

Helping children to learn

Child A, a Muslim girl was struggling with aspects of socialising and learning in the Year 6 Class. She had not been allowed by her father to take part in the class residential trip to Cornwall - the only child not to do so. In addition several parts of the curriculum were not available to her on grounds of her religious beliefs. The teacher seemed to carry some sadness and frustration that this child was unable to take full part in class activities.

Through consideration of 'conscience group' however, it is possible to see that the child's primary loyalties are to her family and culture - and that though she is sad she cannot take part in some things, she understands why and completely accepts the situation. An honouring of her cultural attachment and support for her in upholding them enables the teacher to play a more open and facilitating part in the child's learning.

At the end of term performance, the child sang an unaccompanied song beautifully. Her father, who hardly ever visits school because of the time pressures of his work, had slipped in to the hall a little late to hear her. She saw him and turned to her teacher to ask if she could sing an extra song just for her father. Again, unaccompanied, she sang a Turkish song exquisitely to her father. The whole hall of parents were moved and touched by her powerful performance, which was in a way a public declaration of her culture, language and loyalty.

Jane James, who captured this story, had been working as a 'systemic coach' alongside a classroom teacher in a Wiltshire primary school for a period of ten weeks during the summer of 2004. The words stand as a poignant example of how a relatively small intervention of this type can affect not only the child's capacity to learn, but also the ability of the classroom teacher to teach and crucially, the quality of support the parents can offer.

Her story wasn't an isolated instance. Each of the ten teacher/researchers involved in the project had similar stories to tell and, importantly, showed an enormous hunger for developing the approaches further, both for themselves and on behalf of their colleagues. This is the story about

the quiet revolution that's happening in Warminster - and we are pleased to be sharing our story with you.

LEARNING AND TEACHING IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

The project, inspired by our commitment to develop the applicability of Bert Hellinger's approach to larger systems, was co-created by a team of six people. Judith Hemming and Terry Ingham, directors of the nowherefoundation, led the process along with two associate consultants, Alison Barclay and Jane James. The four of us worked alongside two primary head teachers, Val Culff and Angela Reeves, who had previously used constellations successfully to deal with some of their management

issues. They were very keen to explore how it could be used to resolve issues that were affecting their staff and their pupils directly - in the classroom. Their energy and support were pivotal to success.

The sorts of issues which teachers and learners face are well documented weekly in newspapers and television documentaries. Nationally, the climate for our work ranged from a system that was struggling with high levels of dissatisfaction, to one that was in a state of crisis. The Wiltshire schools were more inclined towards the former state, with teachers knowing things could be better and with enough strength and energy in their professional practice to attempt to do something about it.

Discussions with them highlighted a number of contributing factors to their levels of dissatisfaction. These included:

- an emphasis on raising standards of pupil attainment backed up by the use of testing and league tables
- the policy of inclusion which brought children with a range of special needs into whole class situations
- children carrying complex and often painful family issues into school life
- a sense that the level of resources was still too low to enable the teachers to adequately deal with the situations they found themselves in. Many teachers were often left 'at screaming point' in the face of difficulties.

Conventional approaches to resolving difficulties in the classroom don't deal with the roots of the issue. In the past six years the government has invested £660M in their Behaviour Improvement Programme but even though in some cases it meets with a large degree of success:

"...it is mainly a containment exercise and one that often totters on a precipice of disaster..."
(McCormack 2004)

Several of us in the nowherefoundation have come from a background in education and are also parents, committed to finding ways of continuing to contribute to the welfare of families and children. Judith is an experienced practitioner and teacher of both family and organisational constellations and has been supported to take this passion and knowledge into the field of education, with a team of people who have learned the approach and gathered much valuable practice in earlier projects. At the nowherefoundation we were hoping with this project to play a significant part in helping children and their teachers to thrive in school, so that teachers could be more present with their students in ways that were respectful and life-enhancing. Our focus was to help them carry some of the deep magic that we knew constellation work could open up, even when they themselves were not going to touch directly into such deep issues with the children. Teachers, living in an ideologically turbulent field, are not always encouraged to 'acknowledge what is', to deeply face the fates of children. (One teacher mentioned that she knew more about the reading ages of the children than their loyalties and their deep involvement in their families and home culture, all of which she could now see determined their ability to make use of school).

Over the previous two years we had been building our experience and confidence in the value of bringing the wisdom of the systemic philosophy to schools. We had run a series of workshops, and a conference, where teachers brought issues to explore and constellate. Their responses had heartened us. We managed to get funding from an American charity to undertake a small project where we worked with some head teachers, offering them constellations on key issues, followed up by systemic coaching to embed their new perspectives into school again. It became clear to the head teachers as well as to us, that this approach was far too important to be confined to adults alone. The head teachers were enthusiastic about taking the approach down the line, right into the classroom and playground.

OBSTACLES TO CREATING THE PROJECT

However, if we were to progress then we had three key issues of our own to resolve:

- How could we make the constellating process accessible to classroom teachers in ways that empowered them to work with their pupils? These committed professionals weren't trained in psychotherapy, although they had a basic knowledge of educational psychology and its application to learning. They were not going to become constellation facilitators, and it would not have been appropriate for them to explore in depth (or in public) the ways that their children might often unconsciously be carrying their families' unprocessed trauma.
- Were the children too young to understand and work with systemic approaches? In a previous research project called 'The Schools We Need' an

assistant head teacher at a large secondary school in Cambridgeshire had successfully set up an approach to peer group counselling with seventeen and eighteen year olds based on a weekly constellations club. But we were proposing working with children much younger than this.

- How could development of any significance be funded? These small schools had training and development budgets of just a few hundred pounds - and some didn't even have that. The Wiltshire Local Education Authority was in a similar position, working hard to manage a large shortfall in their budget.

The breakthrough for the first two questions appeared when we came into contact with the work of Marianne Franke-Grische and her colleagues at the spring conference in Würzburg 2003. They had taken various aspects of constellations and matched them to the specific issues the learners were facing. They had begun to create a series of exercises that teachers in the classrooms could use with their children in 'bite-sized' chunks as and when the need arose. Watching the responses of the learners in a school in Mexico City was inspirational and provided us with the springboard we needed.

To tackle the issue about funding we rather boldly went to the top - to the Central Government's Department of Education and Skills. Our point of contact was with Maureen Burns, a director in the Innovation Unit at the DfES. The previous year she had experienced first-hand constellations work with the nowherefoundation as it was applied to the resolution of organisational and management issues and was intrigued by our proposal to develop and take the approach into classrooms. She awarded us a grant to run a small

project in six Wiltshire schools. It was a pilot which would enable us to design and test ideas. Given that the numbers of pupils in the project was on the low side, we could not make any claims to know, but rather we wanted to help teachers gain some insight into some of the issues they often faced and find a new direction for them.

DESIGNING AND RUNNING THE PROJECT

For both our funders and ourselves we hoped to demonstrate an improvement in the capacity of children to learn. So we needed to be innovative with the design of the research and development process.

We created a collaborative action research model that enabled all those involved to work with their strengths. We devised a number of roles. The ten head teachers, teachers and teaching assistants became teacher-researchers. Their tasks were to work innovatively with the exercises and record effects and outcomes. Judith Hemming was the designer, trainer and overseer of the process. Alison Barclay and Jane James were systemic coaches providing on-going support in classroom implementation and the gathering of research data. Terry Ingham and Jane James led the process of finding meaning in the research data and writing the final report.

The method involved a series of distinct stages, beginning with the initial research and development of tools and exercises by the nowherefoundation team. This work was taken into a two-day residential workshop with the teacher-researchers and combined the development of their skills and knowledge with further ideas about how they could integrate the tools into their classroom teaching.

The questions for Judith as she set out to design the two-day residential for the teachers were: What is at the *heart* of this perspective? What kinds of experiences and support could help the teachers embody it deeply enough for it to guide their ways of working in the classroom? Most readers of this journal will have learned about constellations by immersing themselves in the work over many years. With these teachers, we needed to be more focused and practical, without losing the soulful quality of the learning. We wanted to set in motion a process that could then be further developed and supported in the classroom.

