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Third generation coaching: Reconstructing dialogues through collaborative practice and a focus on values

Reinhard Stelter

Third generation coaching unfolds a new universe for coaching and coaching psychology in the framework of current social research, new learning theories and discourses about personal leadership. Third generation coaching views coaching in a societal perspective. Coaching has become important as a form of dialogue because the (hyper)complexity of our society. Today, knowledge has to be shaped and applied in specific contexts and situations, and both in our personal lives and in the public space we have to learn to negotiate. Coaching can help us generate new knowledge and manage social transformation. Coaching thus facilitates new reflections and perspectives, as well as empowerment and support for self-Bildung processes.

Third generation coaching focuses on the coach and the coachee in their narrative collaborative partnership. Unlike first generation coaching, where the goal is to help coachee achieve a specific objective, and unlike second generation coaching, where the coach assumes that the coachee implicitly knows the solution to particular challenges; third generation coaching has a less goal-oriented agenda but a more profound and sustainable focus on values and identity work. Coach and coachee create something together: They generate meaning together in the conversation, where both parties are on a journey, and where new stories gradually take shape. Third generation coaching integrates the experiential and subjective-existential dimension with the relational and discursive.

It is the author's ambition to elevate coaching and coaching psychology to a new professional level with a new agenda. The term 'third generation coaching' may be understood as a sort of manifesto – not in a normative sense but as an invitation to reconsider the main objective of coaching in late- or post-modern society.

Keywords: *Narrative collaborative practice; third generation coaching; subjective-existential; relational and discursive dimensions.*

THIRD GENERATION COACHING unfolds a new universe for coaching and coaching psychology in the framework of current social research, new learning theories and discourses about personal leadership. Third generation coaching views coaching in a societal perspective. And when society changes, coaching as a specific form of interaction has to develop further: The mission of third generation coaching is to develop sustainability by putting stronger emphasis on values and meaning-making – away from a sometimes limiting focus on goals towards a stronger emphasis on aspirations, passions and values. In that sense, third generation coaching takes part in the

unfolding of people's identity – an essential issue for human development.

Social science as a basis for coaching

Third generation coaching involves four perspectives that provide a framework and a foundation for coaching and clarify how the coaching practice is an integrated part of social developmental processes. Societal and individual working and living conditions have undergone significant transformations over the past three decades, which in particular legitimises the third-generation approach with its special emphasis on meaning-making and reflection on values. The following four perspectives will be discussed:

Social legitimacy: Coaching as a response to late- and post-modern challenges

Our society has changed fundamentally and radically, in ways that have affected all its members profoundly. We live in a globalised society (Beck, 2000). Global factors have an immediate local impact. Our society is characterised by hypercomplexity. In our late- or post-modern society, individuals face a growing diversity of social spheres, each with their own independent *developmental logic*. Different social environments create their own unique organisation and culture, and their members develop their own mode of communication and perceptual logic, characterised by their local culture. However, society at large loses internal coherence. The German sociologist Luhmann (1998) used the term 'hypercomplexity' to describe the fact that everything in society can be described and arranged in a variety of ways (see Qvortrup, 2003). Clear-cut, unambiguous understandings are no longer an option. The English sociologist Anthony Giddens analyses the effect on day-to-day life of the huge social changes that have taken place in late modernity. Giddens (1991) stated:

The reflexivity of modernity extends into the core of the self. Put in another way, in the context of a post-traditional order, the self becomes a reflexive project. (...) Modernity, it might be said, breaks down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition, replacing these with much larger, impersonal organisations. The individual feels bereft and alone in a world in which she or he lacks the psychological support and the sense of security provided by more traditional settings. (pp.32–33)

These changes have had a pervasive impact on our professional and personal lives in general and, more specifically, on the way in which we generate knowledge, construct our sense of self and identity and find meaning in our lives. By including these sociological theories, the impact and application of coaching in our current social context is

highlighted. The author argues that coaching offers an answer to late- and post-modern challenges, which may be part of the explanation for the growing use of coaching within many areas of society.

Coaching, identity and self-constructs

Self and identity have become key psychological issues in the late- or post-modern society that we live in. Kenneth Gergen, a social constructionist and a leading figure in the field of social psychology, has set the stage for a new understanding of the individual in modern life. Gergen (1991) made the following statement: 'The postmodern being is a restless nomad' (p.173). In his opinion, the post-modern self is overwhelmed by a myriad of possibilities and ways of acting on the one hand and disoriented about what to do and how to behave on the other. Sociological and social-psychological insights can help coaching psychologists understand the most important contemporary challenges facing individuals and society.

Thus, coaching as a form of dialogue offers the coachee a space for self-reflection; for revising and refining positions and self-concepts. Identity should be understood as a relational process where the coachee is invited to see him/herself in a new light.

