

# **The River Never Looks Back**

## **The Historical Background to Family Constellations**

**Ursula Franke**

*"There is always hope that your life can change because you can always learn new things."*

Virginia Satir

Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations are rooted in a powerful combination of different therapeutic approaches, drawing on the experiences, techniques and views of Hypnotherapy, Behaviour Therapy, Gestalt, Systemic, and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. More specifically, the method is based on the techniques of Psychodrama, as introduced by Moreno, and of Family Reconstruction developed by Virginia Satir. The theoretical background to Constellations is founded on the work of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy who provided insight into the basic structures of systemic involvement, which he examined during decades of research into trans-generational bonds. Hellinger's method is aligned to all three therapies in a common philosophical approach - a humanist view of the client's search to reach his or her full potential.

This introduction to the three important therapeutic approaches illustrates the way in which Family Constellations use some of the pioneers' tools and their trans-generational perspectives and images.

### **Jakob Moreno's Psychodrama**

Jakob Moreno was a doctor, psychiatrist and founder of the systemic dramatic therapy known as Psychodrama. In the 1930s he first started working with his clients on a real stage to help them present and express their psychological and emotional problems. This theatre of spontaneity developed into the therapeutic approach known as Psychodrama.

Moreno worked with children and adults and was particularly interested in fringe groups such as prostitutes and prison inmates. He contributed to a radical new kind of therapy. The theatre-like scenic work was a complete contradiction to the static individual setting of psychoanalysis, which was so popular at the time. Moreno worked in front of a public audience and invited the

observers to participate as actors. He provided an open space for the problems and suffering of the client in which the creative potential of all persons present could unfold.

In practice Moreno created a stage where everything could be included in the play: inner dramas, dreams, fantasies and the replaying of the client's actual reality. Props of all kinds, such as beds or desks, created an atmosphere close to the client's real life situation. In addition, people were used to represent family members, work colleagues, friends and acquaintances.

### **Objectives and Effects**

Moreno's main intention was that the client would pay attention to the current situation, rather than just exploring the past. His primary objective was to try out new ways of behaving, which he achieved by encouraging the client to experiment spontaneously through role-play. In this way, anxieties, fears and other suppressed feelings could be released by the client, and by other group members. The client would be able to practice new situations and encounters with real persons in different roles, and role reversals would help them to appreciate other people's points of view. In addition, observer feedback to the client and the other protagonists was a useful support to the client to take responsibility for their actions.

The principles of Psychodrama are similar to Behaviour Therapy. As in operant conditioning, the client's success, as well as that of the participants in the Psychodrama is positively reinforced by the feedback from the facilitator and the group. For Moreno:

*"Psycho-dramatic methods permit the researcher to observe interpersonal relationships in action. Sources of conflict, past, present, and future, come to light in a milieu where they can be diagnosed*

*and treated, foreseen and dealt with, often with the result that, if and when they occur in relationship, their importance is minimized, and they are viewed with the 'proper' perspective."* (Moreno 1987, p99)

In the course of a session, this externalised and tangible representation of thoughts, perceptions and feelings created a new image, which, it was assumed, would become internalised and have a long-term tangible effect on the client. Just as in Hellinger's Family Constellations, the individual's picture of a problem was replaced by a healing image, or a resolution. Moreover, both Psychodrama and Constellations go beyond the realm of personal issues and individual family systems to a larger context, to the world as a whole in which we are all embedded. Moreno set the framework of the therapeutic context quite broadly:

*"A therapeutic method which does not concern itself with these enormous cosmic implications, with man's very destiny, is incomplete and inadequate."* (Moreno 1987)

There are, however, important differences between the two approaches. In contrast to Moreno, the aim of a family constellation is directed more towards adjusting the client's inner image rather than behavioural changes. Hellinger's work is primarily an investigation of internal, invisible structures. Any space can be used for a constellation and no props are required. Representatives are all that is needed to reveal the hidden dynamics of entanglements or exclusions in a system. Hellinger's objective is not to concentrate on an encounter in the here and now. It covers not so much a real time span, but rather an inner time and structure in which the experiences and the impact of entanglements can be revealed. It is a fictitious encounter in another time, most often during the client's childhood. This is the place where Hellinger looks for a resolution, whereas Moreno's concentration is on portraying the present and drawing up plans for the future.

