

SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS IN INDIVIDUAL THERAPY:

An Integrative Approach

The Systemic Constellation approach, as developed by Bert Hellinger, is a powerful tool for unlocking hidden family dynamics and events that may still influence and entrap individuals many generations hence. This approach has proved helpful in resolving issues of depression, suicide, physical and mental illness, relationship difficulties and challenges in the workplace. My primary training in this approach most often applied to group formats. In this method, some group members are selected to represent family members (living or dead) and are placed by the client in the center of the group in relationship to one another, thus forming a “constellation” representing the family field. Through these dynamics, hidden family secrets and unconscious “entanglements” are revealed. Following this “diagnostic” phase of the work, “resolution” reconfiguration and statements are applied. Through these iterations, the process moves towards an organic conclusion of greater peace, harmony and agreement in the system.

Arguably, this is a powerful way to work. Group participants are profoundly moved as the panoply of family relationships and structures are revealed and reorganized towards a deeper accord. Some clients, however, are not comfortable in a group setting and seek the privacy and dedicated attention of one-on-one sessions. Skilled and skillful practitioners, such as Seiglinde Schneider and Ursula Franke, to name but a few, have shared ways to work

SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS IN INDIVIDUAL THERAPY

Annie Block Pearl, M.S.

Page 2 of 5

with individuals without benefit of a group of live representatives. I have learned much from their work as well as from my teacher and creator of Process Acupressure, Aminah Raheem. Using their tools and approaches as a starting point, I have found a number of ways to incorporate the Family Constellation approach into individual sessions. I'd like to share some of these methods with you.

The appointments that I schedule for these sessions are 90 minutes in duration, which usually provides adequate time for a process to unfold. The first part of the session is an initial intake to determine the objectives of the client for our work. In other words "what is the issue?" If the client's issue has a possible antecedent somewhere in the family system, the client and I then create a genogram¹ in order to have enough information readily available to set up our constellation. In some cases, the family history is quite complicated with multiple avenues to pursue. If this is the case, we may spend most of this first session exploring their history and work only briefly in the final minutes with inner imagery. Another session is then scheduled. More often, though, we develop the requisite information and still have at least 30-45 minutes remaining in our session. In that case, I like to "set up" a constellation of the dynamics that feel to me to have the most

¹ From Wikipedia: A *genogram* is a pictorial display of a patient's family relationships and medical history. It goes beyond a traditional family tree by allowing the user to visualize hereditary patterns and psychological factors that punctuate relationships. It can be used to identify repetitive patterns of behavior and to recognize hereditary tendencies.

SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS IN INDIVIDUAL THERAPY

Annie Block Pearl, M.S.

Page 3 of 5

“weight”, using specially prepared Playskool figures. The client and I sit close to one another at a table with a box of these figures in front of us. I ask the client to select representative figures for their system and arrange these figures in front of us, much as a client would place representatives in a group. We then observe the configuration. As in a group setting, our ultimate goal is to restore harmony, balance and order to the system. I ask the client what she notices and then I share my observations as well. These observations may include relationships of the figures to one another, comments about who is missing, spacing, directionality, etc. Since we cannot query the representatives, we both must use our intuition to gain knowledge of the scene in front of us. Often, the posture, gaze, and emotional affect of the figures appear to me. I test my felt observations with the client and she contributes her sense of these as well. At this point we may have enough information to perceive entanglements and disorder in the system. Thus, once we have observed the relationships and determined what people or elements might be missing from the constellation, we have our initial “diagnosis”.

After adequate observation and assessment, we move on. Based upon our perceptions, we start moving the representatives and add additional representatives accordingly. We may make declarative statements for the figures as well. Many clients feel quite connected to these figures and respond much as they would to a group of live representatives. Throughout the process, I stay very much in touch with the client, often literally touching her, focusing awareness on her breath, her bodily sensations and her

SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS IN INDIVIDUAL THERAPY

Annie Block Pearl, M.S.

Page 4 of 5

emotions. If the client can “hold” this space, then we continue. Our work proceeds in the same way that the process proceeds in a group setting. After identifying the entanglements, disorder and imbalances, we move towards resolution in our constellation. I repeatedly check with the client to assure that the resolution adjustments improve the system. Sometimes I say the resolution statements for the figure representatives. Often I ask the client to repeat these statements and perhaps add words of their own. This resolving time, of course, moves at the same pace as the soul time in our group constellations and so we must allow adequate space and time between interventions for the process to unfold. When we have completed our work, I suggest that the client spend a few moments with the constellation figures. If time permits, we then continue with the chakra work as described below.

Sometimes, our work with the figures ends after the diagnostic phase of the constellation. Some clients become agitated or confused and are unable to hold the space. In these situations, I suggest we move our work to the massage table. The client lies on her back, fully-clothed, and I proceed with deep acupressure energy work, bringing awareness and attention to the areas of the body which reflect the client’s reaction to the constellation. While I am doing this I ask the client to hold the constellation picture in her inner imagery or to turn her glance to the figures still present on the table. While we work with the expressions of energy throughout the body, the energy of the constellation moves towards definition and resolution as well. I have the client repeat the declarative resolution statements as we proceed. When we have found a good place to stop so that the client’s soul can complete the

SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS IN INDIVIDUAL THERAPY

Annie Block Pearl, M.S.

Page 5 of 5

work on its own, I then conclude the bodywork as well, with chakra attunement. The chakra attunement portion allows the resolution to progress through the client's deeper energy system and facilitates the profound soul movements that occur when all members of the family system are given their rightful places. Progressing this work on and through the body helps to catalyze the cellular changes that often accompany these deep soul movements.

The material described above is, of course, only one approach to individual work. In my private psychotherapeutic practice I may use the figures, not just for family constellations, but also to address work and career issues or other personal and philosophical challenges. Individual sessions may be quite helpful prior to group constellations to help define, ripen, or bring focus to an issue. Subsequent Process Acupressure and chakra work also provides a deepening, grounding and mobilizing effect after the groups. The client is left with an embodied clarity that facilitates movement towards peace and deeper fulfillment.

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