

FAMILY CONSTELLATION — A THERAPY BEYOND WORDS

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Family Constellation, a psychotherapeutic approach associated with the name Bert Hellinger, has become a popular yet also controversial form of systemic therapy in the German speaking therapy community. 'Family Constellation' (Familienstellen) means the individual client's physical-emotional positioning and re-positioning of substitute family members in relation to each other, with help of a therapeutic group. Family Constellation is a one-session approach that addresses family-of-origin issues. The therapeutic process is highly experiential, utilising multiple sensory modalities. Hellinger locates his model within phenomenology, and his practice has roots in several therapy schools. His model offers complementary therapeutic techniques in our 'languaged' world of family therapy.

The Inspiration European Family Therapy Association Congress, Athens, 1994. Workshop: Canavero, A., Heireman, M., and Weber, G., topic: intergenerational.

Ingeborg to Andreas: 'Sounds interesting, but you never know what you're going to get, just reading the abstract!' Ingeborg decides she's going. Weber presents in a small crowded room and introduces Hellinger's approach by describing his own Family Constellation. Listening to him, Ingeborg's body produces goosebumps, tears, and simple joy. Excitedly, she later shares the experience with Andreas ...

Germany 1998: Andreas and Ingeborg meet psychotherapist Irmgard Neumayer. *Irmgard:* 'Hey, have you heard of Hellinger?' *Ingeborg:* 'Do you mean the intergenerational guy?' *Irmgard:* 'Yes, can I show you videos of his work? I've been to a workshop just recently.' Irmgard conducts a workshop just for us. We all feel deeply touched just watching the therapy process on video.

Ingeborg to Poppy: 'The other day I was saying to my co-therapist, "Let's generate some hypotheses about this family". We were about to see a new family but had very little information. We knew of mother, father and a teenage boy with difficulties at school. My co-therapist said, "I think this family only consists of mother, father and the one child". I said "I agree, but I think there is perhaps another older daughter, who doesn't live with them any more". Mother, father and teenager are sitting in the waiting room. But then, during the session the mother mentions her older daughter who doesn't live at home any longer. Poppy, how do we know? How did I know there was an older daughter who had left home? Is there another form of communication? ...'

Poppy: 'There seems to be another source of knowledge, a knowledge that doesn't require secondary processing or words. It seems to come alive in families, in supervision and also in the interaction between family and therapist.' *Ingeborg:* 'Similar processes seem to be happening in Hellinger's therapy groups. Do people in Australia know about Hellinger?' *Poppy:* 'I haven't seen any reference to him.' *Ingeborg:* 'Why don't we write a paper to introduce his model to people here?'

Hellinger and the Nature of Family Constellation

Bert Hellinger, born in 1925, is a German speaking psychotherapist and former Catholic priest, who has studied philosophy, theology and pedagogy. Hellinger has been trained in several models of therapy, including group psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, Primal Therapy, Transactional Analysis and NLP. Family Constellation therapy reflects this rich training experience. Hellinger's religious background is reflected by the way he addresses issues of life and death: he says that his therapy deals with processes that are beyond the spectrum of traditional psychotherapy (Hellinger, 2000: 16). In contrast to most contemporary models of family therapy, Family Constellation work relies on immediate processing of nonverbal experience.

Family Constellation is offered within a group therapeutic setting. Normally, 15–30 people meet for sessions over several days. Group members volunteer to 'place' their Family Constellation, which can be their current system or their family of origin. The therapist asks for limited factual data, e.g. who belongs (or belonged) to the system, any significant events, whether anyone died young, whether the parents had previous partners and children from a previous relationship. The client selects members of the group to stand in for each member of his/her family, including him/herself. The selection is preferably gender consistent (e.g. males for males). The client guides each person to a particular position, facing in a specific direction. The spatial configuration reflects the client's current experience of his/her family. Once every 'family member' is placed, group members participating in the constellation give feedback. They describe their 'here and now' experience in relation to the other substitute family members, whether or not they feel comfortable or uncomfortable, cold, hot, sad, in physical pain. A further person may be asked to stand in for an additional family member, if the feedback reveals that an important person has initially been omitted from the constellation. The group members again give feedback. The therapist gradually re-positions group members with help of further feedback until a good resolution is found. The process is active, immediate and brief and may involve a change in grouping, in sequential position, in facial direction, posture or distance. The early tension will ease once every family member is well placed. When good positions are found the therapist will ask the client to exchange places with his/her representative. A statement of affirmation or a therapeutic ritual may follow. These can take the form of an embrace, or a sentence repeated several times, which states/affirms a family member's position within the new family constellation. At this stage of therapy, strong emotions may be aroused in members of the group, especially in the client. The therapist then encourages the client to allow him/herself to be affected by the experience. No reflection is encouraged. Sometimes a session ends with one of Hellinger's stories. These tend to be open-ended and are not further interpreted.

