

Constellations work in supervision

A practical and profound method of making the hidden dynamics within systems – such as family systems – visible, shows up the true nature of a situation and points the way to resolution

by Vivian Broughton

My experience is that it's almost always safe to trust the representatives, to trust that they're providing useful information about the system. Bert Hellinger¹

Explaining constellations work with theoretical words loses the central essence of the work – the existential

experience that involves us and changes us. Nevertheless, theoretical understanding is important and, like everything else, doing this work well requires time and experience, and a solid grounding in the principles and methodology. So, as an introduction to

constellations within the supervision context, I decided that it would be more helpful here to minimise the explanations and present some case studies, in the hope that they might involve you experientially – perhaps moving you to find out more about this work for yourself.

There are four main aspects to constellations work:

1. The methodology of constellations: the setting up of a physical representation of a client's internal sense of an issue, using either people in a group setting, or objects in an individual setting to represent the various elements or people.

2. The phenomenon known as representative perception: the physical, conceptual and emotional experiences of the representatives within the constellation, often providing a view of the situation that hasn't been seen before.

3. A systemic viewpoint that allows one to see the whole in its widest and most

complete sense (ie an embodied sense of ancestry) as well as the particular in its individual representation.

4. An understanding and familiarity with some of the main principles which have emerged from working with constellations, principles that sustain and support the healthy life of systems. For example, the likely effect on a system of including someone who has previously been excluded or forgotten, the trans-generational impact of traumatic events, the deep sense of loyalty to the system that unconsciously dictates behaviour, and understanding how these are likely to manifest within the constellation.

I offer three case studies here, which I hope will illustrate something of how constellations can be helpful within the supervisory context.

1. Finding helpful support *Group supervisory setting*

A counsellor works within a charitable service focused on helping children and their families. She feels stuck with a boy, aged six, who is aggressive and non-communicative. The mother is a heroin addict with four other children, and, though she brings the boy to counselling, her life and behaviour are chaotic and she seems to only just be managing. She has refused counselling for herself, although she often stays while the boy is in session and chats with one of the team managers. The father committed suicide. The counsellor is concerned as to how best to help the boy. She views the mother as unfit, and there seems no other help within the family.

A group member is chosen to represent the boy and the

counsellor herself stands opposite him. The boy's representative looks lost, as if he doesn't really know the counsellor is there.

I ask the group if someone could represent an ancestor of the child who really loves him without complication. Immediately a woman stands up and I place her behind the boy, about five feet away. As I place her she moves up behind the boy and puts her arms round him with great emotion and tears. The boy's representative relaxes into her arms and closes his eyes with relief.

I ask the group if someone could be the mother and a woman says that she has been having very strong feelings for a while and thinks that already she is the boy's mother. She stays sitting in her seat and turns to the counsellor and says: 'I am his mother and I do love him, and I need you to help him!'

The counsellor is visibly moved and starts talking about how she realises that

she discounts the mother, and has been trying to take the place of the mother for the boy.

I suggest she tell the mother 'you are always his mother, I will help while I can'. The mother's representative reports feeling relieved and more peaceful – recognised and valued.

I suggest the counsellor look at the boy and the ancestor and physically take a step back and see how that feels. She says she feels less caught up in the emotions and that it is a great relief to see the boy held by the ancestor. I suggest that the next time she is with the boy she keep a sense within herself of this loving ancestor, and also the good sense she has from the constellation of the mother.

Notes: this constellation deals with the counter-transference, but also gives the counsellor an embodied sense of the possibility of loving support from an ancestor. She sees this before her eyes and experiences it in her body,

and in some way that changes how she looks at the boy next time she sees him, and how she relates to him.

I find this way of working extremely effective. One of the most common things that we find when working with constellations is the tangible and experienced deep love that can come from representatives of the dead. This is so common, and so powerfully experienced in the constellation by the representatives that it is not possible to pass it over as insignificant or irrelevant. It seems from constellations that the dead when represented are almost always in their hearts supportive of those who come later: 'The young ones are the future of the old ones'².

2. 'I am lost' *Individual supervision, using objects as representatives*

The counsellor is working with a couple and feels lost with them. She cannot grasp any useful perspective on how to work with them. They sit there and go over the same pattern of dialogue and behaviour repeatedly and the counsellor finds herself resourceless and confused.

We set up a simple constellation with representations for the three of them. The couple are facing each other and the counsellor is almost directly in between them facing straight ahead.

I ask her what happens for her when she looks at this pattern and she says, 'Well of course I am too close. I am right in the middle, and it doesn't feel good.' She goes on to say that this couple

have a small boy, and they are trying very hard not to let the boy know of their troubles. She feels terribly sorry for this boy because he is often left alone and he's not doing well at school.

I ask her to put the boy in. She places him right next to the representation for herself. Then she says: 'But we are in the firing line here.'

I suggest that she connect with the boy and see what he would say. She takes a moment and then says: 'Well, he would say, "This is awful, I am scared and I feel that the only safe place here is with the counsellor, but it doesn't feel good being in the middle."'

