



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

Das Projekt wurde mit Unterstützung des europäischen Sozialfonds finanziert. Die Verantwortung für den Inhalt dieser Veröffentlichung liegt allein bei den Autoren. Die Kommission ist nicht für die Nutzung der Informationen verantwortlich.

TEACHING SYSTEMIC SOCIAL WORK IN A BA STUDY COURSE AT THE FH CAMPUS WIEN, VIENNA

Helsinki, 21.05.2012

Bernhard Lehr

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Dear colleagues, friends of STEP, dear interested listeners ...!

My name is Bernhard Lehr. I am teaching as a lecturer at the FH Campus Wien in Austria, and I am social worker since 1983 with working experience in SW with delinquent persons, homeless people, alcohol and drug abusers and SW and psychiatric care and counseling jobless persons. I am working as a supervisor for social workers, teachers, clinical professions, and some others .

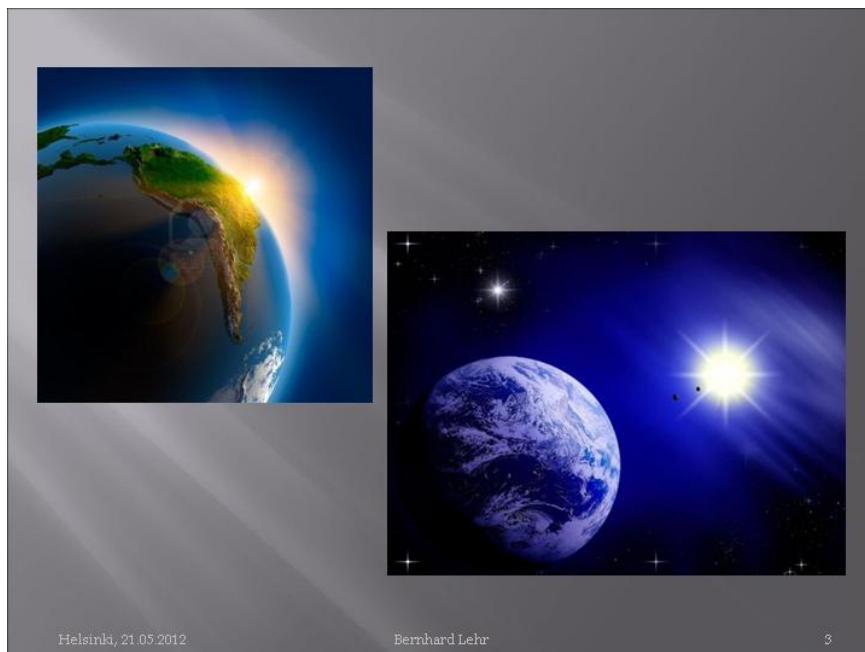
Now I want to tell you about teaching systemic social work in a BA study course at the FH Campus Wien, Vienna. I want to start in the following way:

You know the situation, when the sun rises:



What a wonderful moment. The sun comes up, the sun gets out of the morning redness Gets higher.

I wonder how many of you are thinking in such a moment:

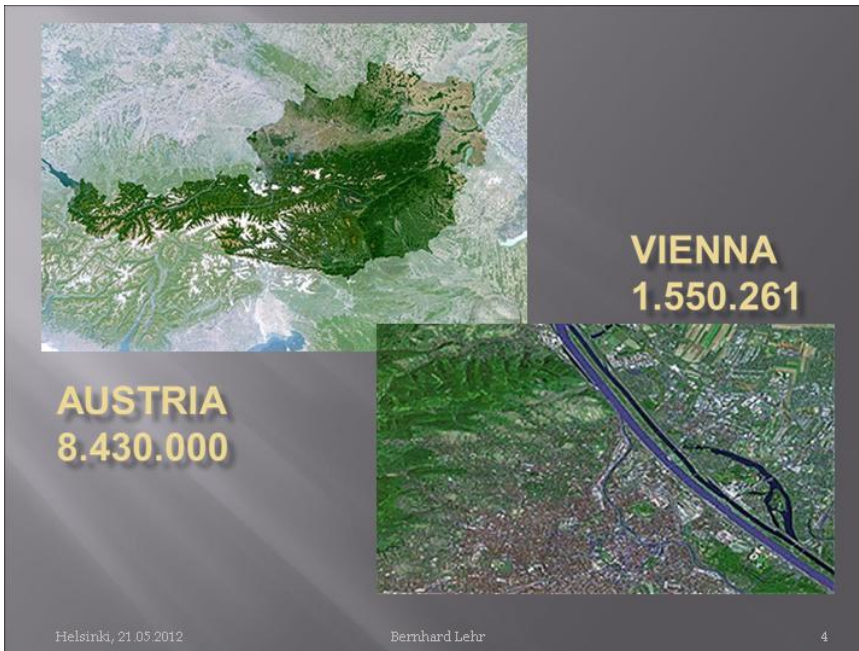


Oh, we (the earth) are turning to our star again . Our star is turning into our view field. Or: We turn towards the sun.

