

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELLING: REFLECTIONS ON CHANGES WITHIN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

LA DIVERSIDAD CULTURAL EN LA ORIENTACIÓN PSICOSOCIAL: REFLEXIONES SOBRE LOS CAMBIOS EN LA PRÁCTICA DEL TRABAJO SOCIAL

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RESUMEN

La dinámica de la migración global constituye nuevas formas de diversidad y heterogeneidad cultural tanto en la vida diaria de los trabajadores sociales como en el contexto profesional. Éste artículo reflexiona sobre los cambios que los trabajadores sociales tienen que afrontar en la orientación psicosocial. Presentamos un modelo de investigación cualitativo para explorar los procesos de orientación que se está usando en un proyecto en desarrollo. Usamos el establecimiento de un contacto inicial con el cliente, lo cual llegó a ser una práctica significativa del trabajo con inmigrantes de la antigua Unión Soviética. Este aspecto puede arrojar luz sobre la cuestión de cómo pueden los orientadores establecer relaciones continuas con sus clientes en la comunicación intercultural.

ABSTRACT:

The global dynamics of worldwide migration constitute new forms of cultural diversity and heterogeneity in everyday social life as well as in professional contexts. The article will emphasize on the changes social workers have to face in psychosocial counselling. We will present a qualitative research model to explore counselling processes that is being used in an ongoing project. We will draw on the establishment of the initial contact with the client, which turned out to be a significant practice of the work with immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This aspect can shed light on the question of how counselors might establish continuous relationships with their clients in intercultural communication.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Asesoramiento narrativo, Diversidad cultural, Asesoramiento sobre drogadicción, Conocimiento tácito, Asesoramiento intercultural a drogadictos.

KEYWORDS: Narrative counselling, Cultural diversity, Drug addiction counselling, Tacit knowledge, Intercultural drug counselling.

CULTURAL COMPLEXITY IN MODERN SOCIETIES: CONDITIONS OF AND CONSEQUENCES FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

In our globalized world (Beck, 2000), societies have become increasingly culturally complex (Hannerz, 1992). According to some definitions, a culture can be conceptualized as a historically constituted, dynamic system of knowledge and meaning inherent in social practices and incorporated in the collective *habitus* of groups (Bourdieu, & Wacquant, 1996). Cultures as knowledge and meaning systems are transitory, i.e. they are open for cultural exchange (Burke, 2000), change, and transformation and consist of *explicit* or *discursive* as well as of *implicit*, *tacit*, or *practical* knowledge (Giddens, 1984; Polanyi, 1985; Renn 2006; Straub, 1999, 2006; Zielke, 2004; Straub, 2007a).

It is important to note that one is largely unaware of one's tacit knowledge. It is practiced and, therefore, it does not constitute or belong to an individual's concept or awareness of this practice. Emphasizing the collective nature of cultural knowledge stores, Bohnsack (e.g., 2003) speaks of *conjunctive* knowledge. Bohnsack follows Karl Mannheim and his documentary method of interpretation (Mannheim, 1980). Conjunctive knowledge is based on shared "spaces of experience" and "horizons of expectation" (Koselleck, 1992); it is action-implicit. Actors have a certain knowledge that enables them to perform actions appropriately; however, when performing, actors are not fully aware of their special kind of knowledge, they cannot accurately verbalize what exactly it is that constitutes their knowledge. Mobilizing implicit cultural knowledge means that an actor performs his or her *know-how*, which is atheoretical (i.e., a practical competence) and different from the conscious mode of *knowing that*.

Cultural complexity consists precisely of the coexistence of different, dynamic, heterogeneous and sometimes incommensurable knowledge and meaning systems (Rosa, 1999). Such systems include both implicit and explicit knowledge, which opens up or enables and at the same time structures, restricts, and limits human action potential. It is well known that culture can function as a material as well as an institutional, symbolic, or ideational reality. As Ernest Boesch puts it:

Culture is a field of action, whose contents range from objects made and used by human beings to institutions, ideas and myths. Being an action field, culture offers possibilities of, but by the same token stipulates conditions for, action; it circumscribes goals, which can be reached by certain means, but establishes limits, too, for correct, possible and also deviant action. [...] As an action field, culture not only induces and controls action, but is also continuously transformed by it; therefore, culture is as much a process as a structure." (Boesch, 1991, p. 29)