### **Guidance**

An important element in Moreno's work is the guidance provided by the therapist who leads the client as he deals with the issues that arise. In addition to the expression of inner ideas, Moreno attached great value to reflecting on what had been acted out.

For Moreno, the therapist is the director, counsellor and analyst in one. Using his attention and experience, the therapist helps the client to create a space that is both safe and free for his spontaneous portrayals. The therapist must assist in determining the direction of the dramatic development and focus on the most important areas. In Moreno's words:

*"It is here that the experience of the director in the art of the psychodrama will count most."* (Moreno 1987, p83)

In family constellations the therapist helps the client to stay in a resolution trance by keeping him centred in the picture or constellation, and stops him from acting out. The therapist supports the client in daring a more complete reaching out movement towards the parents; this is considered to be the primary movement that brings out primary feelings.

### **Virginia Satir: Family Reconstruction and Family Sculpture**

Virginia Satir's approach to working with people was oriented towards better communication within the system. During therapy with families Satir helped members achieve an open and direct exchange of information, which she considered essential in making the system more flexible and permeable to change. At the same time, it also made possible a stable equilibrium within the system, since it strengthened the solidarity amongst its members and supported the self-esteem of each individual. According to the systemic way of thinking, all of the elements of a system mutually influence each other. Thus, in order to achieve a stable equilibrium, all of the elements must be recognised as equal.

### **Family Sculpture**

Virginia Satir used a broad repertoire of therapeutic techniques. Sculpture was one of these and she used it with couples, families and groups. A number of possibilities existed for working with sculpture in the therapeutic setting including individual sculptures; sculptures for an event or process; for physical symptoms; and for the actual and potential state of a couple or family.

In family sculpture, as in psychodrama, a client and his or her family acted out scenes from their lives in a therapeutic setting. The most important innovation Satir introduced was the transition from a stage-like to a symbolic setting. She no longer asked clients merely to act out situations they had experienced, but rather to portray the structure of the family. This shed light physically on the relationship patterns in which clients were trapped and enabled them to form them in new ways.

'Physically' in this context was understood to mean the spatial portrayal of family relationships. The objective was to reveal underlying conflicts in order to bring them to awareness and in so doing, to create the basis of a new emotional order. In this way, the meaning of a family member's symptoms within the family and the family's interactions could be clarified. By extending the sculpture to the parents' families of origin, the impact of the feelings and experiences that each parent added to the relationship became visible. In addition, the sculpture revealed the way roles had been assigned, as well as the regulation of intimacy and distance.

Using this technique, each family member took turns shaping his or her own family picture, thus portraying symbolically the emotional relationships among the members. It was assumed that the posture of the persons and their spatial distance from each other represented their feelings and relationships.

*"The essence of one's experience in the family is condensed and projected into a visual picture. This picture is literally worth a thousand words, revealing aspects of the family's inner life that have remained hidden. Vague impressions and confused feelings on the periphery of awareness are given form through physical spatial expression."*

(Papp, Silverstein, Carter 1973, p.202)

While sculpting directs all family members towards an open contact and communication with each other, family constellation serves to establish an image of family order and hierarchy and to find the right place, or at least a good one for the moment, for the representatives of the family members and especially for the client.

From such a resourceful place the client can start doing the emotional work of inner opening and of

moving towards the parents, or any other difficult or traumatic situation. This process is similar to aspects of behaviour therapy and systematic desensitisation.

### **Family Reconstruction**

Virginia Satir lived from 1916 to 1988 and was one of the founders of family therapy. Her main goal was to draw out the best in human beings and to help the development of each individual's full potential. She employed sculpture in family reconstruction work. This approach helped the client to fill in gaps in their biography and family history. It also enhanced an awareness of feelings and life situations of family members and in so doing, provided a broader context for a better understanding of the client's own history, as well as that of other family members. Additional objectives of reconstruction included: the individuation of the client; disentanglement from his dependence on the family; and detachment from negative tasks.