The approach has been applied to a variety of symptoms, including medical illness (e.g. MS, cancer), psychiatric disorders (e.g. depression, psychosis), disability, infertility, victimisation, perpetration of war crime, fostering/adoption and couple problems (Weber, 1994; Hellinger, 1998; Neuhauser, 1999; Ruppert, 2000). Workshops may focus on a theme, such as psychosomatic illness, or may be offered within the context of ongoing therapy, in which case both clients and therapists attend the workshop. Family Constellation techniques may also be utilised within individual therapy. In this situation, substitute symbols (sheets of paper) symbolise family members. Zawidowski (1999) describes a preventative application, offering Family Constellation to people who are entering a new phase in life, such as parenthood. Finally, therapeutic principles have been utilised within the context of organisational consultation. Hellinger's therapy is essentially single session therapy, which may be repeated after some time has lapsed.

Theoretical Concepts

Hellinger's approach is based on several theoretical concepts. These are well outlined in Weber's book *Zweierlei Glück [Second Chance]* (Weber, 1994), in the English re-working of the book by Hellinger, Beaumont and Weber (Hellinger, 1998) and in Zawidowski's *Family Staging* (Zawidowski, 1999). These concepts explain processes that lead to either smooth family functioning or to an unbalancing of the family equilibrium and resulting symptom development.

1. The Family 'Clan': The Right to Belong to a System of Love

According to Hellinger's model, family members are connected by a deep bond of love. Every person born or brought into the system by marriage has *the right to belong*. The completeness of the system is important and no one should be excluded. A family system in Hellinger's model is multigenerational, including children, their parents and grandparents, the parents' siblings, and sometimes great-grandparents and anybody who has made space for someone else. A previous spouse, a deceased child, or a stillborn baby may belong to the system. Every member must have his or her special place. Deceased people belong to the system as long as a current family member has a significant memory of that person. Since family members have a right to be part of the system, exclusions disrupt the family. They unbalance the family equilibrium and a member of a subsequent generation may try to rectify the imbalance (see further below.)

2. Hierarchical Order: One's Special Place

Family groups organise themselves according to a specific *hierarchical order*, following a chronological hierarchy within an immediate family and a generational hierarchy in relation to the wider family system. In a new family the first born child, alive or deceased, occupies the first place, the second born the second place, and so forth. If there have been previous partners, the first spouse takes the first position, followed by the second spouse, etc. These hierarchies are 'natural'. However, within the intergenerational context, the order is reversed. When a new family is founded, the previous generation allows the new family to take precedence. The hierarchical order must not be violated. When the family system is 'in order' and everyone belonging to the system has his or her honoured and respected place in mind and heart, family members will experience a sense of joy, harmony, completeness and contentment (Hellinger, 1998).

3. The Group Conscience: Systemic Equilibrium

Hellinger assumes that extended family groups have a *group conscience*. The group conscience is governed by principles of fairness and loyalty. The rules of the conscience bind family members to the group in the form of 'moral' obligations. The group conscience acts in the service of the group but the processes remain largely outside people's conscious awareness. The conscience judges whether or not the actions of family members are in accordance with the rules of the system, and if rule violation has occurred, will press for retribution. We believe the concept of the group conscience overlaps with Boszormenyi-Nagi's concept of *Relational Ethics*. *Relational Ethics* can be understood as an unspoken systemic contract, which is based on the principles of transgenerational solidarity and fairness (Boszormenyi-Nagi, 1987: 309).