The global dynamics of worldwide migration (Forum Globale Fragen, 2007; Heuser, 2006) constitute new forms of cultural diversity and heterogeneity in everyday social life as well as in professional contexts. For example, in many cases psychotherapy and psychosocial counseling are transformed into culturally complex practices that demand *intercultural competence* on the part of both professionals and clients (Grothe, & Fischer, 2007; Straub, & Zielke, 2007; Straub, 2007b). Therefore, in modern societies, social workers and counselors face deep changes in their professional life in which they are unavoidably confronted with unfamiliar cultures or micro-cultures (Hannerz, 1992). One may also speak

of “culturatopes”; (Straub, 2007a).¹ They are forced to reconstruct, enlarge, and rebuild their professional competencies. Moreover, migrants, as clients of the national health care system, also have to activate their personal resources in order to cope with the needs of acculturation in one way or another.

Berry, 1996, distinguishes between assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. In order to “integrate” immigrants into the German society on an *institutional* level, a social policy – based on the concept of *diversity management* (Altgeld, Bächlein, & Deneke, 2006) – has been implemented to promote the opening of regular social services for intercultural concerns. Although many politicians and professionals have recognized this goal, one has to confess that it has not yet been achieved. Accordingly, professionals in the psychosocial counseling services in Germany still struggle with the fundamental problem of how to relate to clients from other countries and cultures, and how to establish a long-term relationship with them. At the present, establishing and optimizing inter-culturally appropriate and effective communication and cooperation in social work practice is considered one of the most challenging and important tasks in this professional field. As many empirical studies have demonstrated, there is a great demand by immigrants for psychosocial counseling services. However, there are some serious problems rooted in institutional barriers of access (e.g. language barriers, mistrust in German social services with respect to psychosocial counseling, deficits in information about counseling services). In addition, there is still a lack of elaborate concepts regarding mental health and disease that take cultural differences into consideration.

Nevertheless, in the existing literature on counseling practices, one can find a number of professional approaches especially related to intercultural communication problems, for example, the employment of interpreters (Eberding, & Schlippe, 2005; Oesterreich, 2001), the employment of native speakers as professional counselors (Pavkovic, 2004), bilingual German counselors (Cogoy, 2001), intercultural training (Hegemann, 2004), translating leaflets or to involve language mediators (Lanfranchi et al., 2004). Certainly, these suggestions significantly contribute to the inclusion and integration of immigrants into health care services. However, they refer particularly to language and cultural knowledge. The appropriation of cultural facts and languages or a common cultural background as such do not guarantee that

- a.) immigrants actually make use of these services,
- b.) counseling is performed professionally,
- c.) long-term relationships can be established successfully.

This paper offers a discussion of some selected results of an ongoing research project. It will draw on the establishment of the initial contact with the client, which turned out to be a significant practice of the work with immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This aspect can shed light on the aforementioned question of how counselors might establish continuous relationships with their clients. The paper will further address the following questions: In which ways can social workers effectively overcome the aforementioned institutional barriers? What kind of special features of professional intercultural counseling can

¹ This concept refers to flexible and dynamic micro-cultures, e.g. historical life forms and language games, values, rules (especially social norms) and action goals of smaller groups and communities. Members of such groups and communities share some culture-specific *practical*, first of all *implicit* knowledge. It is precisely this shared knowledge and the practices interwoven with it which constitute a culturatope.

be identified in our data? Finally, the paper will take into account existing commonalities and differences between counseling native Germans and immigrants in Germany.

