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Invitation to a change of perspective:

The potential of the Marte Meo method from a clinical-psychotherapeutical point of view(*)



Abstract:

The main medium of psychosocial counselling and psychotherapy is communication. In the last couple of years, counselling methods like Marte Meo that are led by observations and based on video recordings have been developed. This article illustrates how these forms of working can enrich and complement the traditional form of therapeutic communication in a sensible way.

»Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward.« [Søren Kierkegaard]

1. Preliminary note

This aphorism by *Søren Kierkegaard* also characterises the Marte Meo method, since a key element of the method is to review situations and moments of the past. In this process, the clients⁽¹⁾, as they are described in this book, are invited to look at themselves in a social situation of the past. The term retrospect or »review« stands in a

strong associative meaning with the terms »consideration« and »respect« in German.⁽²⁾ In the counselling sessions, a situation from daily life is looked at and this happens, as it is illustrated at length in this book(*) and the DVD, in retrospect in the context of a respectful advisory or therapeutic setting. (see also Marte Meo information No. 09, Ch. 3.1.1.)(*)

As it is the case in all therapeutic relationships, the respect for a person's dignity is part of the work's basis, especially since the review always exhibits an asymmetric structure in counselling methods like Marte Meo that are led by observations. The images from the video reveal one of the clients' personal situations, which cannot be revised, added to or changed in any way. The clients show themselves exactly in the way in which they have behaved.

The only thing that is modifiable is the meaning that is attributed to the respective moments and scenes by the observers. Therefore, the discussions surrounding the presented images call for respectful and empathic comments, which in turn can point out or open up new positive opportunities for development and support. Such a setting for communication makes it easier for the client to take encouragement from it and to accept the invitation for a change of perspective in regard to themselves and their particular situation.

A respectful attitude towards the images and thus towards the person's dignity shown in them is a »conditio sine qua non«, especially in times of a widely spread abuse of video images in the digital world – and not only in psychosocial fields of work.

The following thoughts seek to point out connections between Marte Meo counselling and coaching processes that are led by observations and psychotherapeutic work that is more strongly based on communication. In doing so, they deepen and expand reasoning that have been brought forward elsewhere (Hawellek, 1995, 1997, 2005, 2006, 2011, 2012).

It is a particular concern of the present article to emphasise the impact of *Daniel Stern's* work for working with the Marte Meo method. But a systematic and extensive appreciation of his contribution to the theoretical foundation of the observation-led and video-based work with Marte Meo would go beyond the scope of this article and therefore has to take place elsewhere.

2. Represented beliefs and self-images

In the work with the Marte Meo method, images and scenes that show learning and development opportunities for the clients are presented. This creates a chance for new opinions and understandings of social situations and – with a view to oneself – for new perceptions of one's own possibilities and abilities.

In contrast, if one refers to self-images in the context of psychotherapeutic theory and practice, it normally does not connote images in the literal sense but ideas and opinions, that is to say beliefs about oneself. As soon as these ideas are communicated to others, they become reports, stories and narratives about the self. Self-images, in a manner of speaking, are in this context rather a metaphor that summarises important information about oneself in a word image, a symbol. If I, for example, think of myself as a loser, then that is a narrative, an orally composed idea, which I concentrate into a metaphor. Such beliefs about oneself are linked to certain expectations in regard to oneself as well as to the anticipation of expectations that others will have in me, the so called »anticipated expectations« (v. Schlippe, Schweitzer, 2012, 116ff.). Thus, a loser is, for example, the centralisation of various ideas in a comprehensible narrative that emphasises one single aspects of the person concerned – in this case a negative one – as the organising characteristic of the whole. From the point of view of the person-orientated systemic theory (Kriz, 1997, 2004), such descriptions become »attractors of meaning« that »enslave« a complex series of events in one special aspect and in this way form a pattern that can be quickly recognized. In a similar way, a short story becomes a joke by means of a punchline. Such culminations of narratives organise our images of the self and the world into meaningful and quickly communicable contents: »It's typical that he only receives letters of refusal, he is and will remain a loser«. The tendency to categorise others as well as oneself in such typifications might correspond to the human need to fit the complexity of life and experiences with a short, recognisable and communicable format. Narratives like that of the loser are created in social interactions with the significant others and then find their way into the self-descriptions of the people concerned, and thus they become presumptions of oneself. Many of these narratives are outlined in a rough way and generalise things. They freeze the process of life into a positive or negative partial aspect of the personality and insinuate this to be a permanent state.