Coaching and learning – between personal experience and collaboration

Learning can be viewed as a transformative process (Illeris, 2004; Mezirow et al., 1990) that is based on a reinterpretation of personal experiences. The way in which we learn and develop often involves a reinterpretation of meaning. This reinterpretation may involve reflection processes where we explore certain perceptions and experiences with the purpose of reviewing and reassessing them. But learning is also a communicative process aimed at grasping the meaning of someone else's expressions. This often is the case, as Mezirow and associates (1990) put it, 'concerning values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts

as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment and democracy' (p.8). Certain events may force a *perspective transformation* or a *shift in perspective*, but such a change may also be triggered by conversations with other people.

Coaching can thus contribute to learning and development. The coaching process *per se* can be understood as a transformative process, where the coach's ability to trigger a shift in perspective in the coachee (and him/herself) is crucial for the successful dialogue.

Coaching in the perspective of organisational and leadership theory

The widest use of coaching is, undoubtedly, within leadership and organisational development. Both managers and staff have to be able to handle the growing complexity that generally characterises our working life, organisations, companies and society at large: Systems theory has introduced the concept of *contingency*, a concept that captures the challenges involved in handling complexity. The contingency concept describes the impossibility of finding clear-cut and unambiguous solutions. Leadership is about dealing with this state of contingency and living with the knowledge that clarity, certainty and security are essentially unattainable. Today, more than ever before, we have to live with the risk of misjudgement. One strategy for handling this contingency is to be in and appreciate the space of permanent reflection. In relation to this point, Bettina Rennison (2009) spoke of *reflexive leadership*, where the goal is to move away from 'an operational closed stance to a self-observing reflexivity, where the management system observes its own way of thinking and acting' (p.123; own translation). This requires adopting a meta-position, that is, *taking a reflexive stance to one's own self-reflexivity*. Leadership is like a sea voyage under varying weather conditions; it requires certain fixed points to navigate by. The leader must provide direction. A growing number of management and leadership

theorists are convinced that values can serve as an anchor and a guideline for the individual manager's (and employee's) actions, and this value orientation may thus help keep the organisation on course. Values are expressed through the manager's agency (Kirkeby, 2009).

Building on these four basic conditions and perspectives, the main focus of coaching will be discussed with regard to providing a space for reflection.

Consequences for coaching psychology: Expanding the coachee's reflective space

The social developments described in the previous sections invite the following key question: How can the coach (or a leader inspired by coaching) best help the coachee navigate in this world?

In reply to this question, the author suggests that a key goal of the coaching dialogue is to strengthen the coachee's *capacity for reflection*. The coachee will learn to embrace hypercomplexity. In addition, a focus on personal and social *meaning-making* – a process that includes the coachee's various life contexts – serves to expand the individual's horizon. And finally, a *narrative collaborative perspective* can shape a coaching dialogue around the purposes of: (1) strengthening a sense of coherence in the coachee's self-identity; and (2) tying events together and integrating past, present and future into a coherent whole.

In the following, I address three aspects of the coaching dialogue that can *help expand the coachee's reflective space*. These three aspects are essential features in the author's understanding of third generation coaching:

- *Value focus.*
- *Opportunities for meaning-making.*
- *The narrative collaborative perspective.*

Value focus

In our society, which is characterised by a growing degree of diversity in social and organisational values, coaches should encourage coachees to see values as guiding markers that can help them organise their

personal and professional lives. Values are somehow timeless and universal but they have to be based on customs and events in our local communities. The ultimate goal is to facilitate and prepare leadership, communication and co-operation, not by focusing on specific goals, but by reflecting on key values as important landmarks for navigating in life.

A value-focused coaching process is inspired by protreptics. Based on these ideas, which have been (re-)articulated by the Danish philosopher and leadership theorist Ole Fogh Kirkeby (2009), the following outline may serve to define and elaborate on these conditions. Protreptics or meta-coaching is a Greek term for the art of turning one's own and others' attention to the core of human existence. Protreptics is a method for self-reflection and dialogical guidance that has been used in the Greek executive academies for generals and leaders since 500 BC. Protreptics is a form of philosophical coaching that is focused exclusively on reflections about values, not on present or future patterns of action. The dialogue between coach and coachee tends towards symmetry, meaning that both parties are equally engaged. Both take part in the dialogue, reflecting on conditions or general topics such as 'responsibility', 'freedom', 'co-operation', etc. Unlike conventional (asymmetrical) coaching dialogues, where the coach takes a neutral position in relation to the coachee's challenge or problem, these dialogues essentially strive for a growing degree of symmetry: The coach and the coachee have a shared interest in examining specific values, because these values are of general relevance to all human beings. This ambition towards greater symmetry also makes it easier for a leader/manager to act as a coaching conversation partner for a colleague or employee. Because the conversation is less goal-oriented, the leader is free to engage in a way that also serves to develop his or her dialogical leadership practice.

The purpose of a value-exploring and value-reflective dialogue is to help the indi-

vidual take a step back from situation-specific and concrete acts. The idea is to create conditions that enable a reflective space and create moments of understanding by setting out on a shared journey, where the focus is on a different level of self-awareness. In these moments, coach and coachee are not attempting to understand each other as individuals but as human beings who stand for something, and who have aspirations, dreams and convictions. Only after this overall value-oriented reflection can the possible consequences for one's future actions find their way back to the coaching agenda. Considering the presented social science analysis, value-reflective coaching can help expand the coachee's (and the coach's) understanding and 'world view'.

