

## **Parallel processes in coaching, counselling and therapy**

*The HR department of a technical company asked for coaching for Mr. Sanders, one of their managers. Mr. Sanders is a very qualified manager, when it comes to technical research, but in social skills, he is doing poor. He is often in conflict with his colleagues and most of the colleagues get easily irritated by him.*

*During the first meeting of the coaching, almost from the beginning Mr. Sanders is discussing the qualities and skills of the coach.*

*He doubts if the coach has enough knowledge about the work Mr. Sanders is doing and the people he is dealing with and he certainly doubts the usefulness of coaching, because every manager has his own style and he likes his own style. So, what's the use of it?*

*The coach becomes aware that the attitude of Mr. Sanders starts to irritate him and he has to do his utmost best, not to go into a fight with him. Therefore, he wonders, if this is the problem, his colleagues are dealing with.*

In coaching, counselling and therapy, parallel processes are common phenomena. Some people find them very disturbing, because they perceive them as an interruption or disturbance of the communication. However, when we take a better look at these phenomena, and learn to explore them and handle them, they can bring us very valuable information about the deeper layers of a person's interaction or about a team or organization.

In this article, I present a Gestalt view on parallel processes, which means, that I will describe several kinds of parallel processes and explore them regarding their function in the broader field.

### **Definition**

The most simple way of defining a parallel process is: "What happens there, will also happen here and vice versa." (Haans, 2009)

In other words, in situations where one person is interacting with another person, within their communication, phenomena or patterns will occur, which are related to other situations these persons are dealing with.

Actually, Sigmund Freud already pointed out this phenomenon, but he was mainly focusing on psychotherapy. He used the words *transference* and *counter transference*, depending on the source of the 'replacement'.

Although, the concept of parallel processes looks like the concept of transference and counter transference, the meaning, however, is wider.

First of all, transference and counter transference were related to hierarchical relations, where parallel processes also occur in equal relations.

Secondly, transference and counter transference are mostly viewed as related to the past, as replacements of experiences from the past, which have only little to do with the present situation. Parallel processes, however, are seen as very actual and totally related to the present situation.

Third, where transference and counter transference are defined as replacements, parallel processes are defined as simultaneous or synchronic occurring phenomena. There is no clear indication, where the source is, like with the question about the chicken and the egg.

I will come back to this later, when I speak about a Field oriented approach to parallel processes.

Finally, the concept of parallel processes is not only related to psychotherapy, but relates also to education and care. (Haans, 2009)

Before going into the Gestalt view on parallel processes, I like to refer to Haans, who sees the roots of the concept of parallel processes at two places; one is the so called process oriented supervision approach of Searls, Ekstein and Wallerstein and the other is Olthoff, who speaks of a 'virus model', when he refers to the phenomenon that a team can get infected by the pathology of a client. (Haans, 2009)

A totally different root of the concept is mentioned by Katelijne Robbertz, who refers to Stanton and Schwartz, who described the concept as: repeating patterns of interaction within organizations. (Robbertz, 2006)

As I stated in the beginning, many people, and among them also Haans, perceive parallel processes mainly as disturbing or even destructive. Haans even restrict him self to describing only the destructive side of parallel processes. I see this as a limited view on parallel processes.

In my view, parallel processes in it self, are neutral; it is up to the person or persons involved how to handle them: ignoring them or trying to get aware of them and see, how they can provide us with new and useful information.

Therefore, if a parallel process becomes destructive, it is not due to the process it self, but rather to the way the persons involved were dealing with it. Parallel processes per definition, ask to be explored, to be seen in their function in the given situation.

And this brings me to one of the basic principles of the Gestalt approach.

## **Gestalt approach**

The Gestalt approach<sup>1</sup> has several important roots, like the Gestalt psychology of Wertheimer, the Field theory of Lewin, the existential and phenomenological philosophy of Sartre, Merleau Ponty and others and the dialogical philosophy of Buber.

