

CONSTELLATIONS IN AN INDIVIDUAL SETTING

Vivian Broughton

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Introduction

Most people's first contact with constellations work is in a group setting, where they witness the powerful contribution of the participants acting as representatives in the constellations, and their ability to provide often very accurate and appropriate information about the person they are representing. This initial experience is often very exciting, and for therapists and counsellors almost immediately will raise the question: is it possible to do constellations work in an individual, one-to-one setting?

In order to look at this question we need to take a step back from constellations work as we see it in groups, and think carefully about what is going on here, what exactly is a constellation, and what of what happens is important and useful for the client. In order to do this we must bring the whole business of doing constellations into the context of ordinary on-going psychotherapy and counselling. It must become a simple technique combined with a way of looking at our clients. And one of the things we have to consider is whether the phenomenon known as "representative perception", the process by which a person who has never met the client before is able, as a representative of the client's family, to come up with information, thoughts, feelings, and sometimes physical sensations that they could not have possibly known, is possible within the one-to-one context.

So, let us look at what a constellation actually is and the ways in which it might be helpful in an individual context. The first step is to separate out the methodology of constellations from the principles involved in looking at a person as being deeply embedded in a system.

The Methodology of Constellations

A good definition of a constellation could be "a three dimensional representation of the relational dynamics within a given system". We have an inner sense of how things are and we take people or objects and set them out in a way that seems to represent this inner sense.

In an individual session this can be done with stones, cushions, pieces of felts, pieces of paper, and even by internal visualisation. It can be done in a large space where the client actually stands on the representation, or on a table where the client makes a connection with the representation by a touch. Visualisations can be a wonderful way of working with constellations, and people do seem to be able to carry quite complex images in their imagination, and with a little encouragement can allow the movements to unfold without effort or will. It is like watching a movie. There is much more to say about working with visualisations which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

The most crucial thing to remember is that whatever is used for the representations it must be absolutely clear in which direction they face.

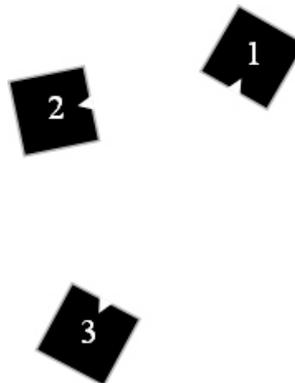
For example:



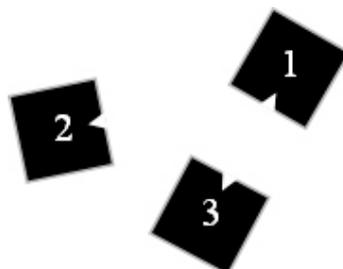
E.g. 1 This image shows two people in a certain relational configuration with the notch indicating which way they are facing.

When we look at this, immediately we can have a sense of the nature of the relationship between these two. No 2 looks directly at No 1 while No 1 looks past and to the side of No 2. If you look at it for a few moments you can feel the possible relational dynamics here, you might even find yourself being able to put simple words or a sentence to each one. For example: No 2: "I'm looking at you", or perhaps "I want you to see me". And No 1: "I can't look at you" or "I look somewhere else" or "I don't want to look at you".

Were we to add another object it might look like this:



Or This:



Both of these have a different feel, and affect how we consider these relationships. For example a sentence you might come up with for No 2 in the second example could be “Can I get your attention here?” In the third of these examples there is a feeling of No. 2 being excluded and pushed outside, whereas in the second example there is more possibility for No 2 to be involved.

At this level of just looking at the graphics of relational dynamics we can get a sense of something of the nature of the relationships between these three. If, however, we decide that one is a mother, one a father and one a child it changes. Try changing them around so that you feel the effect when, say 3 is the child, and 1 and 2 are the parents, or when 2 is the child.