Satir's family reconstructions were carried out in seminars over several days. Prior to the workshops, Satir asked the participants to collect materials and pictures of all of the family members, and to gather information about a variety of things such as: the economic situation of the grandparents' families; their parents' school days; their parents' occupations and jobs; experiences that they had in their own occupations and jobs; the social setting of the family; and wartime and post-war experiences. They were also asked to draw a family tree - a *genogram* - that included a description of the nature of the emotional relationship between individuals. In dealing with the history and social context of the family of origin the intention was to make the life of the previous generations more distinct and tangible. Satir proceeded chronologically in order to obtain information that was as comprehensive and exact as possible, and to construct the family structure and separate it from the personal biography of the client. In so doing, she went back three or more generations:

*"Family reconstruction is a powerful, dramatic experience that enables us to make discoveries about our families and our psychological roots. We tend to reproduce in our current lives the learnings of our childhood, but often they no longer fit our present context. By revising the sources of these old learnings, we can look at them with new eyes*

*and discard those that create problems for us.”*  
(Satir & Baldwin, 1983 p.237)

### **Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Contextual Therapy**

In the late 1960s the Hungarian, Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, began describing the structures of family relationships that went beyond individual and transactional psychology. His working model, Contextual Therapy, came about as a result of a twenty-five-year search for explanations of how therapy worked. The problems experienced by his patients who came from all kinds of social backgrounds, covered the entire range of severity. However, he focused particularly on patients with schizophrenic illnesses where he found relationship patterns that could be identified across several generations. He discovered that these patterns were not conscious, but had an effect on the system even when family members were unaware of them. His most significant contribution was an in-depth examination and precise description of this model, together with an ongoing updating of empirical observations.

His main conclusion was that relationships are determined by a hidden existential ethical dynamic. Since these implicit connections could not be recognised on the surface, he labelled them ‘invisible loyalties’. According to him, the effects of these invisible loyalties were stronger than those of the more observable actions and phenomena in a person’s life history.

Boszormenyi-Nagy’s emphasis was similar to Moreno’s - when openness and directness took the place of denial and secrecy - then they served to create a new encounter, which was made possible under the guidance of the therapist. The main principles of his theory were: loyalty and balance, merit and entitlement. His work was based on values and norms spread across an ethical, moral and social dimension that went beyond a purely psychological framework, describing the multi-personal rather than just the individual aspects of relationships. Here the visible character of the relationship had less significance for the success of therapy than the extent of the unresolved and unconscious commitments that had an impact on the relationships across the generations, and between current family members.

The fundamental concept of this therapeutic approach consisted of a just balance of give and take between people. Strongly influenced by the philosophy of Martin Buber, Boszormenyi-Nagy assigned central importance to the relationship between the ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ and the two polarities of give and take. The essential element of an encounter was the ethical dynamic, seen in the form of justice, fairness and mutual responsibility, which allowed trust to develop in a relationship. He saw the ability to trust and to establish ties between humans as the essence of all therapy and of every personal relationship. Reliability and stability in human relationships was fundamental to health and development.

The behaviour patterns described as invisible loyalties were trans-generational. Using a sort of debit and credit account, unresolved injustices were doled out to future generations by a trans-generational tribunal. For this reason, the goal of therapy was to balance these accounts. In practice, his application of these discoveries took place in the form of discussions involving family members in order to clarify their respective relationships, expectations and obligations. Boszormenyi-Nagy emphasised:

*“There is no philosophy in this. It’s all empirical observation of life.”* (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1973)

Based on his observations, it was inevitable that Boszormenyi-Nagy placed the individual within the hierarchy of the generations. He saw the ‘I’ as entangled and unable to intervene in a rational way to free itself. The unconscious mechanisms at play evaded logical thinking since their roots were not only located in an individual’s own biography, but frequently in previous generations. Pathologies and symptoms in the client pointed to an entanglement but they remained resistant to treatment in individual psychotherapy.