In this way, many psychiatric diagnoses also assume a stigmatising social function (Goffman, 1974; Hawellek, 2012, 20ff.); for example, if an eight year old boy introduces himself in the children therapy group with the words »My name is Dennis and I have ADHD«. Such a statement reveals to what extent the »diagnostic« stigmatization has made its way into the child's self-image and continues to dominate it. At the same time, it becomes apparent what kind of expectations and anticipated expectations are connected with this and how they are prompted by the boy's social environment. From a clinical point of view, negative self-descriptions also have a stabilising function. In our example, they make it possible for the boy to keep the relationships to the significant attachment figures stable, to adapt himself to a superiority that holds the power to define as it were. Hence, these self-descriptions can be seen as creative solutions to a personal dilemma. The task of the therapeutic work is to understand this dilemma, to mirror it and to then look for more positive solutions. The verbal equivalent for an image is an abstract term or catchword as a fixed description. Many tools, e.g. of the systemic therapy, aim to deconstruct fixed descriptions that generate problems, to expand their meaning, to debunk⁽³⁾ their nonsense or to offer possible alternative meanings. In most cases, these deconstructions work with substantiations and distinctions: »Once a loser, always a loser«; – but also while eating or sleeping for instance? In systemic counselling⁽⁴⁾, the change of meaning is caused predominately by means of linguistic tools like various question – reframing – or externalisation techniques. A general objective of the therapeutic-advisory work is to change (self-)descriptions that generate problems and to support the clients in developing a realistic, differentiated and finely nuanced self-images.

The internalised, represented self-images of the self or to be more precise: self-descriptions are considered to be constitutive parts of an individual's identity. Identity has both social and personal dimensions⁽⁵⁾, which merge and work together in one's experience of oneself. That what has been and is being said to me and about me has and will become part of my self-descriptions.

With an increasingly emotional and cognitive maturity, I can challenge those statements towards and about me and distance myself from them, for example in the following way: »It's always me who decides what kind of criticism I accept and what sort of conclusions

I will draw from it«. This ability to reflect and to critically question statements is the result of a maturing, development and learning process. To learn and to expand the ability of self-reflection is another essential element of the psychotherapeutic work.

In most cases, children and many teenagers cannot (yet) distance themselves from what is said to and about them. Because of their social and emotional dependency on attachment figures and peer groups, the comments from significant people have immediate access to the children's self-experience and consequently to their self-images.

Beliefs about oneself are often associated with memories of concrete scenes and settings. Those scenes, whether remembered or imagined, are put into a narrative format and become stories. These are the verbal equivalents to experienced or fantasized scenes. The telling of stories has always played a central role in the counselling and therapy process. Part of the scenes relevant for the narratives, however, cannot be actively remembered anymore and thus remains – using the language of depth psychology – in the subconscious. It is the purpose of the psychotherapeutic work to connect with meaningful scenarios and to enable the client to experience a »scenic understanding«. Scenic understanding gets to the bottom of the scenes behind a situation that has been experienced or just been narrated. An empathic understanding and also a »revising re-experiencing« (Sperber, 1971, 144) of important scenes, as it takes places, for example, in the more dramatic forms of psychotherapy⁽⁶⁾, can then result in a different re-telling of one's own history, a more accepting understanding of oneself and thus become a new orientation for future actions.

When looking at concrete scenes, it is of emotional importance how the people concerned speak to and interact with one another. The inflection, the gestures and the accompanying facial expression create a particular and very specific relationship atmosphere, which lends every statement its own distinctive signature. As »moving emotional powers« (Schmitz, 1989) these forms of expression create the respective relationship atmosphere. Relationship atmospheres act in a meta-communicative way in relation to what is being said. Thus, the meaning of a comment is directly connected to the concrete communication situation, since the manner in which people speak comments on their talking through melody and timbre of the voice, facial expressions and posture, matters of fact that have been recognized, discussed and re-

searched in detail by systemic therapists of the early days (Watzlawick, 1974; Bateson, 1985).

In the context of a video observation, the way to communicate a specific moment, the form of vitality in communication (Stern, 2011), can be immediately experienced.

Naturally, it makes a crucial difference whether a statement is made by a close or by an unfamiliar person. Depending on the child's age and maturity(?), significant experiences of relationships are remembered and assembled into a schema of spending time together (Stern, 1992; Vik, Rhode, 2012) and eventually into an internal working model (Bowlby, 1975). The development of self-images, in the sense of beliefs about oneself, therefore cannot be separated from the experiences of relationships that are concrete and present in the memory and those scenes associated with them (Hawellek, 2012).

