

## The Challenge and Promise for Psychodrama and Family and Systemic Constellations

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Systemic Constellations—sometimes called Family Constellations—is a phenomenological approach developed by family psychotherapist Bert Hellinger in the 1970s in Germany. The experiential method originated to address the trauma passed to both the descendants of the Nazi perpetrators and Jewish and other victims after World War II and has grown into an international movement that is comparable to psychodrama. A growing number of psychodramatists in the United States and around the world are integrating psychodrama and Systemic Constellations in group psychotherapy and training settings. Others are experimenting with and adapting principles of Family and Systemic Constellations in individual sessions. Although this integration has shown positive results, some psychodramatists voice skepticism; others question the value and future of psychodrama in their enthusiasm for this new method. Here we discuss the newer method, alluding to the challenges and possibilities that it poses with respect to psychodrama, and the fact that a growing number of psychodramatists are integrating its principles with positive results.

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Growing numbers of helping professionals around the world are employing Family and Systemic Constellations, an experiential intergenerational healing process developed by German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger. This method looks remarkably like psychodrama—yet also has great differences from it. Many psychodramatists are experimenting with principles from Family Constellations and integrating them into psychodramatic enactment for healing, organizational development, coaching, and personal growth (Carnabucci & Anderson, 2012; Carnabucci & Ciotola, 2013). They report that the action goes deeper and the resolutions often come more quickly.

Systemic Constellations—a term often used interchangeably with Family Constellations, as well as constellation work—is based on the notion that people are connected by unseen energetic forces, not only in the here and now but also

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across time and space. The method was developed in the 1970s in Germany by family psychotherapist and philosopher Bert Hellinger, who noticed that personal and cultural traumas influence our lives for many generations. Hellinger integrated methods derived from family psychotherapy and indigenous cultures into his approach and identified reliable steps for transforming these ancestral memories.

The work is popular throughout Europe, Russia, Asia, and Latin America and is steadily gaining recognition in the United States, attracting professionals from a variety of disciplines including mental and physical health, shamanic healing, Traditional Chinese Medicine, coaching, consulting, energy healing, education, and community and social activism. Its promoters say that constellations can be integrated into any healing or change-oriented process and often produce enduring positive change for many seemingly insoluble problems.

This method appears to expand upon the theories that J. L. Moreno, the developer of psychodrama, pioneered with his writings on tele and coconsciousness, plus other writings about family loyalty (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984) and what has come to be called energy medicine (Hunt, 1996).

When Moreno met Martin Buber in a café in Vienna in the early 20th century (Anderson, 1980; Moreno, 1989), we can guess that they discussed their observations of energetic connections that appear to occur between people during an encounter. Moreno later coined the word *tele* for this mysterious and invisible connection, defining it as the ability to feel into the actuality of another person, experiencing the person in the present moment, without distortion or contamination by previous experience, differentiating it from clinical transference.

The development of quantum physics, particularly the innovative work of biologist Rupert Sheldrake (1988), established the theory of morphic fields and morphic resonance, which promotes a vision of a living and developing universe with inherent memory. Sheldrake's work posits that social groups are organized by fields, as in schools of fish and flocks of birds. How does a flock of geese turn instantaneously, for instance, without any external sign of communication from the lead goose? Sheldrake's answer is that any particular body of related parts, in this case a flock of geese, has a morphic resonance among its members.

## COMPARING PSYCHODRAMA AND SYSTEMIC FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS

The basics of psychodrama are well known. The group leader, called the director, facilitates a group that begins with a warm-up activity, designed to aid in building trust among group members and creating a readiness for action. At some point, the director selects a protagonist for the group to address a personal but representative issue in dramatic action. The protagonist selects members of the group to serve as auxiliaries—people who are willing to play roles in the upcoming drama—and the drama begins. The protagonist typically role reverses with these auxiliaries to “train” them how to play each role, and a good auxiliary will imitate body posture, language, and delivery when he or she takes the role, improvising as the drama continues. The drama moves through multiple scenes, with the protagonist at the forefront of the action, until a closing scene is determined. When the drama concludes, all group members return to their seats for a session

of sharing—auxiliaries sharing what it was like to play the role, and all group members telling how what they have heard and observed relates to their own life stories and experiences.