Opportunities for meaning-making

Meaning-making is considered one of the most important means of facilitating the coaching dialogue (Stelter, 2007). Meaning is fundamental because we attribute particular values to our experiences, acts, interactions with others and personal and professional lives. Things become meaningful when we understand how we feel, think and act, for example, by telling stories about ourselves and the world we live in. Meaning-making is based on previous experiences and expectations for the future and is a holistic way of integrating past and present experiences as well as ideas about what the future brings.

Meaning-making marks an integration of individual and socio-cultural processes. In the following I distinguish (analytically) between two ways of meaning-making:

1. One point of departure for the coaching intervention is the coachee's *individual experience* and *personal meaning-making*. Here, the coaching dialogue is inspired by the phenomenological-existentialist approach. In collaboration with the coach, the coachee seeks to understand his or her subjective reality or subjective perceptions and experiences of the culture and context he or she lives in. The focus is on the

implicit and often sensory-bodily dimensions of certain situations, actions or individuals. This perspective may shed light on essential and existentially meaningful experiences and values of past memories – especially uplifting moments – and of what feels right and important to oneself. The process of experiential meaning-making builds a link to practice, habits and routines, which are embedded in the flow of action. The sensory attentiveness that we strive to articulate provides an understanding of the inherent meaning of our practice. In the conversation, the coach triggers a process that offers the coachee an opportunity to develop a sensory experience of a specific situation or event. It is only once it is articulated that the experience is shaped into an *event* and thus attributed meaning for the individual. Literature inspired by phenomenological thinking describes the *felt sense* of a particular situation as a potential way of approaching the experience through language (Gendlin, 1981, 1996, 1997; Stelter, 2010).

2. The second essential point of departure for narrative collaborative coaching is how meaning is shaped in a shared *process of collaboration* between coach and coachee. The coachee brings in a certain self-perceived reality, which is created in the world outside the coaching context and shaped by the relationships that the coachee enters into in his or her workplace, family, spare time or other life contexts. The coach can offer a new voice among the actors that the coachee encounters. The coach's voice may be of crucial importance, because the coaching conversation constitutes a special and actively chosen context, where the coachee invites the coachee to see the world differently compared to his or her existing views. The coach's task is to support the coachee in a reflection on the cultural roots and social relations that determine the coachee's self-concept and self-perceived social reality.

In the following, the aim is to clarify how the coach can take part in the shared process of meaning-making that both incorporates individual perceptions and experiences and focuses on the coachee's realities, relationships, contexts and cultures.

The narrative collaborative perspective

The narrative-collaborative perspective will be presented as well as its role in stimulating the reflective space in the coaching dialogue. The concept of narrativity and narrative psychology can be seen as an extension of the social constructionist perspective – a new approach that integrates the experiential and subjective-existential dimension with the relational and the discursive. Other researchers, who share this view about integrating the embodied-experiential concept with the relational-discursive concept include Crossley (2003), Sampson (1996), Shotter and Lannaman (2002) and Stam (2001, 2002). They all see the possibility of relating phenomenological thinking with social constructionist thinking, which is also the ambition of the author. This is very different from adopting a naturalist perspective, for example by viewing personality as something that is anchored in a more or less stable character feature. Instead, the goal is a culturally oriented form of psychology, where we use experiences and feelings to shape narratives with personal and shared values, individually as well as together with others. As Bruner (1990) stated, '[Values] become incorporated in one's self-identity and, at the same time, they locate one in a culture' (p.29). Telling each other stories and developing and exchanging stories and narratives, whether in a coach-coachee relationship or in a group context, is crucial for social meaning-making; a person's anchorage in a cultural context is always framed by specific values and meaning. Bruner (2006) emphasised the importance of storytelling:

The principal way in which our minds, our 'realities', get shaped to the patterns of daily cultural life is through the stories we tell, listen to, and read – true or

fictional. We 'become' active participants in our culture mainly through the narratives we share in order to 'make sense' of what is happening around us, what has happened, and what may happen (p.14).

Narratives structure events and order them in a time line. They make stories – the source of meaning-making – coherent and, as a result, make life meaningful. Narratives give rise to temporal coherence and shape the perception of events, acts, others and ourselves as sensible and meaningful. The plot in any story frames the development of an inner structure and drama (Sarbin, 1986). By telling and listening to stories we make our lives meaningful. In Carr's (1986) words: 'Lives are told in being lived and lived in being told' (p.61).

