

Summary of Bert Hellinger's Model of Family Constellations

by Agata Burdziuk

This document provides an overview of Bert Hellinger's (2002) Family Constellations model. A comprehensive look at Hellinger's work is beyond the scope of this summary, and it is my intention to only highlight key concepts of family constellations here.

The Family Constellations Model

Hellinger's (2002) model of family constellations has its roots in family system's therapy, spiritual mysticism, and existential phenomenology. In developing his model, Hellinger was first and foremost influenced by his Catholic upbringing, which protected his family from Nazism, but at the same time caused him to be classified as "enemy of the people" by the Gestapo. He was drafted into the German army and became a soldier at the age of 17. He faced combat, was captured by the allies, and spent time in a prisoner-of-war camp (Manne, 2009). After the war, he entered a Catholic religious order and spent 16 years as priest and missionary to the Zulu in South Africa. He left the religious order after 25 years, as "being a priest no longer was an appropriate expression of his inner growth" (Hellinger, Weber & Beaumont, 1998, p. 328). He subsequently trained in psychoanalysis in Vienna, and studied body psychotherapy with Janov (1970) who developed Primal Scream Therapy. As well, he studied Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1996), Family Systems Therapy (Satir, 1983), Gestalt (Perls, 1969), Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Bandler & Grinder, 1975), and Holding Therapy (Manne, 2009). Satir's (1983) method of setting up families using group members was catalytic to Hellinger's development of his work, which he eventually called family constellations (Broughton, 2010).

For many years, Hellinger did not publish anything about his work, as he was cautious that others may treat it as:

A revelation of truth or as confirmation of their prejudices. "The spirit moves like wind," he has said. What is written loses its connection to real life so easily, loses its vitality, and becomes oversimplified, uncritically generalized, and rendered into fixed patterns and empty sentences. (Hellinger et al., 1998, p.v-vi)

Hellinger et al., (1998) described his method as phenomenological, meaning experiencing the world subjectively “as it is without any intention to change it” (p.91). Other than a few key concepts, and in the spirit of phenomenology, writing about his work is largely based on transcripts of his seminars. He made no claim that he has discovered something new. Rather, he created a new integration (Hellinger, 2002).

The Family System and Orders of Love

The work of family constellations is based on the notion that the family is a system. This idea is common to most family therapy disciplines, and suggests that families are naturally self-organising, emergent, and interconnected, with change in one part affecting the whole, and the whole affecting all parts (Broughton, 2010). According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), “a system is a set of mutually interdependent units. In families, psychic functions of one member condition functions of other members” (p. 2). Many rules governing the family system are implicit and unconscious, and the family system has its own specific, existential, and historic structuring, as well as its own natural order. When that order is disrupted, the effects are felt by subsequent generations, as the system tries to self-correct (Hellinger et al., 1998).

Through his work, Hellinger et al., (1998) developed an understanding of the systemic order, which he calls Orders of Love. Similar to our understanding of order in the natural environment, there appears to be a certain natural order operating to maintain relationships and permit the flow of love between family members. Orders can be understood as recognisable natural patterns and include principles of belonging, hierarchy, responsibility, personal fate, and balance. An example of order is every member of a family having an equal right to belong. If this basic order of belonging is respected and everyone in the family is included, love will be present in the system. If order is not respected, however, negative consequences will arise, which may affect the family system for generations (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999; Broughton, 2010). These negative consequences are referred to as systemic entanglements.

Systemic Entanglements

Manne (2009) described the family system as “an energy field within which we are held, each in our own unique position, from the time we are born.” (p. 2). She highlighted that we not

only inherit our biological genes, but are influenced by and take on the patterns of the family field.

The character of our family energy field is formed by our family's history, including its religions and beliefs—that is, its conscience. . . . Our family energy field is shaped by powerful events such as the relationship history of parents and grandparents, early deaths of children, miscarriages, abortions, adoptions, suicides, wars, having to leave one's country, changing one's religion, incest, ancestors who were victims and perpetrators, trust, betrayal, and so forth. The altruistic and generous acts of our parents and ancestors bring benefit, while their harmful acts damage the field and later generations pay the price. (p. 3)

Paying the price refers to what Hellinger (2002) called systemic entanglements, when the inherent order is not respected or is disrupted, and people in the family system become entangled in the fates of previous family members. According to Hellinger and ten Hövel (1999),