The first day and evening of the residential training was very demanding for the teachers. They were plunged into the constellating process. They were taught the orders of love. They were asked to be far more open and self-revealing than they were accustomed to being. They explored their own interlocking systems; they experienced what a resolution felt like - the healing power of being in the 'right' place, and first hand experience of belonging. They practised bowing, and feeling powerless but respectful in the face of someone's fate. They marvelled at how they could feel the experience of someone they were representing, without acting or having prior knowledge of the person. They began to grasp the power of the 'knowing field' that held them and their pupils, both past and present. They personally felt the power of family issues and the beauty of being respected and having parents held in respect. Thus, they discovered for themselves, some of the ways in which they could contribute to finding solutions for some of the problems.

It was not until the second day that they began to devise ways of translating these ideas into

classroom activities. We provided ideas and suggestions but this first group were extraordinarily creative; each invented unique ways to bring their new visions to life as part of the curriculum, which they then continued to develop throughout the term.

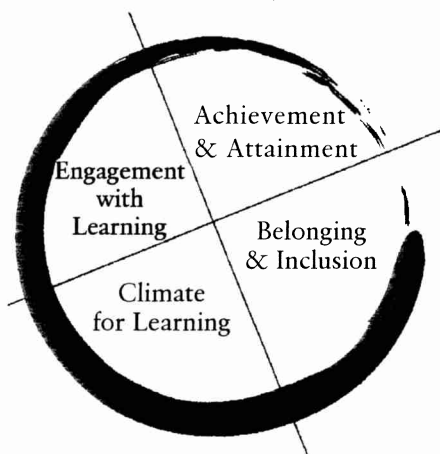
Over a period of ten weeks 'experiments' were conducted in the schools with both the teacher-researchers and their systemic coaches, capturing data in the form of the observations, plans, examples of work and reflections on the process. At the end of the summer this was written up in a way that drew on the evidence provided from the schools and linking it to existing educational theory and policy. The final step was to hold a conference to share and celebrate with all involved and others who were interested. It was held in Wiltshire in early November and was attended by fifty people.

ATTENDING TO THE 'WHOLE'

At the Conference, they heard, saw and experienced a sample of the richness of new thinking and ideas which had begun to address, in varying degrees, some of the debilitating issues the teachers had been facing. They also saw a group of teachers who, to a person, carried a renewed energy for their jobs. What had happened to make the difference?

The major shift was that they had reduced the intense focus on the curriculum and the achievement of the individual learner and broadened it, so that the whole container for learning was attended to. The key aspects of this container are described in the diagram below, which came out of our conclusions at the end of the project. It shows a flow from: safe entry into the school system (with a cognisance of the links to family systems); to an attention to the learning

environment (particularly within the classroom); to the connection the children have with the learning process as whole people and finally, and naturally, to resulting levels of achievement and attainment.



We expand on the first three categories below, illustrating them with the experiences and words of those involved in the project. We are currently gathering evidence of attainment and achievement in a follow-up piece of research, again sponsored by the DfES, which we will document in a separate report later this year.

BELONGING AND INCLUSION

We believed that the role of place, inclusion and family would each strengthen the learners' sense of belonging to their school and class systems, and so was the foundation for learning. Fundamental to this was helping each individual to find a strong sense of place in both the school and their class group, aligned with other key elements such as the family and the community. We offer three aspects below:

Place and Time

One of the most successful ways teachers worked with this aspect of belonging was by using photographs or drawings of each pupil to represent themselves in the class group and incorporating them into a class mobile. The mobiles

provided a simple but powerful representation of interconnectedness for children, encouraging them to see themselves as part of a whole system rather than as isolated individuals.

Here is what one teacher wrote about the use of mobiles in her classroom:

"We have three weights: large, medium and small. We set the agenda for tasks using a traffic lights system, i.e. red for silent activity, orange for whispering, green for free talking.

If the atmosphere shifts, negatively, the appropriate weight is placed on the mobile to shift the balance. Children automatically ask why the weight has been put on and how to get it off. If an individual causes disruption on more than two occasions, they are seen as 'hindering' the collective balance and are asked to place a peg on their representations.

Children have now taken possession of the mobile! They often tell me when to put weights on and 'can I put a peg on because....' Complete ownership! We have discussed how we will shortly make a 'celebration' banner for 'perfectly harmonious' times.

We have times when we just reflect, musing over the mobile occasionally in the middle of tasks, to evaluate how we are."

Another teacher took this notion of place a step further by exploring the effect of time as an ordering force on this sense of place with Year 6 children shortly before they left the school. They used photographs of children who had been at their hundred year old school to get a sense of many other children having left this school before them:

"We got them to stand as Year 6, and one by one experience the children behind them from years gone past. They exhibited all kinds of reactions; mostly they hadn't thought about this before. For some it made them feel stronger; that they were part of a process that so many other children had been a part of, over such a long period of time. One child said that he felt like a 'very small fish in a very big sea' and that was good. They seemed struck by the history, as I was - the children who had inhabited that space (the first school room) for all those years."

Inclusion

As the pupils felt a strengthening in their belonging, the desire to include rather than exclude others was similarly strengthened. The teachers designed exercises that enabled children to experiment with group dynamics and adjust their behaviours accordingly:

"I got them to stand in the middle of a circle on their own and see what it was like. They hated it; they looked at the floor and shuffled. They then placed themselves linked with someone else and where they could see each other. It was better. They talked about the awfulness of being left out and how important it is to include each other."

It was also evident that the head teachers, teachers and teaching assistants were also important parts of the class and school systems. Even though they had different roles and carried more authority and responsibility, they also wanted to find their place, and they wanted to build on strengths, on what was positive and life-supporting:

"The children were given the chance to say something positive about each other and about themselves. I feel an incredible closeness to the children and feel

that I benefited as much as they did - I felt like 'Janet' instead of Mrs A. The children I feel now have a greater trust in me and Val (the Head Teacher) and with each other."

Closer links with family systems

No school exists in isolation, so a question we held throughout the research was: How can the links between the school and home - and to a lesser extent the wider community - be strengthened? It was one of the most important areas for us to explore, since pupils spend more time out of school than in it, and in-school transactions are inevitably informed and shaped by what they know and who they are in the community at large. Given our experience in working with family systems this was an area to which we felt we could make a special contribution.

The primary school system in particular is inextricably connected to the families of origin of all the children. The teachers discovered in new ways how the children brought family life into school. Experiencing constellations about the children whose school life was the most troubling, enabled them to learn more about how family life directly affects a child's capacity to learn. They were surprised to find how important fathers were, especially absent fathers and fathers who were not respected. They could see that all those who were missing in the family had a major impact.

By introducing systemic practices, teachers could see, in a way they hadn't previously been able to, the depth of the issues that some children were wrestling with daily - issues around illness, arguments, separation, death and loss:

"During the 'leaving session' when children cried, it emerged

that some children were crying for other losses. One girl couldn't stop crying - she has a sister who has been in and out of care and has no father."

"Several girls 'missed' their aunts after marital breakdown and separation...There is a loss and they do not know if and how to maintain the relationship after the separation."

Teachers, whilst not being able to resolve these issues (and often there is no resolution), cannot afford to ignore them either. A question we have yet to fully answer is: How best might they deal with them? Their existing training isn't sufficient and many issues go unresolved. But the humble process of simply acknowledging these issues often brings a greater ease for the children concerned, as the story at the beginning of this piece shows.

Some teachers did feel ready to use simple constellations to allow children to see their own family systems and begin to articulate what was going on for them. They constellated using post-it notes, desktop objects, pieces of paper on the floor or each other. Children used the new language to explore and understand their situations and resolve issues that had been troubling them and hindering their ability to engage fully in learning:

"One girl wanted Dad behind her (who doesn't live with her anymore). She said it didn't feel complete and chose her big brother to join Dad. She remained quiet, thoughtful and a little upset for a long time and then she said she wanted Mum there too. You could see the tension physically lift and she said it felt good. We said that those people were all there for her, even though they don't live together and may not be there for each other anymore. She was happy with this."