In summary, self-images can be understood as socialised beliefs or concepts that are encapsulated in characterising ideas about oneself; in our example: »I'm just naturally a loser«. Such ideas lead to characteristic models of expectations, which in turn put the spotlight on certain positive or negative aspects of events experienced. This, on the other hand, sets the stage for what is widely known as self-fulfilling prophecy: that what I expect to happen will happen because the interpretational patterns of my perception are only geared towards the expected (partial) aspects of a situation. Incidents that do not fit the expectation hypothesis are blended out or interpreted accordingly: »Well, yes, this time I was lucky ... and as for once, I'm lucky, it will surely take a turn for the worse soon...«

The self-images that are the focus of the psychotherapy are mostly negative or sometimes exaggerated beliefs about oneself and the social environment. The expectation patterns linked to these have for their part the tendency to affirm themselves. These beliefs and patterns are tested in the context of the therapeutic work. Inner images and self-images change in the course of one's life as do the people that live with these images. They age, mature and become more experienced.

However, these adjustments and changes do not always proceed synchronously. Thus, the parents' perceptions of their children often do not change parallel to their child's steps of development. This, of course,

also is true the other way around for the children's ideas regarding their parents. In many relationships, »antiquated« or even »fixed« ideas of the other prevail. An essential part of the therapeutic work consists of reconsidering and updating these ideas.

The Marte Meo method, which is led by current observations, is optimally suited to carry out such reality-checks and to update old images. In the context of the work with Marte Meo, this takes place by means of the presentation of images and scenes of current situations taken from daily life.

3. The presentation of images and scenes in the counselling session

In the work with the Marte Meo method, the clients are shown images that are provided with development supportive information and altogether, these are presented in a supportive way. The information that is connected with the scenes is supposed to be easily comprehensible and transferable into the client's daily life.

In this procedure, the clients' represented beliefs meet the images the therapist presents. In the course of this, it is inevitable that differences occur between what the clients expect to see and that what is actually shown.

That what is actually being presented and can then be seen creates a new »adequately unusual« situation for the client as an observer. This can produce new information for the client, that is to say a »difference that makes the difference« (Bateson, 1985). »The unusual experience that they (the clients, C.H.) need must be something »adequately unusual«. If the unusual does not differ enough from the usual, it won't make any difference. The same applies, if the unusual is too unusual. Only the appropriately unusual has an effect« (Andersen, 1998, 23).

Accordingly, the images that are presented in the context of the work with Marte Meo first of all join the clients' experiences and then represent a new element: a resource in oneself, in another person involved or an opportunity to change specific behavioural patterns that has not been apparent before. Hence, a moment of suspense (arousal) is created, which is dissolved by development supportive information.

Thus, the presentation of selected moments makes the clients' perception of positive new information possible, which the clients can recognise and use later on in daily life.

Small and seemingly insignificant moments from daily life are presented in the video counselling sessions, so-called micro events whose clinical significance has been elaborated especially by *Daniel Stern*.

Stern was an outstanding researcher of babies, development psychologist, psychoanalyst and an important pioneer of the observation-led counselling and therapy. With his works on an infant's life experience (1992) and on the constellation of motherhood (1998), he has written down essential ideas about conditions for, dynamics and contents of natural development supportive communication. With his more recent articles on the moment of now (2010) and on forms of vitality (2011), he has presented different therapy methods with universal concepts that are suited to place an observation-led counselling and therapy form like Marte Meo on a new foundation (*Vik, Rohde, 2012*).

The concepts of the moments of now and the form of vitality are phenomenological ones, that is to say they are in line with observations and experiences and describe different dimensions of subjective and intersubjective experiences. They will be considered in more detail here after in regard to their significance for the work with Marte Meo.

3.1. Moments of now

The concept of moments of now depicts the time formats of those short »lived stories«, from which we concentrate our experiences (»chunk«) and then narratively form them into our lengthy (self-)descriptions. *Stern* examines the temporal structure of now moments and assumes an average duration of one to ten seconds for them. This is a timeframe in which – under normal circumstances – the majority of social and intersubjective experiences can be processed. Without being explicitly stated, the experiences are organised into »plots«, that is to say short episodic stories.

The structuring questions for the plots are »who-, what-, where-, when-, why- and what for-/how-« questions that, as *Stern* mentions (2010, 73), can also be used by journalists or during a criminological research, in order to capture concisely and describe pointedly, for example, an unknown series of events, also both economically and quickly.

Therefore, the so-called »3Ws«, »WHEN | WHAT | WHY«, the »Marte Meo-3W-counselling system« (see Marte Meo information No. 10, Ch. 3.1.3) also play a structuring role in the preparation of development-orientated plots (*Aarts, J., 2007; Aarts, M., 2011; Hawellek,*

2012) and hence the preparation of a development-orientated thought and communication structure in Marte Meo counselling sessions. (*Aarts, M., 2005, 2006, 2008.*)⁽⁸⁾

The organisation of a series of events into plots also requires an »event«, a sort of encounter with something that is new in that moment. In the gestalt psychology, one describes this correlation also as a requirement for morphogenesis. Those things that appear in the perceptual field at that time and are identified as »new« or »adequately unusual« in relation to individual experiences (*Andersen, 1998*) and to this effect disrupts the stream of consciousness, lead to new experiences.

