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**THE MANAGEMENT OF INTERACTION NETWORK. THE  
“IN-BETWEEN” CONCEPT WITHIN SOCIAL WORK AND  
COUNSELING**

***LA GESTIÓN DE LAS REDES DE INTERACCION. EL CONCEPTO  
“ENTRE-DOS” EN EL TRABAJO SOCIAL Y EL ASESORAMIENTO***

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**Abstract**

We are familiar with the field of group interaction through the traditional work of Kurt Lewin and also systemic thinking talks about network interaction that builds up the system. Martin Buber also discusses the “in-between” concept as the third element. The therapist or counselor, social worker and clients are part of an interaction network, representing therapeutic and social working situations. Success in treatment and reflective processes, depends on the perception and management of the situation by experts. Painting the moment of interaction offers the possibility to know what happens between professional and client. Afterwards it is possible to reflect on this experience.

**Resumen**

*Dentro de la tradición del trabajo social y en otros sistemas de intervención con personas es conocida la teoría de Kurt Lewin sobre "el campo de fuerzas" que se da entre los miembros de un grupo. Martin Buber habla del "Entre-dos" como un tercer elemento presente en la interacción entre personas. El profesional del trabajo social, del asesoramiento o de la terapia crea con su cliente una especie de "red de interacciones" que queda invisible a los ojos, pero que constituye una segunda realidad, "el Entre-dos". La técnica de pintar simultáneamente sobre un mismo papel o lienzo entre dos personas hace visible y hablable la realidad existente entre los dos y posibilita la reflexión de la experiencia.*

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KW.- Interaction, In-between, Therapy, Counseling, Social Work, Methodology, Reflexion

PC.- Interacción, "entre-dos", comunicación, terapia, asesoramiento, trabajo social, metodología, reflexión

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**Artículo invitado**

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## Introduction

In my practice as a counselor and supervisor I find myself often confronted with success for which I have no explanation. This occurs frequently in group work, but can also happen between two persons, for example an expert and his or her client. I want to illustrate these successes with two specific examples.

### Example 1.

I was at home preparing a group session for the next day (to be held 200 km away from my home). It concerned a work's team that worked in the suburbs and at the end of the year wanted to evaluate the work it had done. Specifically, to draw future conclusions from that work and at the same time find new energy and motivation for later tasks. I was to help the team in the pursuit of these objectives by assisting and counseling.

I prepared a work schedule: For example, I prepared material for the members of the work team, so that they could illustrate their topic in all sorts of possible ways, (through clay, colour pencils, crayons, and water colours). This was in order that they could answer the following question. How was work for me last year? Each member of the team was to keep something from the illustrations as a future reminder.

Each group worked according to plan and after intensive individual work produced beautiful collages, posters, sculptures etc. Each member presented his material to the group. There was a lot of material which was exchanged, discussed and reflected on. Each individual received a lot of support from the group, including further feedback and questions.

The last one prepared a large puzzle piece for his picture, held it in his hand and said to the group:” I imagine our group like a puzzle. Each one has a piece, a part.” Then he added to his picture the pieces of his colleagues to complete the picture.

I looked at my work plan and for the end of the session I had planned the following possible advice. I noted “I imagine the group is like a puzzle and each member contributes with a piece, which is his/her part.” Of course, I had had no contact at all with the members before the meeting and no words were spoken about the development of the meeting. However, the picture that emerged was precisely what I had anticipated and noted as a possible outcome at the end of the meeting. As a result, a deep reflection on teamwork (limits, opportunities,

individual responsibility) unfolded. However, I feel it is not appropriate here to delve deeper into this.

### **Example 2.**

Some time ago I was leading a group in the North-Westphalia city of Essen. The topic was the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and its application to work with foreign families, in Germany.

After the first intensive work day, I sat in my hotel room and was contemplating the next day and how to continue the work with the group. After a while, I had decided what was important. In an orderly way, (as is my habit when preparing such meetings), I wrote down on my worksheet a proposal. I would suggest to the participants, a concrete case of how to work methodologically, applying Paulo Freire's method.