With a strengthened sense of belonging, the next step in the flow of learning was to attend to the culture or climate within the class community.

CLIMATE FOR LEARNING

In this section we consider how a better understanding of motivational needs, linked to an overt working with respect, provides a healthy ground for learning activity.

Teachers' awareness of learners' needs

The usual starting point in the provision of any service is to understand need and then shape provision accordingly. In an educational context the focus on need is usually based on an individual's developmental needs, through understanding the requirements of the particular curriculum-based competency. It means identifying the current level of competence of the learner and assessing their need in terms of the 'gap' in skill or knowledge. It is a well-developed and practised approach.

The systemic approach, whilst not offering a great deal directly to this specific process, enabled teachers to go deeper and understand better the forces affecting the pupils' motivation to learn. The importance of this knowledge was especially significant when trying to deal with the minority of learners who appeared to have intractable blocks to school-based learning, whose deeper loyalties impeded their motivation.

As researchers we were impressed by the extent to which the study enabled teachers to find out important details of the lives of their pupils, which they had not known previously. This nearly always led to greater understanding and a more empathic approach to the learner:

"I feel like I've been involved in something very special that touches the very souls of children. Because the work involves recognising truths, the way things really are, it seems to strip away the façade behind which most of us hide. It has given me a chance to look at the real child together with the 'baggage', which they bring to school."

In getting to know the children in this way the quality of the relationship between teacher and pupil improved dramatically. This is captured in a simple statement made by a teaching assistant:

"I feel honoured to be allowed into the children's thoughts and worries. Their trust in me makes me feel very special."

All of the teachers expressed a determination to find out more about the learners' families 'from the start of the new term' - and our continuing contact with them shows this is happening.

Learners understanding their own needs and the needs of others

It is not only teachers who need to understand the needs, interests, systemic loyalties and entanglements of children; children themselves can all benefit from the ability to know themselves and others better. This was particularly important for those children whom teachers had identified as 'fragile learners'. This aspect of the work was built on previous initiatives that had developed the emotional intelligence of children (Goleman, 1996). The use of systemic aspects took it a stage further allowing an easy shift from the individual to the collective. The children had a greater self-awareness, enabling them to know and recognise their own and others' emotions in the moment and, in some cases, start a healing process.

As a result they were better able to manage their own emotions and give support to others.

We developed exercises that would allow children to acknowledge, better understand and increase their capacity to deal with their own and other people's needs, behaviours, interactions and feelings including: anxiety, sadness, anger or excitement and happiness.

An example is where the group made a 'class feelings thermometer' using a peg to register their feelings and moods on a colour calibrated strip to give a dynamic picture of the 'collective mood' of the class:

"It became clear that by accessing the thermometer as a group in the safe set-up of the circle, pupils were able to gauge and begin to tap into a range of feelings that they had. Also a natural open-mindedness and tolerance was being born or perhaps nurtured in each individual as each response was handled honestly and sensitively and accepted as normal."

Another teacher had the children place pegs on their thermometer - red for angry, blue for 'out of sorts'. They visited their thermometer at times during the day to see if they could move the peg, even when they were not sure how they felt. Their aim was to be on yellow for 'content'.

Another teacher reported on the use of individual and class thermometers:

"The system is that children collect their thermometer when it feels appropriate. They prop it up on the table to say: 'talk to me', or 'leave me alone' or 'I'm feeling like this'. They can also place their face and peg on the whole class thermometer to alert me - not necessarily for me to talk to them; often just so that I can be aware. Children are fully aware

that this is a tool to help them to be aware of their feelings, not necessarily to magic them away."

Respect

A third example of developing a nourishing climate for learning was around respect for both the person and their place in the system. The technique all of the teacher-researchers used involved physically bowing to each other - often with startling results.

For a few, bowing was very difficult but surprisingly most children found it quite easy. There are many stories of children taking it into their everyday way of relating to each other - even to settle disputes - and others where whole schools 'respected' the place each person in the system occupied. The evidence pointed, over and over again, to examples of improvements in how people related to each other. For example, one teacher said she now saw her class as:

"a safe place to express feelings and fears - a natural open-mindedness and tolerance was being nurtured and allowed into being."

A more discreet approach used was a meditation exercise based on visualisation. Using the phrase: 'I am here because of you' the teachers pictured in their mind's eye all the people that had played a part in their lives. It encouraged gratitude and respect amongst the class group.

To conclude this section, central to setting a climate for learning is the quality of self-motivation i.e. in Goleman's (1996) terms: 'the ability to marshal emotions in the service of a goal'. Emotional self-control - delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness - underlies accomplishments of every sort. In this instance the self-motivation exhibited by many of the pupils showed evidence of enhancing their

ability to learn, even when the support was minimal.

In the third area, teachers worked proactively to support the children's actual engagement with learning.

RECEPTIVITY TO AND ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING

The questions we asked ourselves were: How can teachers help children be ready to learn and how can they be in a good enough state of readiness to engage with the learning process? Below, we demonstrate three aspects of this state of readiness:

- creating a calm and nurturing atmosphere in the classroom to help concentration
- helping to settle the child to be in a supported place
- the use of various modes of communication to hold interest

Stilling and Concentration

Within the classroom the research showed that a number of strategies were already in place to create good conditions for learning:

- Circle Time
- the innovative use of music
- clear aims communicated to the children
- use of technical and visual aids

Even so, teachers were often battling against a number of factors in trying to get children to settle and concentrate on learning. Structurally the school environments were stimulating and, in many instances, inspirational. There were issues around noise and interruption - not surprising in small primary schools. We illustrated simple strategies based on 'stilling' or 'quiet time', which helped the children to feel calmer.

Three teachers worked with 'stilling' - asking children to close their eyes and focus on, for example a person, their breathing or a good thought. A number also used the link to music to relax and prepare the pupils. Although young children often find it difficult to hold a 'still' state for more than a few minutes, the length of quiet time gradually increased with practice.

The key issue was: Were the children more ready to learn? Our anecdotal evidence suggests they were and it seems a promising avenue to explore further.

Support

Educationalists such as Marsh and Thompson (2001) emphasise how vital the role of parents is in the promotion of early literacy skills. Building on this concept, some teachers helped the children make contact at an imaginary level with family members who could help them learn and concentrate without fear. The children thought about which people they wanted to have with them as they faced particular tasks, drawing little portraits of them and finding exactly the right place to put them - on the desk, in the pocket, or tucked into the waistband. The children could feel the difference easily. A child might choose a dead grandparent for one kind of help, or a sibling or parent. These pictures were laminated and available to be collected, whenever the need arose. Some classes developed this even without pictures - just by imagining their parents, or another relative behind them, they could calm themselves and think more easily. The pictures were once used when there was an

arithmetic test, and the children scored higher marks than usual.

Teachers also asked their children to explore the physical sensation of support by first asking a child to stand at the front of the class by themselves. "How do you feel?" Then she added two children behind to act as support and asked again, "How does this feel?" She then asked the child to name who these people were.

Modes of Communication

A final aspect of opening up the child's ability to connect fully with learning was the strengthening of their 'voice'. By bringing issues to the surface and acknowledging them, there was an 'opening-up'. One teacher-researcher said it had given them a chance to talk to her about things they hadn't been able to talk about before. Others noted that the children became more confident in talking about issues that concerned them and as a result were 'freed up' from some of the burden of anxiety that often inhibited them.

Underpinning this was the utilisation of different modes of communication or in Gardner's (1993) terms 'multiple intelligences'. When working systemically, the teacher-researchers drew on well-developed verbal and visual skills. Less obvious was the use of spatial and kinaesthetic awareness to open and maintain a strong connection to learning.