Consequently, an arc of suspense is simultaneously introduced, which transforms the otherwise insignificant scene into a tellable story. The stories that are referred to in this context are mostly everyday, small moments as *Stern* describes them in his micro interviews about incidents during breakfast, for example when one realises that there is no butter left (*ibid. 234ff.*).

In the work with Marte Meo, the arc of suspense is created through the way in which the therapist announces, presents and comments the video clips. The development encouraging information shows the resources that are already visible as well as new opportunities in many similar future moments of now in the clients' lives.

What happens in a moment of now, *Stern* also calls »micro event« (*Vik, Rhode, 2012*). It constitutes the observation window for courses of experienced events and relationship patterns, which is significant in the video interaction analysis. Hence, moments of now provide exactly that length of experience during which beneficial as well as problematic relationship moments are experienced and structured into a plot. By the means of a video interaction analysis, they can then be visualised and be presented as well as discussed in the Marte Meo counselling session (*Aarts, Rausch, 2009*).

Moments of now that are insignificant when seen individually can thus be regarded as some kind of »sediment of experience and memory« of human socialisation. It is an important objective of the work with Marte Meo to raise the quality of these moments, since »a good moment leads to a better day, a better day leads to a better week, a better week contributes to shape a better life.« (*Aarts, pers. comment*)

The focus on small, insignificant but consistently development supportive moments and opportunities in everyday relationships also structures the video interaction analysis in the work with Marte Meo. It requires some training, in order to be able to find these small supportive now moments and to present them in an inviting way in the context of a counselling session. Therefore, the so-called Marte Meo checklists, that can be found in the relevant literature (Aarts, M., 2011; Aarts, J., 2007; Aarts, Rausch, 2009; Bünder et al., 2009; Hawellek, 2012; this book Ch. 7B and 7C; see also Marte Meo information No. 11, Ch. 3.2.), constitute important guidelines for finding suitable moments in scenes for specific clients and situations. The checklists describe very concretely how the video clips can be watched in order to find development supportive moments and opportunities.

► **Example:**

In the context of a Marte Meo counselling of the team of a day care centre, the morning gathering in a circle is filmed in order to gain an insight into the social-emotional development of individual children and to show the employees how they can purposefully support the children's development in the daily routine of the day care centre. In the course of this, it is noticeable that certain children neither lift their heads nor look around in order to receive social signals during the morning gathering. Thus, these children miss the positive faces of their teachers when they address them. Because of this observation, the employees are given the advice to call the children in question by their names in a friendly tone and to then wait for a reaction from these children.

In a video that is recorded two weeks later, one can see how the children have started to look in their teachers' faces while they are speaking. The team of the day care centre is moreover advised to »expand« these positive moments from now on, to give them more permanence and intensity and thus to stabilise the positive social experience in different relationship moments. ◀

This example suggests that those particular children were not able to develop any stable positive experiences in social situations with adults to date; a fact that lets one conclude that negative inner working models (Grossmann, Grossmann, 2004, 413ff.) in regard to the contact with adults exist. These were possibly caused by previous experiences with important attachment figures.

The Marte Meo therapists' advice regarding possibilities of reshaping social micro events create a realm of experience for the development of alternative and new experiences and patterns in relationships.

3.2. Forms of vitality

Stern calls forms of expression of vitality or forms of vitality for short that which invests an episode in a relationship with vitality and uniqueness. Forms of vitality can be derived from gestures and evidently belong to the communicative basic equipment of our evolutionary heritage. They are – in relation to interpersonal courses of action – part of our implicit knowledge of relationships (*Stern*, 2011, 145). Forms of vitality linger in the memory. »Dynamic forms of vitality are part of our episodically memories. They give life to the narratives in which we express our biography« (*Stern*, 2011, 22). A form of vitality is the distinctive signature of an experience: »They invest the subject matter (of an experience, C.H.) with an outline of time and intensity and therefore with the effect of an animate »presentation«. The subject matter can be an emotion, an emotional change, a train of thought, it can consist of physical or mental movements, of a memory, a phantasy, a useful measure, a routine of dance steps or an image from a film.« (ibid. 36). *Stern* points out that dynamic forms of vitality can only exist if the experience activates the arousal system of the person who makes this very experience (ibid. 36). This happens, for example, when an »adequately unusual« (see above) presentation of video clip causes a moment of curiosity in a Marte Meo counselling session.