QUALITATIVE APPROACH AND RESEARCH METHODS

In our research, we have focused on regular mental health care counseling services – especially counseling services for addicts where there has already been an immigrant clientele. In order to find solutions to the aforementioned problems, we looked at already established relationships between native German counselors and immigrant clients, in particular immigrants from the former Soviet Union. According to the principles of relational hermeneutics (Straub, & Shimada, 1999; Straub, 1999, 2006) and other familiar approaches in qualitative research such as “grounded theory” or “documentary method of interpretation” (Glaser, & Strauss, 1998; Strauss, 1994; Bohnsack, 2003), comparison groups are necessary. Consequently, we included immigrants from other countries as well. However, comparisons between these groups are not the only way to perform comparative analysis in relational hermeneutics. The comparative analyses we refer to in the following discussion include four individual counselors in four institutions. The data represent different counseling sessions and, in addition, interviews both with the counselors and the clients. The results that will be presented here are concentrated on counseling practices in one selected institution called “Sonne” (sun), performed by counselor “Alex” and five of his clients. Three clients came from the former Soviet Union (USSR), one client came from Turkey and another one from Germany. Background information of three other counselors we observed and interviewed with will be added occasionally. Through such methods we hope to deepen the analyses and enrich our results. Thus, we hope to further the sketchy picture of exemplary intercultural counseling practices in Germany and offer some ideas for other countries facing similar challenges.

All counseling sessions were tape-recorded. The same was done with the interviews with both the counselor and the client. All the observations we will be reporting here arose from detailed interpretive text analysis by using the means and tools of cultural psychology, particularly relational hermeneutics and comparative analysis (Straub, 1999, 2006; Boesch, & Straub, 2007). The analyses of the counseling session, the interview with the counselor and the interview with the client were compared with each other and related to everyday life experiences of the interpreter, results of further empirical research in the interesting field, or to theoretical knowledge which functions as an additional type of so called “horizons of comparison” (HoC) (for further details see Straub, 2006, p. 190).

ESTABLISHING CONTACT: “THIS IS A TOTALLY DIFFERENT APPROACH”

The results of our analysis illustrate that it is not only mere knowledge about the existence of a counseling service for addicts that is enough or the decisive factor for them to make use of the service. Moreover, although efforts to translate leaflets or to employ native speakers as professional counselors represent important steps towards an intercultural openness of social institutions, practitioners and institutions often disregard that their clients or customers have the basic need to *relate* to other people and to *communicate* in a creative and satisfying manner. This is a need that is recognized by the counseling organization called “Sonne” located in a large city in the western part of Germany. “Sonne” proactively approaches clients and provides various possibilities of access by

applying the means and methods of *low threshold social work* which includes some of the strategies that follow.

For instance, Counselor Alex personally approaches his clients as a representative of the “Sonne” and visits potential clients in prison. A second method of approaching clients is the “contact café”, located in the first floor of this institution, which was established as part of a low threshold strategy to increase the motivation of the clients and to lower the entrance barriers of the institution. Basically, the “contact café” is a place open to addicted people to share a cup of coffee or a meal. Furthermore, the café provides clean syringes. However, people come to this place not only for food and new needles, but also to get in contact and to communicate with other addicted people. Accordingly, the “contact café” has become a place that actually provides for the basic needs for addicts: food, social contacts, and health care and is used spontaneously by the addicts.

The “contact café” located in the first floor and the counseling premises in the second floor both reflect the model of low and high threshold social work on a spatial and contextual level. The two methods of social work are separated *spatially* into “downstairs” and “upstairs”, and *contextually* into two methods of social work. Basically, the downstairs area for low threshold social work makes it possible to establish contact, since addicted people are given the opportunity to meet one of the counselors. All counselors work alternately in the “contact café.”

In general, during the phase of this first contact in the café, the counseling center at the second floor is not part of the conversation, because the visitors to the café often do not have knowledge of counseling services or are not convinced that they would use counseling centers at all. Once the relationship between counselor and client is established, the premises change. This transition between low and high threshold social work corresponds with a change in the conversational content: Getting in contact and informal conversations are now distinguished from the more formal counseling processes. Therefore, one can conclude that the spatial and contextual separation are also in connection with a temporal sequence, since the establishment and development of a social relationship within a professional framework takes its time.

Both scenarios, prison visits and contact café, represent a differentiated praxis that is a specific characteristic of this counseling institution which considers *cultural* differences as an important starting point for successful social work. The praxis of separation of low and high threshold social work allows for a phase of establishing contacts, which can last six months or even longer. This time period appeals to the counselor’s organizational talent, since his activity does not only include the “classical” counseling of addicts, but also his work in the contact café, prison visits and administrative tasks in a shared office with other counselors. Despite the fact that this diversity of tasks has many advantages, it is also a problem because the time of counselor Alex is extremely limited, resulting in an extremely stressful work environment.

