

Bert Hellinger, Family Constellations and the phenomenon of surrogate perception

By John Harris info@livingmaps.co.uk www.livingmaps.co.uk

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During the 1980s, a new type of therapy called Family Constellations emerged out of Germany. Its aim was to interrupt the transmission of guilt, pain and suffering to successive generations. Since its inception this therapeutic approach has experienced significant growth in popularity, which continues to increase at an outstanding rate year on year. It has expanded into the realms of organisational, educational and environmental constellations and, in 2004, it went through a modification by its founder. Although widely accepted in Europe, the method is only just beginning to find a foothold in the United States. Its founder, Bert Hellinger (1925-2019), authored or co-authored over 30 books and travelled widely during the last 30 years of his life giving lectures, workshops and training courses throughout Europe, the United States, South America, Russia, China, the Middle East and Japan. Hellinger did not formalise any qualification or standard of training and as a result most practitioners add to or modify his original insights, incorporating their existing therapeutic backgrounds or innovating as they see fit. Like most new innovations, it has not been without its critics or controversies regarding methodology, qualification of practitioners and appropriateness (Ulsamer, 2005; Cohen, 2006).

Born Anton Hellinger in Germany during 1925, Bert Hellinger's Catholic family's faith served to inoculate him against the prevailing ideology of National Socialism. Hellinger considered his parents, his childhood home and his childhood wish to become a priest to be major influences on his life. During his youth he resisted the efforts of the local Hitler Youth Movement to recruit him, and he subsequently attracted the attention of the Gestapo for his attendance at illegal meetings for Catholic youth. Nonetheless, he was conscripted into the German army in 1942 and sent to the Western front, where he experienced close combat, the horrors of battle, defeat, capture and imprisonment in an Allied POW camp in Belgium from which he later escaped (Hellinger et al., 1998). According to Cohen (2006, p.2), 'The brutality and destructiveness of the Nazi era is central to Hellinger's life's work. Sixty years after the cessation of warfare, with all the victims and perpetrators either dead or aged, Hellinger continues to focus on the echoes and reverberations from that collective trauma'.

Shortly after his return to Germany in 1945 at the age of 20, he fulfilled his early childhood wish and began training as a Catholic priest in the Jesuit tradition. This involved a 'long process of purification of body, mind and spirit in silence, study, contemplation and meditation' (Hellinger et al., 1998, p.327). It was around that time that he took the religious name 'Suitbert', the origin of the first name 'Bert' by which he came to be known. By the early 1950s he was ordained as a Catholic priest and was working in South Africa amongst the Zulu people as a missionary – but not before studying philosophy and theology at the University of Würzburg in Germany. During the 16 years he spent working in South Africa, he held a variety of roles including priest, schoolteacher and headmaster. He was also able to continue his studies and received a BA and Diploma in Education from the University of South Africa.

Alongside his ministering and teaching, two other sources of personal enrichment during this time left a deep imprint on him. The first was his immersion in Zulu culture and its spiritual traditions. He was particularly affected by that culture's respectful attitude toward ancestors and its angst-free philosophy toward life (Cohen, 2006). The Zulus saw themselves as a link in a genetic and ancestral chain that was very much alive. In the Zulu religious tradition there are three sources of external power: the Earth, the Sky and the Ancestors; the third being the most important and considered a constructive resource of great utility (Lawson, 1985). According to Cohen (2006, p.3), 'Hellinger became a convert to their views of the interdependence between the living and the dead'. Hellinger became fluent in the Zulu language, was known to participate in their rituals and ceremonies, and came to appreciate their unique world view. He observed 'that many Zulu rituals and customs had a structure and function similar to elements of the Catholic Mass' and 'even experimented with integrating Zulu music and rituals into the Mass' (Hellinger et al., 1998, pp.327-328).

The other substantive and life-changing influence during the latter years of Hellinger's time in South Africa was his thorough immersion in Group Dynamics training, led by Anglican priests visiting from North America. Like his experience with Zulu culture, this was enlightening, as it demonstrated numerous similarities between people from diverse cultures. Primarily through training in Group Dynamics, he assimilated a completely new way of caring for people that valued dialogue, subjective experience and self-expression. This was his first introduction to a psychological model and to a method of attending to the personal growth and development of others outside of his religious training. During a Group Dynamics training session one of his trainers asked a question that profoundly affected his tenure in the Church: 'Of people and ideals, which do you value the most?' According to Hellinger, a sleepless night followed in which he realised his fundamental orientation was toward helping others and, soon after, he took the decision to leave the religious order. This had echoes of his parents' decision to rise above the social and political pressure to support Fascism. Being a priest was no longer an accurate expression of his ongoing personal growth, and after 25 years he left the Church, returned to Europe and began training in Psychoanalysis (Hellinger et al., 1998).