Forms of vitality are experienced immediately. They can only be translated into words by means of very detailed descriptions. In films, however, the observer is much closer to the action and can take in the dynamic forms of expression of vitality. S/he can experience the overall impression of a statement, the posture, the facial expression, the quality of the tone of voice, the intensity and the movement of gestures in the communication and immediately empathise with the course of action. In this sense, the scenes and images speak »for themselves«, they do not need a translation into language.

Nevertheless, it makes a significant difference how one talks about images and scenes that one has observed shortly before, what kind of plots are made up in regard to the events.

The work with Marte Meo organises the discussion about the presented images and scenes according

to the guideline that seeks to enable, support and to stabilise positive developments. Thus, it is about reading the development message behind the behaviour- or relationship-related problems (Aarts, 2005; see also Marte Meo information No. 2, Ch. 1.6.) and to then find suitable opportunities to purposefully support the child's development. That way, »dysfunctional« children become children with special needs and hence children that make special demands of their environment.

The presentation of images and scene also depends on how one works with the camera. »It (the camera, C.H.) can record its object from near or far (long shot, knee shot, medium shot, close-up). The distance is similar to the intensity. The closer the camera is to its object, the sharper is the focus of attention and the greater the increase of arousal. Close-ups contain a typical momentum because they breach our personal boundaries and thus ignore our comfort zone. (...) The opposite is true for the decrescendo of the camera movement, that is to say the gradual distancing, that seems like a retreat and results in a fading of tension, a psychological „distancing“ – a characteristic form of vitality.« (Stern, 2011, 124; also cf. Bänder et al., 2009, 385ff.).

This short illustration makes clear – similar to the telling of a story – that the filming of events is never neutral. On the contrary: through the selection of moments and the particular camera work, the observers' experiences are directly influenced.⁽⁹⁾ It applies for the work with films in general and consequently also for Marte Meo that through the manner of the presentation a kind of »second reality« is created. The »second« reality refers to the presentation of scenes and images from the recorded, the pictured »first« reality. Through the manner of the presentation »therapeutic moments of now become possible«, which can have a great, sometimes even revolutionary impact (Stern, 2010, 57). In this context, Aarts occasionally speaks about »eye openers« or »emboldening images«.

In regard to the quality of the presentations, the professional work context, the »setting« and the therapist-client relationship play a decisive role. At the same time, the work with Marte Meo is governed by highly professional and ethical standards that account for a responsible advisory and therapeutic conduct (Aarts, 2011; Bänder et al., 2009; Hawellek, 2012).

It becomes clear in the remarks on the dynamic forms of expression of vitality that each expression is unique in every moment. Nevertheless, the forms of vitality can be classified e.g. on the basis of different progressions (Stern, 2011, 17ff.). This happens, for example, with musical forms of vitality by means of the identifications of the tempi as *adagio* (slow, calm), *moderato* (moderate), *allegro* (quick, lively) etc., which can also be stated more precisely by using additional descriptions like *allegro amoroso* (loving) or *moderato con dolore* (with distress). Changes in the tempi and their typical progressions can also become part of the descriptions like *accelerando* (accelerating) or *ritentuo* (contained).

If one now considers the interpersonal dynamic of communication, one can also distinguish context-specific forms of vitality in communication. For example, one can make out several forms of parental presence in the contact with children.

3.3. Forms of presence

In the last few years, the concept of parental presence (Omer, v. Schlippe, 2002, 2004) in the therapeutic work with parents has become increasingly important. If one looks at the parent-child-relationships at a microscopic level, one can distinguish two basic forms of parental presence, that can also be said to be two dynamic and complementary forms of vitality (Hawellek, 2013a): the following and the guiding paternal presence. Both forms of presence are at the same time forms in which the parents present themselves in concrete situations. They are forms of vitality go along with, support and orchestrate the child's socialisation process. They correspond with the infantile basic development tasks of individuation and personality development one the one hand, and the need to integrate oneself into social situation on the other hand.

In the following moments of a parent-child-relationship, parental presences appear as such:

- Parents contribute to a positive and accepting relationship atmosphere by means of a friendly tone of voice and an open face;
- Parents wait for the child's (re)actions;
- Parents notice, affirm and name the child's focus of attention (see Hawellek, 2013a).