During the period of establishing contacts, the performance of the counselor is an important practical feature because they shape the establishment of a relationship between himself and the client. In this respect, Alex does everything he can, even in times *prior* to an actual encounter in the premises of the counseling institution itself. Hence, the establishment of the relationship between Alex and his clients has already started a long time before the actual counseling conversation.

THE MEANING OF "GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER PROPERLY"

The long period of establishing contact turns into a fundamental feature of the relationship between the counselor and his client, showing the importance that clients attach to the process of getting to know each other properly. During this process, the clients have the possibility to familiarize themselves with the counseling institution and its counselors over a long period of time and without making any commitments. At this place and during this period of time the basis for further mutual collaboration has been built up: confidence or, even more fundamental and important, trust. The definition of both, "confidence" and "trust", has been shown to be controversial (for example Endreß, 2002; Petermann, 1996) and therefore requires further discussion. This is valid particularly with respect to the psychosocial functions of trust in intercultural constellations (Atkinson, 1991; Vontress, 1976). The reason for that is simply that such constellations are often deeply influenced by the actors' expectations and experiences of the "otherness" or "strangeness." On the one hand, there is the necessity to clear off doubts and misunderstandings, and thus to try to bridge the cultural gap in order to continue communication. On the other hand, there is the reality that the clients are hard to reach because actually experienced cultural differences seem to increase the unavoidable risks of human encounters. These differences may transform such encounters into veritable adventures of social life. Without trust, there wouldn't be human interactions, but trust as a kind of psychosocial compensation of contingency within human relationships seems both more urgent and less probable. Lack of awareness of other persons' cultural rules, and high risks of disappointed in intercultural constellations makes trust less likely.

Trust is the most important element for further collaboration, since, according to the clients of our study, *"nothing works without trust."* The counselor describes trust, metaphorically, as being *"on the same wave length"* with his clients, emphasizing the difference between *"knowing somebody"* and *"knowing somebody properly."* This aspect has its consequences for the levels of relations as well as for the practice of counseling. Contrary to many of his colleagues, Alex was able to establish a trustful relationship with his clients, which goes beyond the level of "knowing somebody". Since Alex was able to gain deep and ongoing trust from his clients, he is the one who became the "the voice" for them.

"To get to know each other properly" requires certain efforts in advance made by the counselor. Those efforts are not only highly appreciated by the clients. Even more, these efforts are desired and – implicitly and unconsciously – expected by them.

Finally, we want to explore the criteria that were important for the process of "getting to know each other properly". How did the counselor bridge both personal and cultural differences? And what kind of intentional (symbolic) practice was applied by the counselor to establish and develop trust?

SELF-DISCLOSURE, SELF-REVELATIONS

In our case studies, self-disclosure or even self-revelations of the counselor were crucial for the process of getting to know each other properly. We can conclude from our research on counselor Alex's professional practice that self-disclosures (Bruner, 1990) established an important turning point in the relationship between the counselor and the client. It is this crucial point in time that differentiates two time-spaces and connected modes of being related to one another. On first appearance, clients have prejudices towards the counselors,

describing them in negative terms. One client for instance referred to his counselor as an “idiot” (*Depp*). Others think about their counselors as “educated weirdos.”

In self-disclosure the counselor is willing to reveal personal information about his own life, by means of narrating his own life-story. Alex becomes tangible for his clients. The way Alex uses this technique has an impact on the process of *the client's* opening up. From the client's point of view, the process seems to be “if you are opening up yourself, I will open up myself as well.” The former image of the counselor is revised. Whether the self-disclosure of the counselor displays and communicates “real facts” (or to what extent it does), may be set aside here as an open question. However, a certain degree or “intensity” of relatedness is created due to the fact that the counselor and client gradually approach one another. Moreover, the counselor shows trust in his client by revealing personal information about his autobiographical (and cultural) self. He sets an example to the client of what trust means by sharing personal knowledge.

Of course, self-disclosure isn't unique to counseling with clients from the former Soviet Union. What is rather significant for Sonne is that these self-disclosures take place during the prison visits and in the contact café, namely during the phase of low threshold social work. These are part of the efforts of the counselor to bridge cultural differences.

