

AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY CONSTELLATION WORK

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Systemic Family Constellation Work is a therapeutic process that is based on the understanding that insufficiently resolved traumatic events from one's family lineage can be transferred and continue to influence the next generations. These ancestral event - patterns can emerge limiting possibilities or recreating behaviors and may manifest as illness, addictions, eating disorders and/or destructive relationship patterns.

Furthermore, Bert Hellinger, who was instrumental in the development of this work, emphasized that the bond of love is an intrinsic force in family systems. All members of a family system are deeply connected over many generations. This bond springs from a love that provides strength and a sense of belonging. The bond connects to a family consciousness that wants to recognize all members of the family, including those who have been outcast, dishonored, or forgotten.

Family secrets have a way of remaining hidden. They are not talked about or expressed directly, and over time people or events become 'excluded' from the family story. Miscarriages, a child's untimely death, murders, suicides, sexual abuse, wars, mental illness, criminal behavior, failed love affairs, extramarital love affairs, addictions, abuse, aggression and violence, etc., all have a direct impact on the family system and can leave an energetic imprint for many generations.

How can we uncover these unconscious hidden patterns? Family constellation therapy (FCT) is an invaluable tool for identifying these deeply hidden ripples in a patient/client's case and its background. Fortunately, it is a simple and practical method for illuminating a case with enormous potential benefit.

FCT is the work of German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger¹. Hellinger discovered that the family system, like any system, has its own natural order² and when that order is disrupted, the effects are felt by subsequent generations as the system tries to right itself. It is based on a number of simple phenomenological principles:

- Everyone born into a family belongs equally

¹ Bert Hellinger is a German psychotherapist. It was in his training in family therapy that he discovered the factors which led him to develop the family constellation approach, now the hallmark of his therapeutic work.

² www.hellinger.com

- “Orders of love:”
 - The parents come first, the children later
 - Parents give, children receive
 - Birth order is significant
- Tragic events have an impact
- If anyone or anything is excluded, a systemic imbalance results

In FCT, a central tenet is that everyone that is born into a family belongs equally, and if anyone becomes excluded, that excluded person or event becomes an energetic burden that influences the family system. This burden is carried unconsciously by those born into the family at a later time. We speak of these energetic connections as **entanglements**. These are powerful, below consciousness connections which create an invisible loyalty to the excluded ancestor or that ancestral event. These invisible loyalties keep individuals from attaining the full freedom to live their own lives in the here and now. Nor can the family itself live in any **proper** kind of order when some members of the family cannot live their own fates, **as they** are living out the fates of past generations. **Hellinger stated that** when order is disturbed, love cannot flow, and stuckness is often experienced as a result.

FCT graphically demonstrates that each of us is a part of a field or energetic patterning which we carry into all aspects of our lives. This field is variously termed an energy field, informing field, or morphogenetic field (Rupert Sheldrake³). “Field Theory” is the phrase used by Kurt Lewin⁴, the father of social psychology, to explain this phenomenon. For Lewin, behavior was logical and determined by the totality of an individual’s situation. In his understanding, one’s field is defined as “the totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent.”⁵ Individuals behaved differently according to the way in which tensions between perceptions of the self and of the environment were worked through. *The whole psychological field, or “lifespace,” within which people acted had to be viewed in order to fully understand behavior.*⁶ This field includes everything we have ever encountered on any level: physically, energetically, spiritually, on a soul level, experientially, in fantasy; it all belongs equally in one’s energy field. In addition, Lewin believed that **for any real change to take place, the total situation has to be taken into account. If only part of the situation is considered, a misrepresented picture is likely to develop.** FCT is a dramatic, yet, concrete way in which the missing pieces can be discovered and re-incorporated.

In the constellation process, the unconscious bonding of a person to lineage-related traumatic events is re-enacted, and intentionally redirected.

³ *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance & the Habits of Nature*. R. Sheldrake, 1995

⁴ <http://wilderdom.com/theory/FieldTheory.html>

⁵ Lewin, 1951: 240

⁶ Smith, M.K. (2001). “Kurt Lewin: Groups, experiential learning and action research,” *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*.

Family Constellation Works helps you to:

- make systemic entanglements conscious.
- honor your ancestors and give them their rightful place.
- unburden your current family system and yourself.
- access the remembered love for healing and integration.

In FCT, the practitioner and client (frequently with the help of other people acting as representatives) work together to elicit these hidden aspects of the family dynamic (see box). Order becomes restored when the excluded family member is brought back into the family fold or the past traumatic event is understood and resolved. Everyone can then assume their rightful place, breathe fully, and pursue their own fate. Illness and dysfunctional behaviors can now fall away.

Field Theory and FCT offer an explanation for the repeated negative patterns of behavior, often **persisting** despite years of good therapy. Examples are: **relapsing** addictions, always choosing the wrong partner, pervasive chronic depression, suicidal or homicidal tendencies, or any other deep-seated chronic diseases or illness. FCT gives voice to the hidden cause that lies beyond conscious awareness.

An example from my practice is the case of a 33-year old man, sexually abused by a family friend during childhood. This young man seemingly could not heal from his past. Whatever interventions were tried, they would work for a bit and then he would relapse into his old state; depressed, anxious, and at times unable to function. It seemed clear that some piece was missing, so we decided to set up a family constellation.