A classic Family Constellations session also begins with a group. Participants are typically seated on chairs in a circle. The empty space in the center of the circle, called the field, is where the work takes place. The group leader, called the facilitator, starts with a short talk, a simple introduction or exercise; for instance, the facilitator may go around the circle and give an opportunity to each person to say what he or she is feeling emotionally or physically.

A group member may be chosen by the facilitator to present a personal issue for resolution—or alternatively, a group member may volunteer to present—and other group members are asked to represent people in the person's intergenerational family system and sometimes meta figures, such as love or death or another pertinent force. When group members take the representations of family members and that of the member presenting an issue, no training is necessary to play roles.

The person who is presenting the issue for resolution—called the client—stands behind each representative and slowly and meditatively positions each in the inner circle. When all representatives are positioned, the client returns to his or her seat to watch. Representatives are asked to open to whatever body sensations or emotions arise, as well as insistent thoughts or strong impulses to move. They are then asked to report to the group their inner experiences.

It appears that this matrix of energy interacts within the unconscious, what Hellinger calls the family “soul,” and emerges into consciousness in the field. Representatives may develop unusual physical symptoms, burst into anger at particular representatives on stage, cry over one other, drop to the floor as if dead or fainting, move away from the group, or in some cases wail and scream. It happens without obvious context—yet it obviously appears congruent with other representatives.

The mood of the watching group is generally somber or meditative. Although the work deals with emotions, the emotions do not seem to overwhelm the client or witnesses. They are experienced naturally, like you might feel when touched while watching a play or movie.

Once the problem in the family system is revealed, a solution is sought by repositioning representatives and adding short healing sentences or rituals such as bowing. Resolution is found when a sense of calm is brought to representatives in the family system as well as the group.

Representatives derole and return to their seats for a few moments of silence. The effect of achieving peace is taken in by the group. Sharing about the experience is discouraged, so all group members, including the client, have time for the energy and feelings in the room to settle. In the quiet, there is reverence and appreciation for the work just completed.

## SKEPTICS, QUESTIONS, AND RESEARCH

Many psychodramatists have questions and concerns about this method. They may tend to go into acting mode, bypassing the group leader's suggestion to slow

down and attune to their inner experience. Or they may tend to notice instances where they might be highly directive, pushing a protagonist toward a specific outcome. Finally, there are questions about why role reversal is not employed.

First of all, it is important to state that a Systemic Constellations session is not poorly done psychodrama. Rather, it is akin to action sociometry, where people and sometimes abstract concepts are placed according to their relationship to the protagonist. Representatives need not take part in the usual role-development process because they are able to let the role unfold from their literal position in the sociometric network. In other words, they feel the tele—the connection or lack of connection—to others in the system.

Robin, a psychodrama trainee who has participated in several Family Constellations sessions, remembers her shock of unexpected feelings the first time she was chosen to represent the mother of a client. She had been told nothing about the mother or the mother's relationship with the client; her only instructions were to breathe, loosen her body, and allow herself to move as inclined. Almost immediately, she found herself twisting to the floor, sitting with her legs awkwardly folded next to her. With every breath, she felt more enraged and focused on the client as the place of her anger. She later learned that the client's mother was disabled and used a wheelchair, and the relationship was very strained due to the mother's anger and cruelty.

How do representatives sense information when they stand in certain sociometric positions? We do not know, but the process appears to work in practice from a phenomenological view. The method has been widely challenged in Germany and elsewhere by skeptics who question the validity of this work. A study by Peter Schloetter (2005) at Witten/Herdecke University in Germany documented some fascinating conclusions about constellation placement using statues. Using an actual client situation, up to seven statues were placed in a room, their positions set up by that client, with each statue representing a person in the client's family system. People unfamiliar with Family Constellations were asked to stand in each of the seven positions. Each person in each particular position reported body sensations and feelings. Another seven people were brought in, then another.

What was established was a pattern of extremely high correlation between placement and internal response for each position, no matter who entered the room to stand in those positions. The conclusion: The sociometric position where a person is placed, in relationship to others who have been similarly placed, evokes highly *similar* feelings and sensations. Schloetter had originally set up his research experiment to prove that Hellinger's placements were arbitrary and the responses of representatives random, but reports showed the opposite.

Hellinger has discouraged research into his method, saying that a mechanistic study of the method will take the soul away from what is a living process. However, hundreds of thousands of Family Constellations sessions in Germany and around the world for the past three decades show undeniable phenomenological results documented in an ever-widening body of literature with remarkable results.