The following day I opened the group session with a question, as to what the participants' feelings were of their first day. Several people raised their hands and spoke about different things they had experienced during the previous day, indicating what was important for them. Also, a lady raised her hand and said, almost as if she was reading from my notebook: "Would you be able to show us with a concrete example how we can work methodologically according to Paulo Freire's approach?" The whole group agreed and wanted to know exactly how to apply Paulo Freire's approach practically. They thought that the methodological application of an example was the best way to learn about the educational approach of the Brazilian popular educator. Quite often this type of experience is quite astonishing and makes you think. At the same time, it is challenging to reflect on it not only from a practical but also from a scientific point of view.

## **1. Interpersonal communication as a complex and barely definable phenomenon.**

Surely, some of the theories have several explanations to offer. The field theory by E Kurt Lewin, according to which, groups develop something like a field of forces and interaction which implicates all participants, so that something new emerges. This could be a possible explanation. We know about unconscious communication between people from psychoanalysis, as I have illustrated in one of my earlier works (1998, p.202). However, apparently all these explanations require the physical presence of the participants in

communication. In the first example I was 200 km away from the field of influence of the group and I wrote down my work plan, the day prior to seeing the group. However, it is also true that I had given a seminar for this same group several months earlier. On my second visit; I invested a lot of effort and know-how into finding out what really mattered for the group. I also know that often, participants can be cleverer than the speaker. What was surprising was the fact, that the participant (basically on behalf of the whole group) not only had the same idea, but also even used the same words as I had written down on my work sheet.

Systemic theory tells us about the network or fabric of interaction within a group. However, if this is a definite explanation for what occurs between two people when they are together or when they have some kind of contact it is something, I might have some doubts about.

From the school of Palo-Alto (USA) we have learnt about the theory of interpersonal communication. Authors, like the recently deceased Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues have pointed out, that the very presence of two people is already communication (or as Goffman expressed it, “reciprocal influence”). Symbolic interactionism teaches about the “generalized other”. That is the society that makes sure that each member that belongs to it bears a great resemblance with others, a resemblance that is achieved through a common language. The “generalized other” is internalized in such a way that people reproduce something together when engaging in mutual contact, or understand each other and participate in the same meaning of words, of language (Habermas, 1986, p.147). The latter speaks about inter-subjectivity that adopts an objective character, something that exceeds the dialogue partners as long as it has to do with objects upon which many or even everybody agrees in the description of its perception. However, as soon as it has to do with individual interpretation it becomes much more difficult, because “understanding a symbolic expression requires essentially a communicative process” (p. 159).

In some way, all these theories confirm that something occurs between people that cannot be squeezed easily into theories and reveals a hard to grasp complexity. It has probably become clear that speaking about interpersonal communication does in no way imply that the topic is dealt with exhaustively, as if it were an exchange of information of dialogue partners. “Seen from a psychosocial perspective, communication means partaking/participating in the same *Lebenswelt*’ (vital world) in terms of Habermas”, (Hernández, 1991, p.147). Although, not participation of an objective type, but in an inter-subjective way. In other words, those involved, participate in the same communicative

situation and are observers and interpreters of it. At the same time this, in turn, leads simultaneously to the same and differentiated perception and action of the dialogue partners. In other words, in a real or imaginary vis-à-vis situation the dialogue partners are participants and at the same time more or less distanced observers. Therefore, on the one hand there's identification, on the other hand there's distance. Each interaction (including spoken), relates to people speaking the same language, implies closeness and distance. The shared comprehension of a situation enables understanding but also gives room for 'freedom of interpretation', therefore distance.

## **2. The domain of the “in-between”**

In specialized literature about communication, the two-minute film of a cigarette-smoking scene of the Palo Alto group, is well known. A group of researchers of the Psychiatric Institute filmed the first minutes of a meeting. They exchanged cigarettes, lit them for each other (as is done in many informal meetings of colleagues and friends) and talked with each other. At the same time they combined words and movements (synchronic interaction). The purpose of filming the scene was to discover the coincidence of verbal and non-verbal communication. Watching the film, their attention was drawn to the fact that all movements were coordinated, like a dance. They were so enthusiastic about their observations that they began to write down everything they had observed, from the small scene. However, they were not able to find a common denominator to reduce it to a single point (Bateson, et al, 1987, p.78, 166 ff).

