

Review of Two Books and General Discussion on Constellations in Individual Sessions

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Books Being Reviewed:

In My Mind's Eye, Family Constellations in Individual Therapy & Counselling by Ursula Franke,
translated by Colleen Beaumont, published by Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag, 2003.

Entering Inner Images, A Creative Use of Constellations in Individual Therapy, Counselling, Groups and Self-Help,
by Eva Madelung and Barbara Innecken, translated by Colleen Beaumont, published by Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag,
2004.

Introduction:

Working with constellations in an individual context is rightfully becoming regarded as an extremely important part of the field of constellations and systemic thinking. It is not every professional's wish to work in groups, and indeed it is not always practical, or advisable for the client. Many therapists, counsellors and other workers want to incorporate this thinking and method into their individual work with clients, either in a one-off session or within the context of an on-going working relationship.

The common question that arises in thinking about applying this work in an individual context is whether what we see and experience in a constellations group setting, including the phenomenon of representative perception¹ can be transposed into an individual context, with just the facilitator² and the client. I will return to this question in the general discussion and look at the contribution these two books make to this topic.

The general thrust of attention in the world of constellations work has been towards working in groups. In fact, for many people this is the only context in which they have seen Hellinger's work. These two books start to fill a gap in the currently available literature in English, by specifically addressing the growing interest in applying this method in an individual context.

Both books invite us into the working environment of their authors, giving us insights into their particular areas of interest. With many intimate case examples, they demonstrate how they integrate constellations and the orders of relationships into other aspects of their work with individuals.

Whilst assuming some prior experience and knowledge of constellation work on the part of the reader, the authors offer detailed instruction and insight into their thinking about some aspects of this work. However, both books encompass much more than constellations and systemic work.

"In My Mind's Eye"

The title "In my Mind's Eye" refers primarily to the imaginative, visualisation component of Ursula Franke's work, and many examples are given of how she moves between a physical constellation using objects to an internal visualisation of a needed encounter. The book specifically points in its title to working in 'individual therapy and counselling', (thereby immediately making its intention clear).

The author does not address the application of this work in any other field, for example working individually within an organisational context. However, much of the content could, I imagine, be adequately transferred.

Ursula writes a very interesting chapter on feelings: primary, secondary and adopted, and their relationship to the movements of reaching out and turning away. She combines her work with constellations and her understanding of the Orders of Love with a highly skilled knowledge and understanding of the body as a diagnostic tool and trustworthy resource for both therapist and client. Quite a major part of her book is given over to examining the effects on the body (and thence the psyche) of different types of breathing, posture, movement and experience, and she offers exercises and experiments for client and therapist, to increase awareness of these processes. This book shows a care and concern for those moments when we might find ourselves dealing with slightly more than we expected. She cautions us not to extend ourselves beyond our limits and at the same time offers good practical advice on how to deal with more extreme circumstances. Whether one might be able to access this advice in those circumstances is always questionable, but her suggestions alert us to possible situations, thus enhancing our level of preparedness.

I wonder if Ursula is perhaps a bit uncertain of her audience. The fact is that constellations work is proving to be of interest to people from a wide range of backgrounds and professional disciplines. While the title of the book is obviously aimed at therapists (not, however, just psychotherapists) and counsellors, her sense of caution and desire to teach us so we avoid mishap, makes me think that she probably realised that this book might be read by a variety of people. 'In My Mind's Eye' is a book, which is accessible to many, not only those with a counselling or psychotherapeutic background. In fact, the experienced psychotherapist or counsellor will find much in it that is quite familiar.

“Entering Inner Images”

Eva Madelung and Barbara Innecken offer us Neuro-Imaginative Gestalting (NIG), an adaptation from Neuro-Linguistic Programming, with an emphasis on working with imagination rather than language, and on 'gestalting' rather than 'programming'. By 'gestalting' I understand that they mean a more organismic unfolding of the client's own inner movement towards a life-enhancing position; in other words their emphasis here is on the client as their own authority rather than NLP's notion of the therapist as the 'programmer' of the client.