4. Symptom Development: The Violation of Rules

The violation of rules can take the form of an *exclusion* of a family member or may result from an imbalance between *giving and taking*.

4.1: Exclusion

Family members can be excluded from the system for different reasons, including family secrets (e.g. adopted or illegitimate child), unresolved conflict involving two generations leading to permanent communication breakdown, traumatic loss (e.g. premature death or suicide), or events which are perceived as shameful and guilt provoking, such as crime. Exclusions can be a conscious attempt to expel someone from the system (e.g. a violent man). In this case, family members feel that the person no longer deserves the right to be part of the system. There can also be an unconscious attempt to 'forget', as the memories associated with the person may evoke overwhelming feelings.

Many family therapists will find examples of exclusions in their work. A stepmother may try to replace the children's deceased mother without acknowledging the biological mother's importance. An anniversary ritual may not be observed. Or a family may cut off contact with the biological father. The mother and the children's maternal grandparents may think that the biological father's influence will have a negative affect on the children, as they perceive him to have undesirable personality traits. When an exclusion has taken place, a member of the youngest generation may try to rectify the exclusion by following the excluded person in a symbolic way (e.g. by developing similar behavioural characteristics), thus bringing the excluded person back into the system.

4.2. Imbalance between Giving and Taking

A second type of violation is a skewed balance between giving and receiving. Hellinger assumes an inherent order of giving/taking, which follows time-dependent lines. Parents give the child life, love, and position within the family, with all of its positive and negative essences. The child accepts and honours what has been given, the force of life and everything that has been passed down to it within the particular family context. The parents give what they took from their parents and what they take from each other. All people within the family structure have a particular and unique position in relation to each other. Problems emerge when a person rejects what has been given, or violates the inherent order. However 'symptom development' may only emerge in the following generation.

The process of taking, and accepting what has been given, is often difficult for people who have been physically, emotionally or sexually abused by their parents. The hurt and rage can be so strong that they attempt to distance themselves from their parents, in the extreme case cutting off all contact with them. According to the model, their rejection is a violation of the systemic rules. A person needs to honour what has been given to him or her, the 'life force'.

The system may also be out of balance if a family member accepts/takes what does not belong to him/her. This could include a role, a position or a place, which belongs to an earlier born child or to a deceased family member (Weber, 1994: 55).

Readers may recognise Boszormenyi-Nagy's early concepts of a *fair balance of Entitlements and Indebtedness* in Hellinger's concept of *Balance between Giving and Taking*. Boszormenyi-Nagy also describes the rules of giving and receiving in different relationships. For example, 'equal' relationships (e.g. couple relationships) require a balance between giving and receiving, and 'non-equal' relationships (e.g. between parent and child) require that the parent gives to the child. This process should not be reversed (Le Goff, 2001).

Equalisation of Family Systems: Compensatory Acts

Compensatory acts are attempts to restore the family equilibrium that misfire. Out of love and unconscious identification with a family member, a person may take over that member's guilt, suffering or destiny. A family member may follow someone even into death to restore the equilibrium in the larger system. Here is an example from our own practice.

Seven year old James has been referred for behavioural problems and mild learning difficulties. We invite the family and we meet James, his mother Betty, his father George, his younger sister Rosie (three years old) and his older step brother Adam (sixteen). The interviewing team feels that the parents need help with positive and consistent parenting of James who is an active and slightly impulsive child. But their major concern focuses on Adam. Adam looks extremely depressed and withdrawn. The parents report that Adam has been becoming a difficult adolescent. George says that he used to have a good relationship with Adam although Adam has never been the 'perfect child'. He used to have 'normal problems, those you would expect from a boy'. However, for the past months, Adam had been extremely negative in his attitude and defiant in his behaviour.

When we explore the family history, Betty informs us that she met Adam's father in her teens. She fell pregnant with Adam at the age of sixteen. She said Adam's father was 'a creep'. You couldn't trust him. When the pregnancy was confirmed, he became violent, threatening to shoot her. She left him and has had no further contact with him. Adam has never seen his father. While Betty talks about Adam's father the team can still sense the tension in Betty. Betty then says 'I really don't want to talk about him, that's past now!'