Configuring elements in space lies at the heart of systemic work. The research showed countless examples of people in circles, lines or more complex maps of a particular system. Working with a

sense of direction and distance between the elements the children made 'maps' using such things as: post-it notes on flip-chart paper, mobiles and each other. The children engaged with the process easily and drew a lot of information from it.

The study also demonstrates how kinaesthesia, utilising the perception and sensing of the motion or position of the body, became a powerful vehicle of communication: the act of bowing as a sign of respect; the act of placing indicators on a chart; movement towards a mobile; standing behind someone to offer support; the movement of an arm.

"At the end the children who were leaving stood in a line with the children who were staying in the class in a line behind them (including the teacher and the teaching assistant). I asked them to really feel the presence of those people and to 'take them with them'. The children then turned

round and they swapped places so the children who were leaving, stood behind those who were staying - as a support."

A key phrase here is 'feel the presence'. It is not a matter of imagining or reading body language. There is no requirement to think but instead to open up the body's sensing ability to receive information. It is one of the most contentious aspects of this approach. It seems to work very powerfully and yet is difficult to explain.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

One of our hopes for this project has been to find ways to provide a fertile ground for children's learning. We feel our work has touched the hearts and souls of all those involved - ourselves included - giving fresh hope for a more considered approach to learning in schools.

Since the conclusion of this pilot study, we have received further government funding to develop our work in Wiltshire. We are collecting more data from those schools that took part in the initial pilot, and we have run a second residential with another group of teachers, using a lot of what was developed during the previous year. We are making a short film of the work in school and at the training sessions. These practices seem to be taking root and enthusiasm is spreading - a process that is both exciting and heartening.

There are many ways we could develop the work further and much still to research - we have yet to know the shifts in attainment that our contribution may have supported. We would like to work with a whole school. We would love to work with governors, and with parents. We are in mid-process.

We are grateful to all the teachers, head teachers, teaching assistants, and researchers who participated in this study. They are: Jane James, Alison Barclay; nowherefoundation coaches-researchers, supported by Jane Reed and Frank McNeil (Institute of Education, University of London)

Head teachers: Val Culff, Joss Jewell, Debi Dowling

Classroom teachers: Caroline Evans, Leslie Golledge, Alison Mills, Roli Noyce

Teaching assistants: Janet Aylesbury, Jane Garrett, Sue Bray

You can also read the full report of this project 'Enhancing Children's Learning' by going to www.nowheregroup.com/store.html

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Introducing Constellations at Work

In the UK at this time, the practice of organisational constellations is relatively unknown. The field is very different from the field of family constellations; the organisational work is still finding its place alongside other systemic and solution-focused approaches to change and development, as well as coming to terms with the different issues of organisational need and business culture. The potential contribution that constellations can make to organisations is highly significant, but introducing constellations at work needs care - both for the integrity of the work, for the organisational cultures that this work can influence, and for the shifts in orientation that consultants and coaches need to open themselves to if we are to make best use of the work. This paper is a personal reflection on some ways of introducing and working with Bert Hellinger's systemic constellations in a number of different organisational contexts.

RESPECTING SYSTEMIC DIFFERENCE

Organisational constellations work undoubtedly represents a pioneering new paradigm approach to change and development, which is challenging, both for practitioners and for clients. Some of the challenges of working with constellations in organisational settings do not only come from the groundbreaking nature of the approach itself, which can be difficult to describe in ways that are simple and accessible. They also come from some of the difficulties inherent in transferring and adapting this profound work from its origins and main field of application in family systems psychotherapy, into larger and more complex strategic systems.

I think it is important to take the work forward into organisations in ways which acknowledge the founding of the work through Bert Hellinger's innovative thinking about 'Orders of Love'. Also, in my opinion, organisational constellators from management and

consulting backgrounds need to be respectful of the heritage from therapist colleagues working in family systems (from whom as a consultant I am still learning so much) and who have been the original pioneers of this work.

At the same time, the different contexts, cultures, needs and circumstances of organisations need to be acknowledged. Psychotherapeutic and family systems approaches are not always directly transferable into the organisational domain. For example, some of the 'orders' upon which the work is predicated differ in their application in organisations. While everyone has an inalienable right to belong to their family system, in organisations belonging is contingent upon one's acceptance of leadership, upon competent use of skill, and other variables.

In addition, organisational applications of the work are not always so relationally profound as within family systems work. I have used constellations in work settings to explore how to improve the reach

of a brand through re-balancing certain elements in its communications portfolio, such as: websites, mail shots and other marketing media; to understand what was preventing a creative company bringing successful new products to market; to explore financial strategy for a new business about to undertake a merger; and how to manage service provision for a public sector organisation faced with relentlessly shifting political agendas. Naturally, there are human considerations that relate to these more impersonal issues, but often my experience of organisational constellations has been that illumination is enough. Restoring a wholeness of perspective does not carry - nor need to carry - any immediate or obviously healing charge for individuals. Simply surfacing unacknowledged truths can be of sufficient service to the client and their organisational system.

Despite some of the important differences between family and organisational constellations, happily there is still a lot of creative cross-fertilisation occurring across disciplines in the UK and elsewhere. A number of constellations practitioners I know are now quite naturally talking about 'systemic constellations work' rather than family constellations or organisational constellations, and people on family systems workshops I attend are genuinely interested in less personal applications of the work - beyond organisations, in community and even environmental systems. Working across systems is an exciting area of application and one that I am particularly interested in.

There is much that practitioners from family and organisational

ARTICLE CONTRIBUTOR: TY FRANCIS

fields can learn from and with each other. I believe that this is particularly true with systemic constellations work - perhaps more so than with other forms of systemic work that I have encountered in organisations, which are not so radically inclusive and therefore place less emphasis on the importance and benefits of working sensitively and skilfully across family, organisational and social systems boundaries. Of course, part of the skill here is to separate and 'bracket' issues that belong to different systems, rather than attempt to do too much. It is impossible to resolve an issue from one system within the context of another system. Nevertheless, a constellation is a remarkable tool for working simply and effectively with multiple and complex inter-relationships across different systems (including families and organisations), and for calibrating interventions at different points of the system (in a way that respects the whole organisation as well as its constituent parts), something we normally never get to do as consultants and coaches.

For example, we know from constellations work that entanglements can happen when we confuse systems boundaries and - out of awareness - treat our boss as though she is our mother, or our father as though he is God, and so on. People often innocently try to work out the issues from one system of reference in another system, with disruptive effects. This seems particularly to be the case around issues of authority and our place in relation to hierarchy. Disentangling systemic dynamics is core to this work - within as well as across systems.

In one constellation I worked on recently with a colleague, a managing director of a newly-merged business was having problems relating to his sales

director, who was on the Board. Although the sales director had been primarily responsible for the deal which had profited both merged companies, and still had lots to offer the business, the MD could not find a good place for him in the new organisational structure he was developing. When we remained working scrupulously in the organisational domain, whatever configuration we tried, the issue was unaffected. It was clear that the source of the MD's dilemma lay in the family sphere. Tentatively, my colleague put in 'male support' for the MD (resisting openly calling this representative 'father' which would have been too jarring in this context). This made a slight positive difference, in that the representatives for the business felt more relaxed and focused. However, the MD could not fully take in the male support. The constellation was brought to a conclusion at this point. Over a coffee we spoke privately to the MD alone, and suggested the source of his dilemma might reside in his relationship with his father. He was understandably surprised, and rejected the idea, saying that this could not possibly be the case as he had not spoken to his father for many years... We ended the conversation at this point, and returned to the group, trusting that somehow the frame of the issue had been enlarged enough.

I believe that there is more possibility of an organisational constellation touching upon deeper and more personal family issues in this way, than vice versa. This holds particular challenges for organisational consultants drawn to this approach. We need to ensure that we commit to our own ongoing personal development, and ideally to receive training in family systems dynamics. Clearly it is responsible practice for us to keep the larger bias of the work in the organisational realm, and not to interfere in people's family

systems unless it is essential - and then only minimally. My point is that there are overlapping grey areas that organisational consultants using constellations are likely to encounter - as in the vignette above, or when working with family businesses, for example.