This began an epic 15-year journey through numerous psychotherapy trainings, and more intense personal development work in both Europe and the United States. Psychoanalytic training in Austria was followed by an immersion in the practise of Primal Scream therapy in Los Angeles. Janov's book *The Primal Scream* and his period studying this approach oriented Hellinger towards working with the body, something that endured throughout his career as a therapist and his development of the Family Constellations approach. Eric Berne's TA introduced him to script analysis which led Hellinger to his conceptualisation that family scripts function across generations. Gestalt therapy training was followed by NLP, where Hellinger resonated with the concept of working with resources rather than problems. Immersion in the hypnotherapy approach of Milton Erickson also featured during this time, alongside other modalities too numerous to list here. Throughout this period, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger accompanied Hellinger and further enriched his learning and phenomenological outlook on life. Rounding off this impressive resumé was further tutelage in family therapy from Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis, who were in turn influenced by family therapy pioneers Virginia Satir and Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy. Hellinger's decision to work systemically arose from his exposure

to the techniques and philosophy of these eminent systemic practitioners and their influence is never far from view during a Family Constellation (McQuillan & Welford, 2013; Hellinger et al., 1998; Cohen, 2006).

It was in training with Kadis and McClendon that Hellinger was first introduced to a nascent form of Family Constellations, which he further developed and refined. Satir's Family Reconstruction Therapy required actual family members in the consulting room, as did Boszormenyi-Nagy's Conjoint Family Therapy. In her therapeutic work, Satir observed that unbalanced individuals were the product of unbalanced families and frequently began dialogues between generations of family members to bring about reconciliation. Boszormenyi-Nagy's theory about accountability across generations, and his book *Invisible Loyalties*, reinforced this idea and his assertions that unconscious rules govern families undoubtedly influenced Hellinger. A cornerstone of Hellinger's work is the idea that families are governed by ordering forces, sometimes known as the orders of love, and that alignment with these forces brings about peace and strength for all system members. In contrast to Satir and Boszormenyi-Nagy's approaches, in a Family Constellation it is not necessary for actual system members to be present. Hellinger fully developed this idea and refined the process of using representatives to stand in for family members. A Family Constellation, although done in a group setting, is not group therapy – nor is it family therapy, although it can have a positive effect on a group and the family of the issue holder, despite their absence (Satir et al., 1991; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1973; Ulsamer, 2008). In essence, it is brief individual therapy carried out in a group context.

A Family Constellation begins in a supportive and confidential group setting, with an individual presenting an issue that is investigated within the context of their wider family system. The facilitator is usually seeking to address entanglements with the fates of parents and grandparents, or to identify where ordering forces are being ignored or overlooked and to explore the cost of this to the client and find a solution. Group members stand in for the family members who are associated with the client's presenting issue; they could also represent an abstract quality, like a country of origin, or a family secret. The Issue Holder who has volunteered to work also chooses someone to represent themselves and, under the guidance of the facilitator, sets up the representatives in the group space arranging them spatially and relationally. One representative is set up at a time in quick succession; sometimes more are added in as the facilitator works toward a resolution. The setting-up consists of the client standing behind a representative placing his or her hands on their shoulders, and gently moving them into a place that feels right in relation to the issue under consideration. It is not unusual for a sibling who died young or a relative who disappeared in a shameful way to be represented, but there are many other possible roles. Usually, toward the end of the constellation, the client is placed in the position their representative formerly held. After the initial set-up, the facilitator waits and observes as the phenomenon of surrogate perception comes into play (Torsten Preiss, 2012; Ulsamer, 2008; Hellinger, 2006).

The general formula for a counselling session and a Family Constellation are similar. A client brings an issue and time is spent clarifying and refining it, then the various techniques of the approaches are used to 'work it through', then the session is drawn to a close with time given over to integration and resourcing. Through both encounters the core conditions of counselling are utilised, for example, unconditional positive regard, an absence of judgment, warmth, congruence and empathy.

However there are also many things that are dissimilar. A Family Constellation is conducted within the context of a group of people, even though only one person at a time presents and works through an issue. Fundamentally, a Family Constellation is psychotherapy, albeit with an emphasis on using a different type of tool to access important information about the client and their family system, and that tool is the surrogate perception of the representatives.

In conventional psychotherapy and counselling, the information provided by the client is critical and paramount to the session, as are the therapist's conjectures, interpretations and formulations (Schneider, 2007). Family Constellations differ in that alongside contributions from the client and therapist, other crucial data comes from the 'Knowing Field'.