SHARED EXPERIENCES AS CRITERION FOR (MUTUAL) ACCEPTANCE

The counselor consciously relates to his clients by referring to shared experiences and in this vein, he can state “I know what it's like” in an authentic and plausible manner. Buchholz (2006), who differentiates “learnable” and “non-learnable” knowledge, describes shared experiences as the *competency of participatory knowledge*. This competency can also be referred to as competency of involvement which is often ascribed only to the client. In other words, counseling is carried out by a professional sharing similar experiences with his clients.

One can perceive that the counselors observed and interviewed in this research project feel related to their clients from the former USSR because they share some historically mediated experiences. They have something in common which let them feel related. The former Eastern Bloc especially turns into a horizon of identification. It is said that the Eastern part of Germany shared certain similarities with the former USSR on a political and social level and with regard to the living conditions and lifestyle before the German unification in 1989. Three out of the four interviewed counselors were born and raised in Eastern Germany and had emigrated to Western Germany before the unification; the fourth counselor moved from West Germany to East Germany. Thus, their non-learnable knowledge consists of their own practical and existential experiences of the East-West or West-East migration. They think that these experiences allow them to have more empathy and a deeper understanding of their clients.

Furthermore, counselor Alex and his clients share the experience of imprisonment. As a former dissident, Alex became a victim of persecution in the GDR and was imprisoned for his political agitation. Lastly, the counselor possesses knowledge of the drug scene not only in Germany but also in the former USSR. This knowledge of the drug scene (e.g. lifestyle and rituals, jargon, behavior, and therapeutic methods of treatment) belongs to the tool kit of an intercultural competent counselor who intends to cooperate with addicts from the former USSR appropriately and effectively. The clients appreciate this particular

familiarity with culture-specific meanings of drug addicts in the former USSR. According to Schachtner (1999), it is possible to „build a bridge between the counselor and the client based on one's own experience. However, Wienstroer (1999, p. 172) states that the combination of professionalism and personal involvement provides a particular way of becoming able to relate to potential clients. The competency of involvement enlarges and strengthens the counselor's action-potential. Thus, the counselor can display and perform important conditions for appropriate and effective counseling, including confidence, trust, respect and recognition.

EXPERTISE AS A REGULATOR OF ACCESS

It is important to the clients that their counselors not only have professional knowledge about drugs, but have expertise on working with clients of the former USSR. This expertise has many aspects. Besides Alex's experiences with clients belonging to this group, he also knows much about the contemporary history of his clients' country of origin and about the particular situation of addicts coming from the former USSR. Alex often spends holiday's in the former USSR in order to gain a better understanding of the country and its people. Therefore, Alex's expertise is part of his personal lifestyle that reflects his personal interest in the culture of the former USSR. His curiosity and thirst for knowledge are part of his activities outside his job and go far beyond the usual professional praxis.

Accordingly, the counselor can make intentional use of his specific cultural knowledge, for instance by addressing his Russian clients by their nicknames. The counselor even emphasizes that addressing a client by his nickname represents a very particular knowledge. Alex's statement that many social workers are not familiar with the positive effects of the usage of nicknames shows that he is applying his knowledge very consciously and pragmatically. The familiarity with socio-cultural conventions, linguistic rules and language games serves as instrument in order to create a close relationship to the client (without losing professional distance completely). According to Sanders (2005), one can understand these specific cultural forms of addressing a client by his or her nickname as so-called keywords needed to be learned by the counselor – not to impress his client, but to build empathy within the relationship of a counselor and his clients. Nevertheless, Alex also explains the dangers of an overhasty usage of such knowledge: only if the counselor and the client “know each other properly“, the counselor can make use of such specific cultural knowledge.

THE REAL INTEREST IN THE CLIENT – THE RELEVANCE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF EX- PRESSION

The curiosity of the counselor represents his real interest in his clients, their pasts, their countries of origin, and their living conditions. Beside his interest in his clients, reflected in Alex's personal lifestyle, the counselor offers his clients possibilities to express themselves in the course of a narrative counseling.² These communicative opportunities

² 'Narrative counseling' here, refers to a counseling practice that is linked specifically to narrations about ones own life. Accordingly, narrations become a significant part of counseling practice in which both the client (as in 'narrative psychotherapy') and the counselor, as mentioned above, explore and reflect through stories. These (often very different) narrations are an important issue for the process of developing a relationship before more formal counseling can start.

are of particular importance because they relate to concrete life paths and detailed experiences of the clients based on their origin and culture, their experiences with drugs and their personal life story. On the basis of this counseling practice Alex enables his clients to narrate their individual life stories and thereby attach meaning to their lives (Rosenthal, 1995, p. 167-185). Clients are stimulated to reflect upon their own past and are encouraged to understand their own identity (Chope, & Consoli, 2006; Winslade, & Monk, 2007; Brown, & Augusta-Scott, 2007). Furthermore, necessary processes of learning and awareness are triggered. Clients of the counseling institution Sonne represent a good example of how narration can trigger processes of learning because these clients report that they have learned in therapy to basically identify and formulate their own paths of life and problematic situation.