The key assumptions in the narrative approach

In this article it is argued that the narrative approach expands on social constructionist epistemology and reintroduces dimensions that have otherwise been banned from social constructionist thinking. For example, a clearer recognition of intentionality as important for human action is needed. In the following, three key assumptions are discussed to this effect:

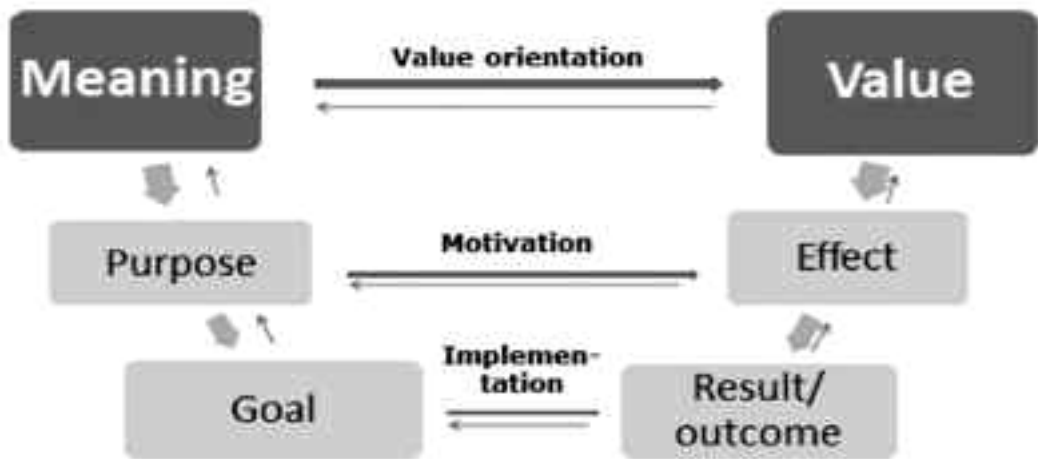
1. *Agency* describes the human capacity to choose among options, mobilise energy and take deliberate action based on personal considerations and plans. In this understanding, the individual is seen as engaging in a proactive relationship with his or her world: People are able to take initiatives and to take life in their own hands. Individuals can act out their own intentions, which are based on active interaction with the social and material environment and not only governed by outside impulses or 'destiny'. When an individual speaks about his or her actions, the story will revolve around certain events, which are linked together and structured in a plot that makes the story meaningful for the actor/narrator. Narrative thinking

uses the metaphor of a '*landscape of action*', a concept that was originally developed by the literary theorists Greimas and Courtès (1976), which Bruner (1990) transferred to psychology, and which White (2007) in turn applied in the field of narrative therapy.

2. *Intentionality* describes the actor's continuous stance towards the environment, which is expressed through the person's intentions in relation to specific 'others', tasks or situations. People always relate to their social and physical environment. Generally, intentionality is expressed in personal values and unfolded in meaningful action. In coaching conversations, this is evident, for example, in the coachee's aspirations and effort in relation to specific work tasks or a possible future. Intentionality can be viewed as a hierarchical structure (see Figure 1).

Narrative coaching operates mainly on the top level, addressing the value perspective with a focus on the meanings of actions. This marks a clear difference from first generation coaching approaches (e.g. the GROW model), which are mainly concerned with goals. Narrative practice (see, for example, White 2004, 2007) applies the metaphor of the *landscape of identity* (or '*landscape of consciousness*'), which should always be viewed in interaction with the *landscape of action* (see point 1 above). The metaphor of the landscape of identity focuses on the actor's thoughts, feelings, convictions or beliefs (Bruner, 1986) and thus on the coachee's self-concept and self-perceived identity. Unlike in the social constructionist position, identity in this framework is also a concept that expresses the individual's special convictions and values. Narrative coaching conversations revolve especially around shedding light on the exchanges between the *landscape of action* and the *landscape of identity* in order to add depth to the conversation and help the individual coachees understand themselves and their actions.

Figure 1: The three levels of intentionality (see Stelter, 2009, 2014).



3. *Deconstruction* expresses the possibility of change and multiple interpretations; it originated as a counter-reaction to idealist philosophy and structuralist literary theory. Deconstructionists (e.g. Derrida, 1978) opposed structuralist text reduction that appeared as an attempt at eliminating the internal contradictions in text or speech. The deconstructionist perspective instead assumes the possibility of multiple interpretations and, thus, multiple realities, which lie hidden in the narrative. In the narrative coaching conversation, coach and coachee strive to reinterpret certain dominant and possibly stressful stories about the coachee's reality; myths that 'call for' re-interpretation and re-narrating. According to White (2004), deconstruction deals with procedures that undermine the taken-for-granted understanding of life and identity. With reference to Bourdieu (1988), White (2004) sought to 'exoticise the familiar', that is, to encourage the person to break with his or her original intimate relationship with certain life and thought forms and embark on a journey of discovery in his or her own life; this will ultimately produce a new plot in certain narratives. In witnessing procedures, the

witnessing participant helps to deconstruct the narrative by contributing to an understanding of what was said and thus facilitating a re-narration or expansion of the person's existing narrative.