In the first case the viewpoint / point of view is where we are standing and we interpret the situation from this point – we have an anthropocentric interpretation of the relation sun and earth, of that what s going on between earth and sun “she/it comes up”

In the second case our point of view is not on the earth, but we imagine seeing the turning from the outer space, maybe from the moon, from the mars or from starship enterprise.

But scientists a hundred years ago were able to imagine this game between earth and sun by bringing it in their mind.



OK. Next step:

Austria has about 8 million inhabitants

Vienna has about 1, 6 million inhabitants



FH Campus Wien has 2500 students and some hundred lecturers in a fulltime and part-time job.

The University of Applied Sciences, FH Campus Wien, is an educational institution which offers a rich variety of 19 Bachelor-, 15 Master degree programmes and 6 Master degree programmes for advanced professional training in the fields of Applied Life Sciences,

Engineering, Construction Engineering, Health, Social Work and Public Sector.

The department of social work includes one BA course (full and part-time) and two master studies, about 500 students for social work all in all.

There are about 350 Bachelor students for social work.

In the third year of the Bachelor study there are 120 students,

In the 6th semester students can choose from several selective subjects “special topics of social work”, One of them “systemic social work”.

So this year I met with 16 students interested on this topic for 18 hours divided into 5 units

For Christ sake! What do they expect? What experiences do they have with “systemic”?

- Family system
- The symptoms
- Circular questions
- Make change visible
- micro, meso, macro levels
- Each system exists of numberless parts of systems and they have exchange all the time
- The individual is part of a system, of systems
- Each system tries to stay in balance
- Each action has influence on others
- different ways of view
- There is no “only one reality”
- Constructivism
- Systems make difference to other systems

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I asked them and they gave me some associations in form of short words (keywords and buzzwords)

So that I could refer to some of their thoughts And make them interested in my topics.

I think, that you understood, that I spoke about a black bird!

Yes, I did!

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But how do I know that they know,

that they think what I think?

Think of white and grey dogs now! We will count at least as many dogs as we are.

We are damned to compare the envisioned things all the time.

What is it I want to transfer to the young students by all means?

PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMIC THINKING:

- Autopoiesis of systems
- ◆ Circularity and simultaneity
- Interconnectedness of all with all
- ✚ The observer is part of the game
- ◆ We create what we call “reality” in ourselves

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To get a notion of those principles we make some experiences in role plays

When the students make this experience they note that doing and watching and watching and doing is very simultaneous; and they get an experience of positive and negative feedback loops, and an idea of the beginning of remarking systems:

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smiled at me, I smiled at her, ...”

“I looked at her, she

There is another exercise (Walter Milowiz has developed it), called “**pantomime**”, I want to show you here and now:

pantomime

You are in a tramway and you injured the left foot of your neighbour

Since 3 hours you are sitting in the waiting room of the doctor and suddenly the person before your turn leaves the priority for you

A policeman comes to a beginning fight

You are in a library and do not find the book you are looking for

Inspector Columbo arrives at a crime scene

You learn to know the partner for your whole life!

Your child is very sad because another child took it's toys away

What you are watching occurs in a disco
....in a football match
... on a children's play ground
... on a crime scene
You watch a pair when they learn to know each other and fall in love

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The main result of this exercise was the realization that there is a meaning for all behaviour but very often it is not evident for others.

And how "reality" begins

And systems begin to exist and exist for long time often without evident reasons.

In social work practice it is important to know and to accept that each person has one's own reasons to do and behave in this or that way independent of one's own awareness of those reasons.

At the end we can get into a dysfunctional positive feedback loop.

"You are doing wrong! You are stupid!" - against - "No, you are stupid! I do right, you are wrong".

But when we accept hidden meanings.

We are able to say and ask:

"Oh how interesting! Would you tell me more please?" - "I am very pleased"

In the following lessons we analyze case studies with the focus on feedback loops

By painting those loops/ circles on flipcharts

It is not enough to draw a line from one point to another, we need to draw half circles or curved arrows from one to another and to try to imagine what messages are circulating from one to the other and back and on and on.

