

FAMILY CONSTELLATION WORK
AND VIRTUAL SPACE:
LESSONS OF FIELDWORK DURING THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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“Children seldom or never dare to live a happier or more fulfilling life than their parents. Unconsciously they remain loyal to unspoken family traditions, which work invisibly. Family Constellations are a way of discovering underlying consequential family bonds and forces, which have been carried unconsciously over several generations”

– Bethold Ulsamer, German therapist



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4. My Fieldwork
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1.

WHAT IS FAMILY CONSTELLATION WORK?

- ❖ Family Constellation Work or *Order of Love* is a form of group therapy, developed by psychotherapist and former catholic priest Bert Hellinger
- ❖ Its main assumption is that there is a “natural order” in the family, which is connected through a “deep bond of love”. When that order is disrupted in one generation, symptoms arise in the next.
- ❖ This method was first introduced in Germany as an alternative way of addressing and healing (transgenerational) traumas of WW2.
- ❖ While Hellinger’s early work is closer to traditional rituals (especially those of Zulu healing work), it’s later iteration, the so-called Movements of the Soul, is focused more on creating a resolution rather than figuring out where in the family system the “natural flow of love” has been disrupted
- ❖ Since the 1970s, Family constellation work grew into an internationally recognized practice of intergenerational healing, as well as that of peace building and reconciliation

❖ Natural Laws that Govern the Family System:

1. Law of Belonging
2. Law of Hierarchy
3. Law of Balance

❖ Blind Love \neq Enlightened Love



"Sometimes children look at their parents and think, "Because I love them, I have to give up my heart's desire so as not to hurt them." Our parents' pain hurts us whether it is experienced as guilt or as empathy. When children try to spare their parents pain and end up giving up what is good for their own souls, this is misplaced love. What father or mother could say to their child, with an open heart and a clear conscience, "You should hurt yourself and burden your life so that I don't have to experience pain"? – Beaumont (2014: 86)

2.

WHAT A FAMILY CONSTELLATION
WORKSHOP LOOKS LIKE

❖ A family constellation workshop is done in a group setting, its participants are:

- The Therapist or **Facilitator**, who leads the workshop
- The Client or **Issue-Holder**, who comes to the workshop with a persisting issue he or she wants to address
- **The Representatives**, who volunteer to represent the client's family members
 - + The Rest of the Group, who are just silent **Observers**

❖ There are is a 1-on-1 version of this method, where it's just the **Therapist** and the **Client**. Instead of "using" people as representatives, **objects**, such as pieces of paper, dolls, even musical instruments, are used.

❖ After the client is chosen, the therapist enquires about what they want to resolve and asks questions about the client's family

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE FAMILY?

- ❖ Questions relating to the client's family of origin refer to: siblings, parents, the siblings (all aunts and uncles), grandparents and, in case of dramatic fates, grand-grandparents + any former partners of the client's parents and grandparents
- ❖ Questions relating to the client's present family refer to: the client's spouse/partner, their children, + any former partners and/or children from a former marriage or relationship

Did anyone in your family...

- Die during childbirth?
- Suffered an illness or disability resulting from having given birth to a child?
- Find her life in danger during childbirth?
- Commit suicide?
- Serve or die in military service?
- Die unexpectedly?

Did you or anyone in your family...

- Have a stillborn child?
- Have an abortion or miscarriage?
- Have an illegitimate child?
- Have a former spouse, fiancé, partner or lover?
- Have a child that was abandoned?
- Have a difficult birth?
- Experience separation from the mother at a young age?
- Experience a traumatic or life-threatening event in childhood?
- Have a serious and/or long-lasting illness?
- Have a physical or mental disability?
- Attempt suicide?

- ❖ Once the therapist decides which family members to start the constellation with, he or she tells the client to choose people from the group as representatives.
- ❖ The constellation starts with a minimal number of participants and as time goes by, if necessary, the client introduces other members.
- ❖ The client intuitively positions them in space, in relation to each other based on “how it felt to be in that family” and then gets outside of their family system and joins the rest of the group (observers)
- ❖ After a while, as the family dynamic slowly starts to show, the show begins!