## THE BACKGROUND OF BERT HELLINGER

Hellinger traveled throughout Europe and the United States in the 1970s to study such diverse therapeutic methods as the primal therapy of Arthur Janov, the hypnotic work of Milton Erickson, the provocative therapy of Frank Farrelly, Fritz Perls's Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir's family sculpture, and the family-systems work of Ruth McClendon and Les Kadis. He had learned group dynamics—as well as many indigenous peoples' reverence for their ancestors—as a school principal and missionary working with the Zulu in South Africa. Trained as a psychoanalyst, he had already picked up on the work of Eric Berne and must have become familiar with psychodrama, since his work has many elements similar to psychodrama, especially action sociometry and group practice.

Ursula Franke, an educator and Hellinger protégé, acknowledges that Hellinger owes much to Moreno in providing the foundations for Systemic Constellations—with one difference: Although Moreno's encounters take place in the here and now, Hellinger moves to a level free of time and space. Franke (2003) points out that Hellinger does not have a real time span to work with, but an “inner” time and structure that is always available.

As Franke puts it, the positionings are part of an internal and invisible picture, “a soul picture.” Once representatives are in position, they seem to fall into the systemic telic relationships of the family system, some recognizable, some on the edge of consciousness, some completely unknown. In constellation work, the space has come to be called the knowing field (Ulsamer, 2005), in that representatives have mysterious access to knowledge about the people they represent. Although there is no scene involving a concrete time or place, representatives on stage become alive with energy, mesmerizing the group.

As Hellinger discovered in his work with the descendants of the adversaries of World War II, traumatic energies appear to be passed to the next generation. French psychodramatist Anne Ancelin Schützenberger (1998) came to a similar conclusion when she noted in her psychodramatic work that patterns played out in previous generations can play out all over again in the current generations; she also participated in a videotape with Hellinger and Sheldrake comparing thoughts and observations on this phenomena (Hellinger, Schützenberger, & Sheldrake, 2002).

## CONTRASTING THE VIEWS OF MORENO AND HELLINGER

Moreno pioneered recognition of the importance of our relationships with each other, asserting that each person is the total of his or her role relationships. Thus, the psychodrama method basically promotes individual dramas that explore relationships in need of emotional repair, or role training in order to respond differently in specific situations and relationships. In psychodrama, we become the stars in our dramas to effect this repair. In classical psychodrama, the protagonist's present dilemma is traced to the locus and status nascendi of the issue in the individual's earlier life, to maximize the effectiveness of the repair.

According to Hellinger, it is not the individual who needs repair, but the system. The client comes to a Family Constellations session as a protagonist not for the psychotherapy group but for his or her family system. As the session

evolves and the difficulty is confirmed, there is an opportunity to shift the interrupted flow of spontaneity through the family system—restoring a flow of energy that Hellinger calls love.

According to Hellinger's experiential discoveries, we carry the emotional burdens of our ancestors due to an unconscious family loyalty, a need to help and remember those who have gone before us. The love that naturally would pass to us becomes entangled in their misfortunes, and we are not completely free to live our lives. Constellation work makes visible these patterns so we can see what happened, respectfully acknowledging the trauma or ancestral pain without judgment.

Once acknowledged, the family system can experience a natural movement toward healing. This reconciliation restores lost dignity to each family member, and a person's obligations, guilt, loneliness, and blame dissolve when the ancestors are honored for their actions and misfortunes. Integrity and strength are restored, so love can flow through the generations. A new internal image of the family is created, allowing a person to relate to members of his or her family in a different way.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF FAMILY AND SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS

After decades of observation by Hellinger and his followers, three basic truths now known as Orders of Love have emerged (Hellinger, Beaumont, & Weber, 1998). When the orders are violated, it signals that the family needs love restored. When constellations are set up, spontaneous movements repeatedly emerge within the sociometric configuration toward a reestablishment of these orders.