We have been wondering whether or not Adam's behaviour is linked to a compensatory act. Is it a coincidence that Adam's behaviour changes when he reaches the age when his mother separated from the biological father? Is Adam 'following' his father, whom he has never met? Can we understand his changing behaviour as a longing to connect with his father? We cannot know for certain as multiple influences may work together in a negative transactional pattern. There could also be other significant intergenerational links, which a family constellation might reveal if it were undertaken.

However, if Adam's behavioural change was linked with the father (e.g. the exclusion of the father from the system), this compensatory act cannot resolve the original conflict, but would lead to further entanglement and suffering in a new generation.

Systemic entanglements can express themselves in different ways. They may include a impulsive urge to act, fanatical beliefs, intense 'inappropriate' feelings that can't be explained by the person's current circumstances, or exaggerated emotions, such as anxiety. They can be experienced as a feeling that one is not oneself or in the form of a psychological connection with an extended family member from the past.

The Significant Sentence

Hellinger often describes the conflict or misguided attempt at compensation or restoration by formulating 'leading sentences'. The misfired attempt in the case of Adam may be condensed in a sentence such as 'Dear father, I connect with you by being like you'. He will then offer a second sentence, which offers a solution to the conflict. This sentence is given to the client once a good family constellation is found. In Adam's case we might chose a sentence that highlights the connection between biological father and son, e.g. (Adam to his father) 'You will always be my father', or 'You will always stay in my heart'. The sentence is usually repeated several times. The sentence may need to be extended to tackle Adam's

dilemma more directly. The therapist may add ‘You will always be my father ... [implied: ‘you have given me the force of life/you will always stand in the position of the father/this position cannot be taken away’] ... but I will chose to live my life in my own way’.

New sentences acknowledge the love and belonging of family members, e.g. where a member has been ‘lost’ from the system. They may also place a boundary around a sub-system or person with an addition that acknowledges the younger person’s right to live his/her own life.

An illustration of the Therapy Process

The following example (freely translated and condensed from Weber, 1994: 296–300) illustrates Hellinger’s therapy with the family of origin constellation of a young woman presenting with anorexia nervosa. The session occurs during an inpatient admission. The client’s family consists of father, mother, the client (seventeen years old) and her brother (twelve). The client cannot recall any significant events in her own family but mentions that her oldest paternal uncle had died of seizures at a young age and the paternal grandmother had died of cancer. *The client selects and then guides four members of the group to the following positions. See Constellation 1.*

Hellinger now invites feedback from the substitute family members: ‘What are you experiencing?’

Client (S= substitute): *Positioned so close to my mother and father, I feel suffocated.*

Father (S): *I feel good here. I am the centre of attention.*

Hellinger encourages the Father to rely more on his experience in the moment. ‘How do you feel towards your daughter?’

Father (S): *I look straight in front of me. There is confrontation between my wife and me, there’s something between us.*

Mother (S): *I feel exhausted and tense, as if everyone is against me. Although everyone is near, I feel lonely and isolated. My daughter is like an anchor for me. I feel no connection with my husband or son.*

Son (S): *I feel good. They play their games and I look elsewhere.*

Hellinger: *Someone is needed here [points towards the opening in the half circle], someone is missing. Who should be here? I’ll try the deceased uncle. [A further group member representing the uncle is placed opposite the father].*

Hellinger: *What has changed?*

Son (S): *It’s better, I can focus now.*

Client (S): *I’ve got some breathing space. I felt too close and suffocated near my parents. My parents can turn their attention in that [the uncle’s] direction.*

Mother (S): *When he (uncle) joined us, I felt robbed of power. With him there my power is gone. [Hellinger now places the father to the left of his brother (the uncle), opposite.]*

Uncle (S): *I don’t feel so lonely any more.*

Father (S): *I feel better here too.*

Client (S): *I feel even better, at ease, I’ve got more freedom to move.*

Hellinger: *My impression is that the father is pulled towards the dead uncle — it’s like a suction, which pulls him out of his family [he places the mother to the left of the father].*

Mother (S): *This is much better. My place is here.*

[Hellinger now moves the brother to the left side of the client.]