However, the stories mentioned by both the clients and the counselor Alex took place at the time and at the place of low threshold social work (contact café, prison work) and proved to be an advanced activity to be carried out by the counselor in order to facilitate the client's situation to approach the counseling process. Within the formal counseling process, which took place in the institution Sonne, problem solving strategies become the central point of counseling. Nevertheless, at the same time there is the desire to give these narrations even more space within the formal counseling.

One can conclude that by means of his personal interest in the culture, by his interest in the people of the former USSR, and by the relevance of opportunities for self expression, counselor Alex has acquired the necessary cultural background knowledge. This background knowledge enables the counselors to establish a deeper cultural and individual understanding of their clients. Clients are thereby given attention and are perceived and treated as individuals. These aspects finally lead to an open and communicative foundation which is characteristic for a trustful relationship and atmosphere. The narratives or stories which enable clients to open up are likewise the organizational characteristics of Sonne. In other words, these features reflect the institution's structure. The counselor Alex distinguishes this working method concretely from institutions that work by the rules. Alex alleges that the counselors working in such institutions would, in some way or another, be disinterested in their clientele and their cultural origin and/or way of living. This prejudice-related statement reflects an idea that his opinion is the right one.

Naturally, it is plausible to say that narrative counseling of this type cannot easily be realized with clients from the former USSR because of their limited German language skills or the limited language skills of counselors. Actually, language skills are often a problem within the counseling process. Accordingly, this process demands endurance and reflexivity from the counselor. He needs to allow temporal and contextual room for these interactions. Nevertheless, it is evident that the counselor thereby gives his clients the opportunity to become an expert on his own biographical and cultural self. By assigning the client with the status of an expert, the counselor has the chance to learn from his clients as well.

SETTING OF COUNSELING PREMISES

We will now turn to another important issue, which is the physical and social setting of the counseling premises. The focus of the discussions about counseling is often put on processes of communication. Hence, the premises where the counseling actually takes place are often disregarded, taken for granted, and rarely reflected (Großmaß, 2002). When

speaking of space here, we refer to social space which “becomes manifest in physical space as well as socio-cultural space, in institutions, and access to public space.” (ibid., p. 188) According to Großmaß, there are three central aspects of social space that are related to counseling: a.) the premises of a counseling institution as a setting, b.) counseling as a location within the socio-cultural space, and c.) the position within the public space. In the following, we will go into detail with the first aspect by explaining the meaning that the counseling premises can have for the establishment of a relationship between counselor and client. According to Großmaß (2002, 189), the “premises and the location of a counseling institution are of great importance to the first contact and not a banal matter of course.”

The fact that the counseling premises are relevant to the relationship between counselor and client becomes obvious from the remarks by the counselor when we initiated a discussion on the communicative situation of a counseling session. From the counselor's remarks one can conclude that the premises are directly related to the communicative relationship. In the counseling room being used by Alex, one can find a number of symbols of cultural localization such as a map of the former USSR with pins marking the places of origin of his clients. Furthermore, posters from the countries of origins of the clients are pinned to the walls, and Russian information brochures are displayed in the entrance area. Contrary to the recommendations made by Großmaß (2002), the furnishings and aesthetics in the Sonne are of a private and personal style: Alex considers the counseling room his second living room, a space that he is living in and represents his own second identity. The strong expression of those feelings indicates the grade of involvement of the counselor in his work and with his clients from the former USSR. The clients themselves find a piece of home (*Heimat*) and their own pasts in this setting. The furnishing of the counseling rooms appeals to his clients, which they find welcoming and are given a „spatial presence“ (cf. Großmaß, 2002). In short, the counseling institution is prepared for these particular clients. Many impressions influence and organize the structure of communication between counselor and client.