Without going into these roots deeply, I just like to describe a few of its basic concepts.

As the word Gestalt (approach) already implies, this approach is focused on 'meaningful wholes' as opposite to other approaches, which are rather analytical.

These meaningful wholes are defined as different than the sum of their parts and as being always involved in a continues interaction with their environment. One can differentiate the parts and the whole, but one cannot separate them and the meaning of the parts as well as the meaning of the whole is always related to their mutual interaction and the interaction with the environment.

This implies, that the Gestalt approach also views human beings within the context of their interaction with the environment. Regarding counselling<sup>2</sup>, this not only counts for the person who is counselled, but of course, also for the counsellor. Both are part of the interaction and therefore, their meaning can only be understood within the context of that interaction.

This also means, that from a Gestalt point of view, we are always interested in exploring this interaction, to see what function the persons involved and their behaviour have within that interaction. Therefore, the basic attitude is to have an open and phenomenological approach to interactions. Rather exploring than analysing or correcting.

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<sup>1</sup> I use deliberately the word Gestalt approach in stead of Gestalt therapy, because the word approach refers to the fact that Gestalt has been applied in much more areas than just psychotherapy. It is also applied in coaching, education, organization development, management development etc.

<sup>2</sup> From here on, where possible, I prefer to use only the word counselling in stead of naming all the time all three ways of guiding: coaching, counselling and therapy. Only, when one of the three ways is especially mend, I will use that word specifically.

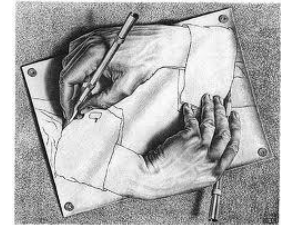
This concept of 'interaction' is essential, when we try to understand the phenomenon of parallel processes. When we look at authors like Haans, we often encounter a rather causal approach or explanation of parallel processes. This means that they assume that someone or some group is the cause or source of the existence of the parallel process. That also explains the use of the word 'replacement', which implies that somewhere within a person or within a relation, an original process takes place, which subsequently is replaced to a second person or relation.

From a Gestalt point of view, causality is not denied, but it is rather seen as one of the possibilities to explain correlating or inter-dependent phenomena.

Partly beside and partly in stead of causality, the Gestalt approach uses a field theoretical perspective to understand correlating phenomena. They are seen within the context of the interacting field.

This means, that we go from the assumption that simultaneously occurring events can create a dynamic, which can not be explained by causality. This interaction between the parts, as well as between the parts and the whole, can be illustrated best by the famous drawing of Escher, where two hands simultaneously draw each other.

Therefore, we speak of an interacting field, where phenomena occur, like in this case the parallel processes, which correlate and influence each other in a more circular way. There is no simple cause and effect relation. The phenomena cannot be attributed to one person or one group only; they occur the moment specific conditions are present. Therefore, they are not replacements, but rather simultaneously or synchronic occurring patterns, which occur in relations or fields where the specific conditions are present.



To illustrate what I mean by these specific conditions, I like to use the concept of 'resonance' as we know this in music.

When we have a piano and a guitar in one room and we touch the A key of the piano, the A string of the guitar – when well tuned – will start to tremble. It resonates with the A sound that fills the room. We can say that the trembling A string of the guitar makes the A sound become visible. Only the A string will do this, because this string is related to the A sound, the others not; they are related to other sounds or tones.

In the same way, an individual, couple or team can make a topic visible, which is present in a relation, team or organization, the moment this individual, couple or team is related to this topic.

*When a group is having problems with the leader, the authority, possibly, the group member who has had a problem with authorities already all his life, will be the first to express this topic and in doing this, he makes the topic explicit; e.g. he will start to rebellion.*

*In a group with hidden aggression, the group member who is very sensitive for this topic, will express the repressed aggression of the group. Possibly, he will do this in an extreme form because he is actually doing the work for the whole group.*

The extreme aggression or this ongoing fighting the leader are examples, which illustrate, that a specific behaviour, which at first sight, seems to be dysfunctional, at second sight, appears to be very functional within the given interacting field. It represents a topic in the field.