In his later publications, Boszormenyi-Nagy called for an ever-broader responsibility on the part of the individual for the ‘Thou’. Like Moreno, he talked of the ethical responsibility of every individual for the human species as a whole. Boszormenyi-Nagy claimed that we couldn’t detach ourselves and act freely as individuals. Even if we think we are living without taking the past into consideration, we have an impact on the future. The way we act today shapes the foundation for the quality of life for future generations.

## Conclusion

Hellinger's Constellation work is similar to both Moreno's Psychodrama and Satir's Sculpting in that they all use intensive trance work oriented towards finding a resolution. They all work with the premise that learning other types of behaviour and gaining new knowledge takes place more quickly and thoroughly through experience, action and play, than it does through words alone. The three-dimensional work offers clients the opportunity to obtain complex information directly and intensely.

In the course of a constellation, clients learn to see their own behaviour, and that of the people they have relationships with, as embedded in the systemic commitments of all the members. As with Moreno and Boszormenyi-Nagy, this ultimately goes beyond the client's own biographical experiences to the question of the meaning of life and the consequences of being inextricably linked across the generations. Usually the origins of an action become clear. In this broader dimension it is possible for clients to experience the positive intentions and objectives of their parents' behaviour, (as well as those of other family members), which they could not recognise in any other context.

*"The new organization of the intra-psychic representations that emerge in the trance phases of the mutual performance, and especially in the direct encounters with the representative's 'father', 'mother', etc., leads to intense experiences of reconciliation on the part of the protagonists with their real persons of reference, whom they hallucinate about in their metaphorical reality."* (Stahl 1992, p.188)

Bert Hellinger's unique contribution to the field has been his clear and detailed description of the invisible loyalties, the unconscious dynamics and structures that operate in families. He discovered that a family would be functional and supportive for all members if 'the order' were respected, and dysfunctional if it were not. Using healing sentences and rituals he provided tools and techniques to guide the client through his process. Hellinger's approach shows us that 'acknowledging what is' has an immediate relieving effect, and is the most effective way to resolve systemic entanglements.

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# Shamanism and Family Constellations

Daan van Kampenhout

Some years ago I came across Bert Hellinger's family constellations, and it wasn't long before I started to notice that constellations have certain characteristics in common with shamanic rituals. Soon I started to think of constellations as a kind of shamanic phenomenon. In *Ordnungen der Liebe* Norbert Linz interviews Bert Hellinger and Hellinger mentions the various factors that have been influential in the development of family constellations. He does not directly mention shamanic sources but he does say that during his years in Africa he was impressed by the respect the Zulu people always expressed for their parents and elders. This is something the Zulu clearly share with other traditional shamanic cultures. So although Bert Hellinger was not personally exposed to traditional shamanism, family constellations are in some ways very close to traditional shamanic healing practices.

What is shamanism? The word was originally used to describe the spiritual traditions of various ethnic groups in Siberia and Lapland. Although the spiritual practices of the nomadic peoples of these regions varied considerably from tribe to tribe, they were all rooted in a given set of paradigms about the nature and functioning of reality. Probably the most important idea was that the world we see and experience with our physical senses is but one of many worlds that are all interacting with each other. Spirits inhabit all these different worlds, and a shaman can contact them while he is in trance or dreaming. The good spirits can bring healing and practical advice, but in the classical shamanic worldview there are also evil spirits that cause illness and other harm. The Siberian shamans contacted spirits through specific means: wearing a heavy costume covered with spirit figures and dancing; beating a big flat drum; and singing lengthy improvised songs. For today's Western people shamanism no longer restricts itself to the spiritual traditions and rituals of Siberia and other Arctic regions but rather the term has come to mean simply the art of contacting the worlds of spirits, regardless of the specific way this is done.

So what do constellations and shamanism have in common? There are many shared characteristics.