The book also gives us many interesting thoughts about systemic theories, including a chapter entitled 'The Existential Paradox' which discusses in detail two views of reality, the systemic-constructivist and systemic-phenomenological: either we construct our reality, in which case we can change it, or reality is as it is and therefore not changeable. This second reality is the view that Hellinger has highlighted to great effect, as the authors put it: "reality as it is manifested to us... the unchangeable givens in our lives" [p.183]. These two views of reality are at the same time paradoxical and complementary, a case of holding two truths at the same time, and the authors go on to make a link between our belonging as related to the manifested reality (I belong to this particular family and no other) and our need for autonomy or individuality as related to constructed reality (I choose see my life in this way).

With Neuro-Imaginative Gestalting they combine constructivist ideas and applications (NLP and Brief Therapy) with constellations, adding in a creative component from art therapy. Their work involves asking the client to create drawings of his representatives. These drawings are then used by the client as "spatial anchors" in setting up constellations and can represent anything from family members to more abstract elements such as: 'the problem'; the 'past'; an unformed idea of a good solution; experiences such as 'solitude' or 'solidarity' and so on. They suggest that the client creates these drawings with the non-dominant hand in order to by-pass the more rational left-brain and connect with his more intuitive side. This also helps the client with any self-consciousness he may be feeling about his artistic ability. As any therapist who has ever invited a client to do a drawing in a session knows, this work can often result in profound insights on its own; for instance, just looking at how I might draw something to represent my mother can, in itself, be revealing. So, using these drawings to set up a constellation and inviting the client to stand on each one and report their experience offers additional exciting possibilities. From the case accounts they give in the book, it is obvious that they are willing to set up any kind of constellation using this method, and the drawings become a major part of the process.

General Discussion

Now I would like to take a more general look at the initial question regarding the transposition of constellation work from a group to an individual context and more specifically at what these books may offer us in this respect. For those of us who have learnt about constellations primarily in groups, the central issue at stake when we come to work in an individual context is: how do we take what we have learnt about this way of working into that other context? The simple practical issues are addressed to some extent in these two books, but what is perhaps not addressed so fully are the broader, less tangible considerations of what qualities a facilitator needs in order to confidently transfer their group learning into an individual context. So, I would like to take a look at what I believe these qualities to be and how this transfer might happen.

Firstly, by being exposed to the ideas and revelations of this deeper systemic level we are permanently changed as clients, as human beings and as therapists. We can never 'un-see' or 'un-experience' what we have seen and experienced, and this exposure must influence the way we live our lives and work with our clients, whatever the context. The underlying principles that we encounter, naturally become part of the ground of our perspective in working with people: our way of seeing our clients and their problems becomes more inclusive and respectful of other members of the system, regardless of what they have done. We develop a less judgemental, more understanding attitude, in some ways finding ourselves both at a distance and yet also present to the system as a whole, with a motive towards finding possible resolution that is good for the system as much as for the client.

Secondly, the natural orders or principles that we encounter within constellations clarify the nature, or character of the particular system before us, giving us insight into what is likely to be needed and what might constitute a good place for the client.

Thirdly, for most therapists the idea of "setting up" something is not new. For the last 70 years therapists have been "setting up" situations: with stones, toys, cushions, plants, building blocks, chairs, people, whatever came to hand, finding this a useful way of understanding how things are for the client, and of helping the client to move beyond their habit-

ual view of things. What we gave less importance to formerly was the directional information and the deeper story that this might point to. Part of our education through our exposure to Hellinger's work is to look for the deeper, more archetypal story: a person looks out from the constellation... are they perhaps leaving? Does that imply death? Are they looking for someone else?