In a similar way, parallel processes can occur and represent an actual topic in the field, the moment, the conditions for resonance are present.

## Parallel processes, some examples

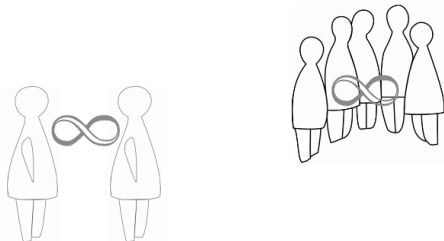
I like to describe some possible parallel processes, we encounter in coaching, counselling, therapy and supervision.

Although, I describe them as separate phenomena, normally these processes are much more mixed and intertwine and always part of interacting fields.

I will describe the following examples:

1. The patterns that occur in the interaction of a client with his world, will also occur in the interaction of this client with his counsellor and vice versa.
2. The patterns that occur in the relation of the counsellor with his client, will also occur in the relation of this counsellor with his supervisor.
3. The patterns that are present in the client will also occur in the team of workers, who are involved with this client.
4. The patterns or hidden topics of a team of workers, will also occur in a client or client group.
5. The topics of an organization can also occur in the relation of the counsellor with his client.
6. The topics of a society in general can also occur in an organization and in that way also in the relation of the counsellor with his client.

### **1. The patterns that occur in the interaction of a client with his world, will also occur in the interaction of this client with his counsellor and vice versa**



One of the characteristics of the Gestalt approach is, that we work with the 'here and now'. This is not out of being lazy or being short sighted, but out of the experience that exactly in the here and now, the world of the client, or better to say: the interaction of the client with his world becomes visible. Therefore, it is interesting to explore the here and now interaction.

As a counsellor, we normally start with some exploring questions about the problem or need of the client and the context of his problem or need.

Soon, phenomena will occur in the interaction, which are characteristic or illustrative for what the client is describing or experiencing within his world. In other words: just in front of our own eyes, we see a reflection of the way the client is interacting with his world.

If, for a moment we are willing to become confluent with this way of interacting, we can experience from the inside, what exactly is happening within this interaction. We are willing, for a while, to become part of the parallel process in an attempt to experience and explore it from the inside.

*A manager complains that he is dealing with a lot of resistance in his team and he doesn't know anymore, how to deal with it. The moment the counsellor tries to ask him a question, the manager interrupts him with the words, that the question or topic is not relevant for now and continues his own story. This just goes on for a while and during that time, the counsellor is aware that he experiences more and more resistance to counsel this manager.*

*A client who speaks about having problems with his wife and children, speaks with a low voice and hardly makes any eye-contact with the counselor. He says, that his wife and children are not really interested in him. They often even ignore him. While the client is speaking about this, the counselor notices, that he is also losing his interest and that his mind is slipping away to other situations.*

It is clear, that the counselor does not experience the interaction with his client in an objective, detached way. He, rather perceives and experiences it fully from his own personal perspective. And this is exactly one of the main principles of the gestalt approach: a counselor per definition, is always subjective. From the Gestalt point of view, there is no such thing as 'objectivity'; there is only subjectivity and therefore, we make a plea for taking full responsibility for this subjectivity and work with it.

Working with it, in the sense, that the counselor allows himself to experience personally what is happening in the interaction. Therefore, he allows himself to become fully confluent with the interacting field and experience it from the inside.

Subsequently, a next step is, to dis-identify from this interacting field to get more free to explore what is happening. Actually, this already happens, the moment the counselor becomes aware of the interacting field. In that moment he is no longer identified with the interaction and is able to take the meta-position and give meaning to what he experiences in the interacting field. By stating this awareness, he actually invites the client to explore together with him, what he perceives as happening in the interacting field and to see, what possible parallel processes are going on.