The forms of vitality of this kind of presence comes across as friendly and accepting and therefore has tension easing, calming and supportive effect. It conveys support, security and a feeling of being accepted. The children are encouraged to trust their own ideas and initiatives and to embrace and get to know them and thus themselves better using the mirror of the parental reactions. A key element of the following presence is an essential part of the intuitive parental abilities: the attunement between parents and children. »In the attunement, the mother matches her actions to the dynamic qualities of the child's actions. In this way, she signalsises the baby that she has understood what it has done. However, she does not repeat the content and the modality of its action, but presents it with her own modality that has an individual content. This reassures the child that she has understood how that what the baby has done has felt. She has not imitated it, but has „translated“ its behaviour „into her own words“ – this carries her signature. It is something that she has also felt. She has effected an attunement of inner emotional states.« (Stern, 2011, 148)

Based on the attunement with the child, the parents name the child's initiatives. They do this by saying what the child does, what it might think and feel. Thus, the child gets to know the »world of words« and later the »world of stories« (Stern, 1996).

Parents who follow their children become familiar with their children's world of actions and ideas, their transformations and development.

The guiding form of parental presence provides structure and orientation:

- Parents name what they are going to do in the next moment and what the children could do. Thus, they become observable and predictable for the children. At the same time, they help the children to get to know options and courses of action. (see Marte Meo information No. 07, Ch. 1.13.2.5.2.)
- Parents affirms the children's (re)actions that are appropriate in the respective situation. In doing so, they provide the children with the confidence to act adequately and successfully in similar future moments.
- Parents name their thoughts and feelings in the actual moment and help the children to »read«

the parents' ideas and feelings. In this way, they support their children in connecting with other people's emotional processes and in developing empathy. They help the children to recognise that and how other people think, feel and judge and thus stimulate the mentalization processes of their children (v. Schlippe, Schweitzer, 2012, 302ff.). (see Marte Meo information referred to in annotation 10)⁽¹⁰⁾

- Parents say »I« and »you« and hence emphasise that people have different opportunities and points of view and also make different decisions (Aarts, 2011, 128; also see Marte Meo information No. 12, Ch. 3.2.4.).
- Parents use sounds of cooperation and guidance and communicate in this way that they occupy the guiding parental position.

Attunement between parents and children is also a key element of communication in the guiding parental presence. Stern mentions the following example:

► »A child is delighted that it is allowed to use a friend's toy gun at his/her house and lets out a cry of joy. If the mother is by no means happy but does not react too harshly or does not want to reprimand the child in front of other people, she can show her disagreement in a modified form. If the child shouting with acclaim has been, for example, very loud and long, she can produce a sound that is much more muted and slightly shorter. In other words: she performs a „deliberate“ disagreement and purposefully does not match the dynamic qualities of her expression to that of her child, but presents it with a form of vitality that indicates: „Toy guns don't make me happy in any way; I don't like that you are so delighted about it, but I've understood that you are.“« (Stern, 2011, 149) ◀

It is not difficult to notice that two different forms of expressions of vitality are also present in the following and guiding parental presence. A positive mirroring attitude towards the child's initiatives is characteristic for the following parental presence. In the guiding presence, the parents state clearly how they want to shape the situation. For this purpose, they name their own thoughts and feelings as well as their initiatives and the relevant possible courses of action in a shared experience.

Both types of presence are in line with the requirements of the respective situations: Daily life consists of an interplay between moments of following and moments of guidance. With this in mind, both forms of presence complement each other like the white and black keys of a piano. Together, they form a set of tools that accompanies the children in different contexts of experiences and actions. Because of the situational interplay of following and guidance, the children learn to identify social contexts confidently and competently.

4. On the potential of an observation-led work with Marte Meo

The presentation of images and scenes in the work with Marte Meo leaves an immediate impression of the events just observed. No indirect route via language is necessary in order to imagine oneself in that particular setting and to identify with the protagonists and their experiences. Special moments and the forms of vitality of the people involved are experienced from a distance, which is secured and organised by the setting of the counselling or the therapy. Marte Meo therapists use many opportunities in order to professionally direct the observers' gaze in a presentation.⁽¹⁾ This includes the selection of moments and short scenes, the freezing of images for highlighting moments, the repetition of a scene according to a particular perspective, close-ups of the people involved, fast-forwarding and rewinding the film etc. On that note, every presentation carries the signature of the one that gives it. Concerning the technical possibilities of a film presentation, *Stern* notes: »All these technologies are an interplay between different forms of vitality.« (ibid. 125)

In the Marte Meo counselling, the selection of video clips takes place according to different guidelines. The guideline when working with children and adolescents is to discover one's own possibilities in certain situations and to purposefully develop these (*Rausch*, 2011). The examples in this book should be understood in the context of this guideline.

When working with parents, focus is mostly on making the development processes and needs of children visible in daily life and on conveying advice regarding the support of those.