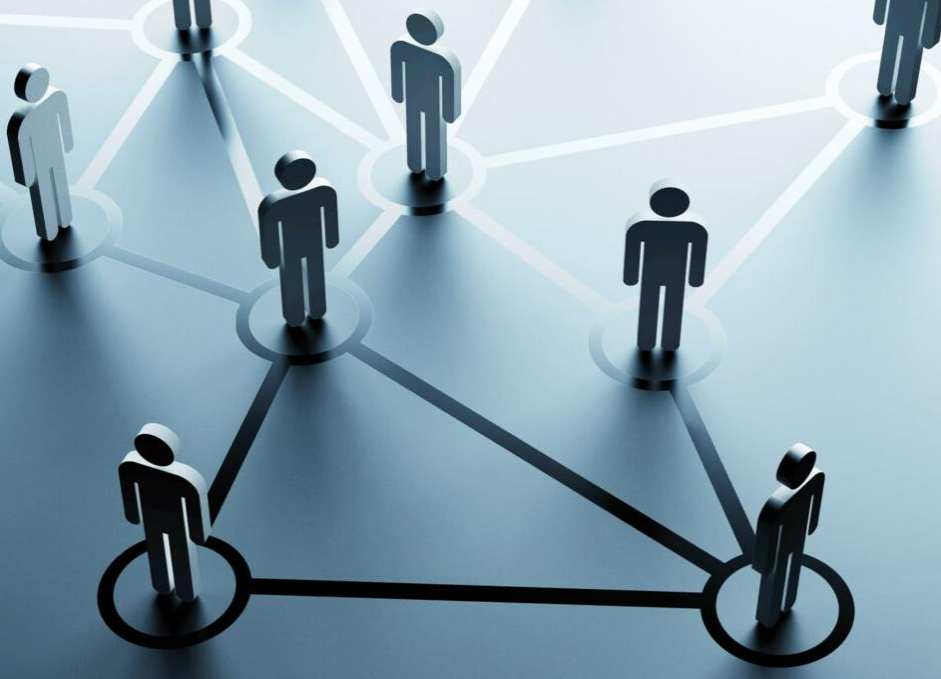


- ❖ By repositioning the representatives in space and experimenting with their position in the system, the therapists seemingly rearranges the existing narrative.
- ❖ By adding members who were forgotten or for whatever reason “written out” of the family history and allowing the representatives to express themselves verbally, the family system is slowly transformed into a more orderly constellation
- ❖ The constellation may be concluded when all the representatives in the family system intuitively feel like they are in their proper place



The background is a deep, dark blue to purple gradient, speckled with numerous white stars of varying sizes and shapes. Some stars are simple dots, while others are four-pointed or six-pointed. There are also soft, glowing nebula-like shapes in shades of teal and purple, creating a sense of depth and cosmic wonder.