So from this perspective, setting up a constellation will always reveal something, just on the level of taking this inner sense of how things are and externalising it into a physical form. Of course many therapists and counsellors have been doing something like this for years, using stones, cushions, toys etc. However, what I think we have paid less attention to is the deeper nature of the relationship that is revealed by how things are placed, what the positions are indicating subtly by the direction of their intent.

Working with a Constellation

At a very basic level, the work that we do with a constellation involves the movement of the various representatives until we find a configuration that feels and looks better than the one we started with. It is possible when working with objects to simply set up a better configuration and spend a bit of time looking at that, and sensing with the client what might need to happen in order for this “better image” to come about. However, although simply seeing a “better” image can be very helpful to the client, and is a valid intervention when working with constellations, attending to the moment by moment process by which we get there is crucial to the deeper possibilities of change within the client. It isn’t always as simple as just moving things around. Indeed, when we work within a group with actual people as representatives, we often find a lot of resistance from the representatives if the suggested movement doesn’t feel right, and the work becomes a collaboration between the facilitator, the representatives and the client, seeking the movements that are possible and helpful.

Representative Perception in an Individual Context

In an individual context we find that if we ask a client to tune into one or other of the objects, they can often do this, sometimes coming up with interesting, relevant and useful information. We are inviting the client to connect with a knowing that they don’t consciously know that they know. And while the information gained might not be quite as startling as when it comes from someone who doesn’t know the client at all, it is often enough to offer new insight and a movement within the client, a seeing

of something differently. In fact for many of us it is easier to accept this phenomenon we call “representative perception” when it arises from the client who, after all, we can accept may know far more about their family system than they are consciously aware of.

The difficulty, however, in working in an individual context with only the resources of the client and the therapist, is that a client, by definition, is deeply embedded and entangled in their view and experience of their situation, and as such they are, perhaps, more closed to novel information in a way that an unconnected representative is not. It may transpire that the client finds it well nigh impossible to connect with anyone else in the constellation without imposing his or her habitual image of that person. Sometimes it helps to designate a place that is a “neutral” or “cleansing” space, and we can help the client to leave their particular version of things there and encourage them to make a space inside themselves for something new. This often works quite well.

By way of an example of how a client might allow something new was a constellation I did with a client who’s grandfather had been labelled a “criminal” because he had committed fraud within the company that he worked for. This brought great shame on the family, and yet when I invited the client to connect with her grandfather the first thing that came to her was to say “I was also a good father”. This totally startled the client, and gave her the space to see that her grandfather was more than just a criminal, and to put the sense of shame in the family that she felt she inherited in a proper context.

It isn’t that the phenomenon of “representative perception” is unavailable within the context of individual work, it’s that it is less astonishing because the therapist and the client are known to each other, and sometimes it takes more preparation and time to allow it to unfold.

The therapist is also a possible resource as a representative. While this takes practice and experience I will sometimes use myself as a representative if it seems right and helpful to the client. I will usually only do this if we are working with standing in the various positions and usually in order to facilitate some needed dialogue or just to give the client a sense of someone actually standing there. It requires clarity of intent so that it is obvious to the client and myself when I am taking up a representative role and when I am being the therapist. With sufficient experience and a good working relationship with the client this can become like a finely choreographed piece of collaborative work, with both the client and myself taking up various positions at different times as we work our way through the constellation. However, this does require a good knowledge and understanding of the process of the work by the therapist, and a certain familiarity with the process by the client.

A Systemic Perspective

In constellations work we talk about the soul, and the meaning of 'soul' that I think is helpful here is given by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas via an article by Jean-Jacques Suurmond [1]: "The Greek term for 'soul' (psukhe) originally conveys our fundamental dependency on the other...I depend on the life and love of my parents, my family and my friends... the farmers who grow my food, the language developed and spoken by my community... thus [we can] arrive at the extraordinary definition that the soul is 'the other-in-me'". A constellation is a representation of the soul... the representation of how I hold important other(s) in me... showing as it does the relational nature of this representation as I sense it in myself. We could even say that the soul is a constellation as it is experienced within myself. If we can find a way of allowing some movement within a constellation, a movement that isn't forced, but comes about naturally, restoring the natural flow of energy in the system, resulting in a new image, a new constellation, that feels more "right" and gives a sense of ease within the client, then that is the function of constellations work. A new image for the soul. In this way we can see that whether we set up a constellation using people as representatives, or objects, or even by working with inner visualised images of the constellation, we are still affecting the representation of the important 'other(s)-in-me'.