In the same way, I think it is impossible to capture everything that occurs between people when they are together. On the one hand, they are able to observe each other as objects and on the other they are somehow touched by each other, in such a way that none of them can be alone. When two subjects face each other, something emerges between both that is neither mine nor his, as Martin Buber expressed it. This great philosopher of dialogue spoke about the “in-between” and said that between people, between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ emerges a third instance, which is neither yours nor mine. It is a type of immaterial', in-between space of biological, physical, spiritual nature and stands between subjects. This in-between space is not necessarily attached to physical dimensions or limits. It's a communication of souls, an immediate coincidence of souls that can overcome even time and space. However, it's not a disembodied communication between people, a communication of spirits. Rather, the

integration and the overcoming of different levels of interpersonal communication that is not only served by language, symbols or time-space significance. Buber (1979) expressed it with the following words:

All things considered, when referring to the interpersonal sphere I refer to interpersonal events, that may be completely reciprocated or that will necessarily become reciprocated or apt to be complemented because participation of both partners is essential. The sphere of the interpersonal dimension is being face-to-face; we call its development the dialogical approach. (p.276)

But how can we experience those *in-between* spaces of human communication in such a way that we can speak about it, observe it, manage it or learn about it? How can we convert it into a method for social intervention, social work or social counseling with the purpose to broaden consciousness or modify behaviour?

When we speak about social intervention we do not refer here to society, to the entire social system, but to the interpersonal dimension, even though we do not ignore that society consists sociologically of interaction. We speak here about a social method that can be influential on one's own living sphere, 'Lebenswelt' and become an instrument for professionals of social action. It concerns the shaping of the *in-between* and the discovery of its origin and how to handle it.

### **3. The management of the “in-between”: how it operates through painting as a form of (shared-inter-subjective) expression**

To express this in-between space, to objectify it, so that we can observe it, I use a method of expression with colours, not language. Through painting, through using another unusual means of communication, the communicative event between two or more people is slowed down.

To make this painting together possible, I use different materials. First of all, the participants need a blank paper (it can be coloured), size and quantity according to the needs and numbers of participants (DIN A4, DIN A3, or larger) and a colour box with crayons or colour

pencils or finger paints. When the group leader gives a signal, the participants are not allowed to speak or to communicate with gestures with each other. They should likewise not use written signs. They should only paint according to what emerges inside and paint as long as they want. They can also observe what is happening, but this is not so important. What is important, is that they paint with each other. Sometimes, I add an observer. The experience of painting with each other, and the painting that comes out of it, are then an object for observation and subsequent interchange of experience and reflection of the painters, and possibly with the group.

In the following conversation the painters not only share what they have learnt but also their particular experiences, what they felt, how they experienced the painting process, what they did with each other, etc. What emerges is a meta-communication, communication about the communication process that took place while painting. If the painters had an observer, they give their feedback to the painters, but only as observation not as evaluation. Communication is slowed down and the meta-communication afterwards enables many to become aware of what has been observed and therefore understand what happens between participants (i.e. supervisors and clients) and between participants and leaders. It becomes a learning process about oneself and more importantly perhaps, about interrelation.

The result, the picture that emerges from this painting is an objectification of what happens between them, a type of protocol of the conscious and unconscious process but also of psycho-temporal, of mental-spiritual and physical-space sharing. It is not easy to represent the emerging picture that develops in-between. As to the question who made the picture and from what perspective it should be seen, the participants react with surprise because there are one or two perspectives, one or two pictures at the same time. However, this is a paradox, because logically seen, nothing can be one and, at the same time, be two. It is not the domain of logic but the reign of the in-between. "A relationship of two people that, to a smaller or larger extent is determined by the element of comprehensiveness<sup>1</sup> (Umfassung), may be called dialogical." (Buber, 1969, p.32).

With all these research proposals we should not forget that being a human person is only possible in a relationship, as is underlined not only by Buber but also by the Symbolic Interactionism and systemic approach.

Once participants have created their own pictures, they can interchange their experiences and discover new elements when observing it anew. With the help of the group and the

group leader it is possible to include, to insert “to put-in-between” (see as object) and stimulate new learning effects by experiencing consciously what “happens-between-the-two”.

It is not concerned with a specific picture or the aesthetics of a picture it is only paying attention to the experience and the expression of the interpersonal process.

