Discussion session:

Values – socially constructed and phronetic capacity

Prof. Reinhard Stelter, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

In times when fake news are a frightening phenomenon and identity and self-concept are becoming increasingly fragile, we need to reflect on what we as people stand for. Our current times promote a sense of restlessness where life is not always perceived as meaningful but instead often makes us slaves to self-control and our own performance drive. We need to reflect upon who we are, whom we want to be and at the end of the line reflect upon moral values as a guiding source for our action.

By following the post-structural tradition social constructionism challenges the notion of universal truths. Some people might understand social constructionism as a theory of knowledge that might fall into the trap of pure relativism. Therefore, it is important to advocate an *epistemic relativism* while unreservedly *rejecting a moral relativism.* In his book *Invitation to Social Constructionism* Gergen (2009) clarifies this moral position by indicating a move from relativism to relational responsibility, a position that gives the discussion about morality a new, relational foundation. In Gergen's perception, a statement such as 'That simply cannot be tolerated!' reflects a first-order morality. This form of moral view is related to a notion of good versus evil. Gergen strives for a second-order morality, which requires a focus on the community, and which he describes as follows:

> In the case of second-order morality, individual responsibility is replaced by relational responsibility, a collective responsibility for sustaining the potentials of coordinated action. To be responsible to relationships is, above all, to sustain the process of co-creating meaning. … In being responsible for relationships we step outside the individualist tradition; care for the relationship becomes primary. (ibid., p. 364; italics in original)

Certainly, this position is relevant and important. Nevertheless, for a further discussion I would like to go beyond second-order morality as a central issue for any social organisation, like family, team, community or corporation. I would like to discuss the issue of values as an expression of an 'I can'.

Reflecting on values gives individuals a strong basis for being able to act. Values emerge when we immerse ourselves in what is meaningful and most important in our lives. Values ensure a readiness to act, individually and as social organisms. Values also come to the forefront in conflict situations and acknowledged dilemma situations. Examining values or central concepts and themes helps prepare us to act with confidence, consistence and commitment. Values are a key anchor point for our identity and a link between our ethical convictions and our actions.

Society forces individuals to be self-surveillant

The current situation in society has dramatic consequences on how we see and reflect upon ourselves. In his book *The Burnout Society,* Han (2015), a Korean-German philosopher, argues that

our competitive societies are dominated by the *supremacy of positivity.* According to Han, "Yes, we can" becomes the energizing motto to live by (with the consequence of satiation, overcapacity, communication overload, hyperactivity and multitasking), which generally leads to a state of shallow attention. However, the individual is left with severe psychosocial consequences ranging from tiredness, exhaustion, burnout, depression and attention deficit disorder to borderline personality disorder. Inconveniently people can no longer identify and target an external enemy, rather the enemy is the individual him or herself. Individuals become focused on their own performance, and control is based on *surveillance of one's own performance*. We live in a control society where self-disciplining has become increasingly intensified during the last decade, a trend that is resulting in disempowerment. In societies organized on the basis of neoliberal ideas, self-disciplining becomes the central issue that dominates the social discourse of society and thereby our social relations.

We live in a time when we have forgotten the art of lingering. A narrow focus on goals, a constant quest to move on and the fear of missing out (FoMO) lead to a sense of restlessness, where life does not always appear meaningful, but often makes us slaves to our own self-control and performance drive. The growing tendency to self-monitor is further promoted via 'likes' and constant 'updates' from our 'friends' on social media. To get a sense of being our own masters we need to pause, to reflect and to stop always striving for the next achievement.

Values – more than just a moral issue

As a counterpoint to this trend, Han (2017) – in his book *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering* – reaches back to a concept from Heidegger, Besinnung – reflective thought – and the *vita contemplativa*. In order to find our way back to ourselves and regain our strength, we need to be able to linger – on our own, with a coach, with a colleague, with a friend or in a group of people who share this desire. We need to reflect on what we stand for and in specific situations we need to *stand firm* as the Danish psychologist Svend Brinkmann (2017) expresses it in his book with the same title.

Values can be considered a central part of our identity and, as such, are an essential point of reference for different forms of developmental and transformative dialogues. They connect our actions to our convictions. A value implies the capacity to act and grasps our implicit readiness to do things in a way that is fully in accordance with our experience, knowledge and beliefs. In his book *The New Protreptic – The concept and the Art*, Kirkeby (2009), a professor of leadership philosophy, describes a value as a perceived sense of "'I can' based on knowledge, and a knowledge of what we have done, and will be able to do, and guided by ethical imagination by both deliberate and intuitive judgment" (p. 156). Deliberate judgment can be related to and unfolded in conversations where people who need help or support are invited to explore an important and perhaps challenging situation in depth, and where they can find key elements of what may be most important for them. In our daily life, these value judgements are often pre-reflective, embodied and intuitively anchored in a specific situation. We have a sense of the event or situation and act on the basis of earlier experience, a *phronetic capacity*. Phronesis is a central

concept in Greek philosophy (often translated as practical knowledge) and was described by Aristotle (1999, book 6) as a virtue and set of states. On this he wrote that, "practical wisdom [phronesis], then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human good" (p. 95).

In narrative-collaborative practice as described in my book *A Guide to Third Generation Coaching* (Stelter, 2014) the exploration of values is part of the unfolding of the *landscapes of identity,* which supports coachees in their efforts to make sense of their life and work. Here, value reflection and meaning making take place in a process of both social negotiation and individual reflections. It is in this reflective process that the dialogue between both/all parts can be on specific values, convictions, aspirations, ambitions or dreams which play an essential role in developing a firm personal foundation and driving force for action.

The intention with this session is:

- to initiate a dialogue for the groups of participants about specific values (e.g. care, courage, responsibility) based on a specific structure that will be presented in order to facilitate the group reflections (personal experience of what I have tried to describe seems to be the best way to go)
- to discuss what values are as a concept and how the idea of value reflection fits / does not fit to social constructionism
- to discuss the further development of social constructionism and possible supplements from other theoretical positions (e.g. phenomenology)