As it is the case with all forms of counselling, the Marte Meo counselling is embedded in a professional

system. For that matter, the relationship between therapist and client plays a crucial role in addition to the subjects discussed in the counselling sessions.

4.1. The significance of the therapist-client relationship

What takes place during the counselling session is the professional contribution for meeting the agenda and for reaching the goals of the therapy. In the course of this, the Marte Meo therapist has several tasks. These include, additionally to the responsibility for a professional counselling setting (*Hawellek*, 2012, 13ff.), the selection and presentation of adequate moments and short scenes in the counselling session or the review with the clients. The review with the clients is informed by a shared observation of significant moments and scenes. The existing resources and the opportunity to use them are stressed by means of the images and hence a positive development is activated.

It suggests itself that such a review also has to take place in a development supportive environment in order to cause the desired effect. The review checklists represent an important orientation for the shaping of or a precise »participation« in the shaping of the review (*Aarts, J.*, 2009, 103ff.; *Aarts, M.*, 2011, 110ff.; this book Ch. 7A/7C.)

According to all relevant studies, a trusting and stable therapeutic-advisory relationship is both requirement and basis for effective counselling and therapy. In the work with Marte Meo, one aims for a therapeutic relationship in which the clients' experiences with the images are understood, commented and evaluated by the Marte Meo therapist.

In order to do that, Marte Meo therapists require, in addition to their professional expertise, the ability to build, maintain, cultivate and end a supporting and clarifying relationship with the client. Therefore, Marte Meo is an excellent additional tool for well-trained and experienced counsellors and therapists. Working with the images and scenes from the client's daily lives enriches the therapeutic material with possibilities of a directly witnessing and re-experience those scenes. It creates, to use *Stern's* words in a slightly modified way, many opportunities for now moments that can be used in a therapeutic context. The work with images is geared towards the clients' visible resources and opportunities for development and thus creates perspectives of development and concrete changes in daily life for them.

4.2. Principles of effective work in the therapy and counselling process

In a well-known study, Grawe (1995) has named four psychotherapeutic principles that can be found across the different psychotherapeutic schools. These are:

- motivational clarification,
- activation of problems or the principle of real experience,
- activation of resources, and
- active advice for problem solving (Grawe, 1995; Hawellek, 1997, 131ff.).

Marte Meo connects these psychotherapeutic principles in a special way.

In most cases, the clients are motivated to work with images in a particular way because they get opportunities to observe themselves with their personal strengths and abilities and because it also gives them the chance to show what exactly their problems in daily life consist of (motivational clarification). In a first step, it is often necessary to show the clients, using images, that the therapists also see and understand that certain moments are problematic and that there are moreover concrete opportunities for change. The client's motivation is increased, if they have in the therapist a person by their side, who invites them to a shared quest for concrete and new resources and opportunities in addition to displaying a respectful understanding for their existing problems. The positive representation of the chances of a Marte Meo counselling in connection with information on the responsible handling of the recorded images and scenes clarifies and supports the clients' motivation for the counselling.

Those things the clients observe in the context of the Marte Meo presentation (activation of problems, real experience) are linked with images of visible resources and opportunities (activation of resources) in the review. Furthermore, by presenting images and scenes from the clients' daily lives, once creates the opportunity to »read« the displayed situation in a new light and thus to enrich or even amend the former belief within the protective environment of a supportive therapeutic relationship.

For that purpose, the client's distanced observer position is used, which allows more easily to see oneself in a new perspective and to empathise with the situation of other people involved. When this process

is backed up by the Marte Meo therapist, it can contribute to new readings of social moments and hence to a changed mentalization of the clients.

In addition, concrete advice for the use of resources and changed behavioural patterns in specific situations (active help for problem solving) are worked out in the reviews. These are – and this is an additional benefit of this method – immediately evaluated in the subsequent reviews so that they are affirmed or modified.

Hence, the Marte Meo therapists see the daily realities of their clients, but also the practical consequences of their advice. In this way, they get to know their clients' diverse needs for support and can use their interventions accordingly.

The reviews offer the clients the opportunity to absorb the fruits of their labour. They can experience that they are able to overcome challenging moments on their own strength. By putting the focus on the successful moments and positive opportunities, the clients gradually get to know a development-orientated perspective that they can transfer into their daily lives.

Clients absorb these positive presentations at a very different pace and with various lasting results. For instance, for people that are described as »instable personalities«⁽¹²⁾, the new and positive images often only have an elusive and short-term effect. These people are clients that one has to pay attention especially, to support promptly and through various means so that these new impressions can have a lasting effect. In their case, one negative experience can suffice in order to undo all new positive impressions. To put it differently, using terms from the social learning theory, these clients require a slower pace and many repetitions in order to develop, to keep up and to integrate »chaining«, a positive inner chain. An observation-led supervision of the Marte Meo therapists is part of the professional basis in order to get to know the clients' different needs for support.