- **Each person has the right to belong to his or her family.** Everyone needs to belong to his or her family. If anyone is rejected or excluded—the isolates in the protagonist's family—difficulties most likely will arise in future generations. The same principle appears with traumatic and premature deaths, stillbirths, abortions, and miscarriages. Those lost to the family need to be grieved and taken into the hearts of the living.
- **There must be a balance between giving and taking.** When someone takes advantage of others unjustly, an imbalance is created that can show up in following generations. If not addressed, generations of obligation, guilt, and inability to become intimate can follow. Restoring the balance between giving and taking between the unbalanced parties will lead to those in the present and the future being able to love more freely, give more generously, and receive with gratitude.
- **The order in a family needs to be respected.** Parents come first, children second. Something has gone wrong when children feel they must take care of their parents, and parents look to their children to meet their needs. Likewise, birth order is important and must be acknowledged. Second marriages and blended families require clarity in the order of births and marriages. When the order is ignored, dysfunction in the family can result. When a sense of order is restored, insecurity is abated, and there are feelings of security in having a place in the family.

To reestablish the orders, constellation facilitators ask questions about previous generations—those who have been neglected, marginalized or shunned, as well as those who have died of suicide, deaths that have not been grieved, accidents that have left people disabled, love affairs that have taken spouses away from their families, injustices that have occurred, and children who have felt out of place because of a parent's favoritism.

These are questions that are helpful to assess what is out of order:

- Who was excluded or rejected in this family system? For instance, was someone disowned because he or she married outside of the family's religion, ethnicity, or race? Did someone die and was not mourned? Was a child given away for adoption or fostering and no longer remembered?
- What wrongs were suffered in past generations? Who was disgraced, shamed, or shunned? Did one brother cheat another out of an inheritance? Has someone caused a death, whether by murder or tragic accident? Was a spouse or partner unfaithful?
- What is out of order? Has a later-born child been preferred to the child who is first born? Has a half-sibling been disowned or neglected? Have pictures of a previous spouse been ripped from the photograph album and forbidden to be discussed?

## ILLUSTRATIONS OF PREVIOUS TRAUMA AFFECTING CLIENT TODAY

To illustrate the effects of an ancestor who has been dismissed from the family, we have the story of James, who arrived in psychotherapy with a desire to be coupled and unhappiness that he was alone. At 37, he was unmarried, with limited romantic or sexual involvement with women through the years. He voiced a longtime feeling that sex was somehow “bad” or “wrong.” He did not recall any specific instructions from his parents or his church about this attitude, and he did not believe that he was gay because he did feel attracted to women.

The genogram showed that several men in James's generation were unmarried—and that his father was conceived out of wedlock, after which the father's biological father, James's grandfather, vanished. The pregnant grandmother married another man, who adopted the child and gave him his surname.

During an individual session, James placed small figures in the sand tray to represent himself, his parents, and grandparents. When questioned, James admitted that the grandfather figure was not his biological grandfather. Karen asked him to add a figure for his biological grandfather—an unnamed man he had never met. When James saw the unknown grandfather placed behind his father, his heart started beating very quickly. His body reaction confirmed that the unknown grandfather was key to his issue and linked to the feeling that sex is bad and wrong.

Karen, in the double role, offers this statement to acknowledge the unknown biological grandfather: “Although I did not know you, I acknowledge you as my grandfather. I acknowledge that you are part of my family.”

The beating heart, reports James, seems to calm.

Karen, still in the double role, offers a different statement for James to say to grandmother: "I see your pain, shame, and loneliness, dear grandmother, and I now understand this deep shame that you carried for a long time. I leave the shame of sex and sexual pleasure with you as your fate, not mine."

James spoke haltingly, yet genuinely, and it was easy to see that he was touched by this moment of recognition and acknowledgment of the pain in his family, just two generations away.

A year later, he happily reported that he had met a woman and the relationship had developed into an engagement. Three years later, they were married and the parents of a toddler.

In another session, this one within a group, we see the generational impact of trauma on a physical problem. Millie arrived in group with embarrassment about the condition of her teeth and the difficulty in finding a dentist who could repair them properly. Now in her mid-40s, she had lost several teeth due to poor dental hygiene as a child growing up in England. She had consulted several dentists who had attempted to repair her teeth and paid thousands of dollars for their services; however, the teeth kept falling out. She was greatly distressed by the loss of her teeth and habitually covered her mouth when she spoke.

We began with a session in the group where the missing teeth were represented by rows of pillows. As the process evolved, the teeth morphed into gravestones marking the places of the dead. She suddenly remembered that her great-grandfather served as a soldier in World War I and fought in several fierce battles in the countryside of France.