The collaborative dimension

With inspiration from Anderson's (1997) thinking, which is strongly influenced by post-modernist ideas and social constructionism, the coaching dialogue can be seen as a relational form of knowledge generation and as a coachee's opportunity for improved self-concept and self-insight achieved through the verbal discourses, which coachee and coach are mutually involved in. The coaching dialogue can be viewed as a shared exploration, where the therapist/coach and client/coachee together explore the world, thus creating a conversational partnership. The underlying philosophical position that Anderson (2007) described for her therapeutic work, can also serve as a foundation of collaborative practice in coaching (psychology): Coach and coachee are both considered dialogical partners. They take part in the shared production of meaning and knowledge and in the collaborative, reflective process of development, learning and transformation, and this is

fundamental for third generation coaching. The coach is seen as a 'generous listener' (Stelter & Law, 2010) who attempts to expand on the coachee's dialogical contributions.

Collaborative theory and practice place renewed focus on interpersonal relationships and community as knowledge-generating and meaning-making factors (see, for example, Anderson & Gehart, 2007). As a dialogue form, collaborative practice is less structured than the narrative approach. The coach will be less likely to rely on his or her own inner 'compass' and will be co-reflective in relation to what the coachee brings up. The collaborative approach is a refreshing answer to the growing social isolation, and it counterbalances the growing individualisation in society, which leaves it up to individuals to find answers to their own challenges and existential issues. Collaborative theory helps bring about an applied perspective to social constructionist thinking. In collaborative practice, people are seen as inter-related and capable of finding answers to individually meaningful questions with the aid of one or more listening and co-reflecting 'others'. The conventional way to learn from someone else has been to be *persuaded*, convinced that the other, by virtue of his or her professional authority or life experience, could reasonably be assumed to 'be right'. But in a time when people of (professional) authority find it increasingly difficult to offer firm and clear-cut answers to complicated work and life issues, it becomes increasingly important to *provide a space for conversation and dialogue*, where people can share challenges and experiences, and to have a dialogue partner who is able to listen rather than offer recommendations or advice, which in many cases is not quite right for the specific situations and challenges the other is facing. In this sense, collaborative theory and practice follow the main premise of social constructionism: We create meaning in relationships, not individually. We do not control the outcome of the conversation, the relationship or the situation as individuals; it

is our collaborative meaning-making that ensures quality and progress in conversations, relationships or situations (McNamee, 2004). The first-order, that is, the causal-linear change perspective, that has worked in the past, and which is currently encountering limitations due to the (hyper-) complexity of the world we live in, is supplemented with a *second-order change perspective*, a meta view, based on a living exchange between conversation partners and their positions, and which can, ideally, help initiate a process of change for all the dialogue partners in the contexts where they work and live. The 'best' or 'right' way to provide information – a requirement of good counselling or leadership in the age of modernity – is replaced by *spaces for collaborative conversations and development*, which are more better suited for facilitating personal, social or organisational transformation processes in our current late- or post-modern age. To quote McNamee (2004):

Our focus is centred on the participants engaged in the immediate moment and the wide array of both common and diverse voices, relations, communities, and experiences that each brings to the current context. (p.18)

The collaborative perspective forms the basis of an entirely new way of generating knowledge. Individuals – including managers or advisors – lose their monopoly of knowledge (which is already proving hard to maintain) and instead generate knowledge in collaboration with others. Collaborative processes form the basis of shared meaning-making.

Basic preconditions of collaborative practice

In the following, some of the key basic preconditions of collaborative practice are described:

1. *Responsiveness*: A key condition of the collaborative dialogue form is the mutual responsiveness of all the participants (coach and coachee or coach and coaching group). Collaborative practice thus facilitates an entirely new conversation culture, where one

listens to the other and in turn seeks to inspire the other with one's own thoughts and reflections on a particular story or description presented by one of the participants. Wittgenstein (1953, p.122) speaks of a new form of understanding: 'that kind of understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'.' In this sense, listening is about more than simply understanding what was said. Listening is not just about absorbing information but involves making meaning for oneself as a listener and inviting the other into the reflections it gives rise to. The original speaker then listens to the other person's reflections and considers them. The complexity increases, the more times the process is repeated, and the more people are involved. The contours of a new landscape of meaning emerge as a result of the participants' way of sharing experiences, thoughts, etc., with each other. Katz and Shotter (2004) described this interaction as follows:

To think we are in only a mechanical cause-and-effect relation to events in our surroundings is to ignore the crucial role of our spontaneous, living bodily responsiveness to the other and the otherness around us. (p.73)

2. *Relational attunement*: The previous quote leads us to the special conditions that need to be in place in the collaborative, responsive dialogue format. The participants have to demonstrate a willingness to engage mutually with each other and to show mutual empathy; this is in contrast to a conversation culture, where the goal is to prove a point. Instead, the goal is to develop a presence and an attunement, where the participants are constantly trying to tune in to each other. When listening to someone's story, one should pay attention to oneself and the, initially often implicit, sensations the story unravels and then reflect on the impact that the story has on oneself. In this way, the conversation partner's story or challenge becomes one's own. With inspiration from the Danish theologian and philosopher Løgstrup, learning researcher Kirsten Fink-

Jensen (1998) speaks of *attunement* as an articulation where one gives shape to something by means of a variety of expressions; this 'something' may be a bodily sensation, a sensory impression or a particular, personal theme. Here, *relational attunement* is described as a *shared or co-created articulation*, where a sensation, a sensory impression or a theme is addressed collectively, and where the participants manage to meet. People act as each other's sounding boards. Relational attunement generates new knowledge that can only take shape in a relationship characterised by mutual responsiveness. The process may resemble a dance, where the partners find a common rhythm and reach out to each other through mutual understanding and shared meaning-making – with respect for the other and themselves, with the knowledge that there will always be differences, and with the acceptance that everybody goes their separate ways after the final dialogue.