FIRST HURDLES

There are some more basic practice dilemmas facing consultants who wish to introduce constellations to their organisational clients, other than knowing how to balance different systems' influences in a constellation, as in the previous example. Some of the 'first hurdles' are because systemic constellations work is so new, innovative and powerful. Organisational clients usually have some 'first hurdle' questions, among which are: What is a constellation? What are its applications? When would it ideally be used? How does it work? What will the process deliver? What will the benefits be? Who else has used the work? What will it cost?

It is important to meet these questions directly and succinctly, although anyone familiar with the work knows that some of the questions are difficult to meet fully - constellations represent an innovation where practice is in advance of theory, so straightforward answers are not so easy to provide! Related to this is the consideration that to present the work in purely organisational terms misrepresents it, and sets false expectations for clients who might reject the work if they are surprised by the unorthodox approach and the occasional deeply revealing insights that are likely.

Until recently my own strategy has been to flag up the innovative and searching nature of the work, and to hold back from suggesting that it can be used too widely. I talk about the fact that a constellation is a way

of looking at hidden dynamics that are 'below the radar' of awareness and which can entangle projects and people over long periods of time if not attended to. I suggest that the most appropriate first uses of a constellation are where there are recurrent problems (described by one colleague as 'ground-hog day' problems) that are not amenable to conventional approaches, and which might already have had considerable effort and resource devoted to them with no satisfactory or sustainable results. Another area of application I point to, is where progress is urgently required in areas where little or no data is available. Starting with conveying a sense of the weight of issues the work can address, and stressing the fact that it is not necessarily a 'first port of call' for a manager, seems to do justice to the work and to help contextualise its unusual approach. Another organisational colleague describes constellations as 'an unusual option for an unsettling time' - again, framing the difference of the work and pointing to when it can be most effectively applied.

Another early consideration in taking constellations into large organisations is that aspects of the language of systemic constellations work can generate resistance in organisational ears. For example, notions of 'soul' and 'healing' can be difficult to express and explore in corporate settings. Equally there is a need for client education about the epistemological and methodological framework of constellations - things such as: phenomenology, the 'orders of love', the 'knowing field' and the related phenomenon of 'representative perception', need meticulous contextualising, robust handling and occasionally, reframing - are they really 'orders of love' in organisations, for example? Can we talk about 'intuition' rather than 'the knowing field' (recognising that

there are considerably deeper things going on in a constellation than intuitive process)? Even working with the body in organisational settings has different cultural sensitivities and sometimes, even taboos. These things need careful attention.

At another more pragmatic level, the process of constellating in its purest form - using a group of strangers in a workshop setting - is logistically not easy for a company to arrange at short notice. Hiring a group of representatives can be costly, and raise significant confidentiality issues. Desktop and floor applications in one-to-one settings have been an important development for consultants and coaches, in this respect. However, some of the depth and subtlety of the work is often sacrificed, and these ways of working are more reflective than dynamic.

Significantly, one of the highest hurdles for the 'constellating consultant' to get over is the fact that this work is not about the practitioner agreeing to pre-determined outcomes, as a consultant or coach would. Organisational contracts are usually very results-focused, and clear about the fact that clients need agreed deliverables within agreed time frames. Yet a constellator cannot make strong outcome claims.

All the constellator can agree to, is to serve the emergence of an unknown or unacknowledged 'truth' about the system. If we collude with the cultural imperative to be goal-oriented, and try to 'fix' the outcome for the client, even with good intent, we are not working phenomenologically and we degrade the work. It is quite a paradox for a beginning practitioner - to be staunchly solution-focused and also scrupulously unattached to outcomes. The principle of active non-intentionality is important in

this work. In the family systems field, for example, there is a real sense that the work is not about healing, although greater health and wholeness are often clear outcomes. Trying to remove symptoms for people might have some success at an individual level, but the symptoms often carry a systemic freight, which must be borne by someone - so they may recur elsewhere in the system. Acknowledging what is, and helping clients understand how symptoms are acting blindly in the service of something important in the system, means that as constellators, we do not have to do anything more to support resolution.

One way of handling this dilemma is to be clear that the modes of constellator and consultant are different, and that the constellator's job is simply diagnostic - with the added value element of suggesting some viable way forwards. Also, in longer-term pieces of organisational work it might be useful to engage the services of a constellator intermittently - say, at the very beginning of a project, and at one or two significant points throughout the project's life cycle. The constellator works as part of the consulting team in this way, but one step removed. This helps preserve the sort of phenomenological distance that enables him or her to remain effective and unencumbered by the sorts of loyalties consultants feel towards their clients.

One UK organisation I was a part of works this way to good effect, and also uses a constellator in a supervisory capacity to consultants on a project. This bounded approach means that the client gets the benefit of an innovative and powerful process but it is contextualised alongside other consulting and facilitation processes that are more familiar and trusted. Constellations are not the 'be-all and end-all' in organisational work;

other approaches have their place and must be respected, too.

Related to the issue of the contractual promise to the client, is the fact that a constellation is not able to promise a result within an agreed time frame. We are not working with causal relationships here, where doing 'x' results in 'y'. Rather, we are working with multiple overlapping contexts which co-influence one another, in ways that are not so predictable. For me, this is not a limiting factor, but part of the excitement of this approach. In one sense, this work is about how fields create action at a distance, in ways that are both subtle and profound, and apparently co-incidental. One client, a senior director of a business, who had done several constellations, noted:

"I can never say that something happened in the constellation and therefore something followed in the business. However, one of our directors retired from the Board after I set up a constellation in which it was obvious that he was not occupying a role that did anything for him or us. Nobody in the business knew that I had done this constellation, and I talked to no-one about it. I was just pondering what to do afterwards, and then received his resignation. This enabled us to recruit and bring someone in to a different role, and a lot of things have flowed from the freedom that gave us."

In another constellation, two people from a Health Authority came to explore an issue to do with a project that was faltering. The team was trying to co-ordinate work with strategic partners and stakeholders in wider health and social care networks. The boss could see that there were difficulties but he couldn't unravel them and did not know how best to intervene. In his constellation, the solution was for the project leader to form a new

team with a particular set of players. However, the solution could not be put into place in the real organisation as funding was suddenly withdrawn and the project collapsed prematurely. You could say that nothing happened; the boss moved on to other issues and the project leader left the organisation and went to another, unrelated job. However, a year later a new job was advertised which exactly matched the solution in the constellation. The old project leader re-applied and was given the post. It is as though the seed of the solution had found a place where it could germinate, and the field as a whole moved to support it over time.

These are mysterious and powerful dynamics. However, if organisational clients have not experienced a constellation (in particular what it is like to be a representative), it is less than straightforward to make a conventional business case around such results. The boss in the example above might have felt fascinated by the constellations process, but might have seen the work to be fruitless initially, as the constellation did not yield information about the Health Authority's decision to cut the funding so suddenly. It is only the longer perspective that reveals the mystery.

THE VALUE OF CONSTELLATIONS AT WORK

It seems to me that constellations are centrally concerned with the issue of what supports 'flow' in systems. Part of the promise of a constellation is that things can move forwards with more grace and ease, that sustainable progress can be made, and that new things can happen. By providing a 'living map' of the factors and forces at play in a situation, a constellation provides support for often unimaginable solutions to present themselves. A constellation suggests that by

acknowledging the 'given-ness' of things, a kind of inclusive spaciousness is created, through which we can find fresh possibilities and renewed energy for change.

As highly task-oriented, results-driven systems, organisations can derive great benefit from processes that support change. The solution-focus of a constellation makes it doubly attractive in those settings where grounded practicality is essential and where constructive and creative action is prized. In a constellation, we have a way of exploring and resolving a scale of issues from the private leadership struggles of an individual to more public dilemmas of global strategy or terrorism, for example. In addition, the power of the constellation to reveal previously hidden dynamics, and the authority of the underlying 'orders' that a constellation is predicated upon, and which insist relentlessly on the good of the greater whole, make this approach invaluable in large and complex systems. The sort of change a constellation supports is, quite simply, sorely needed in most organisations.