Fourthly, we learn in time to trust the process of each constellation. In a group this means trusting what the representatives report, even if it doesn't seem to make good sense at first. Albrecht Mahr talks about practising 'radical inclusion'; Bert Hellinger says: "My experience is that it's almost always safe to trust the representatives..." [Love's Hidden Symmetry, p.187]. We come to accept that everything that happens when a constellation is running, is to do with the constellation. And from this we come to have an expanded notion of the field, expanded in a way that we do not yet fully understand, but as Hellinger says: "I'm unable to explain this phenomenon, but I see that it's so, and I use it." *bid*, p.xi Now, when we look at anything laid out in a pattern, we have as part of our ground that sense of expansion and the possibility that there is more here than we can as yet adequately understand and account for, and we can work with it.

The first three points come to influence our work in individual sessions probably quite naturally and without great effort. We think differently about our clients and the issues they bring. We make new interventions and suggestions. Perhaps, as Hellinger suggests, we are more inclined to align ourselves with the client's mother in the face of the client's persistent and stubborn resentment. We are less divisive in such a case, perhaps refusing to align with the client and bad-mouth her mother, but endeavouring to support the system as a whole.

The fourth point brings us to the issue of the client as self or representative in their own one-on-one constellation. This is the question that tends to make some people decide that they cannot give full justice to constellations work in an individual context: is the work limited or impaired by the absence of independent people to act as representatives?

Client as Representative in their own Constellation

What about the ability of a client to be a useful and useable representative? Is it true to say that a client, who is bringing an issue that colours their view of themselves and their lives, cannot be a useful representative in their own constellation? Hellinger has said that they tend to be too attached to their ideas about things. It is true that another person, as a representative for the client, may come relatively clear of thoughts or ideas about the issue, but we often find that representatives are representing issues that are similar to their own. Nonetheless, it does become even more complex when we invite a client to become their father or mother, with all their emotional and systemic entanglements colouring their view of their family.

I currently think of this as a question of degrees. To what degree can this client at this time make this shift?

Both books offer the use of the meta-position as a way of moving the client out of their known story to find an overview, which helps them make a shift away from their established position. This doesn't necessarily take the work to the deeper systemic dynamics, but it does usually result in some kind of shift of awareness and expanded view. My thinking is, that if the client can make this shift, perhaps they can make more and bigger shifts. Eva and Barbara talk of "looking through the eyes of another", helping the client to experience what it might be like to see things as the other does. As we already know from the history of two-chair work and psychodrama, such a shift can often produce important insights.

Eva and Barbara seem to think it unlikely that work in an individual context will move far from the level of the 'biographical' (the client's personal experiences and version of events, their construction of their life). They state that: "...we should consider a family constellation in an individual setting using spatial anchors, figures or imagination, to be primarily in the realm of a 'constructed reality'" [p.47] (my italics), and they therefore consider that most often the work will proceed at the 'biographical' level rather than the level of deeper systemic dynamics. With this in mind, their book is there to show us an inclusive view of what constellations work can be, incorporating systemic views, a sense of the natural order of things as well as the process of 'setting up' constellations. They are suggesting that, in spite of their opinion of these limitations of the work, there is still great value to be had. This is obvious from the many case examples they provide.

I find Ursula more hopeful, because her primary interest is in the body, which she regards as the most relevant and truthful source of information and her interventions flow from this instinctive commitment to our physicality. It is from the body that those mysterious movements 'the movements of the soul' emanate. She talks about how a client can stand in the position of his father for example and in doing so, he 'enters his father's field' [p. 34]. This says more than 'looking through the eyes of'. The notion of entering another's field has an effect on us; we have a mysterious sense of what that means, it invites a more spatial and inclusive experience. It is not just 'looking', it is 'entering', it invites 'being'... it speaks of energy, experiencing with all senses. It may sound small, but I think the shift in emphasis is considerable and that if we approach our work with this sense in ourselves, that is what we will find, and that is what we will then, even without words, invite our clients to find. This, in my opinion, has the potential to provide the necessary shift.