Exploring the interacting field and the possible parallel processes together, will help the client to gain more awareness on his way of interacting with his world and on the possible pattern or dynamic that is taking place.

However, it is important that the counselor shares his awareness in a phenomenological way, which means that he describes his awareness, without judgments or interpretations on what is happening. He let the phenomena speak for itself.

*If I may interrupt you. I hear you say, that you encounter a lot of resistance in your work and that you do not understand, how or why this is happening. Are you willing to explore with me, what is happening here right now, because I also notice some resistance in me and therefore, I assume a striking parallel?*

*I like to interrupt you. I really want to stay focused on you, but at the same time, I notice that it is hard for me to keep my attention with you. If it is okay for you, I would like to explore with you what is happening here right now, because I see a parallel with what you are speaking about.*

It sometimes is really striking, to see the impact of such a description of the occurring phenomena on the client and to see how that client often is totally unaware of these phenomena.

*“Do I really have this effect on you? Of course, I sometimes noticed that people were turning their back on me, but I never understood why they did this. If it is because of this effect, then I can understand why they did that.”*

This awareness already leads to change, because in every next moment, the client will be much more aware of how he is interacting and of what is happening with the other(s).

Of course, this does not mean that suddenly, his whole world will change, but awareness is the first step in the process of change.

Because, the counselor makes use of the parallel processes in the interaction, he does not have to stick to 'talking about there and then'. Together with the client, he can immediately go to the concrete experience in the here and now and explore the interaction. This leads to a very effective and efficient way of counseling.

For clarity, it is not only the interaction of the client with his world that becomes visible in the interaction of the client and counselor, but also the interaction of the counselor is present during this meeting. From the gestalt point of view, it is impossible for a counselor to be fully detached from his own interaction with the world. He is always part of this interaction and brings it with him in the counseling.

To aim for a so called 'objective, unbiased presence' is a nice attempt, but as already stated, from the Gestalt perspective, this is not realistic. We rather make a plea for developing our awareness on our own way of interacting with the world and to take responsibility for that way of interacting, for our subjectivity.

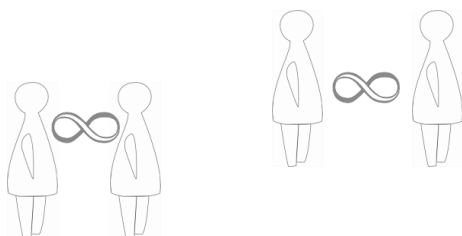
When we say, from the Gestalt point of view, that parallel processes are no replacements, but correlating or synchronic occurring phenomena in different fields, then, it is logic to assume, that when the clients interaction with his world is reflected in the interacting field of this client with his counselor, vice versa, the interaction of him with his counselor will also be reflected in his interaction outside of the counseling situation.

In other words: the parallel process works two ways. This means that the moment, the client's way of interacting is improving because of exploring it and gaining more awareness on it, this improved way of interacting will also show up more and more in his interaction with others outside of the counseling room.

Of course, we can partly explain this also by the fact that the client is more aware of his way of interacting and because of the fact that his improved way of interacting will be valued positive by others. This positive reinforcement will increase his improved interaction.

On the other hand, the change or improvement of his interacting is also related to the phenomenon of the parallel process.

## **2. The patterns that occur in the relation of the counsellor with his client, will also occur in the relation of this counsellor with his supervisor.**



Another kind of parallel process will occur in the relation of a counselor with his supervisor.

In the relation or interaction of the counselor with his supervisor or within a supervision group, we can observe and experience phenomena or specific dynamic, which are connected to the interaction of this counselor with his client and in continuation of that, to the interaction of this client with his world.

