, it may become obvious which feelings, processes, atmosphere or difficulties in the supervision situation are expressions of a parallel process – that is to say, which correspond to what happens in the treatment, and which may be an expression of other processes in treatment or supervision. Some items that had been experienced in the supervision process (see Appendix A, phase 3 table) may remain uncircled. What remains uncircled may give us an idea about how to proceed in the relationship with the client.

Phase 5: Theorization and intersubjectivity

In this phase, everyone in the group looks at the remarks on the board and what was circled (see Appendix A, phase 5 table on parallel processes). Everyone reflects and with the help of the supervisor gives a theoretical framework to the supervision process and the identified parallel processes. This is an important phase in supervision. This is part of learning about and

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understanding the treatment process and supervision process, as well as ourselves and our roles together in these processes. The notion of intersubjectivity may help in realizing a common understanding of the issues at hand.

Phase 6: How to proceed in working with the client?

In this phase, the supervisee generates ideas and considers what might be the next step in the treatment and how to implement it. All members of the group also express their thoughts on how they would proceed if this was their client. The supervisor only contributes her ideas only if no one from the group has expressed the same ideas. Once everyone has put forward their ideas and problematized them, the supervisor addresses the supervisee who presented the case: "You have now heard our thoughts about what we would do if this was our client. You are the only one who knows yourself and your client. Now that you have heard everything, which of these ideas or any combination thereof, or any new idea would be most suitable in your further work with the client? You can choose only those ideas that suit both you and your client in the particular situation and that are possible to implement".

The supervision process is doomed to failure if the supervisee cannot apply what he/she has learned in his/her role as a supervisee, as well as what he/she has recognized in his/her role as professional. Van Kessel and Haan (1993) claim that the process of creative integration requires more time and space for investigation of one's own style and potential. To facilitate, the supervisor may prompt through questions such as: "How will you proceed in the particular situation? What will you concentrate on? Is this what you want? What obstacles might there be to you carrying this forward?"

After the supervision session the supervisee returns to his/her own practice situation in the role of participating actor; acting and deciding are now decisive... This is no linear application, but a creative practical search for the form and possibilities which match her/him. (Van Kessel & Haan, 1993, p. 40)

REFLECTION ON THE SUPERVISION MODEL AND SUPERVISOR'S ATTITUDE

Phenomenology as a method and the phenomenological reduction help us to adopt an attitude of "ignorance" in supervision in the sense that we do not interpret what happens in

supervision from the aspect of theoretical knowledge before we investigate the phenomenon that has appeared. The need for bracketing the opinion and knowledge of the supervisor (i.e. phenomenological reduction) is a way of freeing the supervisor from the earlier approach under which psychodynamic interpretation was used and sometimes badly received. Intersubjectivity plays a significant role in the learning process. This model may help us to gain a common understanding and knowledge of what is happening in the supervision and treatment processes.

It is important that the supervisee puts into words what he/she has discovered and learned. What happens inside us is given a name. "Giving names has an important guiding effect on the development of the direction taken by the supervisee's learning process." (Van Kessel & Haan, 1993, p. 38).

Unconscious processes and parallel processes are not learned from books or lectures. The ability to recognize them is acquired through experiential learning. Each professional has a duty to reflect on his/her feelings and reflections regarding his/her attitude towards the client so that he/she can recognize his/her contribution towards creating the process and relationship with the client. The supervisor has the same duty towards the supervision process and work with the supervisee (Cajvert, 1998, 2009). Žorga writes that, according to Kolb:

... learning is a holistic process that includes integrated action of the entire organism – thoughts, emotions, perception and behaviour. This is exactly what happens in the supervision process, when the supervisee adjusts and integrates his/her new knowledge with practical skills, viewpoints and behaviour patterns. (Žorga, 2009, p. 37)

Each phase in the supervision model presented has its own structure and prepares the way for the next step. This is an interactive process at two levels: the process that happens inside the supervisor which may be observed from the meta-level, and the process which the supervisor observes going on between herself and the supervisee in the supervision group. This process is similar to the one used by Van Kessel and Haan (1993) – the way of knowing, the way of choosing and the way of acting. They write that the supervisee passes through these three stages in the learning process. This is similar to my way of reflecting with the help of my "internal supervisor", by focusing on me and the work in the supervision group, where the members of the group pass via my intervention through these three stages: the way of knowing, the way of choosing and the way of acting.

HOW TO USE THIS MODEL OF SUPERVISION?

Could the model that I developed from my experiences of group supervision be adopted by other supervisors in education? The step-by-step development that the model relies on may seem simple to use by any supervisor. However, successful implementation will depend on which theoretical framework a supervisor uses, and how one considers the participation and significance of the supervisor in the process of supervision. Parallel processes in general, and this model in particular, involve the supervisor as part of the process. The supervisor needs to be able to take a meta-position, to be part of the process and simultaneously to observe the process with the aid of an "internal supervisor". If the supervisor follows the same attitude as that recommended for therapists – trying to find a way of knowledge, choice and action – then it should be possible to use the model.