3. *Witness-thinking, knowing-with or the art of being with the other*: Relational attunement is achieved by means of a special form of co-thinking, which Shotter (2006) calls witness-thinking. From the listener's position the goal is to develop a special form of *sensory empathy* with the other, not necessarily as an attempt at feeling and thinking like the other but as a sense of the other's position from one's own position and life perspective. This does not quite match the typical understanding of empathy, defined as *having an understanding for someone else's feelings and being able to put oneself in the other person's place*. It is in fact closer to *empathia*, Greek for passion. It is a passion for immersing oneself in the narrator's situation, allowing oneself to be gripped by it and linking the narrator's story to one's own life and experiences or thoughts while listening. Shotter (2006) described witness-thinking as a way of being with a strong element of body sensation:

Witness (dialogic)-talk/thinking occurs in those reflective interactions that involve our coming into living, interactive contact with an other's living being, with their

utterances, with their bodily expressions, with their words, their 'works'. It is a meeting of outsides, of surfaces, of two kinds of 'flesh' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), such that they come into 'touch' or 'contact' with each other. [...] In the interplay of living moments intertwining with each other, new possibilities of relation are engendered, new interconnections are made, new 'shapes' of experience can emerge. (p.600)

The point is thus not to interpret what one hears or to attempt to reach a 'correct' understanding of the story. It is not a *representation* or a depiction of what the other person 'really' means and thinks. It is clear that we cannot actually hear and see what is going on in the other person and in his or her world. The best we can do is to allow the things we hear and see to influence the way we think and act. What the other person says may cause the listener to think and find new ways of understanding and acting in the world. We can share these reflections with the speaker, who inspired them in us. *Witness-thinking* becomes a shared process of knowledge production between the dialogue partners. In a mutual process of witness-thinking and presence, the conversation becomes a dynamic dialogue between both parties or – if it takes place in a group – among all coaching partners. Dialogue is understood here in its original Greek meaning: Dia-log=through (διὰ /dia) speech or discourse (λόγος/logos). The participants develop in a mutual relationship *through speech and discourse*. The dialogue becomes the art of conversation, where one is simultaneously with the other and with oneself.

4. *Conversation ethics*: In a coaching relationship, the coach's attention is aimed at the coachee's experiential world. In the coaching dialogue, development happens on the basis of the coach's witness-thinking and empathic position. In this process, both/all participants move forward and develop¹. Questions are initially primarily driven by the coach's need to engage in witness-thinking in relation to the coachee's life context and to develop a sense of what is happening. In contrast to a strictly narrative inquiry strategy, which follows a particular structure (Lowe, 2005), Shotter and Katz (1996) spoke about 'striking moments'. These are the moments when one or both participants experience challenges, concerns, confusion or movement in a new direction, where a new perspective emerges, and where the dialogue is driven toward transformation and development. It involves a sense of being present and allowing oneself to be moved by the other's thoughts and reflections. A specific conversation or discourse ethic is beginning to take shape as the basis of the special qualities that characterise this dialogue; the partners are present for the sake of the other as well as for themselves. They create meaning together and find pathways to each other's development (Anderson, 2007). Each listens to the other and attempts to understand the dialogue partner on his or her own terms. Both parts engage in witness-thinking by reflecting on the other's reflections and by being inspired by the other. The collaborative form of meaning-making unfolds the developmental potential of the dialogue.² In this interaction it also becomes crucial for the coach to inquire whether and how the coachee perceives the relationship as supportive (see also, de Haan, 2008).

¹ In group coaching, hopefully everybody moves forward – each in their own way.

² Collaborative practice can be applied across a variety of conversation contexts, for example in meetings, team development or creative developmental processes – and, of course, in coaching. By engaging in collaborative practice the coach attempts – as much as it is possible in the coaching context – to establish a symmetrical relationship with the coachee.

Practicing third generation coaching as a narrative collaborative dialogue

In the following, four dimensions of the applied practice of third generation coaching are outlined, all of which focus on meaning through collaboration between coach and coachee. I will highlight the following:

1. Appreciation and focusing on strengths and possibilities.
2. Reflection on values, aspirations, wishes and dreams.
3. Externalising conversations, re-authoring and alternative stories.
4. Witnessing.

1. Appreciation and focusing on strengths and possibilities

The coach works from the following basic assumption: The coachee has come in because of certain challenges, which the coach needs to take seriously. But in the coaching conversation, the focus is placed mainly on the uplifting aspects and on the coachee's successes in order to trigger a process of change and development. In the concrete intervention practice, various social constructionist-inspired approaches are combined to form a narrative collaborative process.