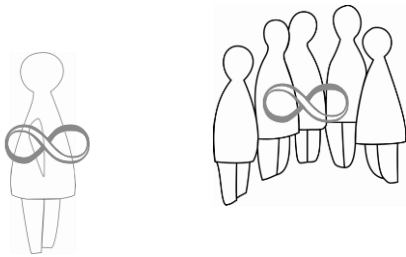
*In a supervision group, one of the counselors speaks about a client, who is struggling with a difficult choice. The counselor tells, that his client is torn between his feelings and his thoughts.*

*After the group members have shared their awareness, two of the group members get into an intensive discussion, with really totally opposing ideas about the client. Listening to them, it*

*becomes clear, that these two group members are both identified with the polarity of the client; they represent the two poles of the polarity, the client is dealing with.*

Therefore, in supervision groups it is interesting to explore possibly occurring parallel processes, because this can bring new awareness on the interaction of the counselor with his client and in continuation of that, more awareness on the interaction of the client with his world.

### **3. The patterns that are present in the client will also occur in the team of workers, who are involved with this client.**



This type of parallel process is also described by Haans in his book. Following the example of Olthof he refers to this type as the ‘virus model’. (Haans, 2009). And, also Katelijne Robbertz writes about this type in her article in the publication Groepen, where she focuses mainly on some specific client populations. (Robbertz, 2006).

The moment a team is taking care of a client with a specific kind of fixed pattern of interacting with his world, which we can also indicate as a specific type of psychopathology<sup>3</sup>, we often see, that after a while, this team also shows comparable phenomena or symptoms or patterns as this client.

However, I want to state clearly again, that this is not due to some replacement of the original pathology from the client onto the group of workers, or that the team is infected by the virus of the client, but that we are, again, dealing with correlating or synchronic occurring phenomena, which occur because the conditions for resonance are present.

This resonance can occur with practically all kinds of psychopathology from clients, but according to my experience, the resonance is the strongest in the case of so called ‘personality disorders’.

In fact, this is not so surprising, when we realize that – next to biological aspects – psychopathology and especially personality disorders develop itself within the relation with the environment. I refer again to the publication of Francesetti, Gecele and Roubal about psychopathology (Francesetti, Gecele and Roubal, 2013) and the publication of Wollants about the relational approach of psychopathology (Wollants, 2007), who all state, that all psychopathology is relational, is a pathology of the situation.

Within the context of this article, I restrict myself to the pathology of the personality disorders.

As it is maybe already known, the pathology of the personality disorders is divided into three groups, where each of these groups actually relates to one of the three basic survival mechanisms we see in nature: flight, fight and freeze.

In other words, the groups are related to the basic choice, the young child has made because of the insecurity in the relation with his parents:

- Group A: this child has chosen to stay away from relations (flight), which is illustrated by his isolated way of existing and his sometimes, very strange and eccentric behavior

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<sup>3</sup> From a Gestalt point of view, psychopathology, and especially the so called personality disorders, is regarded as an originally best possible way of creative adjustment to a situation, which, however, during the years has become a fix gestalt, a fix way of interacting with the world. (See e.g. Francesetti, Gecele and Roubal, 2013)

as we see this with persons with a paranoid, schizoid or schizo-typical personality disorder.

- Group B: this child keeps on trying to find security by searching for and fighting with boundaries (fight), which is illustrated by the dramatic, emotional, impulsive and sometimes manipulative behavior as we can see this with persons with a borderline, anti-social, narcissistic or theatrical personality disorder.
- Group C: this child has chosen to do whatever is needed to be loved by others. He totally adjusted (freeze), which is illustrated by the avoiding, dependent or obsessive behavior as we can see this with persons with a avoiding, over-depending or obsessive compulsive personality disorder.<sup>4</sup>

For a more profound description of the personality disorders, I refer to other publications on psychopathology, like the book of Francesetti, Gecele and Roubal.

For now, I restrict myself to this short description, because I want to stay focused on the phenomenon of the parallel processes related to this kind of psychopathology.