A representative was brought in to stand as Millie's great-grandfather. Another representative was brought in to stand as World War I. As the representative felt into the position, he acknowledged that a great sadness emerged from his heart and spread throughout his entire body. War stood quite close to the great-grandfather, as if they were bonded. The representative for Millie felt quite drawn to great-grandfather, and they locked eyes, as if they knew each other very well. In reality, the great-grandfather had died long before Millie was born. Tears fell from Millie's eyes as she watched the scene.

Karen, in the double role, offered this statement for the Millie representative to say to the great-grandfather: "I see you. I see the losses that you have suffered as a result of war."

The great-grandfather representative appeared to breathe a long sigh of relief.

Karen, still as double, added: "I see your grief, and I understand that I have been carrying it. I release and return this grief and loss to you, as the men who died here have been returned to the earth for burial."

The Millie representative repeated this sentence, and all of the representatives in the scene appeared to relax further. It was agreed that the session was complete. About a month later, Millie returned to the group with a wide smile. She had been to the dentist for her last bout of dental work, and the new teeth now remained firmly in her mouth. Now that her great-grandfather's losses were acknowledged and grieved, the teeth in Millie's mouth were no longer lost.

With these vignettes, we see five specific differences between psychodrama and Systemic Constellations.



- Auxiliary work in psychodrama depends on the process of role development. Systemic Constellations relies on what emerges within the representatives and the systemic configuration.
- Doubling in psychodrama attempts to discover the truth of the protagonist through the use of an auxiliary. Systemic Constellations tests what lies beneath by having representatives repeat what are known as healing sentences given by the facilitator, to see if they resonate within the representative and within the system.
- Psychodrama is the drama beginning with the perceptual reality of the protagonist. Systemic Constellations creates the scene that emerges from an unconscious reality, an intergenerational family matrix, the field of energetic relationships.
- Classical psychodrama goes to the origin of the protagonist's issue within his or her life. Systemic Constellations mostly seeks to uncover the origin of the client's issue in his or her ancestral history.
- Finally, psychodrama is a group therapy first. The greatest therapeutic gains, therefore, often are achieved in the sharing segment, when the protagonist is reunited with the group following self-disclosure in the action. The group members share with the protagonist the emotional investment and struggle to find a resolution for the protagonist's issue, and they feel closer to each other. The sharing is sometimes seen as having the most lasting effect on group members, long after the stories are forgotten. In Systemic Constellations, the therapy is done in a group, with the advantage of group energy, but its bonding is temporary and based on the profound experience of this work's resonant energy, everyone feeling movements of the soul leading them and uniting them in the achievement of peace. But once that peace is achieved for the client, the bonding falters, because there is not the same struggle toward resolution that people share in a here-and-now situation.

## CONCLUSION AND LOYALTY TO THE ANCESTOR OF PSYCHODRAMA

As we can see, there are many similarities between psychodrama and Systemic and Family Constellations—particularly the group setting and the recognition of sociometric connections—as well as differences. There is much in Hellinger's work, especially the observation of the knowing field, that furthers Moreno's concept of tele into a new developmental stage.

What happens due to the telic connections found in constellation work should not be all that surprising to those trained in psychodrama. Moreno, should he observe constellation work, might reflect on his early enthusiasm about the power and mystery of tele. He might say that Hellinger stole his idea—and Hellinger, a great synthesizer of methodologies, just may have.

Hellinger has written about loyalty in his papers and books (Hellinger, 2001; Hellinger & ten Hovel, 1999), and states that people are bound more than they realize by loyalty to their family members, known or unknown. Those who are indebted to psychodrama will be quick to be loyal to psychodrama, just as the

child will have a natural tendency to be loyal to his or her parents. Likewise, those who have gained much from constellation work remain loyal to Hellinger, seeing psychodrama as a relic from the past.

The late Ronald Anderson, who received the Innovators Award from the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama in 2010 for combining the two methods, wrestled with his personal loyalty to Moreno, whom he trained with at Beacon Institute, and Hellinger, whose trainings he also took. In a personal communication (April 4, 2011), he wrote that he considered Family and Systemic Constellations as the probable path Moreno would have taken in the further development of his method, confirming yet another level of the mystery inherent in our connectedness, beyond categorization and measurement. We believe that psychodrama can add to its repertoire while still remaining loyal to its founder.

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