3.
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
SPACE

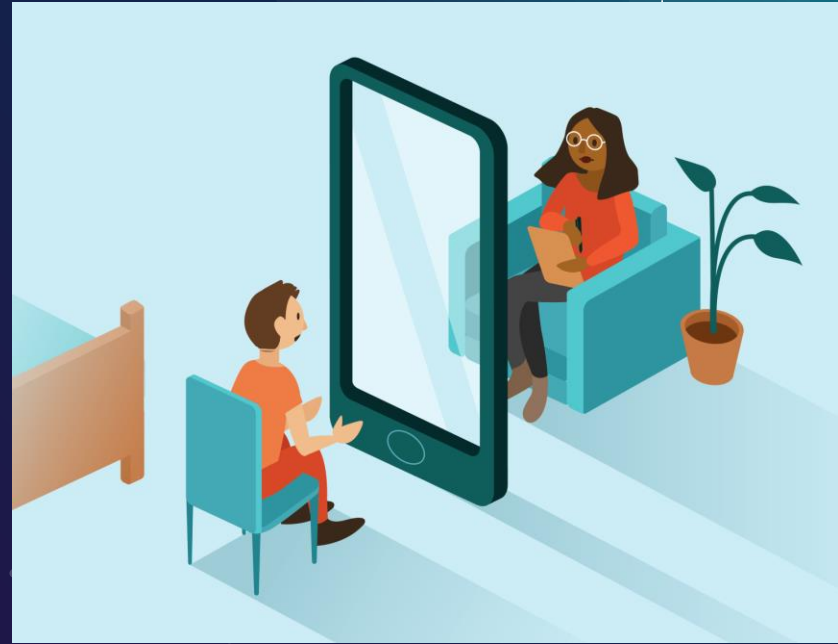


THE FIELD

- ❖ Field Theory, as developed by gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin, proposes that there is a field of energy that connects the client and the therapist, as well as the group with its environment
- ❖ A Field or a system is an information field, and it has both influence and memory. Once it is formed it has a tendency to sustain itself
- ❖ There isn't just one field, but many different fields (think of social networks, but this is more energetical).
- ❖ Traumas or unfinished business from one field can be transferred to the next until resolved
- ❖ "Knowing field" – Hellinger

DISTANCE THERAPY

- ❖ As media of communication (letters, telephone, internet) began to be more widespread in people's everyday lives, they started to be used as a method of communication between the therapist and the patient/client
 - ❖ Freud and Jung
 - ❖ Suicide prevention hotlines
 - ❖ Online therapy
- ❖ E-therapy or cyber-counselling is "the professional providing of mental health services via e-mail, video conferencing, virtual reality technology, chat technology, or any combination of these." (Sućala et al., 2012)





4.
MY FIELDWORK

WORKSHOP IN FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS: ORDER OF LOVE

(DIFFERENT APPROACHES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY)

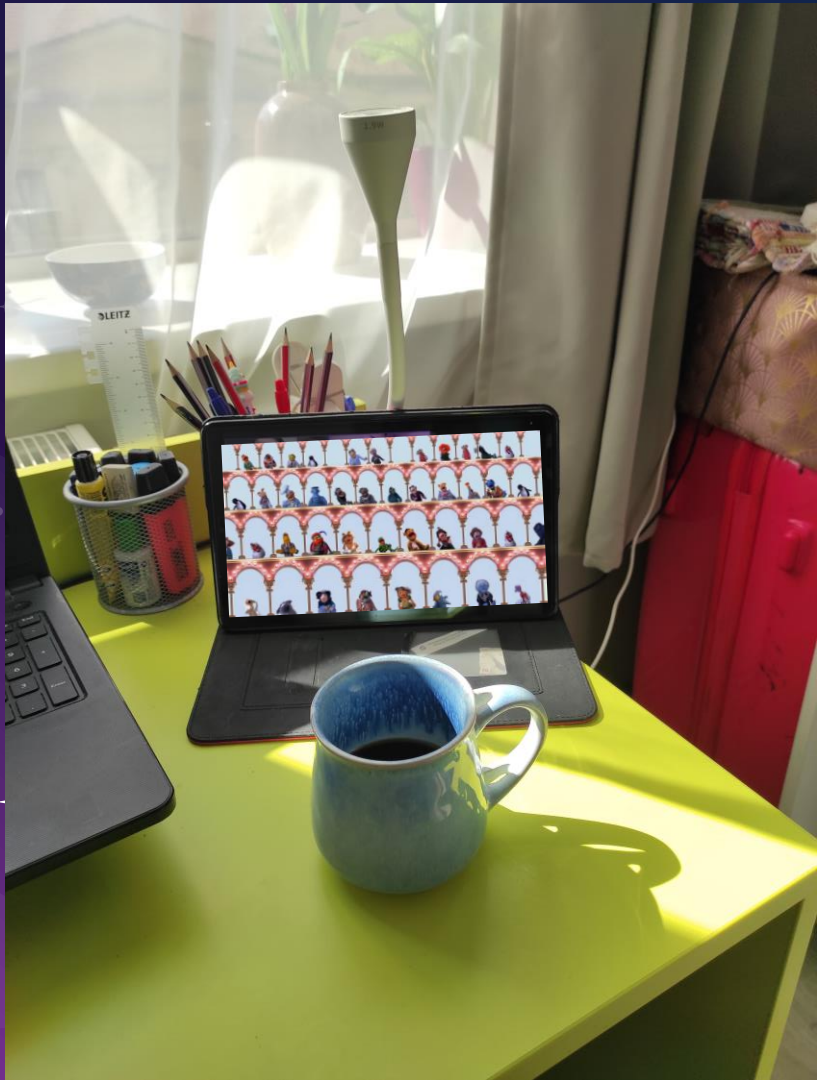
★ BELGRADE, SERBIA: Studio for Education Beograd
(EAPTI-SEB)