For example, both are community oriented. In a constellation and in a shamanic healing ritual there is one person who is the client, but the actual healing is directed at more people than just the one. A shamanic concept is that when one individual is ill, the whole family needs healing because everybody in the family is connected and they all suffer together, in one way or another.

Another trait shared by family constellations and shamanism is giving a place to both the living and the dead. They have equal value and each group needs respect and care, otherwise the whole community will suffer - both the living and the dead. In each discipline the dead ancestors are included and have a place for all to see. A lot of shamanic rituals are performed to help the dead come to terms with their lives and find a good place among those who have gone before. In many constellations exactly the same work is done. Moreover, both in shamanism and in constellations the dynamic of representation plays an important role. In shamanic practice, the spirits are represented by songs and altars, but also by the shaman himself when he dresses in his costume and dances. In family constellations individuals from the group of people participating in the workshop represent the family members of the client. There are many more ways in which shamanism and family constellations connect and these are described in more detail in my book 'Images of the Soul'.

To me, family constellations and shamanic practice are very alike, grown from the same roots but with different manifestations. How can they support and complement each other? Let us look first at how constellations can add something of value to the shamanic context. In a traditional shamanic setting, people seldom confront each other. Originally, shamanism was practised in cultures where people lived a nomadic lifestyle, travelling around in small family groups. Survival depended on close collaboration. Any confrontation that threatened the cohesion of social unity could have serious consequences, especially in times of crisis when the group needed to act as a unit. From the shamanic point of view, everybody in the community is welcome;

everyone is needed and valued. Therefore someone in need is always helped and hospitality is offered to anyone knocking on the door. Any irritation or resentment that might be felt is not expressed because it would cause trouble. Instead prayers are said asking for the strength to bear the difficulties.

This cohesion is a strength in shamanic cultures, but it is also a weakness. It works very well when everybody sticks to the rules, but when some people use the social inhibitions against confrontation and start to exploit others for their own gain, for example, by abusing the rules of hospitality, then serious stresses emerge in the community. And the sad fact is that today, in the former traditional shamanic cultures there are many individuals who are lost, who have become alcoholic or a burden to others. Disconnected from the past but unable, or unwilling, to connect to the Western way of life, many people in the shamanic cultures are now suffering.

During the last few years, some individuals have been offering family constellations to Native Americans, on and off the reservations. On the reservations constellations may still be too direct and confrontational for some, but there are some Native American people for whom they have been a good way to ease personal tensions and stress, to help them come to terms with the past, and to improve relations between family members. In constellation work there is an eye for the well-being of the whole community, just as in traditional shamanism, but individual fate is also respected and individual needs are addressed in ways that can be helpful to people who are lost between two cultures.

Just as shamanism can benefit from constellations, so constellations can benefit from shamanism. For example, in shamanic cultures there is a lot of knowledge about how to stay connected to deceased ancestors in a way that benefits both the dead and the living. Shamanic cultures know how to include those who are lost and have no place. Through rituals, songs and practices that affirm life and well-being, they can connect to the spiritual sources that help the sad and weak to find new strength.

The following example illustrates how this is possible in practice. In a recent training group one of the participants was in great pain. She told how her younger brother was in deep trouble and

how her heart ached to do something for him. He had left his family and friends to become a soldier in the Foreign Legion but had become involved in criminal activities and ended up in prison in terrible conditions. I told her that it is hard to help someone in such circumstances. In fact, joining the Legion is often an indication that a man is driven to suicide, because he feels there is no place for him anywhere else.

I wanted to help the brother, but also to find a good way for the sister, so I used a combination of constellation work with shamanic ritual. First I explained how, when we need support, we often long for something to come to us from outside ourselves, be it love, practical support, or a shoulder to cry on. Of course, it is a fact that much help does indeed come from outside, but for the work I wanted to do I asked her to use another image. I guided her in a short meditation, asking her to imagine she was standing in front of herself. Then I asked her to see the one standing in front of her as the part that was in pain, and that her physical body was the strong and balanced part of herself. I asked her to feel into her body a source of strength that could be a support to the one in front of her who was suffering. However, I told her to give nothing to the part of her that was in need, to refrain from reaching out. Instead I asked her to just open her heart and literally make space inside for her weak and sad self, without trying to draw this other self in. I asked her to simply be available, anchored in strength and welcoming to the crying self in front of her, and to pay attention to the shape of the space she created for the other. She could mould that welcoming hole in the exact form of her sad and crying being and dedicate that space in her heart solely and purposefully to herself.

