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2 Optimism: An Idea too Big to Fail?

Good afternoon, I am Jean-Jacques Ruppert and I am here on behalf of the Luxembourg based 'Applied Vocational Psychology and Policy' research unit. The two other authors of this talk are Andreas Frey of the University of Applied Labour Studies of the Federal Employment Agency in Mannheim in Germany, and Annie Ruppert, my wife. Andreas has asked me to present his apologies to you for not being here today with us due to a prior commitment. The same is true of Annie who is taking care of visiting in-laws, **3** a job she is very much better equipped to do than I am.

The title of our contribution refers to the now sadly famous assertion made at the beginning of the financial crisis that some financial institutions were **4** "too big to fail", that they were so large that their failure would have been disastrous to the economy, and that they therefore had to be supported by government when they risked going under. We simply wondered whether the same can now not be said of optimism too.

In 2009 Barbara Ehrenreich published a book entitled **5** "Smile or Die - How Positive Thinking Fooled America and The World". In this book she confronts the cult of positive thinking and the resulting pressure on people in all kinds of adverse circumstances to "put on a happy face".

The present crisis, frequently "positivised" as an economic downturn, was initially not expected to last nearly as long as it has. Nevertheless, here we are in 2013, still in crisis and the general outlook has not improved, indeed quite the opposite is true. And yet, despite or perhaps because of this situation, many have adopted a "head in the sand" attitude whereby they filter out the negative in their lives, seeing only the more positive. A similar approach can be witnessed in some areas of guidance and vocational counselling where it sometimes seems as if a blind faith in the powers of positive thinking, hope and sheer optimism have become the new mantra. Of course, even in times of crisis, there are still opportunities available and clearly counsellors should always encourage their clients to adapt their behaviours to changing conditions. However, wishful thinking relabelled as positive thinking will in itself not increase the chances of a counselee getting a job; hope is

not a substitute for real policies and optimism cannot be the basis for sustainable counselling.

There is of course plenty of evidence that hope and optimism may have a positive effect on people, but there also is plenty of evidence to the contrary. In the mid80s ⁶ Norman Vincent Peale, the author of 'The Power of Positive Thinking' said in a speech he gave to the executives of the investment bank Merrill Lynch: *"There is a deep tendency in human nature to become precisely what you visualise yourself as being. If you see yourself as tense and nervous and frustrated ... that, assuredly, is what you will be. If you see yourself as inferior in any way, and you hold that image in your conscious mind, it will presently, by the process of intellectual osmosis, sink into the unconscious, and you will be what you visualise. If, on the contrary, you see yourself as organised, controlled, studious, a thinker, a worker, believing in your talent and ability and yourself, that is what you will become."*

Merril Lynch collapsed in 2008.

⁷ In 2011 Heather B. Kappes and Gabriele Oettingen published a paper on a series of experiments designed to unearth the truth about 'positive fantasies about the future'. They found that spending time and energy thinking about how well things could go, actually reduces most people's motivation to achieve them.

⁸ We all know from experience that people prefer to be told what they want to hear and that they furthermore frequently and conveniently indulge in selective hearing. Hence it is hardly surprising that there are a lot of guidance counsellors who find nothing wrong with yielding to the improbable aspirations of clients.

This takes a lot of pressure off them, they can bask in the glory of doing the "right" thing. After all counsellors are in the people business, they are the "nice" ones, the "good" ones who give "positive" feedback to their clients even if the latter are not aware that the chalice they are handed is a poisoned one. Furthermore, these Pontius Pilate of counselling, as I am tempted to call them, can easily pass the blame onto somebody else if their clients' future does, despite all the positive encouragements, not turn out as bright as they had been led to believe. ⁹And I simply cannot imagine that Sisyphus ever was happy.

But effective **professional** guidance is definitely not about telling fairy-tales or going along regardless with the unrealistic hopes clients may have, never mind that such behaviour also is highly unethical. For we should not forget either that counsellor credibility constitutes the principal foundation upon which effective counselling is built.

10 Rest assured though, we do not advocate that counsellors simply advise their clients to “grin and bear it”. On the contrary, we would like to encourage a new realism in counselling, one that is based on “telling it like it is”, on encouraging clients to **11** “get real”. And if such an approach might seem harsh or even cynical to the so-called positive thinkers, we would argue that it is in the long term far less cruel as it will better equip counselees to deal with the unfiltered reality, thus providing grounds for realism that is genuine optimism, grounded in the knowledge that they have to make the future themselves.

As early as 2009, students in the self-designated **12** "Research and Destroy" collective at the University of California, Santa Cruz, issued their famous "Communiqué from an absent future": "*'Work hard, play hard' has been the over-eager motto of a generation in training for ... what? – drawing hearts in cappuccino foam ... We work and we borrow in order to work and to borrow. And the jobs we work toward are the jobs we already have. What our borrowed tuition buys is the privilege of making monthly payments for the rest of our lives.*"

We should therefore no longer deceive ourselves and go on pretending that handing out false hopes is the right way forward. With youth unemployment hitting 50% and more in the stricken countries of peripheral Europe, we simply have to accept that our economic model no longer works as it cannot deliver enough high-value work for its ever more highly educated workforce. And no wishful thinking is going to change that situation any soon.

And if you only imagine that each and every one of the 8 billion people on our planet has the same structure of needs and the same entitlement to have these needs met, the case for optimism crumbles even more. Optimists therefore just remind me of the guy who is walking all alone through a forest at night and is whistling, not because he is fearless but on the contrary because he is afraid.

13 Let me now finish this short presentation by reading you the so-called ‘Little Fable’, a short fable-like story about a desperate mouse which Franz Kafka wrote in 1920. It was published posthumously by his friend Max Brod, who also gave it its title.

"Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

Although these few lines are meant to be a fable, they lack an edifying message revealing only hopelessness. Kafka's 'Little Fable' pours scorn on the enlightening optimism characteristic of the genre and warns of a misguided life. The path between the narrowing walls of the trap can be interpreted as representing life with its different stages: the difficulty of finding oneself in youth, the ever more confining duties of adulthood and the inevitability of death. The cat's words then almost seem like a welcome invitation to get off the trodden path, to get out of "normality" and to venture into a fundamentally different avenue, not least because in the end we are anyway going to die. The trap can then be seen as reflecting our existential Angsts: if we cannot run away from external threats, we also seem to be unable to free ourselves from our own internal impulses.

We, the authors of this talk however prefer to interpret Kafka's 'Little Fable' differently, namely as an encouragement to tackle life head on and not merely wander aimlessly between its walls.

Hence we would like to encourage counsellors to engage with their clients in the pedagogics of reality or of realities, as promoted by the [14](#) French philosopher and economist Jean-Pierre Dupuy in his 2004 book: 'Pour un catastrophisme éclairé.', 'For an enlightened catastrophism'.

Its subtitle is 'Quand l'impossible est certain', 'when the impossible is certain.'

Well, if the impossible is already certain, then at least let us try and make it happen.

[15](#) Thank you for your attention.