Principles from Constellations Work that affect me as I sit with my Client

One of the gifts of constellations work is that it offers us a way of understanding, and at times even healing, events that happened in the past. The Mormons have a long history of researching their family tree and finding those who have not been baptised and performing ritualised baptisms for the dead. Whether one agrees with this or not, it is part of a long traditional history amongst tribal and less conventionally sophisticated cultures that acknowledges and honours through ritual those who are gone. Through the experience of "representative perception" in a constellation we come to know through bodily experience what it means to be a part of the flow of life that has come down to us from countless generations, passes through us on its way to our children and grandchildren, and on. We find when working with actual people in a constellation that the dead often have a lot to say.

We also come to understand that the things that affect us are not just the actions of our parents, but sometimes have their origins two, three or even four generations earlier. We come to see that the actions of our parents are deeply embedded in their experiences with their parents and their grandparents. That, for example, the impact of the death of a small child and the resulting unexpressed grief of a mother who has other children to care for, leaves a legacy of influence on those who come later. That the impact of the death of a young man at war two generations back on those left behind is profound, and with the best will in the world cannot *not* influence in some way those who come later. These events often have a deeper effect on the system than we might ordinarily think. The effects are part of the systemic flow and pattern of our particular family, and the hidden emotional and systemically dynamic

legacy has an effect on those who come later. This then affects our sitting with our client. It becomes much harder as a counsellor to focus simply on the relationship between mother and client. We come to sit there with an acute sense of a much larger field... and even if we never actually set up a constellation, our work is changed, our interventions are different and the results are different.

Some of the Influences that seem to Apply within Systems

Bert Hellinger, who supported the conception and growth of constellations work with families, found that the energetic impulses in the constellations could be seen to provide a framework of principles that seem to support the good flow of energy in relationships. He called these the Orders of Love. It is in my opinion important always to remember with any such conceptions that one must always look to the particular constellation for confirmation of these rather than think that these are ideals that need to be imposed. I don't intend to elaborate on these here other than to say that, as a therapist working in an individual context, I consider it likely to make things easier if I hold a stance of respect and intention to understand in relation to everyone who is a member of a particular system. I am then likely to be able to be more useful to the system-as-a-whole, which will in turn perform a service to the client in particular.

In Conclusion

The research and practice of Systemic Constellations Work continues to grow and evolve, both in the context of groups and individual work. It crops up in an array of contexts as being useful, useable and unique. Within the application in individual work, it surfaces in the arenas of therapy, counselling, life-coaching, executive coaching and leadership coaching. Many people are out there working and experimenting to find helpful ways of working with constellations in individual contexts, and I am sure that in a couple of years there will be much more to be said. My own feeling is that when, as a counsellor or therapist, one is exposed to this work, and like many forms of work it is only by personal experience that one can really understand its impact, one's individual stance as a therapist or counsellor is changed. Whether one works with groups or in an individual context, whether one decides to practice setting up constellations or one never actually sets up a constellation at all, exposure to the experience and thinking behind this work has its effect and changes us. The current range of practice of this work is growing. There is a strong movement towards including constellations in organisational and larger systems work, whether within the private or public sector, with other types of larger systems such as ecological and environmental, in work with conflict resolution between races, nations, countries and cultures. In my opinion we don't yet know the boundaries of the possibility of this work, and part of the journey is understanding and realising the practice of this work within the context of the one-to-one session.

Reference: [1] Beyond Buber: Gestalt Therapy in the Light of Levinas, Jean-Jacques Suurmond, in The (US) Gestalt Journal, Vol XXII, Number 2, Fall 1999