When the client was able to do this, I asked her to stand up and choose a representative for her brother and then I placed them with their backs to each other, about two metres apart, looking in opposite directions. I told them that I would sing a healing song, shaking a gourd rattle to accompany my voice. I asked the sister to repeat the meditation and to identify herself as a source of strength and openness. But this time the space in her heart would not be for herself but for her brother. I asked her to concentrate on absorbing the healing song and to imagine it wrapped around the space she had available to her brother. I also asked her to refrain from actively

trying to help the man, only to be available for him by offering him a place in her heart. This left him the freedom to make use of that space, or not. I instructed her to stay still in her place during the meditation, but the brother was free to move if he felt like doing so during the constellation. Then I stepped into the constellation in front of the sister, looked into her eyes for a moment, and then, focusing on her heart, I started rattling the gourd and singing.

Soon the sister started to sob loudly, and I had to stop singing for a moment, reminding her to ground herself as a source of strength. She was able to do this. For some minutes the healing song reverberated through the room. Then something subtle and beautiful happened. Both the sister and brother closed their eyes. Silently, tears started to run down their cheeks. And very slowly, while the song continued, the brother's representative started to turn towards his sister and towards the song, like a flower turning to the sun. Brother and sister looked strangely alike, standing straight, each with their own dignity, the tears running silently but steadily from their closed eyes. Although the song was sounding in the room, there was a sense of silence, a sense of blessing.

Sometimes it is possible to simply combine some constellations with healing songs or other shamanic tools and interventions. At other times, it is not so obvious and it takes experience to find ways to combine the two, just as in the case of the brother and sister. But some movements that are used in constellations are so close to shamanic rituals that there is hardly any difference between the two, and aspects from one can easily be transferred to the other. For example, many therapists who do family constellations sometimes set up a representative for death and ask the client (or someone else in the constellation) to move towards death. Whatever the result of this movement, the specific dynamics are the same: there is an individual and death, and the individual in one way or another moves towards death. The very same movement is made in certain shamanic rituals.

In my training sessions I have often asked one of my assistants to represent death. The representative would wear a prepared mask: a face with empty eye sockets, pointed teeth and very long black hair. Death would stand still, hands

extended forwards a little and palms up. One by one, the participants in the group would walk towards death. Then, when they were facing the figure, I would whisper two questions in their ear: "What does death take away from you? What does death give you in return?" The participants were asked to let an answer come up by itself and to simply let images arise. I whispered the questions so that everyone would hear them for the first time and have no time to mentally prepare an answer. It is easy to imagine that in some cases the interventions that are used during constellations where death is confronted could be helpful for an individual during a shamanic ritual. Likewise, it is easy to imagine that the questions from this ritual could be asked during a constellation, or, if a client in a constellation has difficulty in recognising death for what it is, the skull mask could be used. Such a mask would add an archaic dimension to the overall image and help the client to realise who is standing in front of them, and to take seriously the gravity of the situation.

Together shamanism and constellations can be a fertile couple and produce beautiful offspring. However, it is important to realise that many aspects of shamanic ritual are only effective within a specific frame of mind and when they are embedded in a precisely defined context. Beside this, according to traditional shamanic cultures it takes a very long time before someone can really carry the responsibility of leading a ceremony and directly touching people's souls in this way. Therefore, I feel comfortable going slowly. My personal exploration of the area where shamanism and constellations meet and can be of mutual support, is a gradual process and I take time to carefully evaluate each little step. Moving carefully and slowly through this field for the last few years has been a rewarding and fascinating adventure, transforming my experience of both shamanic ritual and constellations, subtly but tangibly increasing the healing potential of both.

### **Reference**

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