His constellation revealed that the original traumatic event happened in the generation of his great-great grandfather, who was excluded because he committed a murder. In this constellation it was clear that none of the men in this family could find a good place for themselves, nor could they be in relationship with anyone else except through violent expression. A representative for that great-great grandfather was brought in. The patient was immediately drawn to this new person, showing an obvious entanglement with or loyalty to this ancestor. He had no prior knowledge of this man and only became aware of his feelings for him via the constellation, where he experienced a deep attachment and love. There was a tearful, loving reconciliation. The ancestor was able to explain that he did what he did to save the family. After that the patient was able, for the first time, to find a good place for himself in the constellation with the representatives for his parents and siblings. The entire family breathed as the system re-positioned itself.

After this constellation, the young man started becoming functional, and further therapeutic interventions worked and held. The missing piece had been found so that healing was possible. (As of this writing, about 10 years after his constellation, this young man is living a contented life).

I cannot recommend the practice of Family Constellation Therapy highly enough. I have been involved with FCT for about 6 years now and it has helped me to understand myself, family systems, human nature, and my clients in a much larger totality. From FCT I have learned that what we see and hear is often only the superficial layer and that a clear totality perspective can only be gained by these deeper energetic techniques.

This work is best experienced, not merely read about. May I suggest you **participate** in a Family Constellation to fully experience this work. You can then **consider** how you can incorporate this work into your practice, such as identifying clients that you may be able to help more effectively if family entanglement patterns could be identified and efforts made to clear the underlying conflict. Further insights can be gained by having your own family constellation done or participate by representing in someone else's constellation.

The Hellinger website (www.hellinger.com) has video links so that if you cannot attend a constellation in person, you can still witness this powerful work in action. Whatever you do, you will be enriched by the experience and your practice will benefit from it.

Recommended Readings and website information: [www,Hellinger.com](http://www.Hellinger.com)

Love's Hidden Symmetry written by Bert Hellinger with Gunthard Weber and Hunter Beaumont

In my Mind's Eye by Ursula Franke

The Art and Practice of Family Constellations written by Bert Ulsamer

The Language of Souls by John Payne

I hold monthly meetings, generally on Tuesdays at 1 p.m. in El Cerrito. This is a small group generally, around 10 people. Cost for attending and representing is \$35, cost for your own constellation is \$150. We run 3 or 4 full constellations in the afternoon, and often do some little exercises as well. The next constellation is scheduled for December 8.

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HOW A CONSTELLATION LOOKS

A group of people meet to do a Family Constellation (FC). Someone has a question regarding an issue in his/her life. The facilitator asks some simple questions about the members of that person's family, and then representatives are set up to stand in for these family members. This is the field of that family. Representatives are instructed to silently act on the energetic impulses they feel and sense. Everyone observes the constellation set-up and watches how it develops. Which people move towards one another? Which people move away? Where does the attention go? Into the family or away from it? Is there a lot of activity or lack of it? We see after some time (often very quickly, within minutes) how the energy does or does not flow within this field. We observe whether or not something seems to be stuck or missing, i.e. all attention is on some spot on the floor, or on a space outside the room.

The facilitator investigates the dynamic of the relationships between representatives with some very non-directional questions (i.e. "How do you feel standing here?", "What is it like to see this one lying on the floor?"). This information guides the facilitator to identify key elements in the constellation. By adding to or removing some elements from the constellation, and with the help of some restorative sentences guided by the facilitator and spoken by the representatives, the constellation eventually comes to a peaceful place. At this time it is noticeable that everyone in the constellation has a relaxed posture and is able to breathe more freely, and to make eye contact. At some point the client is inserted into the constellation and his representative leaves. The client experiences the restoration of order and peace in her family system and the constellation is then stopped.

As a result of the constellation, the client experiences a new energetic sense of her 'story' on multiple levels, now including all the pieces necessary to make her 'story' whole. Client now has the freedom to choose different ways of behaving. In the greater field the actual family system has also experienced this sense of wholeness and these ripples of healing reach out from the client and from the constellation into all parts of her family field, including back in time to the ancestral past. Even people not present often experience a shift. Representatives also report being deeply affected by these ripples of healing.

A quote from a facilitator:

“I came to the insight that my first priority is not in the healing process for the individual client itself. I am much more interested in helping people to awaken their awareness on psychological- and (family) soul-level of what is going on around the issue concerned and how he or she is acting in daily life.

For me the constellation field is a tool to get a wider perspective on the issue concerned in order to increase the awareness. Background of this is that I feel very sympathetic to the idea that only an increase of awareness of a huge number of people is going to help humanity a step further in evolution. This constellation work has a tremendous power in guiding people in finding a direction for behavior in daily live. And more and more I see and hear the need for that. In order to make this work accessible to all I find it necessary to minimize the mystification and to enlarge the openness and understanding of what is going on in a constellation. Also I think it is very helpful for the members of the whole group concerned to be able to follow step by step what is going on, what is healing behavior and what is denial. My greatest reward is always when someone tells me (without doing a constellation!) how important issues in their lives changed just by changing a specific attitude. On a deeper level I can also see that during the time I was a child my soul understood a lot of what happened. But there was also an atmosphere that did not give the allowance to really know it and talk about it. I suffered from that and it took me a long time to be able to understand with my conscious mind what my soul understood as a child and speak about it. I am not going to repeat that in my life if I can help it. In my experience integration and growing awareness comes from a process of investigating and chewing and see what is needed to keep as yours.”

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