I suggest that she take the boy and the counsellor and, while staying connected with the boy, she move them to a place that feels better. She does this and moves them so that the two representations are next to each other facing the couple but with some good space between them and the couple. 'How does the boy feel now?' I ask. 'Much better,' she says.

I invite her to connect with the mother and see how she is. She says the mother is relieved that the boy and she are out of the way, that now she and her husband can see each other and may be able to talk better. She adds that, for the mother, it is good to see the boy next to the counsellor as it relieves her of needing to take care of him while she talks to her husband. I then invite the counsellor to check with the father; when she does that she gets very emotional and says that, as him, she feels such a lot of love for the mother and that to be able to see her is very good.

I suggest to this counsellor that the next time she sees this couple she make sure she moves her chair slightly back, to remind her to take herself back from the couple, and that she hold a sense of the boy as sitting by her side.

The next time I saw this counsellor she reported that the work was going very well, she maintained her sense of the boy sitting next to her and the couple were talking to each other seriously about their difficulties. She also reported that on one occasion she told them that she had a sense of their son beside her and the mother became very tearful and said, 'Oh, that helps so much.'

3. 'I get terrified in groups'

Groupwork in group supervision

A woman co-runs a group with another counsellor. Her issue is that she gets terrified in groups and apart from causing her difficulty with the group it also affects her co-facilitator on whom she relies because of her fears.

She says that there was a lot of violence in her family over a number of generations and in her own childhood. She identifies a part of her that is terrified in groups and another part that 'manages to stay present'.

We set up representatives for the terrified part, the part that copes, and a representative for the group as a whole and another for her co-facilitator.

The 'terrified' part reports feeling alone and ignored, and curls up on the floor. The 'coping' part says she

'I ask the group if someone could be the mother and a woman says that she has been having very strong feelings for a while and thinks that already she is the boy's mother'

can't move and can't look at anyone, and feels rigid and in pain down the right side of her body (the supervisee confirms that she often feels stiff, tight and achy down the right side of her body). As this continues the 'group' reports feeling irritated and frustrated, and at the same time feels concerned and wants to help. The 'co-facilitator' feels concerned and helpless.

Later the 'terrified' part says repeatedly 'I need attention' with increasing urgency, so I ask the remaining group members if there is someone who can give her good, helpful attention. A woman says that she has been having strong feelings of wanting to help the 'terrified' part. I ask her to

follow her impulse and she goes to the 'terrified' part crouching on the floor and gently touches her and strokes her hair. The 'terrified' part relaxes and leans against her, breathing deeply.

In time the 'terrified' part looks across at the 'coping' part and says she wants to go there but can only do that if the 'attention' goes with her.

The 'attention' reports a continuing wish to try to bring them together, to embrace both parts. They go over to the 'coping' part and, very gently, the 'terrified' part touches the hand of the 'coping' part who starts to cry softly, saying 'I need time, I need time'. She

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reports feeling that her body is melting and softening, as if life is flowing back into what had been frozen muscles.

She tells the ‘terrified’ part that she can’t be rushed and the two of them sit together just touching – the ‘coping’ part continuing to cry softly. I ask the actual supervisee who is sitting next to me to go to the two parts of herself and tell them it’s okay to take their time.

This feels good for them. Then I suggest she turn to the group and the co-facilitator and tell them ‘I am taking care of it’. They are both already feeling much better. We ended the constellation here.

Notes:

■ In many constellations dealing with post traumatic effects, ie the splitting into the named parts as above, we find that the frozen emotions are held, not as we would imagine in the identified ‘terrified’ part, but in the essentially weaker and more vulnerable ‘coping’ part, which looks on the surface more able to cope, but actually is extremely vulnerable to re-triggering.

■ This constellation shows the holding of the supervisory boundary, in that we did no investigating

of the cause of the terror other than in general terms, violence in the family. We stayed with the issue of finding what is needed for the supervisee to function better in the professional situation by giving space for the beginning of the process of integration of the split. It was obvious from the ‘coping’ part’s feedback that we could not rush this process, but that the energy had been released and the integration could happen. The supervisee was very moved to watch this slow coming together of parts of herself that were very familiar to her.

Conclusion

There is no question in my mind that constellations work has a great deal to offer us in thinking about our work at this time. Its philosophy of radical inclusion rather than exclusion, aspiring to see the whole as a way of understanding the particular, has far-reaching implications for the problems we face in the 21st century.

In understanding the issues in the Middle East, for example, we are required to include the long history of unresolved conflict, the fantastic and primal urge for revenge in the individual

from their deep sense of systemic and tribal loyalty, turning victim into perpetrator and perpetrator into victim.

The deepest crime against another is a refusal to see them as they are, including all of their failings and successes and systemic entanglements.

A constellation is always about seeing another as they actually are, as were the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. A constellation is always an endeavour to understand the whole and the particular’s place within it.

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