Client (S): *I feel good too. Where I was before, I felt lonely. It was good to have more space but I didn’t want to be as lonely.*

Brother (S): *I don’t feel so good here.*

[Hellinger now places the brother next to the uncle, a form of test to see if there is a connection between the brother and uncle. The brother feels better. Hellinger confirms the link.]

Father (S): *I feel better with my son here [next to brother].*

Hellinger says that he doesn’t quite trust this statement and emphasises that the therapist needs to perceive whether or not the representatives are in touch with themselves. Cognitive construction and logical reasoning are discouraged. See discussion. There is a link between son and uncle but this isn’t the solution. [The brother is moved back to sister’s left, and the uncle is now placed behind the father].

Hellinger: *How has it changed?*

Client (S): *That’s better.*

[Hellinger now includes the paternal grandparents and places them behind the uncle.] **Hellinger:** *How is it now?*

[After feedback some small changes are made]. The father reports that he is feeling stronger and the mother says **she** can experience **her** husband more clearly.

Client (S): *I would like someone behind me too.*

[Hellinger places the client left to the mother but only temporarily.]

Client (S): *This is better, I can feel my energy.*

Hellinger: *Yes, it is good to take energy from the mother (places daughter in front of the mother).*

Client (S): *I like it, it’s a feeling of freedom and energy, but I feel sorry for my brother.*

Hellinger: *This was only temporary, you can go back to your brother. [Hellinger now turns to the client.] ‘Would you like to try to see how it feels?’ [The client substitute now exchanges position with the Client who takes her position in the*

constellation. A long pause follows]

Client: I feel they're all against me.

Hellinger: *This is a feeling based on cognitive processing. [To the Client]: 'Take time to experience the position'. The Client still doesn't feel right and Hellinger places her first in front of the mother and in front of her two parents, **with** her back towards the parents. The Client confirms that the position feels right. After some time he encourages her to go back to the place near her brother. After **another interval** he takes her again to a position in front of the mother; mother and daughter look at each other. 'How did you refer to your mother?'*

Client: *Mum*

Hellinger encourages her to say several times, 'Mum, I will stay with you'. Mother and client embrace and the sentence is repeated.

*Hellinger encourages the Client to take deep breaths and repeat the words lovingly. The Client starts to cry, but Hellinger simply asks **her** to continue breathing until the feeling is right and the sentence becomes stronger. He guides the father to the mother–daughter dyad. Hellinger then positions the Client (back facing her parents) in front of the parents. He finally encourages the Client to take her space near the brother.*

Client: Yes, here is it better.

The session ends.

The therapy 'only' consists of a few moves. Hellinger includes the uncle, the father finds support from the uncle who is supported by the paternal grandparents, the mother finds a new place near the father, the client takes energy from the mother, then finds a new position near the brother where she finds breathing space. We can see how each move carries rich, highly condensed meanings about the relationships within the system.

Discussion

Hellinger places his approach within a phenomenological framework. Phenomenology, based on the work of Brentano, Husserl, Scheler, Hartmann and Merleau-Ponty (Sahakian, 1968), presents a radical departure from the 'objective' sciences. Phenomenology is the study of direct, sensory experience (Abram, 1996). It relies on participant perception, lively apprehension and subjective experience. Not guided by logic, reasoning or will, the technique calls for immediate, pre-conceptual sensory experience. Phenomenology assumes that we are not just biological, rational and communicating beings. We are also body–spirit units, connected at different levels with mankind, with the past, and with higher spiritual planes. With the help of the phenomenological attitude we enter the subjective world of other people, crossing time and generation boundaries.

We can find an application of phenomenological principles in the actions of the therapist, but also in the utilisation of spontaneous group processes. The therapist actively discourages discussion, arguments or rational explanations. S/he guides group members back to their immediate sensations and feelings whenever s/he perceives group members relying on cognitive instead of experiential feedback. Family Constellation therapy requires congruency between processes in the group and processes within the therapist and as such, a specific therapeutic attitude is required. The therapist must allow him/herself to be open to his/her own spontaneous, unrehearsed experience (Zawidowski, 1999).