The perceptions of the representatives are moderated by the facilitator, who usually gives some basic instructions such as, 'don't act, don't be therapeutic and don't be kind'. Rather, representatives are asked to allow any sensations, feelings, impulses and emotions to arrive, and report any such phenomena to the facilitator. More often than not, astonishingly, the representatives are able to access accurate information about the people they are standing in for and with this information a new, formerly-unseen, living map of systemic dynamics emerges. According to Cohen (2006), the perceptions of representatives are subjective and can contain components of personal projection, but this does not impair the process. It is normal for a broad cross-section of affective material to emerge, from intense emotion to numbness and indifference. Of great value, alongside the information about how the representatives feel, is the illumination of the relationships between them. This potent therapeutic resource, which blends individual affect and relational dynamics and which is rich in unconscious material across generations from representatives for both the living and dead, was aptly named the 'Knowing Field' by physician and prominent Family Constellations facilitator Albrecht Mahr (Torsten Preiss, 2012). In terms of benefits from standing in this Knowing Field, Naidu et al (2019), who researched how a group of psychologists experienced being representatives, found that subjects gained a new and different perspective and developed more trust in their own subjective experience. And Ruhl (2014), who carried out similar research among non-professionals, observed that representatives felt an emotional release and healing as a result of their participation, even though the feelings originated elsewhere – but also noted that naturally-feeling individuals found the process easier than the cognitively inclined (Cohen, 2006; Naidu et al., 2019; Ruhl, 2014).

It is not unusual to hear workshop participants who have been representatives or clients, especially for the first time, describe the experience as amazing, powerful, exciting and incredible. Less common are descriptions of feeling uncomfortable or finding the experience difficult. They also report feeling safe, despite entering a realm of perception that is quite possibly beyond anything they have experienced before (Ruhl, 2014; Naidu et al., 2019). For example, a young man may represent a great-grandfather or a middle-aged woman, or a family's spirit of stoicism that enabled them to get through a war. Although it may become necessary to 'de-role' a representative who has stood in for a system member with a heavy fate or intense suffering, this is unusual. (Ulsamer (2008) confirms that de-roling is only necessary in extreme cases, but nevertheless devotes time to explaining the process.) In our lives, outside of a Family Constellation workshop, we can easily transition in and out of our normal perceptual arenas. Watching a television programme or film, for instance, we might put ourselves in the position of a character, perhaps a victim or perpetrator, leave behind our prejudices and preconceived ideas for a brief moment and experience the

character's perception (of course, some element of personal projection will be present). This could also apply to a character in a book we are reading, and I have no doubt that the authors of novels, in an imaginative process, place themselves in the perceptive realm of their characters, leaving behind their usual experience of self.

Other therapeutic approaches do see examples of clients leaving behind their regular perceptual states and entering either those of others, or possible future perceptual states of their own. Ulsamer (2008) noted Psychodramatist Grete Leutz's observations that spontaneous psychodramatic action in the role of a stranger can be so accurate as to be incomprehensible given the total lack of knowledge of the role player. Moreover, in Gestalt two-chair work or empty chair work, the essence of the technique is to move into the other person's perspective, or a desired future perspective, and take on that role (Kellogg, 2014). Both these approaches seem to employ or display something like surrogate perception; however, it is not at the forefront of those therapeutic paradigms, and questions are not asked about this shift of perceptive position. In contrast, the most asked question of Family Constellation facilitators is: how does the phenomenon of surrogate perception work?

In a 2016 article in the *New Yorker* magazine, journalist Burkhard Bilger writes about his experience of having a personal issue constellated and describes the process as 'like a visit to a psychic under the sober auspices of therapy'. Which, indeed, raises the question: what forces are at work here? How can people with no knowledge of another's family give accurate representations of the feelings and perceptions of its members? According to Torsten Preiss (2012), Hellinger regarded the mechanism behind surrogate perception as a secret that would not benefit from further investigation. Torsten Preiss (2012) puts forward the possibility that quantum physics and mirror neurons are involved, and reminds us that one of the most important discoveries in quantum physics is how the transfer of information takes place beyond space and time. Scientists who study the subject found that simultaneous reactions in different particles in multiple locations happened via the phenomenon of 'nonlocality'. In the case of mirror neurons, researchers concluded that humans only need to see a part of a picture to understand the complete picture. Mirror neurons help us to empathize, understand and trust others and could be involved in surrogate perception (Gallese, 2006). Rupert Sheldrake's Morphogenetic Field Theory is often cited as at least a partial explanation for surrogate perception. In Morphogenetic Field Theory, Sheldrake asserts that 'patterns of activity in the present resonate with similar patterns of activity in the past, through a connection across time' (2020, p.204). His theory does encompass the component parts of a Family Constellation: the past in terms of the origin of the presenting issue, and the present as manifested in the symptom. Indeed, these two come together and there is a resonance across time in the form of material accessed by the representatives. However, no single scientific theory has offered a definitive explanation for surrogate perception and, given the almost unquantifiable nature of this highly subjective experience, probably never will. This raises the question of whether the experience of representatives in Family Constellations is better explained in non-scientific terms.