A person is entangled when he or she unconsciously takes over the fate of an earlier member of the family and lives it out. For example, if a child has been given away, even in an earlier generation, then a later member of the family will behave as though he or she had been abandoned. . . . There seems to be a group conscience that has an effect on all the members of the family system. . . . When any one of these group members has been unjustly treated, the group conscience demands that things be evened up. This means that when an injustice has occurred in an earlier generation, a later group member will suffer in an attempt to restore order in the group. There is a sort of systemic drive to repeat the occurrence. This, of course, can never bring things truly into order. (pp.3-4)

Hellinger's (2002) reference to a systemic drive to repeat the occurrence reminds me of Freud's (1938) phenomenon of repetition compulsion, where a person is unconsciously pushed to seek situations and re-enact a trauma or circumstance that would allow for assimilation of the experience. I see the above drive as compulsion to repeat the unresolved issue on a systemic level to resolve the original issue, conflict, or trauma, and as Hellinger pointed out, to restore the orders of love in the family.

The entanglement is an unconscious bond motivated by a strong sense of loyalty and love to the other system members. On an unconscious level, the entangled person identifies with the

systemic disturbance (emotion, person, or event that has been overlooked, ignored, or unresolved), and this in turn affects the person's life on a behavioural, emotional, relational, or physical level. The family system perpetuates its own existence as best it can in the face of the unresolved consequences, and it does so by requiring those who come later to hold these effects Broughton (2010).

The systemic entanglements of Hellinger (2002) parallel the concept of invisible loyalties, which was defined by Boszormeni-Nagy and Spark (1973). Boszormeni-Nagy and Spark (1973) see loyalty as a sustaining principle, with members of a group behaving loyally out of external coercion, conscious feelings of interest or duty, and unconscious obligation to belong. "Loyalty commitments are like invisible but strong fibers which hold together complex pieces of relationship 'behaviour' in families as well as in larger society" (p. 39).

Since the systemic entanglements are largely unconscious, the family system will go on repeating the pattern of behaviour and experience. Through the process of family constellations, these entanglements become conscious and visible, releasing one from the invisible binding and allowing for a different way of connecting. Through constellations, order in the family system is restored (Hellinger, 2002; Broughton, 2010).

The Method of Family Constellations

Family constellations are typically carried out in a group setting. The facilitator asks the client (the person wanting to set a constellation) what the issue is. The facilitator seeks information that is strictly factual and discourages any storytelling, judgements, or interpretations (Hellinger et al., 1998; Manne, 2009). An example of an issue would be: I am unable to be happy, or I have cancer. According to Manne (2009),

A client who says, "My mother did not love me," is giving an interpretation of his mother's behaviour. The facilitator will try to obtain factual information by asking, for example, "How did you know?" The client cannot know. What we know in this work is that when a child feels unloved, his mother is caught up, or entangled, in a holding pattern that prevents her from being the fully loving mother she longs to be. What family constellations reveal is the essential truth that underlies the painful situation. (pp. 7-8).

According to Payne (2006), when one submits to this simple truth, one is “liberated beyond all that which we have known” (p. viii). And, as the Bible suggests, “the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32, King James Version).

In addition to clarifying the issue, the facilitator also asks the client what would be a good outcome for their constellation. The client’s answer sets an intention that spontaneously guides the unfolding of their process (B. Sztab, personal communication, Fall, 2011).

Once the issue and intention are established, the client is invited by the facilitator to choose from the group participants’ representatives for the client’s family members, including him or herself. The facilitator may add more representatives as the constellation develops. The representatives are then placed silently and intuitively by the client in the spatial and directional positions that feel right to the client (Hellinger 2002). “As they [the representatives] are placed, the constellation emerges and an autonomous energy field is created” (Manne, 2009, p. 9).

Standing in the constellation where they have been placed, the representatives are invited to become aware of their physical and emotional experience, and their sense of relationship to the other constellation members. The representatives are also free to move into another position if they are intuitively drawn to it. Again, the information that is sought from the representatives is factual and phenomenological. Interpretations and explanations are excluded to prevent premature meaning making. As information arises and movements are made, either spontaneously by the representatives or encouraged by the facilitator, the non-helpful or stuck dynamics of the system come to light. What has been excluded or missing in the family order becomes apparent (Broughton, 2010; Manne, 2009).