#### **4. Evaluation of the experience with the exercise**

At first the painters present their picture to the others, in case of groups, or to the leader when the work is only done by two. The evaluation focuses on the exercise of painting, on deepening the shared experience, on what each one has become aware of individually or with the help of the co-painters, or the observer. It is not the resultant picture which matters but the experience gained in the process with each other. Sometimes, questions from the leader can help the process. For example the following: How did the painting go? What did you do while painting? What did you feel? What was important for you while painting? What experience did you feel in relation to your partner? What did you think? What did you understand, or not understand? What, how and where did you paint? It is important that the painter does not feel pressurised during the evaluation by the questions. The questions should stimulate dialogue and should not be a catalogue to work through.

Very often the partners experience together what it means to share something in common and at the same time have some differentiated space. Often they are surprised when they look at the picture again and talk about it. The painters are quite often surprised when asked, how the picture should be seen. Depending on the position of the different painters, there are two different pictures, which at the same time form one common picture.

It becomes clear what it means to participate in a communication process where participation (closeness) and observation (distance) are present at the same time. It's interesting to observe how both partners deal with what has happened in the communication situation. By using this unusual form of communication through colours, the inner and outer psychological and socio-psychological processes are slowed down; they become more easily perceptible and observable. In the following consultation between the co-painters and possible presentation in a meeting it becomes even clearer, how complex, diverse and unconscious communication processes between people are. The empty blank sheet on which the

participants paint becomes a symbol of the common frame of a communication. The interaction, the sharing, on the one hand, and the inner dialogue that emerges during the painting, on the other, become clearer. The experience can be transposed to many other situations of an interpersonal relationship.

## 5. Procedure of the method

**Preparation of the material:** painting colours, painting paper or blank sheets, if necessary water in a bucket to wash off paint e.g. finger-paints. Everything is placed on the floor or on a table. The leader decides on dyads or triads. In the case of triads being agreed, decide who should be the observer.

**Dividing the group in dyads:** According to the size of the group decide if the painting is done in dyads (two without observer) or triads (with an additional observer). Afterwards form dyads or triads in case of groups.

**Rules of the exercise:** The following rules are to be strictly respected

- The leader gives the start signal. From then on: No speaking is allowed during the exercise, nor is it allowed to communicate with signs or gestures.
- In silence each pair takes the necessary material. Each participant takes as many colours as needed and starts to paint on the single pair-sheet.
- The pair paints without speaking or writing words on the common paper.
- The picture is ready when the partners stop painting.
- The observer should not participate with any kind of intervention during the painting. The observer only observes what the two are doing together and watches over the fulfillment of the rules.

**Painting together.** It lasts until the two painters have given the impression to have finished.

**Short evaluation together.** In case of triads the observer participates in the evaluation. He can communicate the observations.

**Presentation and evaluation to all the group members.** In groups each pair presents its picture to the other group members. The paintings represent the objectification of the communication process. New observations and questions by the leader help to talk about each picture individually.

**Meta-reflection or theorisation.** Once all pictures are discussed exhaustively, it is time for meta-reflection. It has to do with transfer work involving questions such as : How do we experience communication situations, how do we slow down communication in normal living situations so that people become aware of what happens when they communicate with each other, how do people treat each other, what is lost, what can be gained in a communication situation. How can such a method be applied in professional practice? Etc.

Here is an example of a series of pictures produced in a course about communication for formation groups in supervision and counseling. The paintings were created in pairs under the observation of a third participant. The author gave the titles, not the painters. It is the effect the pictures had on me here and now. The reader him/herself can have a dialogue with each picture.

Picture 1



Centring

Picture 2



Pose

During the course of the production the participants learn about each other`s experiences as well as their own. In the final evaluation meeting each one tells “his story” of the painting. For example, in picture 1, one of the painters told us:

*I began with a green crayon in the centre. First I waited for the other one to start, but then I began. I didn't know how to invite him to begin painting. When he started to paint with the brown crayon, I immediately changed to red. I don't like brown, that is why I wanted to change but then I thought that he might get angry if I'd put red colour on his brown, and so I started to paint red under his brown. Then I was happy that he changed to red. I thought he wanted to be nice to me and then I thought perhaps I could let go the red and take the blue....*

Apparently the other partner told a totally different story. He likes red and wanted to paint burning stars and had painted six burning stars. The green ball would fall into the empty nothing therefore he wanted to paint a floor. The blue was too much for him therefore he drew two red lines out of the blue... etc., etc.