Could any supervisor and therapist use this model? I believe they could. The model is widely applicable, although some supervisors may not feel comfortable working with parallel processes if they do not use or accept psychodynamic thinking. Obstacles that may be explained by an unconscious parallel process may remain undetected or remain unresolved both in the therapy and in the supervision session. Therapists working within the traditions of cognitive behaviour therapy, solution-focused therapy or system therapy do not work directly with unconscious processes or with parallel processes as described in this article.

This model of supervision may be used differently depending on the context and when the role of supervisor requires a different attitude in the supervision process. In educational processes for pedagogical purposes, the supervisor is required to describe the phases, what is happening for her internally and her own processes of reflection. This is similar to the process described in this article, while in the supervision of practitioners it is usually not necessary to describe each phase so explicitly and minutely.

APPENDIX A

A supervisee's case – parallel processes in practice

In a supervision group of six social workers, one of them presented a case: a divorced couple who cannot agree on how much time the children should spend with each parent.

The supervisee's questions were "How am I going to relate to my client, the wife, who has a strong impact on my feelings? What position should I take so that my client does not think that I am against her?" The supervisee said she was tense and dizzy when in contact with the client. She feels provoked and angry with the client. She is fatigued. The supervisee believes the client wants support; she has good intentions and wants to spend time with her children but is unwilling to cooperate with her former husband. During supervision, the supervisee talked about the case at length.

Phase 1: Supervisor's inner experience

The presentation of the case was incoherent with many details. I became increasingly frustrated. The story kept changing. I wrote in my notebook: "It is hard for me to focus, it is good that she is talking, what am I going to do with this, it is OK to feel everything, it is hard to delimit the problem, it is hard to identify the need, how am I going to proceed, I am lost for words, I am speechless".

Phase 2: The supervisor froze the situation – here and now

Phase 3: Visualization and identification of the subjective perception of the supervision process

Reported feelings and thoughts:

Supervisee who presented the case	Other members of the supervision group	Supervisor
I feel dizzy Tense I don't feel adequate Provoked Angry It is difficult to delimit the problem/need	Closed Envy Irony She's letting it all out She's talking to much Irritated Anger Strange Silence/expectation Allowed	It is hard for me to focus, It is good that she is talking, What am I going to do with this, It is OK to feel everything, It is hard to delimit the problem, It is hard to identify the need, How am I going to proceed, I am lost for words, I am speechless

Phase 4: Back to the supervisee

The supervisor asked the supervisee to observe all remarks on the board and indicate

- which of them would be appropriate for her client;
- which remarks could be said to describe her feelings while working with the client;
- which remarks best described her relationship with the client.

The supervisor circled the answers in different colours. Thus, some remarks were circled once, twice or three times, while some remained uncircled.

Phase 5: Theorization and intersubjectivity

Everyone in the group looked at the remarks on the board and what was circled. Everyone reflected and with the help of the supervisor developed a theoretical framework for the supervision process and what could be interpreted to be parallel processes.

Client's characteristics, according to the supervisee	Supervisee's feelings to the client, according to the supervisee	Relationship between the supervisee and the client, according to the supervisee	Supervisor's relationship to the supervisee, according to the supervisor
It is hard for me to focus,	It is hard for me to focus,	It is hard for me to focus,	It is hard for me to focus,
It is hard to delimit the problem	It is hard to delimit the problem	It is hard to delimit the problem	It is hard to delimit the problem
It is difficult to delimit the need	It is difficult to delimit the need		It is difficult to delimit the need
How am I going to proceed	How am I going to proceed	How am I going to proceed	How am I going to proceed

The table shows circled expressions of thoughts or feelings in the supervision process. The supervisee recognized these feelings as characteristic of her client, of herself in her relationship towards the client, and of their mutual relationship. Many were identical to the feelings and thoughts the supervisor had at the beginning of the supervisory session – the reason for freezing the situation. Through the visualization of feelings and thoughts on the board group members could follow the supervision process independently and see the characteristic pattern of a parallel process between treatment and supervision. All of us understood the process and gained knowledge of how a parallel process can be reflected in supervision.

Phase 6: How to proceed in work with the client?

The supervisee decided to work with the client on delineating the problem and discussing the client's concrete needs. This will help them find a common focus for the treatment.

NOTE

- 1 "Internal supervisor" is an internal dialogue that a supervisor holds with oneself during supervision. With the help of an "internal supervisor", the supervisor may perceive his/her own reactions, feelings, thoughts etc. that occur while conducting a supervision process.

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