According to Hellinger (2002),

When a certain positioning is found, there is often a visible, perceptible, relief and relaxation on the part of the representatives, as well as the observing audience members. . . . [This] is the hidden order or hidden symmetry of the family system . . . Without an acknowledgement and expression of this order, love cannot flow freely in the family system. (p. xi).

The resolution then comes from including or acknowledging what has been missed or unresolved in the family system, whether a person or an issue. This inclusion often happens

“spontaneously and can be supported by ritual statements such as ‘I see you’, [or] ‘I include you’ (Broughton, 2010, p. 123). Hellinger (2002) believed that “once these patterns are brought to light, and the underlying feelings acknowledged, then the web of entanglements lifts, and the system re-orders and harmonizes itself in a mysterious way” (p. xii). When the underlying systemic ordering is acknowledged consciously, and “when the right statement is found that expresses it, then the individual is freed from the entanglements of the past, and empowered to move on with life” (p. xiii).

Hellinger et al. (1998) further suggested that when constellations, which he sees as healing rituals, are properly facilitated, they can change the systemic dynamics that shape the clients’ lives. “The rituals performed in the therapeutic situation can change the inner images that organize a clients’ experience of the world” (p. 276). In that sense, constellations offer the possibility of deep inner healing and a new perception of self and the world.

Phenomenology, Representative Perception, and the Knowing Field

Having described the method of family constellations above, I feel it is important to point out the concepts of phenomenology, representative perception, and the knowing field, which are intrinsic to the understanding of Hellinger’s (2002) work.

Before Hellinger (2002) developed family constellations, he was guided by the work of Satir (1983) and Moreno (as cited in Scheiffele, 2008) – the originator of Psychodrama, and set up group members as role-play representatives of a person’s family. Hellinger began to notice, however, that with little information about the person they were representing, the representatives’ experience mirrored those of the actual family members, which was confirmed by the client. Hellinger’s work evolved from psychodrama and role-play, and he began to listen to the representatives from a more existential and phenomenological place, relying on moment-by-moment observation of their and his experience, and emergence of truth that one may not have any previous knowledge of (Broughton, 2010; Manne, 2009).

The representative seems to “know” in her or his bodily experience and emotions the inner condition of the represented person or element. This experience has been called representative perception (Mahr, 2004). According to Broughton (2010),

When we are chosen to be a representative in a constellation we enter a kind of trance state that is more connected with our right brain than our left, and in that moment the boundaries of ourselves soften, and we are more available to this informational field, to an experience of interconnectedness. (pp. 104-105).

The informational field that Broughton is referring to above relates to an energetic field beyond the linear time and space that contains all information about nature. This field has been widely studied and was originally developed by Einstein as the zero point field (McTaggart, 2008).

McTaggart provides the following explanation of the field:

At our most elemental, we are not a chemical reaction, but an energetic charge. Human beings and all living things are a coalescence of energy in a field of energy connected to every other thing in the world. This pulsating energy field is the central engine of our being and our consciousness, the alpha and the omega of our existence.

There is no 'me' and 'not-me' duality to our bodies in relation to the universe, but one underlying energy field. . . . We are attached and engaged, indivisible from our world, and our only fundamental truth is our relationship with it [the field]. 'The field', as Einstein once succinctly put it, 'is the only reality.' (pp. xxiii-xxiv).

In constellations, the field is referred to as the knowing field. Boulton (2006), among others, has postulated that our family system has an energetic field that exists and can be experienced and changed by others through the process of family constellations. Through setting of a constellation, the representative enters the knowing field and becomes a medium of experiences, which bring forth the systemic entanglements. The field then provides to us what needs to be seen and acknowledged to restore order and love in the family system (B. Sztab, personal communication, Fall, 2011).

The knowing field is believed to guide the unfolding of a constellation. Hellinger called this method phenomenological and refers to it as "watching without intention":

For me it means subjecting myself to larger contexts and connections, without needing to understand them. I accept without fear of what might arise, and the horrifying things that do come out don't frighten me. I face everything, exactly the way it is.

In a constellation, I look at everyone, including those who aren't present. I keep them all in view, and then, exposed to this picture, I get a flash of what lies behind the phenomenon. (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999, pp. 22-23).

