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**Coaching between Cultures:
Function and Tasks, Chances and Challenges for
Counselling**

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She has a PhD in Sociology, she has an immigration background, as one says nowadays, a certain kind of immigration background, since she is of Russian origin and culture, she is 50 years old, she was married to a German man, is separated from him, lives with her two children. She recently was at a conference at which I also gave a lecture. At the end of my presentation she came to me and wanted to know how she could launch a citizen's initiative in the field of interculturality. Some other participants who were standing next to me, too, jumped at her immediately, making a lot of suggestions to her. I took part in this. Since I had just been in my expert role I felt entitled to propose her my ideas as to how she might tackle the project and so on. For each suggestion she found an excuse regarding its realisation. This to me was a clear sign that she needed anything but "good advice" from clever people. And not from me, either...

Then I said to her: "I don't want to continue suggesting things to you, I would like to offer you the possibility of a counselling session."

She immediately said yes. I thought I had half an hour available but actually I only had 15 minutes as then I had to take the train and, as we know, trains don't wait for absent-minded professors.

In this quarter of an hour I learned that she has a PhD in Sociology, that she is 50 years old, that she was married and is now divorced, that she has two children, that she emigrated from Russia to Germany hoping for a better future in the home country of her ancestors. There I learned that she has one goal in her life: to offer her children a better world, in which they would live together in peace, i.e. together with the Germans and the other people living here, no matter what their nationality, skin colour or origin. I learned many more things – that she is a woman full of experience, full of power, worried about a better world, and she asked me desperately how she could manage to launch an initiative in her living environment, at her home, in the quarter she lives in, for the benefit of a community with other people in which her children would feel safe, belonging, normal like all the other children of the quarter, the school they learn in, without fear, without discrimination, etc. I learned a lot about her life, about her worries, about her impulses, a lot about her and her threatening environment.

"Coaching between Cultures: Function and Tasks, Chances and Challenges for Counselling" is the title of this lecture, and I would like to offer you some thoughts, not as a final answer but as suggestions for your work at home, for your work as counsellors and not least as an input for a discussion at this meeting.

The Development of the Coaching Concept:

From sports to business management

As you all know, the word "coaching" semantically derives from the English "Cutsche", Spanish: "coche", which means bus, wagon, car, a vehicle for transport, for movement, which is used to transfer people and goods from one place to another.

In the U.S. the word "coach" refers to the work of a sports trainer under whose guidance a sportsperson strives for perfection and maximisation of their performance. The coach is actually the trainer. Each sport has

trainers, whose role it is to help improve the performance of a sportsperson as far as possible by way of training. In the literature on coaching, on the other hand, the trainer aims at something else than "only" good performance. Here coaching mostly focuses on sportsperson's mental strength. The sportsperson's opponent is not only the outer but also the inner adversary. The inner adversary of a sportsperson is stronger than the outer one, the opposing tennis player – this is what Timothy Gallwey, Professor of Literature at Harvard University and tennis trainer, basically already says in 1975, in his book "The inner Game of Tennis". It is interesting to remember this origin of the word, since by doing so we already take a position that is important for this professional activity we call coaching. Since, as François Caby says: "The concept of coaching comprises maieutics not so much aimed at outperforming the opponent but at recognising and overcoming oneself." With this, Gallwey turned the theory of learning by training upside down, because according to his thesis the issue was not to teach a person something and train, exercise, "learn" this new behaviour but to help them find themselves, give the best of themselves. In one of my texts (1998) I spoke of neo-Socratism in this context and – referring to the socialisation of teenagers in teaching institutions – I meant the following: "This is not about the transference of values and forms, behaviour, lifestyles and roles stemming from traditional society but about support from the counsellor, the educator or whoever works with them as a professional, to achieve their own – the young people's – ideal I, to find their own direction in life, to perceive and put into action chances and possibilities offered to them by society, it is about the development of communicative competencies, such as dialoguing, negotiating, so that – starting from their own I – they treat others respectfully, live together, independent and autonomous in their behaviour, self-confident and responsible" (p. 99).

This focus on one's own sportive I, the mental aspects, led to a certain revolution in sports among coaches, among trainers. The same is true

for education and youth work. But it would be very one-sided to consider professional coaching only from the mental perspective, the focus on the I, since each individual lives under the pressure of their living conditions, which make life easy, difficult, possible or impossible, independently of them. Speaking in systemic terms, this is also called environment. So the environment, too, belongs to the subject of work in coaching. But what does this concept of coaching mean in the field of our work as counsellors?

Coaching as a method of counselling for managers

Coaching gradually started to refer to the leadership function within organisations, too – at first as a part of leadership within one's own organisation, most of all in the industry. Just as in sports every trainer should get the best out of every sportsperson, the manager in a company should make sure that all employees give the best of themselves for the benefit of the organisation and the contentedness of the manager and the employee. The manager is basically a trainer who is able to ask for and bring out the best in each of their employees.