In Family Constellation Therapy we also find numerous systemic and group dynamic components. We can conceptualise the model in the terminology of general systems theory, as Hellinger describes the structuring, bounding, patterning and ordering processes of an (open) ongoing system. The concept of the family conscience gives the model a special edge. We see systemic influences stemming from structural and experiential family therapy (e.g. hierarchical order, the utilisation of the spatial configuration and the technique of family sculpting). Hellinger makes extensive use of rituals, again a tradition found in many models of family therapy.

As indicated before, Hellinger's model overlaps with historical schools of family therapy, especially Boszormenyi-Nagy's contextual model (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Ulrich, 1981, Le Goff, 2001). Concepts such as relational ethics, systemic legacies, invisible loyalties and the balance between giving and taking resonate with Hellinger's ideas of the conscience, the balance between giving and taking, and the systemic entanglements that result from the violation of larger systemic rules. Finally, Hellinger's approach reminds us of early forms of psychodrama (Moreno, 1953) in that both models utilise nonverbal communication channels as primary source of psychological knowledge, although Moreno's model is more action oriented, and, notably, more reliance is placed on the intuitive 'knowing' of the 'auxiliary egos' (the group members who play roles for the protagonist), whereas Hellinger's model expects much of the intuition and subsequent instructions to the substitutes to come from the therapist.

Fascinating processes seem to be occurring in these groups. How is it possible that group members 'know' about members of a system they have never met? Perhaps the clue lies in the concept of spontaneity. Moreno suggests that once group members transcend the verbal (and cognitive) level with help of spontaneous action, a different source of knowledge can be reached (Moreno, 1953). The processes occurring in Family Constellation groups resonate with our own experience as therapists in various contexts: in supervision groups, in family therapy, or in body–mind therapy with individual clients. To us, there seems to be a knowledge channel that shows itself immediately, that is rapidly processed, that does not require words and that gives us relevant clues about another person or system.

In trying to make sense of this phenomenon we have turned to interdisciplinary models of the unconscious, perhaps more correctly called 'co-unconscious' (Wilber, 1993; Fromm, 1979). The unconscious is bound up with the evolution of consciousness, with dualism and with the fictions of our constructs. The unconscious represents universal, cosmic entities.

Models of the unconscious assume a universal connectedness, which disregards the limitations of space, time and scientific logic. The unconscious may relate to archaic, 'early' methods of communication, stemming from our phylogenetic heritage.

Foulkes's concept of the matrix (Roberts, 1982) addresses specifically the processes occurring in groups. He refers to a web of communication and relationship in a given group, common shared ground, which determines the meaning and significance of all events and upon which all communication (verbal and nonverbal) rests. The matrix is like a line of force (or an X-ray) that passes right through the individual members and can be conceptualised as a transpersonal network comparable to a magnetic field. Perhaps it is this transpersonal network that is activated in Hellinger's groups.

Hellinger's model has not been developing without critical voices being raised. One criticism is that Hellinger has conducted workshops in front of large audiences, where the effects of Family Constellation work on more vulnerable members of the audience cannot be monitored. This poses a potential ethical concern. Yet despite the criticism, some of Hellinger's ideas make sense to us when we grapple with the 'repetition' of processes from generation to generation, the inexplicable phenomena, the coincidences occurring in families in regard to onset of illness, disability, or tragic death. Further, Hellinger has embraced controversial and difficult themes, such as abuse or war crimes committed during the Second World War. To these problems he offers unique and refreshing therapeutic solutions, leading to reconciliation and inner peace. But most of all, in this 'age of isms and constructions' the approach helps us to value a rich source of knowledge within ourselves, a knowledge that exists before and beyond words.

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Postscript

Gestalt Therapy Australia is presenting workshops in Family Constellation in Melbourne. Inquiries: Malinda Kemp, gta@ozonline.com.au. Hellinger's teaching seminars on videos can be ordered: email: www.ZeigTucker.com

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