★ SARAJEVO, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: Gestalt
Psychotherapy Training Institute – Psiho-Integrum d.o.o.

★ ZADAR, CROATIA: Gestalt Psychotherapy Training
Institute – Psihika d.o.o.

★ MALTA: Gestalt Psychotherapy Training Institute Malta
(EAPTI-GPTIM)





Not an actual picture from fieldwork (because that would not be ethical), but a reference photo of what it was like to be me during fieldwork

❖ Since I started my fieldwork in January 2021 while COVID regulations were still in place, it was conducted entirely online, on Zoom

4.

MY ONLINE FIELDWORK

- ❖ The “Community” in which I conducted my research in were students and future therapists-to-be of gestalt psychotherapy

- ❖ All the workshops were facilitated by renowned gestalt psychotherapist Lidija Pecotić, PhD, a student of Hellinger and Beaumont, who first introduced FCW to the territory of ex-Yugoslavia back in the 90's

- ❖ Methodology:

- Participant Observation

- FCW training groups of 60-90 people per session, 8:1 were women

- Semi-directive Interviews

- 1+3 interviews, conducted in Serbian

- Experiences depending on the role (observer/representative/client) difference in the in-person/online workshop experience

WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS SAID ABOUT ONLINE WORKSHOPS

"Physical touch is really missing in online the experience."

"The overall emotional experience is a bit dimmer."

"The online experience is a bit 'crippled'."

"Not being in the same space as the representatives and the rest of the group, as a client, is on the one hand safer as I am not exposing myself. But on the other hand, it makes me feel isolated from the group."

WHAT MAKES FAMILY CONSTELLATION WORK WORK?

- ❖ According to some researchers, what makes constellation work so effective, and what sets it apart from individual therapy is precisely the presence of “public witnesses.” All those present are invited to acknowledge conflicts and participate in their reconciliation.
- ❖ My informants had different ideas:

“Disrupted or dysfunctional family relationships are identified and then publicly and ritually re-configured”.

– Sax, Weinhold &
Schweitzer (2010: 74)

❖ My informants had different ideas:

- “The all-knowing Field”
- The conduction of energy is making it all work... if I had to choose an emotion... It would be “love”. Not just the love between people but the “universal cosmical love!”
- “You know I never thought about this. It works... I don’t know how it works, but I know it works”.

❖ What’s interesting is that Hellinger himself stated on numerous times that he does know how exactly this method works, only that it works

5.

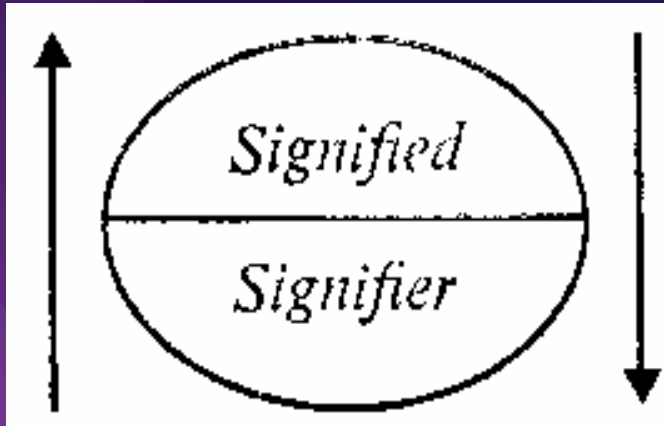
THE RITUALIZED USAGE OF
LANGUAGE
OR
HEALING SENTENCES

WHAT IS A RITUAL?