The benefits of using constellations at work are clear and compelling. The process is versatile, economical and effective. It makes a profound difference at personal and systemic levels. It can help resolve deeply intractable, recurring problems and also suggest potentially viable future possibilities with a minimum of data. Over the eight years that I have been interested in this field, I have experienced systemic constellations work making these and other differences in family and other small businesses, in global corporations, in public sector institutions and in social organisations such as NGOs.

While the approach is incredibly versatile, in my own practice I have noted that there are four key areas of work that organisational interest

frequently clusters around. Other constellating consultants will no doubt see things differently. I am sure that these issues are drawn to me as much as I notice them, because of the parallel emergence of my own learning needs along the journey with my clients. The four key areas of application I seem to work with include: leadership and governance; restructuring; conflict resolution; consultant effectiveness.

In talking about organisational constellations with clients these days, I raise these as areas that might be of interest to them. In each of these areas, constellations can be used diagnostically (to determine what the underlying dynamics are), remedially (to point to resolutions that might move a situation on), and prognostically (to glimpse future possibilities). In some instances, all elements seem to be present in a single issue.

In one constellation, for instance, a consultant brought an issue about a company department she was advising which had become steeped in blame, and as a result was becoming dysfunctional. One director in particular was being scapegoated. The question the consultant posed was two-fold: Firstly, would it make any difference if a new person was introduced? For example, was the issue of blame and scapegoating so endemic that it would make any difference who was in the role? Secondly, what could she do that might make a difference? The constellation showed that some of the issues were indeed systemic, and when these were identified and brought into order, it was clear where the consultant had to position herself to have an optimal effect, and what personal qualities she could manifest that would help the departing director and those in the team who remained behind.

The constellation in this instance became a very precise consulting tool, which helped the external consultant find penetrating, effective interventions, and promoted constructive action in ways that did not seem to generate a huge number of unintended consequences, which is what most change agents tend to get lumbered with. Economy of intervention is an important part of this way of working. At the same time, there are enormous learnings about such issues as: how good leaders strengthen systems if they fully take their place and power; how departing people need to be released respectfully, if the system is to proceed unencumbered; and how consultants can neutralise their effectiveness if they inadvertently take the place of someone in the system.

Although case studies such as this illustrate quite complicated inter-related elements, a constellation enables us to touch the complexity of organisational issues without being overwhelmed by them. The systemic 'orders' of time, space, belonging (and the related concept of conscience), give and take, and specific socio-cultural norms of a collective, enable us to realign the organisation. The role the 'orders' play in releasing the energy of the system should also be emphasised.

MOVING FORWARDS

The question of the educational and development needs of the organisational constellator, and the consultant, coach, facilitator or manager interested in applying this approach, is one that needs attention if the work in organisations in the UK is to continue to grow and flourish.

The key issue for me is to begin by thinking of constellations not as a technique that we do with a group of people in the middle of a room, but as something that stands for an

entirely new way of looking at how we know things, and opening up more non-judgemental space so that constructive change happens naturally, with less resistance and more engagement from others.

It is often not possible to do a constellation, even a desktop constellation, in the workplace. Instead, it is essential to work more homoeopathically, inserting potent fragments of systemic constellations work into workplace conversations, facilitated away-days, and other settings. I find this often takes the form of innocuously suggesting constellation sentences to clients; or of making phenomenological observations that bring certain things more into focus; or offering a small bow of acknowledgment in the form of a nod of the head, or changing a seating plan to one that is more 'ordered'. There are many creative ways to insert constellation approaches into work spaces, and they make a difference when offered from the place of the consultant's non-judgemental presence rather than as a technique.

In integrating constellations into my own practice, I have had to relax and release many received understandings that are current in more conventional systemic organisational consulting. It has also been essential to take on new and often uncomfortable concepts. This has been disorienting at times, but necessary. Most other forms of systemic practice in organisations, for example, do not explicitly hold the view that problems persist across generations. While it is advisable in consulting work to start with the present, I have observed that problems with the founding energy of the business often hold the key to organisational transformation. It is through the systemic constellations work that I have discovered this and found practical ways of working with it.

Also, part of the challenge for me, and possibly for some other organisational constellators coming from management backgrounds, has been to really understand that there is a way in which a system seems to know about itself, and have its own form of consciousness which takes priority over more individual needs. This is a unique learning for me, from systemic constellations work. Hellinger talks about this as a 'soul', which is really not a very business-like term. Yet we could see the 'soul' in this context as a pattern of reproduction - something that reminds the whole system of what it is and where it is going.

Finding more organisationally resonant ways of distilling and communicating these concepts is important, and for me has opened up creative avenues of thinking and developed my practice quite powerfully. For example, one brand development project I was engaged with had to do with illuminating the 'special-ness' of the client organisation so that staff would feel proud and customers would be drawn to the company. While I did not constellate this company, the thinking about 'soul' (which we called 'the corporate DNA' on this assignment) from systemic constellations work gave a very different starting point to the project. The project was not concerned with adding any marketing magic, as the commissioning client originally supposed, but about unfolding the qualities of the founding energy of the company, and the deeper patterns of current behaviour that made the business unique. The process of working in this way was

more engaging for staff, as well as more respectful of the organisation and more interesting for me.

As constellating consultants, we also need to be able to learn at what level of a system to intervene, if at all. A friend was recently talking to me about the poor service at a day-clinic in a local hospital he had attended. Patients were walking out because there were no consultants and nurses to deal with the queues. We talked speculatively about what could be done from the perspective of systemic constellations work. Towards the end of our conversation, he let slip that there had been a road accident that morning to the north of the city; he had heard on the news that a lorry had overturned on the motorway and shed its load. This detail was salutary for me, as the issues he described in this hospital had nothing to do with the *clinical* system. Instead, an unrelated accident had snarled up the *transport* system and kept healthcare professionals from travelling to work. Apparently, this was quite common in the region! I recalled how often, in my early consulting experience, I had started from the wrong place, or put great effort in the wrong place!

With experience, constellating consultants develop discrimination to separate the systemic issues in organisations from structural or developmental issues. The reason something might not be going well could have to do with sudden work overload during busy periods, when human resource teams cannot recruit quickly enough, or when there are skill shortages and training requirements, for example. It is not

that these issues are not systemic, but recognising that these belong to more structural areas points the way to where solutions can be found - which might not need a constellation at all.

Finally, there is a need for more practice-based research into using constellations in different organisational settings. After all, the purpose, context and culture as well as some of the issues of commercial companies differ greatly from those of public sector organisations. Also, the issues of schools, hospitals, prisons and local government organisations are also different in many respects from one another. While the differences between organisations are not to be overstated in reference to this work, as the underlying orders that regulate systemic functioning are common to all, my point is that working in depth and over time in these contexts does require respectful but non-confluent familiarity with the client's issues.

More discussion with, and writing from other organisational, consulting, and constellating colleagues (as well as from therapists interested in this different field of practice) would help energise organisational constellations in the UK. I think these forms of collaboration might also create the communal energy and evidence-base our clients need to understand the deep contribution the work can make.

I'd like to end by inviting such collaboration.

Constellation Work in South Africa

"...BEHIND EVERY CITIZEN IS A FACE THAT COMES FROM A FAMILY."

In 2002 I followed an invitation to give a workshop on family constellations in Swakopmund, Namibia, and another in Cape Town. Both organisers had been at the Hellinger Intensive week at ZIST in southern Germany where every year about 100 participants from all over the world come together to learn how to facilitate family constellations, to refine their skills, to share an international exchange and to network with colleagues.