Thus, Marte Meo proves to be a modern, evidence-led method that appears to be suitable to support both the quality of the clients' relationships in daily life as well as those of the therapeutic work in an effective and permanent way.

Tool box

- ❑ The Marte Meo method uses images of resources and opportunities from the clients' daily lives in order to show how the development aimed for can be purposefully supported.
- ❑ In this process, a supportive and trusting therapeutic relationship and respectful handling of the images are absolutely crucial.
- ❑ The therapeutic discussions are generated in between the poles of the clients' beliefs and the presented images. They open up concrete perspectives of development and courses of action.
- ❑ In the hands of experienced therapists, Marte Meo enriches the repertoire of possible interventions already available with an additional visual quality.
- ❑ The clients can observe the consequences of their changed behavioural patterns and thus are able to experience themselves as increasingly efficient and capable.
- ❑ The transparency that characterises Marte Meo contributes to a cooperative and participative structure of therapies and counselling sessions.

Annotations:

(*) Whenever the »book« is mentioned in this article and it is referred to a »chapter« and/or »Marte Meo information«, it means the following book:

»Marte Meo: Einladung zur Entwicklung«, by *Maria Aarts, Christian Hawellek, Hildegard Rausch, Marian Schneider, Christa Thelen*, including a DVD with an interview with *Gerald Hüther*; ISBN: 978-90-75455-31-1. Verlag: Eindhoven: Aarts Productions (2014) (see Website, Web shop: www.martemeo.com)

- (1) For economic reasons, male terms are used throughout this text.
- (2) Respect derives from Lat. *respicere* = looking back.
- (3) cf. v. *Schlippe, Schweitzer* (2009).
- (4) The terms »counselling« and »therapy« are used synonymously throughout the text. The common attempts to differentiate between counselling on the one hand and therapy on the other are mainly relevant for social law issues and therefore do not matter for the thoughts developed in this article. In this context, psychotherapeutic work is understood to be a special form of psychosocial counselling. The point of the psychotherapeutic work, as it is in the psychosocial counselling in the broader sense, is to support the clients' positive developments.
- (5) This matter of fact has been emphasised in socialisation theories, for example in the symbolic interactionism by *George Herbert Mead* (1973).
- (6) This refers to *Moreno's* psychodrama, *Iljines'* therapeutic theatre and the approach of the gestalt therapy (*Petzold*, 1973).
- (7) In his heuristic concept of memory, *Petzold* (1993, 700ff.) distinguished several development stages of the human memory; the proprioceptive, the atmospheric, the multimodal iconic, the scenic and lastly the symbolic or the verbal memory.
- (8) See *Maria Aarts*, in: *Marte Meo Magazine* 2005/2, pp. 5ff.; *Josje Aarts*, *Marte Meo Magazine* 2005/3, pp. 7ff.; *Maria Aarts*, *Marte Meo Magazine* 2005/3, pp. 16ff., German articles: *Marte Meo Magazine* 2006/1, pp. 40ff.; and: *Marte Meo Magazine* 2005/4, pp. 12ff.; and: *Marte Meo Magazine* 2006/2, pp. 36ff.; and: *Marte Meo Magazine* 2008/1, pp. 23ff., German article: *Marte Meo Magazine* 2008/2, pp. 48ff.
- (9) It is not without good reason that the way in which images are presented in the internet and on TV has such an enormous influence on social and

political processes that one speaks of a »media democracy« or even of a »media dictatorship«.

- (¹⁰) Also see in this book: »Expanding the image of the person opposite«, Marte Meo information No. 03, Ch. 1.7; »Naming oneself/naming«, Marte Meo information No. 07, Ch. 1.13.2.5.2; »Developing a sense of I and you«, Marte Meo information No. 12, Ch. 3.2.4; »Taking turns in communication«, Marte Meo information No. 15, Ch. 4.3.4.1.
- (¹¹) This refers to the orientation on a guideline that has been developed in the therapy agreement (Hawellek, 2012).
- (¹²) For the classification of emotionally instable personalities also see the diagnosis manuals ICD (International statistical classification of diseases and related health problems; cf. *Saß et al.*, 2003) and DSM (Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders; cf. *Dilling et al.*, 2010).

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- Observation-led therapy
- Therapist-client relationship
- Moments of now
- Clinical-psychotherapeutical point of view
- Presentation of images and scenes
- Video-based therapy
- Forms of vitality
- Beliefs/self-images, represented -

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