This concept of facing and accepting everything the way it is and as it emerges from the field reminds me of the Buddhist practice of Vipassana, where observation of body and mind without judgement allows for insight into true nature of reality. Goenka (Heart, 1987) described Vipassana in the following way:

By observing ourselves, we can come to know reality directly and can learn to deal with it in a positive and creative way. . . . Vipassana is a practical way to examine the reality of one's own body and mind, to uncover and solve whatever problems lie hidden there, to develop unused potential, and to channel it for one's own good and the good of others.
(p. 5)

To me, the phenomenological way of working in constellations and subjecting one's self to the process of allowing and acknowledging all that surfaces from the field has the potential to lead one to witness and accept the true reality of what is there underneath the systemic entanglements and the story. Through this acknowledgement, it is possible to release oneself from the effects of the entanglements and the accompanying story, create new meaning and perception of self, and restore love towards self and others.

Heart Opening in Family Constellations

While the concept of heart opening is not explicitly talked about by Hellinger in his work, he often spoke of feeling love in the heart, or choosing from the heart, and ultimately saw healing as restoring the intrinsic order and flow of love in the family system (Hellinger, 2002; Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999; Hellinger et al., 1998).

In my own experience of constellations, I came across Brigitte Sztab (whom I trained with), a facilitator that actively asks the constellation participants if their hearts feel open (personal communication, Fall, 2011). I interviewed Sztab about how one's heart becomes open in a constellation process. What follows is an excerpt of the interview transcript:

Agata: How does the heart open in constellations? How does one's heart become open?

Brigitte: It's when you decide to trust. We talk about hearts closing, hearts opening, but the way I see it in reality, the heart is never closed. It has walls built around it that the mind puts there. It's our mechanism of protection against feeling. The more mental a person is, the less they rely on feelings to give them information about their life. They figure everything out with their head. And that's basically what the walls are. They're just coping mechanisms. And when we talk about heart opening, it means that we are willing to let go of those protective mechanisms and trust that the heart can't be hurt.

Agata: So an actual decision to let go of the wall? Like deciding to let go of the old story?

Brigitte: Yes, of the old story, of protective mechanisms, of the fear of the child. The fear is always about the overwhelm, about feeling so many feelings that we do not have guidance with, that we are left alone with, and a lot of these feelings are uncomfortable feelings and we don't know how to work through them . . . how to get from feeling alone to feeling held. And ideally you learn all of these things in the family. You learn that when you feel alone, when you feel hungry, when you feel tired, you call and somebody comes and fills that need. And that's how trust builds. And the more trust builds, the more resilient you become when maybe sometime there is no one coming, or not right away. You can weather that. But if you, from the start, feel this neglect or the non-response so many times, then you lose the trust that it is coming, and then you can't see it anymore when it is, because you already set yourself up to not feel it, to not feel disappointed anymore, to not feel at all basically. So then you can also not feel when something good is coming. And that is usually what happens in most people's lives where they built these walls to just not feel and live their life with their mental capacity. But the heart is still there it's just the voice is not heard. The heart is still open, it's just we're not listening.

Agata: It's open underneath the wall.

Brigitte: Yeah, underneath the wall, and it's still processing, and it's still feeling. If we truly didn't feel it, we wouldn't be sitting here at all. But we continuously re-enact the old story, we're still getting hurt, we're still protecting, so we're living in an illusion of what really is. It's a story.

I can feel my heart opening when I am touched, anything that touches me whether it's a happy thing or a sad thing, or a beautiful thing . . . I can feel literally my chest opening . . . and it usually reaches my eyes right away. I feel some tears behind my eyes that do not have to actually appear, but I can feel my eyes filling with tears. And it's a really exquisite feeling ... I love that feeling. I don't judge it. I feel so alive when it opens.

Agata: How do you keep your heart protected once the walls are down?

Brigitte: There is no protection necessary. You don't need protection. It's an illusion that we can get hurt. Who's there to hurt? Maybe I'm naïve, but the way I operate, the way I feel it is that the whole world is just an extension of myself and whatever reflects back to me is always myself. So the more my heart is open and loving, the more love I feel and see around me. (B. Sztab, personal communication, December 11, 2011).

In attending and facilitating family constellations, I have personally witnessed the trust and heart opening that Sztab is referring to as a movement by the client towards the mother, father, or other ancestors, in which the client reaches out for the love that is being offered to him or her by the family members' representatives. To take that physical step with authenticity, the client spontaneously lets go of the survival story he or she has created and the walls that have been built around the heart, and becomes open to receiving the love that is now restored and present in the family system.