THE NEEDS

South Africa is in a period of transition. The legacy of Apartheid, and the years of oppression, violence, crime and poverty have worn the fabric of South African society thin. There has been a recognition of the need for healing by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but as yet, the huge experience of loss and trauma by all sectors of South African society has only been partially addressed. Limited resources are stretched far within the reconstruction and development programme that concentrates on providing basic material resources such as: electricity, water and adequate housing, and prevention and treatment of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

There is, however, a great need to address the huge losses that the South African people have experienced through violence, trauma, and AIDS. Rather than passing the injustice of the past on to future generations, the urgency is now to find healing at an individual and psychological level, as well as that of relationship and community ties. South Africans need reconciliation within themselves, their families, their communities,

and even between themselves and their perpetrators.

Since 2002 more than twelve workshops have been facilitated by European trainers drawn from our group known as 'Family Constellations Africa'. Due also to the continuous work of my colleagues in Africa facilitating workshops, organising training peer groups, and working beyond psychotherapy with family constellations in the context of hospitals or self-help groups, the interest in family constellations is steadily growing. Now our workshops comprise about 30 participants, one third being black and coloured women social workers. One woman came from Uganda where she works with orphans infected with HIV/AIDS. Another came from Rwanda where she helps both victims and perpetrators through the process of reconciliation initiated by the government. Both sent moving letters of feedback. They described how the constellations touched on personal issues, but they also felt the importance of this approach in social and political contexts and in the process of development in their societies.

On this promising basis we founded a non-profit organisation to spread the benefits of family constellations through workshops and set up a two-year training that started in February 2005. Our participants work as psychotherapists, social workers or traditional healers, in private practice, hospitals or organisations like Rape Crisis and Trauma Centres. Through sponsorship we are trying to open the space for the so-called 'formerly disadvantaged', for social workers and for traditional healers to bring back to the country what Bert

Hellinger developed through his experience in South Africa, living with the Zulu for more than ten years. He combined his experience of the traditional African relationship to family and the ancestors with western psychological group therapy methods. This makes constellation therapy a powerful tool in working with trauma, reconciliation, loss of loved ones through AIDS and inter-racial prejudice.

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

The potential for this work in the psychological rebuilding of the South African Nation is expressed in the words of workshop participants:

"Family constellations have a cathartic effect. It feels to me that there is a potential for all of us to release the tensions and miseries we have inherited from our past. The way we normally look at our family history, generations, ancestors, relationships in the family is often on the blaming side of what was taken away, re-inforcing hurts rather than working towards changing destructive patterns in our lives. This method seems to give power to the individual to do what is best for them."

It was useful for me to reflect on my past and see how hard it's been to see the imprints of my childhood without being scared of the pain and hurts. These reflections after my constellation revealed to me that I needed time to re-organise the roles I play in my home, and work life. The fact that I do not need to feel guilty or ashamed is empowering, and I just need to learn to bow to that discomfort. This is a very unusual approach to negative emotions. It's easy to say and very hard to do."

ARTICLE CONTRIBUTOR: URSULA FRANKE

... This is a space that one can only have if one is already on the path towards changing one's life or the way one behaves under all sorts of pressures. Does one breathe it out or hold it? Does one fear the link with the ancestors or is one going through an identity crisis and unaware that the ancestral connection exists at all?

What is significant for me as a South African black woman (and probably could be the same for all women), is the nature of multi-tasking which we do with so much zest. We then build an illusion of that superwoman image of ourselves - proudly inherited from the legacy of the previous generations who were convinced that we had to do everything perfectly, look perfect and speak in a lady-like manner Now our generation is on the cutting edge of reclaiming or disclaiming all those family traits and associated cultural histories.

In this continuing transition period of social transformation this work can benefit individuals. Looking at family constellations my impression is that they can enable a 3D image of the family inner circle to function within wider collective circles. It was very helpful for me to be in a group with most people ready to share tragedies, and triumphs. I feel it would be too much if someone were still in a denial stage about themselves. The role of representative in the constellations is very revealing and challenging to one's story. At the same time one can feel separate but 'at one' with the person the constellation is about.

I also enjoyed the use of homework in dealing with and reflecting on what is going on in our lives. We are so used to quick-fix solutions and finding the targets to blame for our confusions. Family is where charity is meant to begin but all that charity comes with lots of unhappiness one has to unlearn as well. Family constellations seem to have the potential to evoke a

lot of emotions and soul searching that requires one to acknowledge one's past and move forwards from there towards the future. I am so keen to learn this method because we all need healing from all sorts of traumas as a country, and behind every citizen is a face that comes from a family. So from my experience of working with groups this approach looks beneficial for embracing our pain or life patterns in order to move on."

The following letter was sent to us by an HIV/AIDS counsellor and trainer working with a mobile AIDS homecare and orphans programme in Uganda.

"Dear friend,

What struck me most was how past generations affected the lives of both the present and future generations and how making peace with my ancestors through reconciliation messages allowed love to flow within me and I felt at peace!

To me, the therapy is an efficient healing approach and a model for me to face reality in different life situations. The significant moment was inhaling and exhaling to release tension and stress, supported by others around me representing my ancestral spirits; also talking to express my feelings and let go, as well as the shedding of tears to get relieved.

I have worked with communities infected and affected with and by HIV/AIDS in Uganda for over seven years. My experience is that many never get space to express their feelings in terms of grief/ mourning and as a result these bereaved families (orphans and their guardians) have developed grief symptoms, namely: depression, anxiety, anger, guilt, mistrust, difficulties in relating and psychosomatic disorders, which have affected their relationships as family members and with the outside community.

The process is enriching, consciousness-raising and provides an insight applicable to personal life and the work situation. I feel inspired and called to support, encourage, and guide the bereaved families, families of victims and perpetrators through this process."

And finally from another workshop participant:

"By the end of the two days having witnessed and experienced the constellations of a cross-section of the South African population, I found that I was experiencing feelings of compassion and interconnectedness to the group and a sense of unity in our humanness. Racial, cultural, class, sex and any other barriers had been transcended. I believe that working with constellations has enormous potential for nation building in South Africa. If more people can share in the experience of transcending our barriers and truly connecting at the human level, we will move significantly towards a non-racial society. Our differences will no longer be an issue as recognition of our commonality as humans will mean that respecting and valuing our differences will follow naturally without judgement."

My thanks go to Beulah Levinson who first invited me to South Africa, to Tanja Meyburgh and Svenja Wachter for their co-operation in building the institute, to Eva Madelung for her support and her contribution towards spreading the method and to the South African people who live their will for reconciliation as a model to all with a common past.

(For information on the annual intensive held in Germany, visit www.hiddensymmetry.com)

Body-oriented Interventions in Family Constellations

How can body-oriented therapy techniques complement those of Hellinger's family constellations? It was with this question in mind that the authors of this article began, at the end of 2003, to include body-oriented interventions in family constellations. Initially they thought that concrete physical interventions, such as those performed in bodywork, must be too unrefined to be combined with the subtle, soul-oriented constellation techniques. In practice, the opposite appears to be true: body-oriented interventions can add an extremely valuable dimension which, if correctly applied, can enhance the constellation process.

Let us begin with a brief introduction to bodywork. This form of psychotherapy works with character structures. Character structures are the visible physical form and posture that convey the way in which psychic resistance, or resistance mechanisms, are expressed. For example, the body of a person with a schizoid structure is slim or thin, the joints are pronounced and there is much tension around the eyes. The psychic resistance mechanism in this structure is the rationalisation of feeling. The goal of bodywork is to use character specific, physical interventions to support the client in releasing psychic resistance quickly and efficiently.

This was exactly the quality we wished to utilise in family constellations. The question was, how were we to combine these two techniques that worked on such different levels? Initially we aimed

body-oriented interventions at the client who, at least in the beginning, had not yet entered the constellation field. This immediately produced a number of interesting situations:

1. *Maria's representative cannot look at the father of her aborted child. Her eyes remain closed. It looks as if this impasse will continue for some time. The co-trainer places her hands on Maria's feet (Maria is still seated outside the field, watching). Almost immediately, Maria's representative opens her eyes and looks at the man in front of her.*

This may suggest that touching a client who has not yet entered the constellation could influence the client's representative. After the constellation, the client herself said that the touch had given her a physically pleasant feeling.