From a *solution-focused perspective*, the coachee may be invited to outline a preferred future scenario and thus focus on certain resources that he or she actually possesses, and which have emerged on several previous occasions. Specifically, the coach and the coachee can arrive at an understanding that paves the way for a new narrative, where the coachee can begin to see possibilities of realising the preferred future scenario (see more in Berg & Szabó, 2005).

From an *appreciative perspective* one would address the following three key aspects in the work and life contexts that the coachee highlights: In the conversation one would appreciate and value the best of what is, envision what might be and dialogue what should be. In a narrative collaborative perspective,

these three elements can be seen to form three different plots, which may serve as a basis for working towards a more uplifting narrative about a specific topic. *An example:* A female coachee presents a situation in her workplace, where she is very frustrated about certain cut-backs and growing workloads. As a first step, the coach should allow the coachee to speak about the situation as she perceives it. Making room for that initial narrative is important for several reasons: First of all, the coachee needs to be allowed to 'unload' and tell the full story. Second, the coach's interest and openness help promote the basic acceptance and sense of security that the coachee should experience in the conversation with her coach. And third, it gives the coach a chance to listen to a narrative that forms the basis of the ongoing dialogue and developmental process with the coachee. From an appreciative perspective, the coach will at some point choose to focus on the best of what is in the coachee's workplace. Ideally, the coachee then discovers that there are enough qualities present, for example, the collegial relationships, that she can view the current challenges in a more positive light. The coachee may, for example, discover that there are plenty of resources among her co-workers that make it possible for them to take a creative and innovative approach to the cut-backs (see Orem et al., 2007).

Certain perspectives from *positive psychology* are quite compatible with the basic deconstructionist pattern that characterises coaching as a narrative collaborative practice; In particular the coach's support in helping the coachee develop optimistic explanation and attribution styles, which are properties that may be considered crucial for the development of psychological resilience. These attribution styles may begin to unfold more in the coaching dialogue, if the coachee chooses to consider her strengths rather than the problematic aspects of her interactions with the environment. Questions such as, 'Could you mention three things that you have done really well in

handling this difficult situation?’ or ‘If you imagine that you were the manager, what would be the first positive initiative you would take in your team?’ are possible ways of strengthening new ways of addressing challenges which counteract a focus on problem-oriented explanation patterns (read more about positive psychology coaching in Biswas-Diener, 2010).

2. Reflection on values, aspirations, wishes and dreams

A key perspective in the narrative approach is to couple the coachee’s drive to act, that is, the coachee’s *landscape of action*, with the coachee’s values and culture-based foundation and his or her identity and self-perception, that is, the coachee’s *landscape of identity*. The coachee is able to take initiatives, to take life into his or her own hands and to act on the basis of personal meaning and intentions. In many cases, the coachee is not fully aware of the values that are so important in guiding her actions. They are implicit in the action. The coach’s questions about the underlying values behind the action may alert and activate these values and trigger a process of reflection and development. The action thus takes on a conscious identity link to values and convictions, which will be very satisfying to the coachee, because the purpose and objectives of the concrete tasks are thus reflected and anchored in the coachee’s identity and long-term aspirations, wishes and dreams. In the course of the conversation, certain values and convictions will often be found to have roots far back in time and to be associated with specific individuals and with situations and cultural contexts that the coachee has been a part of, and which have been important for the coachee. This link to the past in connection with an added value perspective in relation to future acts constitutes a crucial working perspective in narrative coaching. Certain current events and acts are more clearly associated with former life contexts

and events and are also linked with aspirations and possible acts in the future. This makes the coachee’s story about a certain topic richer and thus more meaningful and valuable.

Working with values in the coaching dialogue

In a one-on-one conversation the coach will act as the reflective dialogue partner (a witness), for example, by appreciating and reflecting on the values and meaningfulness in the coachee’s way of acting. The coach focuses on the potential *effect* or *impact* of a certain event for the coachee. The coach might make the following statement:

I noticed that [event Y] is very significant for you and the way you think and act. Could you tell me a little more about that, and how it affects the way you act in the context we were just talking about?

In the subsequent conversation, the goal is to examine how these consequences are reflected in specific experiences and other events involving the coachee. In the ongoing dialogue, the dialogue partners seek to examine possible general values and their roots in the coachee’s past. In this process, the goal is to expand the story’s plot and to *thicken the narrative* in an uplifting direction in order to add new dimensions to the narrative. The coach asks the coachee to try to link the presented values with specific individuals or contexts in the past:

Can you think of someone from the past, perhaps someone from your family, a former colleague, a boss, a teacher, etc., who represents some of the values that you were just talking about, and who may have influenced the way you think and act today?

Eventually, these values can be included in a conversation that seeks to clarify possible future action. The coach might ask, for example, by involving this person from the past:

What do you think this person would propose with regard to the decision you’re facing?

