

Gesellschaft für Interkulturelle Seelsorge und Beratung
Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling – SIPCC

Remarks on the self-understanding and identity of SIPCC

Helmut Weiss, president

SIPCC – an open space for personal and institutional encounters and relationships

SIPCC is an association which creates and designs “open spaces” in which interaction and encounter among people from different countries, cultures and religions can take place in order to promote learning of intercultural and inter-religious care and counselling.

This principle of promoting encounter and exchanges is featured in all the activities of SIPCC, in international seminars, meetings and conferences, study tours and training courses. *Personal encounters* are understood as *the* basis for dealing with intercultural and inter-religious issues to learn from them intercultural and interreligious competencies.

In immediate personal – physical and bodily – encounter with people and their situations, relationships are formed that are inescapable. They set the life and the surrounding of persons in a new light. Intercultural and inter-religious learning needs this incarnational (born into) “corporality” so that encounters and relationships take place not only on an abstract and intellectual level, but in a physical, sensory, and emotional manner.

SIPCC conducts all events in cooperation with *other institutions and agencies*. We want to build up relationships on institutional levels too and to enhance the learning of institutions. Preparations with these organisations mean sharing and crossing structural boundaries without abandoning our respective institutional identities. There is always a common interest and goal: to enhance care and counselling and to become aware of and engage to the needs of the people.

Not only as individuals, but also as a Society we want to learn. That is why we have set up what we call a Study Group and a Research Network to reflect on and develop this common institutional learning. At the same time, we offer our experience and expertise to other institutions.

SIPCC – an open space for the development of hermeneutics of intercultural and inter-religious care and counselling

The encounters of different people with their life and faith stories, with their beliefs and cultural and religious influences, always develop a dynamic that can be full of strangeness, tension, surprise, pain and blissful togetherness. Encounters in this – especially emotional – diversity with openness and respect are often accompanied with uncertainty and in some cases even with unconscious harm. It is therefore necessary to reflect again and again on the processes of encountering and to develop them in each situation anew, but which can be described as building up “relationship in difference”. “Translation work” in a very broad sense could be a good description: *to learn to “read” the signs and the communication of others and to search for their meaning – despite diversity*. Intercultural and inter-religious encounters clearly reveal what is constitutive of all work in care and counselling, namely, to become open to others and to meet them with one’s own personal being. This hermeneutical principle of *difference in relationship* provides an important clue for human encounter and caring action. Offering these learning experiences in International Seminars and other conferences, study trips and courses and through reflecting on our experiences in a variety of publications SIPCC is contributing to theory building of care and counselling.

SIPCC - areas of learning in difference

In intercultural and inter-religious context we have to adapt to new perspectives on a wide range of topics. From the experience of our activities in the SIPCC, we have learned that many issues are at stake: language, family, gender roles, authority, power, work and economic conditions, violence, values, religion, health and disease, to name only a few. All of these issues are closely tied to specific cultural and religious meanings; there is a great variety how these terms can be understood and these different understandings must be discovered and explained in conversations.

Here a few are mentioned which are important for our work in SIPCC:

Language and communication

With great intensity SIPCC dealing with language as essential element of interpersonal communication. Again and again it is necessary to reflect on meta-communication in communication. This is even more urgent when people of different cultures and religions meet. Words, gestures and behaviour have to be “translated”. To be sensitive for communication means, that the others express themselves in their otherness and they have to explain themselves not to be directed by others.

Culture

Cultures can be understood as “networks of meanings” in which humans “spin a web of meaning” to communicate and to have orientation. Humans need these mechanisms of orientation and control for their behaviour. At the same time a continuous discourse has to go on about meaning under ever-changing circumstances. Culture is asking about the meaning for humans and how the meaning can be expressed in behaviour and orientation. “Culture as network” means: being with others, being in communion and taking responsibility for social developments. Culture means being in community. Culture is a common “system of signs”.

Intercultural hermeneutics understands word, gestures and behaviour of others not only as individual expression, but as a system of signs embedded in community. In intercultural communication we encounter diverse complex “worlds” that can only be understood when we reflect on them and go into communication with them.

Religion

Religion can be viewed as a particular “culture”, as “socially established structures of meaning”. However, culture and religion have to be distinguished, because religion is in correspondence to an ultimate reality and can be characterized as a combination of three forms of expression: myth, ritual and ethics. However, *religion* is not fixed, but is formed in living and in “practicing”. Religion is an interpretation of reality and life that helps us to reflect on the significance of our daily lives provides an overall context and supplies meaning and purpose.

When you meet people from other religions, you will encounter persons with convictions that are essential to them and part of their identity. For religious people, these beliefs are ultimate truths that are non-negotiable, especially if they become resources for their life. Inter-religious and inter-faith exchange not only requires mutual respect for the religious experiences of the other, but mutual appreciation.

Believers of different faith-tradition can go a step further, when they are able to come together in the adoration of God and Gods, their foundation of their being, without losing their own confidence in life.

SIPCC – a learning experience in intercultural and inter-religious competence

The activities of SIPCC enhance intercultural and inter-religious competencies. Emotional, rational and spiritual learning grows through encounters, reflections and understanding the interpersonal dynamics of people who are different from us.

It is obvious that behind this understanding there is a comprehensive concept of education, which is essential for dealing with people: through reflective experiencing and thinking can be shown that people only through encountering others shape themselves and are in an ongoing process of creating identity and relatedness. SIPCC fosters the own cultural and religious confidence in life, the appreciation of cultural and religious beliefs of others and an open discourse in which changes and

learning are possible. Thus SIPCC is working for formation in care and counselling and also makes substantial contributions in intercultural and interreligious competence and thus to social integration of societies.

SIPCC as learning community

SIPCC understands itself as a “*learning community*”. Our association sees its task as helping people to develop their cultural and religious identity and to relate to people with identities different from our own. In an open and at the same time protected space of this learning community people may experiment in dealing with others, may learn and test themselves. It is important that others may remain different from us, they do not have to adapt and to resign - and yet people may change in meeting each other and sharing. In this way, diversity is lived, the exercise of power is reduced and togetherness is strengthened. Differences can be seen, endured and appreciated. At the same time, it is important to seek understanding and interpersonal similarities, to show that people are equal in dignity and share valuable experiences. Thus, integration and inclusion can be learned and the cohesion of societies promoted.

The learning community focuses its activities on *care and counselling*: Concern for people in their concrete life is the connecting reference point. The specific living conditions of people form the fundamental point of reference, which helps us not to circle around ourselves but see what is going on “outside”. Concern for others becomes the common task. The perception of the respective contexts of people and their impact on the physical and psychological conditions of those people are essential in order to go into relationship and to be helpful to them. Intercultural and interfaith care and counselling is learning with concrete people and their specific needs, difficulties, problems – and joys.

Through including cultural, religious, economic, social and historical contexts, *care and counselling becomes a socially relevant activity* and reinforces learning in civil responsibility and participation.

Inter-religious and intercultural care and counselling is *learning in spirituality*. It occurs in relation to an “ultimate reality” that can be named and believed in differently, but can be seen as a creative force that seeks and donates confidence in life. Caring for people is connected with this ultimate reality in practice and its spiritual and theological grounding. This leads to realising one’s own human limitations and to humbleness towards the power that “is greater than ourselves” and to the people who seek help and give help.