2. *Rob is a very rational man. He can't sit still; he keeps going to the board on which the genogram is written and giving long verbal explanations about it. The co-trainer waits for at least half an hour, respecting Rob's obvious anxiety about feeling rather than thinking - before touching him. Then she places her hands very gently on his feet. At exactly the same time, Rob's representative in the field begins to sway. He almost falls over. The trainer asks him, "What's happening?" The representative answers, "I want to go upwards into my head, but I'm being sucked down into my body."*

In terms of character structure, we are dealing with a client who has a strong schizoid component. His energy is mostly in his head; he tries to understand his feelings. If you ask such a person how he feels, he will normally answer, "I think I feel good." The problem with this structure in the family constellation setting is that he will most probably always search for the meaning behind what he sees. It is difficult for him to allow the image into his system; he conceals his feelings and his soul behind a barrier of rationality. In this case, the representative's reaction conveys that the client has come into his body and thereby into contact with his feelings.

Subsequently we began, very carefully, to use touch in the field itself:

3. *Irma, a middle-aged woman, is standing behind her representative in the constellation. The representative has forgotten to take off her shoes. She's wearing boots with quite high heels. The co-trainer, standing behind Irma, notices that she's not entirely present: her thoughts seem to be wandering and her energy is more in her head than in her body. By holding her pelvis, the co-trainer attempts to bring Irma's energy back into her body. This doesn't really work, so the co-trainer takes a firm grip of Irma's feet and pushes them into the ground. At virtually the same time the representative says, "I just want to take my shoes off!"*

The representative's remark suggests that an intervention performed on Irma, the client, simultaneously brought about a physical reaction in her. She became aware of her body and the boots on her feet.

Other interventions specifically affected physical resistance:

4. *Babette, a young woman with a slim, tense physique, gets a bad headache during her constellation. Coming from a place of resistance, her already tense muscles become even more tense, leading to increased physical tension without the emotional pain behind it. After consulting with her colleague, the co-trainer calls a halt to the constellation and invites Babette to shake her body. The co-trainer assists her by making tickling movements over her back and shoulders. After a short time, the tension eases and Babette is ready to fully participate in her constellation.*

Physical touch was also used to get feedback on the state of the client:

5. *During her constellation, Petra approaches the women in her ancestral line. Each ancestor reinforces an essential message. The co-trainer walks with her, and supports her by placing her hands on Petra's lower back. When Petra's great-grandmother repeats her essential message, the co-trainer can feel by the tension in Petra's body that it hasn't been assimilated. The co-trainer lets her colleague know what she perceives, and she asks the great-grandmother to keep repeating her message until it is accepted.*

Encouraged by the visibly effective success the interventions appeared to have, we decided to take them a step further and introduce the idea of touching the representatives as well:

6. *The constellation is about Paul's current problem, his divorce from his wife. He obviously finds it difficult to accept the divorce; there is a lot of resistance. At a certain point, the trainer asks Paul to go and stand next to his representative. Paul does this, but he doesn't enter with the same emotional intensity. The representative is crying, Paul isn't. The co-trainer's interventions (hands on his lower back) do not succeed in bringing him into better contact with his body. His resistance is too strong. Then the co-trainer tries to connect Paul and his representative by placing one hand on Paul's back and the other hand on his representative's. Within moments, Paul is crying too.*

This was the first time it became clear that touching a representative in the field has a positive rather than disruptive effect, although it would seem unlikely in practice, that a client coming from a state of resistance, would allow him/herself to be influenced by the feelings of his representative; often the opposite occurs, as the following example illustrates:

Judith is a Jewish woman in her early fifties. The atmosphere of her constellation is one of death caused by persecution and disease. The representative is standing in the middle of the field. Her eyes are closed and she is as white as a sheet. The position is obviously very taxing for her. While the client outside the field recognises the situation, she remains emotionally untouched by what she sees. It is obvious that this reaction is one of resistance. The trainer, in an attempt to get Judith to move beyond her resistance, asks her to enter the field, behind her representative. Instead of Judith opening up to what is happening in the constellation, the representative shuts herself off. After a while, both are in the field, both in an

emotionless state of resistance. The representative says to Judith, "It's like a second rate movie," and they both laugh.

This is an example of one of many situations that can cause a representative to be resistant. A logical step was to start using body-oriented interventions on representatives:

7. *Sophia's grandfather had been part of a resistance movement against a powerful organisation. He is now dead, but the superhuman quality of his actions in life seem to have made it impossible for him to believe in his death. Grandfather's representative refuses to go and sit with the dead, among whom are also people from the powerful organisation. The co-trainer moves behind the grandfather and gently places her hands on his back. Grandfather relaxes and, slowly but surely, sinks to his knees and goes to sit with the dead. He feels better for taking his rightful place.*

These are just seven of the many situations in which we have consistently seen that body-oriented interventions add to the efficacy of family constellations, whether the intervention is directed at the client, his/her representative or someone else within the field.

The following are therefore our preliminary conclusions derived from our experimenting for two years with this combination of techniques:

1. *The approach in the field is at a soul level. However, the client outside the field or a representative in the field may be unable to move beyond his/her psychological resistance. (The authors are referring to psychological resistance from a characterological perspective).*

- Body-oriented interventions can support this client or representative in overcoming psychological resistance and reaching the soul.
2. There is a strong connection between the client and the representative. Body-oriented interventions can help us take advantage of this connection:
 - from client to representative: working on the energy field of the client can influence that of the representative (sometimes of the whole constellation field).
 - from representative to client: by connecting client and representative via concrete physical touch, energy can be transferred from the representative to the client (e.g. when the representative experiences more than the client).
 - from client to trainer: with the help of physical touch the trainer can determine the client's state (i.e. whether or not a message has been taken in by their emotional and physical systems. Character resistance causes muscular tension in the body. When a

person emotionally accepts information, muscular tension caused by the resistance is released).

Our experience has shown us that body-oriented interventions can make a positive contribution to the effect of family constellations - as long as they are attuned to characterological resistance, and take into consideration the level at which the client is operating. Both authors intend to continue working with and researching this material because, in their opinion 'crude' bodywork can indeed supplement and enrich the 'subtlety' of constellation work.

We Are Seven

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

*A simple child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?*

*I met a little cottage girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head.*

*She had a rustic, woodland air,
And she was wildly clad:
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
Her beauty made me glad.*

*"Sisters and brothers, little maid,
How many may you be?"
"How many? Seven in all," she said,
And wondering looked at me.*

*"And where are they? I pray you tell."
She answered, "Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea."*

*"Two of us in the churchyard lie,
My sister and my brother;
And in the churchyard cottage, I
Dwell near them with my mother."*

*"You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,
Sweet maid, how may this be?"*

*Then did the little maid reply,
"Seven boys and girls are we;
Two of us in the churchyard lie,
Beneath the churchyard tree."*

*"You run about, my little maid,
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the churchyard laid,
Then ye are only five."*

*"Their graves are green, they may be seen,"
The little maid replied,
"Twelve steps or more from my
mother's door,
And they are side by side."*

*"My stockings there I often knit,
My kerchief there I hem;
And there upon the ground I sit,
And sing a song to them."*

*"And often after sunset, sir,
When it is light and fair,
I take my little porringer,
And eat my supper there."*

*"The first that died was sister Jane;
In bed she moaning lay,
Till God released her of her pain,
And then she went away."*

*"So in the churchyard she was laid;
And, when the grass was dry,
Together round her grave we played,
My brother John and I."*

*"And when the ground was white
with snow,
And I could run and slide,
My brother John was forced to go,
And he lies by her side."*

*"How many are you, then," said I,
"If they two are in heaven?"
Quick was the little maid's reply
"O master, we are seven."*

*"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"*

Posted on the ConstellationTalk
website by Helena Sprake