*Teams, who are working with people, who mainly have characteristics of the psychopathology, as described under group A, very often show themselves also extreme or eccentric characteristics. Therefore, these counselors also, often have a more or less isolated position in the field of social work and are many times avoided or disqualified by other social workers. An illustrative example are the street corner workers, who work with drug addicted people or prostitutes.*

Again, I am not speaking of a causal relation here. Possibly, it is a specific kind of workers, who is attracted by this type of client.

*When we look at teams, who take care of people with mainly Group B pathology, like in psychiatric hospitals, or like in nursing homes or home care, we also see that such a team can show characteristics, which belong to this kind of pathology: there is a split in the team, which often leads to conflicts in the team, or people are losing the nuances in thinking and start to think in black and white, or there are a lot of problems with boundaries.*

These are just two examples, where the pathology of the client is also occurring in the team. Of course, in these teams, the occurrence of the parallel process is stronger or more visible, the moment, the conditions for resonance are more present.

E.g. in a team, where the workers cooperate very well and have clear agreements on their approach and boundaries, and are quite consequent in dealing with the clients, the conditions for resonance are less present, and therefore, in such a team the possibility for a parallel process to occur is less.

In a way, we can say, that if there is a strong parallel process going on in a team, actually, the team can perceive this as an invitation to explore their interaction and cooperation.

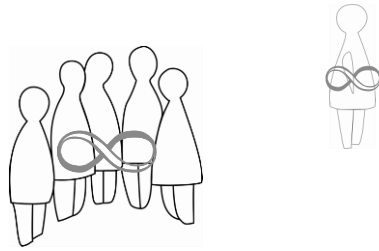
I like to quote Katelijne Robbertz, who writes: "Giving attention to parallel processes, can give valuable information about the functioning of the team as well as about the treatment of the client. (Robbertz, 2006)

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<sup>4</sup> This very short and global description is based on an article of Bas van Alphen and Sylvia Heijnen about elderly persons with personality disorders (Van Alphen en Heijnen, 2005 en 2006).



#### 4. The patterns or hidden topics of a team of workers, will also occur in a client or client group.



Connected to the previous example of a parallel process, where a team shows the same pathology as the client, I now focus on the other side of the same parallel process, where a client starts to represent the ‘pathology’ of a team. Unfortunately, this kind of parallel process gets much less attention in literature. When I refer to Olthoff with his ‘virus model’, we could say, that in this case, the client is infected by the pathology of the team. (Haans, 2009). However, I still

like to keep to the gestalt perspective, which does not go from this ‘cause – effect’ point of view.

A clear example of this kind of parallel processes, we can see in care centers for people with a mentally handicap and / or with pervasive development disorders, like autism.

In general, both these groups have difficulty in dealing with emotions like fear, anger, sadness or stress. They often lack the social and emotional skills to share such emotions and rather express it in an uncontrolled way.

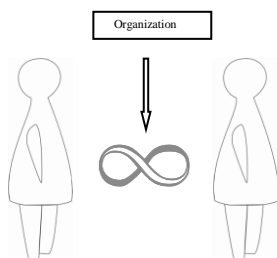
Therefore, if in a team, which takes care of such a group of clients, there are hidden tensions or unexpressed irritations or conflicts, there is a big chance, that the clients will resonate on these hidden or repressed emotions. Because these emotions are implicit and the clients are not able to speak about them, they probably will start to express them in an another, more extreme way, like severe agitation, conflicts or even auto-mutilation.

Based on the concept of parallel processes, it is advisable, in moments of sever agitation within a group of clients, to ask the question, what this agitation might say about the atmosphere or cooperation in the team.

Again, the phenomenon of parallel processes invites a team, to look into the mirror and explore a situation, to be able to learn from it.

Furthermore, this approach and such a reflection can do more justice to the clients, who otherwise, might be stigmatized as so called ‘identified patients’<sup>5</sup>, who are extreme and negative and cannot be handled and thus, need medication.