3. Externalising conversations, re-authoring and alternative stories

The key quality of each narrative process depends on collaborative practice. And in this narrative collaborative process, the *externalising conversation and re-authoring* are important methods for scaffolding the coachee's learning by helping the coachee to experience certain social and cultural spaces and to understand the importance of these experiences at a personal level. Scaffolding is required to help the coachee move into the 'proximal zone of development' (Vygotsky, 1962). The purpose of the scaffolding process is to help the coachee move from a problem-solving strategy regulated by others to a self-regulating action strategy in relation to a given issue (Nielsen, 2008). In the narrative process, scaffolding is based on what currently makes sense for the coachee.

In an externalising conversation, the coachee is invited to tell his or her story in a different way. In many cases, one will find that the coachee has internalised the problem, as if it sprang from his or her own personality features or qualities. In narrative coaching, however, the conversation is based on a different basic assumption: the problem is not the coachee as a person. The problem is the *problem*, which is external to the person. The coachee will tell the story by giving the problem a name (i.e. 'my frustration'), and the story is told with a focus on what *my frustration does*. Externalisation thus offers the coachee a new perspective by providing an alternative way of viewing and talking about the problem (Law, 2013; White, 2004).

In re-authoring, the coachee's story is treated as a manuscript that is written by the coachee – in co-operation with the coach. This implies that the coachee is free and able to re-author his or her life story. In this context, re-authoring can be seen as a different form of externalisation, where the coachee adopts an externalised position as author by viewing his or her life story from a different vantage point. In narrative coaching, re-authoring techniques are integrated with the externalising conversation process.

4. Witnessing

In witnessing, others (the coach, other members of the coaching group or invited guests) reflect on their thoughts upon hearing the coachee's story, their impressions of the storyteller's *landscape of identity* (aspiration, wishes, convictions and values) and the impact the story has for them and their own aspirations, etc., for their life, work, relationships, etc.

The participants take turns being audience and narrator. One person at a time witnesses what the coachee has just said by reflecting on the coachee's statements on the basis of the witness' own world views, values and specific everyday challenges. Witnessing is an important element in the deconstruction of the coachee's existing reality, a reality that may seem stressful, unsatisfactory or challenging. The purpose of outsider witnessing is to help the coachee reconstruct his or her reality, in part by means of thickened narratives that challenge thin conclusions about the person's life, identity and relationships. This is in keeping with the post-structuralist tradition, where identity is viewed as a social construct, a public emergence. This emergence takes place in narrative collaborative coaching through outsider witnessing and defining ceremonies. Identity is variable and shaped by the contexts and relationships that the person enters into. This means that all narrative collaborative coaching conversations have an underlying deconstructive perspective by virtue of the relationship between coach and coachee(s) and the development of new, thickened stories about the coachee's life, contexts and relationships. Witnessing processes are most effective in group contexts. The following may serve as an example: After the coachee has presented an event, a situation or a challenge to the group, the coach may develop a group conversation that revolves around the following questions:

1. *What stood out for you in the coachee's story? – What expression, what phrase caught your attention as a witness?*

2. *What impression does that give you of the coachee's life, identity and world in general? What does this expression/phrase tell you about the person's intentions, values, convictions, hopes and ambitions?*
3. *What does this expression/phrase tell you if you relate it to your own life?*
4. *How does the story move you? Where has your experience with the story taken you?*

Thus, the witness serves as a sounding board for the coachee's story. Over time, this becomes a mutual process, where shared meaning-making becomes the key driver of development for everyone involved.

Closing remarks

The theoretical positions and reflections of this article discuss and analyse the properties of a new and third generation of coaching (Stelter, 2014). The approach could be understood as a kind of manifesto towards *more symmetry* in the dialogue between coach and coachee, but the approach should not be understood as a closed, dogmatic system. Third generation coaching can be viewed as an attempt at *developing a new dialogue culture*. The coach leaves the role of a more or less neutral facilitator and includes him- or herself as a *fellow human* in the dialogue. Third generation coaching is about presenting one's reflections, sharing with others and reflecting on what the others have said and reflected upon. The coachee can use the thoughts and reflections of a dialogical partner (the coach or another person) as an impulse to put his/her own experiences, thoughts and reflection into perspective. These witnessing processes and other forms of community-building rituals from narrative collaborative practice are new ways of sharing feelings, thoughts, ideas, etc.;

they are conversation formats that strengthen social capital (see Stelter et al., 2011). We reflect on what we have heard, *without* judging or evaluating. Listening to the other and suspending counter arguments releases a collective intelligence that we enact far too rarely. Dialogue can make *synergy* more than just a buzz word. Narrative collaborative practice triggers shared movements where everyone adopts a position of appreciative mutual interest and is willing to listen in order to learn. Thus, third generation coaching can become a process of shared meaning-making that aims for a new understanding for everyone – an ideal that we can strive for, but which is probably never fully achieved. In this sense, third generation coaching can help provide a direction and a value base which is crucial for dealing with societal complexity and ensuring more sustainable developmental conversations. Recent empirical research in group coaching (Stelter et al., 2011; Stelter, 2014) suggests that third generation coaching creates development for all participants, provided they are willing to participate constructively in the dialogue.

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