The shaman Dan Van Kampenhout informs us that a representative's body acts as an anchoring point for the souls and spirits of others, and that the state of consciousness thereby encountered is typical of shamanistic practices (2001). This is a natural phenomenon in many indigenous traditions, whereby a person becomes a conduit for the essence of another (Boring, 2018). For transpersonal psychologists the entire body is acting as a receiver, resonator and amplifier for information that has

its origins outside of space and time as we generally perceive them in modern Western cultures (Naidu et al., 2019). In the Western psyche there is an overemphasis on the rational, the logical, the intellectual and that which can be verified empirically, but so far Family Constellations has not travelled well in the laboratory. In contrast, the feminine, with its focus on 'non-rational' elements such as spirit, soul, heart, feeling and emotion, has been neglected in the modern world and, as a result, we have lost touch with non-linear perceptual states and other indigenous sensibilities (Naidu et al., 2019). However, in Family Constellations workshops and seminars across the modern world, it's entirely normal for people to seamlessly transition to these archaic perceptual states, showing that they are not as dormant as one might expect and, in fact, are easily accessed.

That Family Constellations don't represent veritable truths, but rather energies present in a family system, is universally agreed by facilitators of the approach. For example, a constellation may reveal (through the representatives) a family member who has been excluded and is suffering as a result, or may demonstrate how a husband is drawn out of his marriage by an affair or even abuse. Therefore, it may well be that the best form of research into the arena of surrogate perception is personal experience. Anyone who encounters the phenomenon should carry out their own investigations and decide, based on their participation in Family Constellations, whether surrogate perception exists or not. The experience of representing has numerous components: for example, being set up, perceiving bodily and other sensations, accessing feelings towards others in the field, the reordering of spatial positioning by the facilitator and the uttering of healing sentences between the representatives given by the facilitator. In other words, there is a lot to investigate, to evaluate, and to come to some kind of decision about. Hellinger (2001, p.2) describes wanting to understand and control the unknown as scientific inquiry, and asserts that it is no use in this case. Instead he advises pausing in our efforts to understand the unknown rather 'allowing our attention to rest, not on the particulars, which we can define, but on the greater whole'. He calls this stance 'phenomenological', and it pervades his writings and teachings.

Conclusion

Hellinger lived an extraordinary life: a life of faith, service, exploration, effort, experimentation, hard work and an unwavering dedication to the search for truth. His parents, who were conscientious objectors, instilled in him an inquiring mind that placed personal values above any prevailing ideology, and a lifelong commitment to helping others. His experiences of outgrowing, or being outside of groups, led to his theory about 'conscience groups' and the importance of belonging which he incorporated into his approach. After 25 years in the Church, a 15-year period of immersion in psychotherapeutic modalities followed and aspects of every method he studied are employed in Family Constellations. It was the emissaries of Virginia Satir and Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy who first introduced Hellinger to working systemically and the concept of using stand-ins for family members, but he developed the work into something new and fresh in the therapeutic world. Thinking and theorising about what conditions are required for systems (and therefore their members) to function well, and applying them in clinical practice, led to the refinement of the Family Constellations approach into what it is today – including all its other manifestations.

In psychotherapy, surrogate perception appears as far back as the 1950s in Moreno's Psychodrama, but Hellinger placed it front and centre in his approach, preferring not to investigate how it worked, but rather accepting it as a gift and a blessing. Scientific research into surrogate perception has not

made any great progress, although Sheldrake's theory of Morphic Resonance – which holds that 'things behave as they do because they remember what they did in the past' (2019, p.4) – helps, as do his assertions that information in the form of memory can be accessed by someone other than the owner (Sheldrake, 2019). Indigenous wisdom traditions do better at explaining the process of surrogate perception, as does transpersonal psychology, with its emphasis on subtle energy fields and transcendent aspects of human experience. For those who experience standing in a constellation representing someone or something, the process is simply *accessed* – no experience or expertise is necessary, and there are personal benefits to be had (Rhul, 2013). It is this aspect of Family Constellations that sets it aside from other psychotherapeutic approaches. The 'field resonance' that representatives experience is a trusted ally of the facilitator and is treated with great respect at all times. Its origins go way back in time, unlike many of the other basic tools in constellating which originate in humanistic psychology. It is a process that can soften, align, teach, enlighten, challenge, change, inform and gently deconstruct a bias or judgment held by the representative. In my opinion, the best way to evaluate this phenomenon is personal experience.

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