#### 5. The topics of an organization can also occur in the relation of the counsellor with his client.



According to the previous type of parallel process, it is also possible that topics or issues, which actually belong to the organization as a whole, start to show up within the relation of the counsellor – client.

A clear example is, that the way the managers are dealing with their staff, will often be reflected in the way the staff is dealing with the clients.

If the management does not take the staff serious in their requests or critics, or is quite rigid in applying

bureaucratic regulations, there is a big chance, that the staff will handle the clients the same.

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<sup>5</sup> The word ‘identified patient’ comes from family therapy. It means that one of the members of the family is perceived as the cause of all the problems in the family. Therefore, the family believes, that if this member is treated, all problems will be solved.

*E.g. the way, I am handled by a person at the reception desk of an organization, often illustrates the way I will be handled by others in the organization and the way clients are handled. If I meet a friendly, supportive person, then I often find out, that also the management is quite friendly and supportive and the clients are also handled friendly and with respect and care.*

*Unfortunately, the opposite is also true: when I am handled in a detached, impersonal or even unfriendly way, I meet this same attitude on other levels of the organizations too.*

When we are coaching an employer or we do team coaching within an organization, it is important to keep the concept of parallel processes in mind and explore situations from this perspective.

Again, this might help to increase awareness on the larger field and in a way de-accuse the person or team, because they can see, that what they are dealing with, does not only belong to them, but belongs to the larger field of the organization.

This does not mean, that they do not have any responsibility in this, but it helps to understand, why some changes within the team or organization, are so hard to realize.

*During a team coaching, we found out, that the confusion, which occurred over and over again in the communication of this team, had a clear function for this team. One of the team members made it quite clear: “As long as there is confusion, nobody can address critics to me, because, my responsibilities are also not clear.”*

*When we discussed this phenomenon with the district manager, we encountered the same confusion and actually, it became clear that this confusion regarding tasks and responsibilities and its function, were present on all levels of the organization, including the board.*

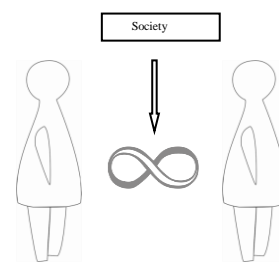
*After we discovered this, the wish to achieve more clarity in this team on tasks and responsibilities, got another dimension.*

## **6. The topics of a society in general can also occur in an organization and in that way also in the relation of the counsellor with his client.**

Finally, according to the previous one, I will shortly make a next step, which means, to see the organization as part of a larger field, society and culture.

Topics or issues, which are present in the society or culture, where we are part of, will also influence the relation counsellor – client, and in that way, they will be present in the interaction.

A clear example is, what we see in our training institute in Nepal, where we learn a lot about, what the Nepali perceive as ‘normal’ in life and in counselling.



*The Nepali culture is characterized by a very polite attitude, people have to each other. Our students told us, that they normally have sessions of two or even three hours with their clients. During these sessions, they mainly listen. Confronting their client or provoking him, or setting boundaries, is totally ‘not done’. So, the moment, I was slightly provoking my client during a short demonstration in the training, they were really shocked.*

Beside the culture of a society, there can also be other issues very actual which are not totally related to culture.

*An example is the influence of social media like Facebook and Twitter on our society, and according to that on the relation counsellor – client.*

*We see an enormous desire to be connected and to be seen and although, these media pretend to offer that, people still feel very dis-connected and lonely. And at the same time, the pressure, to be and stay part of it, is enormous.*

To recognize and acknowledge this type of parallel processes, again, can help us to increase our awareness on the broader context of our clients and in that way on the larger field.

## **7. Closure**

Parallel processes are very interesting phenomena, which can occur in every interaction or relation. In my view, it is important to recognize them and explore them in a phenomenological, non-judgemental way, because in that way, they can offer us lots of valuable information.

It can help us to increase our awareness and with that, we can increase the effectiveness of our counselling.

Frans Meulmeester

August, 2013

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