But very soon it became clear that this concept and the resulting activity have their limits. The enmeshment of the manager's interest with the ones of the staff, the pressure the manager was faced with when it came to cutting jobs or the difficulties that came up with the changes in the organisation and/or conflicts of any kind made this form of coaching difficult or nearly impossible.

It was thus recognised that managers and leaders of organisations actually needed to release, to liberate themselves from this enmeshment in order to have their role as leaders under better control and better manage the tasks resulting from this role without forgetting or losing themselves in the process. So managers became the subject of counselling in fulfilment of their function as leaders, managers or whatever other role, in fulfilment of their task and function of leadership at whatever level. This means that the development went from a concept

of self-sufficiency of the organisation and the manager towards the necessity to consider the outer environment in systemic terms in order to contract a consultant for themselves, the managers, for their tasks and functions, to develop their own skills and abilities, to overcome their own conflicts in fulfilment of their role of managing difficult situations, to master their own I and their own professionalism and to use them strategically for the benefit of the organisational objectives, taking the environment as well as their own social and ethical principles and values into account. This kind of coaching was called executive coaching or simply coaching for managers (cf. Schreyögg 2003).

Coaching as an ambivalent concept

But meanwhile we speak of coaching like in former times we, professionals in education, the psychological services and the counselling centres, used to speak of counselling, referring to all kinds of help to determine, discover, manage oneself or even help to overcome basic life problems and existential problems of individuals, as a help to find sense, to support one's own goals. Gradually, just as the word counselling, the term coaching is developing into a word that says a lot and nothing at all at the same time. In an information leaflet on training in coaching in Spain I read: "Coaching is a process of communication, support and leadership given by a coach (trainer) to help a coachee (client) to achieve excellence (the best of themselves) within the framework of an alliance between the two." With such a definition, you can present a counselling process in the field of personal as well as professional issues or even the family system. It says it all – and nothing at all.

Often suffixes and adjectives, i.e. descriptors of any kind, are used to precisely define and describe the concept of coaching, like we did in former times to describe or define counselling. So, for example, we used to speak of parent counselling, marriage counselling, financial consulting, job consulting, etc. Today we have become a bit more

distinguished, calling these services coaching for parents, coaching for families, coaching for teachers, coaching for important questions in life or coaching for the joys and worries on the job (formerly supervision) or executive coaching and/or coaching for managers. Depending on the approach, we speak of coaching, e.g. as a form of counselling in systemic, NLP or resource-oriented terms.

Personally, I only use the word coaching to refer to a form of counselling, i.e. help and support from a trainer/coach for a manager to fulfil their leadership role in any professional context, be it an organisation, a company, a state institution.

In general, coaching is used with the same meanings as the word counselling. Together we have created a total confusion about what we are to contribute to the benefit of people as counsellors.

This confusion, in my opinion, is an exact reflection of the general social confusion people find themselves in everywhere, in all areas nowadays, be it the family, the conduct and project of life, work or business.

Counselling/coaching as a reflection of society

Zygmunt Bauman, the old sociologist, Emeritus Professor at Leeds University (England), with an origin from Poland and Russia, winner of the Spanish award "Prince of Asturias 2010" in the category of communication and the humanities (a kind of Spanish Nobel Prize) calls our society ambivalent, thus describing the state of a society in which all clarity and order of former years of the industrial era have disappeared, in which the disjunctive "either ... or" has changed into a conjunctive "and ... and" in our thinking but also in our acting. This means more or less that everything is valid and equi-valent everywhere at the same time; and there is no external authority to define in general, for everybody, what is valid, to distinguish this from what is not valid and make it valid for everyone. Or at least, as an authority, give orientation and criteria for distinction, for the individual behaviour and the

behaviour of all areas of life, the systemic one (business, power, bureaucracy, following Habermas' concept) as well as in the one of the living environment. On the contrary, in a post-modern society, as ours is called, each individual must account for themselves, define their role for themselves, project and master their own life for themselves, with all risks and chances this solo attempt may imply. The individual is thus uncoupled from society, released and free from society, with the task to get along alone, to master "the everyday wrestling for one's life" (Beck et al., 1995: p.9).

So we have now explained how the concept of coaching developed and we have found a quite great confusion or rather determined the position of coaching as being in the middle of post-modern times, within the ambivalence which characterises our society. Thus coaching becomes a reflection of our society.

But what about the concept of interculturality? And what does it have to do with the tasks and the function of coaching?

Interculturality means ultimate aim, not prior condition

In an article I recently wrote (2010: pp. 115 et seq.) I call interculturality a "field of tension". My aim in doing so is not to reject the concept but to clarify what interculturality means. A misunderstanding might arise when assuming "the reality" of interculturality, as if there was any such thing as interculturality resulting from the fact alone that people who come from different cultures live beside each other. With this assumption we would ignore the tensions that exist among cultures, using the false image of a harmonious society, which does not and cannot actually exist.

This is why I am rather in favour of the thesis that there is a certain tension among cultures. Cultures that are faced with each other must first of all define themselves as being different, they must distinguish themselves from others and thus demarcate themselves from all others.