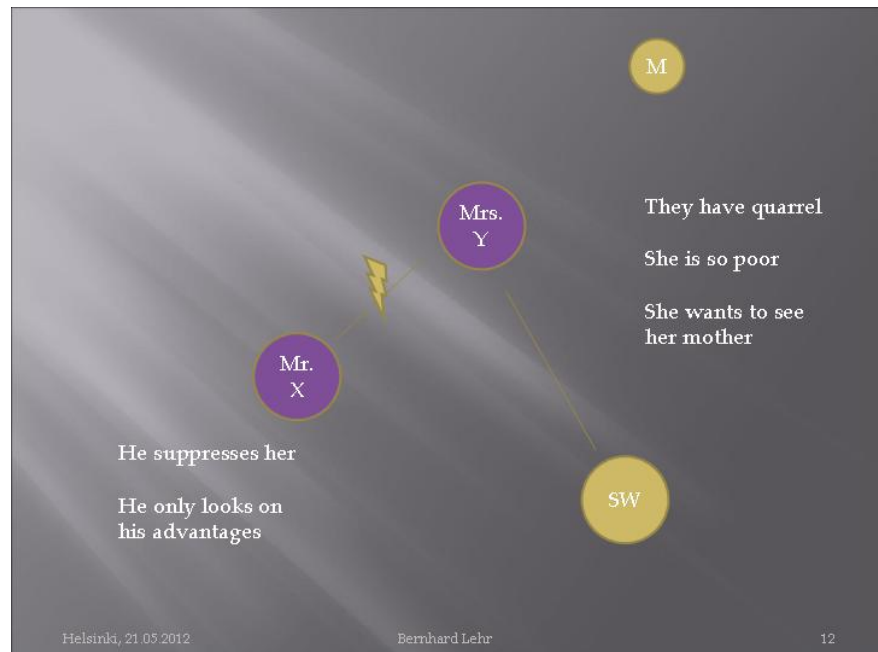
An Example will show this:

An Austrian-Chinese couple and a Social Worker as a counselor in an information centre for migrants:

Case X Y

- Mr X and Mrs Y come to a SW in an information centre for migrants. He is 69 and Austrian, she is 41 and Chinese born and refugee, lives in Austria since 3 years and is married with Mr. X since 2 years. She speaks only simple German.
- Her mother in China is critically ill Mrs. Y is very worried and considers to go back to China

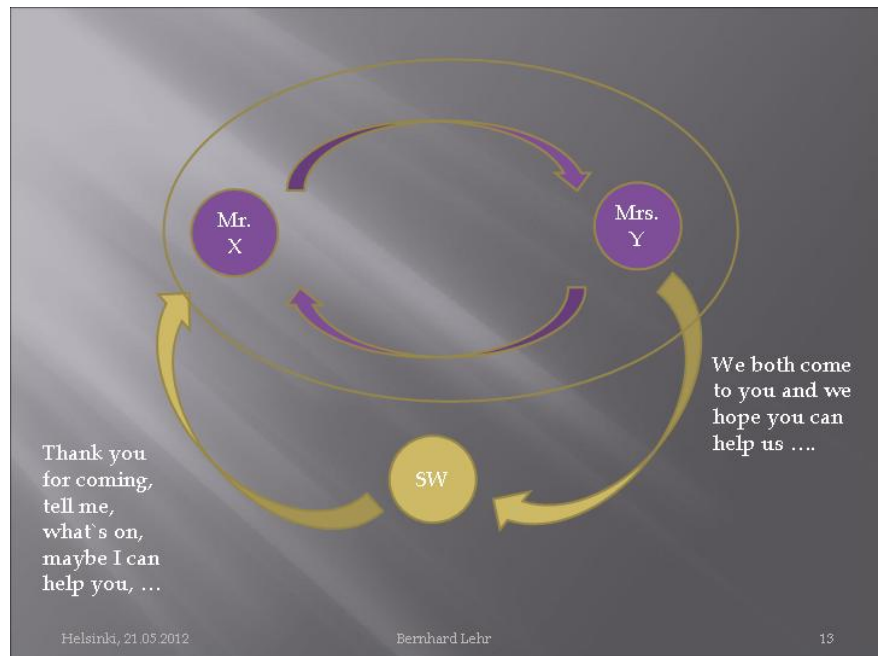
First Interpretation:



Second try:

By asking the social worker found out, that he was worried about her leaving him and she did not at all want to go but just wanted to talk about her grief and did not find a way.

This form of visualization is the one I want them to know and to remember all the time.



Afterwards we do some role plays in order to get awareness for dysfunctional feedback loops.

And some other forms of visualizations of relations:

- by papers
- by coins
- by chairs

At the end the students get the task to write about their insights on systemic thinking in social work.

And I hope that they will think of circulating balls when looking at a sunrise – being aware of the ball (or starship) sitting on or in.

(For children it is a great experience getting aware that when walking in the night seeing the bright moon – that this moon is not dancing around on the night heaven, but it is depending on the movements the child itself does) Jean Piaget wrote about this.

That they recognize communication as a happening of circularity - oneself being involved all the time.