QUICK “GOING-INTO-ACTION” AND “ENACTMENT ASSISTANCE” – REAL, VISIBLE, AND PROMPT HELP

The next aspect, of importance to the phase of establishing contact, is the real, visible and prompt help offered by the counselor. His real, visible, and prompt help can be understood as “enactment assistance“, which enables the clients to act independently. On the basis of such “enactment assistance“, the image of the counselor becomes that of a professional assistant, somebody who is “always able to help“. Such expectations towards counseling – not only on the side of the client, but also on the side of the counselor do not always correspond with reality. Any lack of achievement of these goals is often blamed on the counselor (Osterloh, 2002, p. 52ff.). Most clients do not understand that drug addiction, and especially heroin addiction, are complex symptoms that take their time to heal and require a close examination as well as reconsideration of patterns of problem solving and behavior. Migrants from the former USSR often understand counseling, in a culture-specific way, as a kind of “mechanical repair“. Accordingly, if their expectations do not meet with the outcome, these clients often react with a lack of understanding or even with the termination of the counseling process. Consequently, the counselor is under

work stress. The counselor who does not want to lose his job needs the clients to justify his own job position. He is institutionally forced to become a good and hard-working counselor, even in meeting the unrealistic cultural expectations of his clients.

GENDER AND LANGUAGE

The majority of the research for this project took place in West Germany. However, three of the counselors were from the Eastern part of Germany. One of the counselors spoke Russian fluently. The other three counselors just had rudimentary knowledge of the Russian language. Hence, the clients were more or less forced to speak in German with their counselors since the counseling was performed in this language. This could be, but is not necessarily experienced as a handicap. The analysis of the counseling practice shows that many clients from the former USSR opted for German counselor Alex despite the fact that there was another counselor working in the counseling service who was a native speaker of Russian. One of the clients for example told me that he refers to Tanja (the Russian-speaking counselor) “only as a woman” and “not as a counselor.” Another client pointed out that he would never talk about his drug problems with a woman. Because of these representations of females by the clients, Tanja mostly only participates in everyday conversation. This perspective is a result of the general attitude toward women in the former USSR. They are seen as educators in a kindergarten or as teachers in a school.³

Consequently, language is not the only decisive point for the choice of a counselor, although its meaning is justifiably pointed out in the literature. In addition to the importance of gender, Alex points out that he as a person and a counselor also differs from other men in the way he is trusted. This suggests that being a man is an important aspect, but not worth as much without trust. However, the counselor's gender plays a significant role for the establishment of the relationship which gives the counseling process a structure.

CONCLUSION

The counseling institution Sonne offers a very particular, in some ways unique, approach towards the clients. The commitments of counselor Alex through actions to create trust before the actual counseling process starts, on the one hand, and the organization and working methods of the institution, on the other hand, simplify the establishment of relationships. It is up to the client to decide how far he wants to go within the process of establishing the contact and at what point in time he is prepared to open up to the counselor. This informal way of getting in contact with each other can be understood as a client-oriented working method of an institution that helps clients make use of the services. However, it is important to note that the counselor's role is a balancing act, since he also runs the risk of being exploited by his clients. Naturally, the level of his clients' cooperation is often unequal to his own concessions. However, it is also important to note that the act of getting to know each other properly is a fundamental prerequisite for a relationship between counselor and client, which in turn is based on trust.

In general, one can draw the following important lesson for counseling clients from the former USSR: The distrust on the part of clients from the former USSR towards psychosocial counseling services needs to be taken seriously. In this context, it is important

³ This statement is from a conversation with a scientist from the former USSR.

that counseling institutions meet the basic need of the clients, that is, to interact with other people as well as to relate to the counselor. Clients need to communicate in a culturally adequate and effective manner, since this aspect is the starting point for building up trust. Clients need positive experiences they can relate to before any successful counseling process can start. According to Niklas Luhmann, it is impossible to build up trust without “a guiding principle and without preceding experiences.” (Luhmann, 1973, p. 20) Despite the fact that this process of establishing contact is very time-consuming it finally pays off in the actual counseling sessions, since trust “strengthens the present in its potentiality” (Luhmann, 1973, p. 16) and allows the counselor to deal with more complexity within the psychosocial counseling situation.

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