This demarcation can cause curiosity as well as rejection, fear and worry in people of other cultures. These different attitudes can also make people build fronts or, on the other hand, blur differences, demarcations, which in turn rather entails a denial of one's own features as well as a failure to see the fact that others are different. This would be just as dangerous as the other option, because it can be naive and inconsistent, for oneself as well as for the intended real solidarity with the foreigners. Different cultures are in a relationship of tension with each other, which can result in rejection, blurred lines but also learning.

Tension comprises the possibility of conflict; this fact should not be ignored. But there is also another possibility – the chance of mutual learning. Thus interculturality becomes an ultimate goal instead of a prior condition. Interculturality is the result of shared learning, the result of shared experiences, the result of shared action.

This tension is inevitable and becomes the starting point of the coexistence within the difference of the cultures. Several and different cultures exist at the same time in our societies, and we should acknowledge and accept this fact as a starting point, as a basic reality. It is our task for the future to weave these elements together. As Heinz Kersting (2004) used to affirm: "Each society knits its own social system using all kinds of feathers from several cultures, no matter whether they are individual or collective constructs".

Bauman (2006:38) maintains that understanding is created together, from "horizontal melting", i.e. looking into a future in which all differences lead to interlacement, or, if you will, from shared experience. Which in turn is only possible with mutual agreement in space and time. This raises the question of what coaching can contribute to the development of a shared horizon and/or interculturality as a rudimental reality? But, first of all, what does culture mean?

Culture as a construct of thinking, feeling, acting – individually or collectively

I consider culture to be people's form of life, the way they dress, the way they greet each other, say goodbye to each other, how they sit at table, how they receive a guest, how they pray, whom or what they pray to, the way they keep in touch with their ancestors, how they marry, whom they marry and under which circumstances. All these and many more aspects contribute to what we call culture and what is visible in everyday life. Max Weber once basically expressed it: All people are beings that enmesh themselves in their self-spun tissue of meaning. This means that we all create our own views of the world, construe our own world, and that this very personal tissue represents our individual culture. This individual culture can be shared with others; we then speak of a culture group. Occupational groups but also peoples, people from certain regions, people who feel they belong to a certain cultural background – they all can feel as culture groups. What we have experienced with immigration in our countries is just that people from different cultural backgrounds live, work, dwell together. This is not the only case of confrontation of different cultures. Each company has its own culture, often managers of one enterprise have to work with managers from other countries and other companies. Also coaches can feel that they belong to different cultural backgrounds, which leaves them faced with the fact that people who belong to one culture think, feel and act differently than people who belong to another culture.

This, in my opinion, is a difficult chapter of the professional behaviour as a counsellor, if we want to talk about "intercultural coaching", if we want to offer counselling or consulting to various cultures at the same time, be it that the participants in a counselling setting define their cultural background differently than the coach does his or hers, be it that the coach wants to exert his or her counselling profession with people of different cultures (cf. Nazarkiewicz/Krämer (2009): OSC N° 3/09, pp. 245 et seq.). This raises questions such as: What do coaches

need to take into account, what are their tasks, which functions do they have to fulfil?

Function and task of intercultural coaching

One of the crucial factors for their activity is to become aware of their own cultural background and how it shows in their actions as a counsellor. It is important to raise this awareness as a coach and/or counsellor. Since whatever might lurk as a danger of transference or enmeshment of the counsellor with the client may become particularly virulent in the field of interculturality (cf. the concept of implication, Hernández 1995). This is why counselling first of all requires keeping in constant touch with oneself. What effect, e.g., does the cultural difference of counterparts, clients, have in counsellors? Which resistances and/or curiosity does the clients' world view trigger in them?

On the other hand, the endeavours of counsellors should result in their understanding of the counselling clients in their cultural framework, accepting them, making them aware of their potential of conflict with other cultures.

When interacting with people, institutions, living conditions, it is also important to discover black spots in their cultural background and to take them into account when acting.

When several participants of different cultures are present, the coach must ensure the communication among them and teach them methods of communication. This slows communication down but it is indispensable to make understanding possible.

Finally the coach should make sure that shared moments, shared interests and possibilities and opportunities for interculturality are discovered and action is taken jointly.

The coach should help to develop strategies to overcome obstacles and/or change organisations or simply act together more efficiently.

As most authors show, coaching is often about cultural changes, in companies but also in the thinking, feeling and actions of individuals; as interculturality and the coaching of members from different cultures are hard work that requires a lot of patience, persistence, courage and humility. We counsellors have the opportunity or rather the occasion in our job to grow ourselves, as persons and as professionals.

You know how the story with the sociologist ended? I only asked two "circular questions":

"Could you imagine that there might be people in your environment who have similar questions and worries as you have?"

"Yes, of course!" she said.

And the second question: "How would it feel to you if you asked one or two of them whether they were willing, together with you, to think about how to tackle such a project?"

Upon which she said enthusiastically: "This is easy to do ... I know a family ..." and so on.

I thank you for your attention.

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