During observation somebody in the group pointed to an enormous snail coming out of the green toward the green ball. The first one mentioned surprisingly that he hadn't seen the snail and painted it only partially and he spoke about his pains in life because it was hectic. This was the pressure he normally experienced when he had to do things. He was also surprised about the fact that the other person had painted the red part of the snail picture and not he himself.....

Picture 3



Movement

Picture 4



Invitation

## 6. Applicability of the method

The method can be applied well in the deciding the formation of counselors, in communication trainings of any profession or simply in groups that want to experience communication. The attached pictures (1-4) were created in the formation of supervisors in our Institute Gingko for Counseling and Personal Development (<http://mitxelena-gingko.com/>)

Often the participants are very surprised about what they have discovered about their inner and outer processes in the communication, about what they learn about communication and beyond. Additionally, what it means to pay attention to communication processes in counseling for example about what one does, thinks, feels, how one reacts to himself to what is said by the client or partner.

The method has also a certain advantage compared to other communication vehicles like language because the exercise is unusual and normally none of the dialogue partners has an advantage. This is often the case when one is more eloquent for example and the other is rather tight mouthed. Painting allows both partners to join into conversation using an unknown and little rehearsed form without the help of speech or gestures.

The method of painting together simplifies the understanding of communication. It can therefore be used for adult education and social work, not only for teenagers but also with adults, particularly when they show certain resistance to participate verbally in seminars, meetings or training. It is not easy to speak publicly (e.g. in front of a group). It is much easier to speak about something in public when having an object in front of you. One speaks not directly to the audience, but about an object. Objectified subjectivities (in our case objectified inter-subjectivities) are easier to handle and to deal with. In terms of Habermas we can say that objective realities are easier to deal with, to handle; they are much easier to modify and objectify ideas, feelings, evaluations, intentions that emerge in the inter-subjectivity and to reflect them. It gives room for further meta-communication.

The exercise and following reflections are not concerned with the interpretation of the colours used, the shapes and figures that were created, etc. Only with the understanding of communication processes, approaching experienced inter-subjectivity and becoming aware of what the in-between means. For this achievement we do not need interpreters but rather good listeners who are able to understand the participants better when their pictures are discussed. This is also possible through objectified pictures.

We can apply this method in many professions and situations. Particularly in the education of social workers, teachers and counselors in anything that has to do with communicative procedures and in their accompaniment. We can consider for example, any client-counselor situation as an in-between situation, like an empty page that is about to be designed, in dialogue, in speech and silence, in doing and letting be. Through the creation of collages or pictures of this type, it becomes apparent what happens between people therefore this method can also serve for partner relationships, as a chance to understand oneself and others in interrelation. In the daily treatment with others, communication occurs with incredible speed and nobody can observe everything, pay attention to everything, and understand everything. However, painting produces a sort of slowing down of communication. Communication takes place in a simultaneous and reciprocal way, so that it becomes difficult to observe oneself and others (from a distance). This is different when painting. The objectified painted picture gives the counselor, as well as the client, a chance to observe what goes on here and now, or there and then in the fabric of relationships of the I-you environment. Understanding what has been experienced, it becomes easier to deal with (life) tasks and situations successfully. Often daily life experiences find an expression, things that are otherwise difficult to talk about, because objectification through speaking can be polemic and misleading.

In a situation of counseling and assistance in general, helpers, counselors, social workers in normal professional situation cannot observe everything, since they themselves are part of what is happening. Through this method of shared painting one can learn to get into touch with oneself, to observe together what is happening. In this way this method becomes training for a real situation of counseling and/or assistance.

I even recommend the assistants to observe any communication situation as an objective picture together with their clients in their time-space fabric. This is so that clients and helpers create a situation they have to solve together and the helper gains influence through shaping the situation by mastering the communication.

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### **Notas:**

<sup>1</sup> Comprehensiveness according to Buber: “Broadening ones one concreteness; fading out of a situation lived through, a totally new presence of reality one participates” (1969, p.31).

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