In my experience in groups, if I ask the question: "what is happening with you?" it takes the person (and indeed often the whole constellation) away from their physiological phenomenological experience. They have to go into their head to even understand what I am asking, and even though they may answer with an account of physical experience, it is often a re-

membered experience from a moment ago; the immediacy is lost. It is also a question that invites a thought-full answer. We come from a cultural tradition that values thought and reason over all else and with a question like this we are left to our own devices as to what takes precedence in our experience, and most likely it will be to do with our thoughts about our experience. The old therapeutic adage holds good: any sentence that starts with, "I'm feeling that..." precedes a thought "about".

Ursula directs her client's attention to their physical experience. She may use questions such as: "How are you standing on the floor?" "How is your breathing?" "How is your weight distributed?" These all direct our attention at very specific physical experiences. It would be hard not to answer directly. And if there is something that she notices about their posture she will draw the client's attention to it. Ursula is also not averse to using herself as a representative which, if done sensitively and modestly, offers a useful model to the client for attending to physiological information, thereby extending the possibilities of opening up the work to the deeper systemic levels. Surprising information can be gained in this way, perhaps even at times as surprising as happens in groups.

Visualisations

My last words are about visualised constellations. This obviously is an important part of Ursula's work, so I would like to have had more of her thinking on the subject of visualisation. Even though the book is entitled "In My Mind's Eye", there are barely 3 pages on visualisation as a method, although it is obvious from her case study accounts that this is a fundamental part of what she does.

When we are visualising something we are less in our thoughts, we have our eyes closed, we enter a slightly hypnotic state, and it often is a physically relaxing process. It is astonishing how a visualisation can unfold, as if we are watching a movie, with its own momentum and character; frequently what a client would like to happen in the visualisation doesn't... but what does happen, if followed through, seems to find its own truth and harmony; people in visualisations seem to move of their own accord, speak when not asked to, grow bigger or become smaller, change shape even, all happening quite spontaneously; the client can often hold great crowds of people in their imagination with ease; needed encounters can take place privately, profoundly and emotionally within one's mind's eye. The use of visualisation in the work of constellations, I am convinced, needs much more careful research and consideration.

To conclude

Making a brief differentiation between these two books, I would say that "In My Mind's Eye" looks towards the family system and the needed encounter on a deeper systemic level as the source of healing, whereas "Entering Inner Images" focuses on connecting the client with their inner creativity and life-resources as a means of helping them make different choices in the here and now. Both books make a useful contribution to systemic constellations as a whole by giving us the benefit of the thinking of three very experienced practitioners about this work, and in addition they contribute towards the ongoing debate about the possibility and appropriateness of transposing this work to an individual context.

Hellinger's systemic work is on the rising side of an evolving and emerging wave, nowhere near its peak, and tremendously exciting for that. There is space here for new thinking and creative working that we can all contribute to. We don't know yet the limits of this work, and all our ideas and thinking have novelty. Hellinger has offered us a unique opportunity to take what he has shown us, grow with it, think about it, experiment with it and give back our thinking and experiences. These two books are important signposts along the way, offering as they do, the authors' "new thinking and creative experiences".

I thank the three authors for their books. It has been a profoundly challenging and exciting business immersing myself in them and finding a way of presenting them to you. There is much more in these books that I haven't even touched on. Read them both. Enjoy!

Notes:

1. I have used Albrecht Mahr's term "representative perception" to refer to the phenomenon of a representative having distinct experiences that seem to replicate the reality of the person they are representing. There are other perfectly valid terms in use.
2. I use the word "facilitator" because I am aware that when discussing this work we are addressing a larger field of practitioners than just therapists, psychotherapists and counsellors.

Bibliography:

- "In My Mind's Eye – Family Constellations in Individual Therapy and Counselling", Ursula Franke, Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag
- "Entering Inner Images – A Creative Use of Constellations in Individual Therapy, Counselling and Self Help", Eva Madelung/Barbara Innecken, Carl-Auer
- "Loves Hidden Symmetry – What Makes Love Work in Relationships", Hellinger, B., Weber, G. & Beaumont, H., Zeig, Tucker & Co., 1998.