- ❖ Generally speaking, a ritual is a repeated, prescribed and standardized action that has a structure.
- ❖ It communicates through symbols.
- ❖ Its performance is stylized as it is both dramatic and compelling.
- ❖ A ritual is an action that has an effect on the people who perform it, as well as the audience which observes it, as it inspires public emotion and virtues – “whether through pain or through pleasure” (Feuchtwang, 2010:283)
- ❖ As the ritual goes on, it builds up expectations and it depends on its completion.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

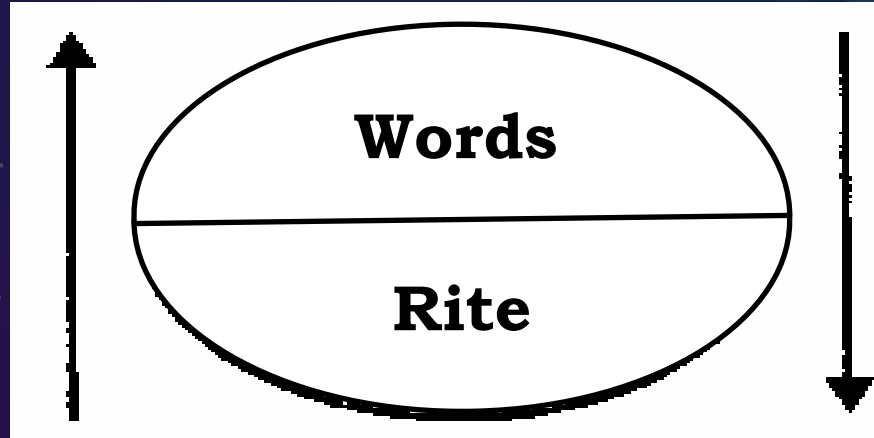
- ❖ A medium of communication
- ❖ It is made out of sounds and letters, which in a specific combination make up specific words which then make up specific phrases and sentences – which we then use to convey specific information to one another



"A word, like any verbal sign, is a unity of two components. The sign has two sides: the sound, or the material side on the one hand, and meaning, or the intelligible side on the other. Every word, and more generally every verbal sign, is a combination of sound and meaning, or to put it another way, a combination of signifier and signified."

– Roman Jakobson, 1942

RITUAL USAGE OF LANGUAGE



"It is not the case that words are one thing and the rite another. The uttering of the words itself is a ritual."

– Edmund Leach, 1966: 407

EXAMPLE 1:

Hellinger: Tell him [the deceased father]: "I respect you as a father."

Carol: I respect you as a father

Hellinger: "I will always love you as a father."

Carol: I will always love you as a father.

Hellinger: "Please bless me if I stay." [alive].

Carol: (starts sobbing) And please bless me if I stay.

Father: I want you to stay and I give you my blessing.

Hellinger: Tell him, "You are still present for me."

Carol: (sobbing) You are still present for me.

Hellinger: "Your life is continued inside of me."

Carol: Inside of me, your life continues.

Hellinger: "I am respecting you by staying."

Carol: I am respecting you by staying.

—"Touching Love" (1999: 24-25)

THE USAGE OF LANGUAGE IN FCW

❖ The language itself is highly formalized.

- Such style is described by Bloch in his article "Symbols, song, dance and features of articulation". What makes formalized speech so powerful is that it is *impoverished*, abandoning the freedom of the day-to-day discourse, while at the same time "polite, respectful and holy" (1974: 27).

❖ In online workshops, specifically, words serve the purpose of coordinating the participants, since they do not share the same physical space.

EXAMPLE 2:

Mother: It's so empty. I lost everything. Everything was left there. It is as if I can't see you clearly anymore **cries a bit** I really miss it all. Even now... But it does mean a lot that so many years have passed I can take a quick look at it.

Therapist: What is missing for you?

Silence

Mother: It's like somebody needs to tell me something, but I don't know what... And I don't know who... I am looking at my older daughter now.

Therapist: Older daughter say "Mum, I went back to the place we came from"

Client: Mum, I went back to the place we came from

Therapist: "Six months after dad died"

Client: Six months after dad died

Therapist: "I wanted to see that place"

Client: I wanted to see that place

Therapist: "I saw it"

Client: I saw it.

Therapist: "Many years have passed"

Client: Many years have passed"

Mother: Thank you for that. Thank you for not forgetting. And for going there... It means a lot to know that you went there.

Client: I'll go back there again.

Mother: It is important that you don't forget

Client: I won't forget

Mother: I feel sad, but I feel relief. It means a lot that you said you won't forget.

Therapist: Mother, can you say that to the War trauma? Say "We survived"

Silence

Mother: I can say that, but it is not true. I don't feel as if that is the truth

Therapist: What feels like the truth?

Silence

Mother: I don't know.

War Trauma: Can I say something? Every time I hear the mother speak I feel relief.

Therapist: Tell her "I am glad you survived"

War Trauma: I am glad you survived

Therapist: "I am glad your family survived"

War Trauma: I am glad your family survived

Silence

Mother: I can look at the trauma for a moment.

War Trauma: My back feels better. As if I am lighter

Therapist: Mother, say "Now I can see you"

Silence

Therapist: Mother?

Silence

the internet connection of the representative of the mother got disconnected for a moment

Mother: I disappeared, everything just disappeared

Therapist: Can you say "I disappeared but now I reappeared again"

Mother: I disappeared, but now I reappeared again

Therapist: Maybe tell that to everybody. "It was terrible. I was really scared, especially for my child. I was pregnant. Those were the last days of my pregnancy. I disappeared."

Mother: It was terrible. I disappeared. But I reappeared again... I was really scared for my child. It was horrific... But I reappeared... It's like now I can finally say: I am here!

Therapist: Say "I am here"

Mother: I am here!

Therapist: One more time – "I am here"

Mother: I am here. I am here! I AM HERE!

...

This is my place now

Therapist: That's right. "That is where I belong"

Mother: That's where I belong. I live here.

Therapist: "That's the place I raised my family"

Mother: That's the place I raised my family... I feel at peace as I say this.

Therapist: That's right... Maybe it's a sort of gratitude toward the place you are in now.

Mother: I feel grateful that I belong there. That this place is a part of my life

Therapist: Can you say "I belong HERE", instead of "there"?

Mother: Of course **giggles** I feel grateful for being here, where I am now.

“HEALING SENTENCES”

- ❖ Healing sentences are a therapeutic intervention which the therapist uses to put the representatives back in their proper place and true role in the family system. They are considered to be an explicit statement of what is:
 - Evoking the famous Levi-Strauss' shaman from the Cuna Indians who with his song incantation directly and explicitly psychologically manipulates the pathological condition (p.192). By using seemingly prosaic language, the therapist too verbally reorganizes the narrative – not calling upon myth, but the ideal family structure
- ❖ Healing sentences thus serve as a tool to bring about change to the family system – by employing the “natural laws” that govern seemingly every family system, which then restores the order and heals whatever malady the client has come to resolve in FCW.

The background is a dark blue to purple gradient, filled with numerous small white stars and larger, four-pointed starburst shapes. There are also large, soft, wavy shapes in shades of teal and purple that overlap the starry background.

6.
CONCLUSION

❖ The language itself is the key to establishing order in the family system

❖ The client brings the group a persisting issue and they verbalize it, maybe for the first time. They also verbalize what it is like to be in their family. They then step back and the group, guided by the therapist, takes over and reconfigures the system using speech. As Jakobson said in his lecture no.1 "On Sound and Meaning" (1942):

"When I speak it is in order to be heard".

❖ I am arguing that the "change" in Family Constellation Work comes from healing sentences not only being said (outload), but being heard – by both the client, as well as the rest of the group – the so-called "public witnesses".



THANK YOU!