

Family Constellations, Neuroscience and Epigenetics

Yildiz Sethi

Family Constellations is a modality that has been around since the early 1990's. It stands on its own in being a combination of former methodologies along with the latest in body sensing and the use of energy fields. It may be thought of as Energetic Systemic psychotherapy. It is brief, experiential and solution focused and may take place in groups or private sessions.

Family Constellations originates from Germany and has spread through Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries (Spain and South America) and many countries in Europe. It is now spreading through China, Hong Kong and Taiwan and is growing more slowly in English speaking countries such as UK, Australia and North America.

Family Constellations facilitates deep changes on many levels, often in a brief therapeutic process.

Developments in neuroscience show the brain constantly repairs itself and has a neuroplastic consistency. With the advent of further research and developments in neuroplasticity, it has been discovered that the brain is not hard-wired as was previously thought. There is constant change taking place. The neurons of the brain have the capacity to be constantly being formed and reformed throughout life. New neural pathways are formed as others disintegrate with lack of use, just as muscles go stronger or weaker with use or disuse. This information has profound implications for mental health and its treatment and our use of the Family Constellation process.

Interestingly the science of epigenetics supports this finding, that contrary to former beliefs, most DNA is not hard-wired and may be switched on or off by many internal or external environmental factors. These factors may be such things as beliefs, emotions, diet, life style, relationships, ecology, toxins and trauma. This means that people can change much more than we thought, especially with good therapeutic, effective approaches such as Family Constellations and others. It has been found that changing thoughts, feelings and perspectives can switch DNA on or off.

In fact, anything that can uplift a person, or enable them to find expression or emotional release, or expand their experience of themselves, may be useful in enabling change. Processes such as Family Constellations enable people to reframe or change their perspectives. In essence change their story. This is very much part of the healing and recovery process. From a broader perspective these findings show how such things as acupuncture, diet, exercise and lifestyle can have a positive effect on all aspects of mind and body. This understanding helps us to understand the value of viewing people holistically. In fact it is important to not only to focus on test results, behaviour, thoughts or brain functionality, but also how people feel as well.

In addition, the body itself needs to be considered too, as it has been found that the body remembers. There is much research into the connection of mind and body and it appears that psychological and emotional stresses also impact the body because according to Babette Rothchild, as she explains in her book: *The Body Remembers: The psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*-(2000), the mind and body

are connected through a vast network of neurons between the body cells and brain. This means that what we think or feel is transmitted to the body cells. Further, Doidge (2015) discusses how the body and brain send continuous two-way signals. Brain to body and body to brain.

In looking at what is important in effective therapeutic approaches, in more recent times, there has been a rise in emotionally focused therapeutic processes. The claim is that emotionally focused work may be more effective than the mainly cognitive processes of traditional Cognitive Behavioural Therapies that are favoured by many medical models utilized throughout the world.

Emotional disturbances and trauma do indeed appear to be at the root of many of our client's issues. Therefore working with the emotions to allow expression, and release must be of value, especially if this can be done in a way that is safe and can avoid re-traumatization.

The other side of working with emotional disturbances is the need to resolve the 'unfinished business' that accompanies them, in a more satisfactory way. This is true of unfinished business of personal lives and also the family system. Interestingly the unconscious mind doesn't know the difference between truth and fiction according to Doidge (2010) in *The Brain that Changes Itself*. This means that if a new perspective can be found in the therapeutic process, the mind is likely to take it on, especially if it is more favorable and less painful or disturbing than the original story.

Human beings are meaning-making beings. They always have a story of themselves. If that story is optimistic, successful, one of resilience, or of overcoming obstacles, this may be considered a healthy story. This will have the power to drive an individual's ability to create their lives well. If, however their story is of defeat, helplessness or hopelessness, this may be called an unhealthy story. This too becomes the driver of their tendency to create their lives in a less healthy way.

Many people become stuck in their story because of its disturbing qualities as many are suffering from personal or systemic traumas. Trauma occurs on a continuum from troubling emotional disturbances to extreme assaults on the mental, emotional, neural or body systems. Franz Ruppert in his book *Trauma, Bonding & Family Constellations* (2008) makes the point that there is a natural movement to complete the fight or flight response of the original traumatic situation and that if this cannot be done at the time, it often remains in the body as an interrupted movement or disturbance. This may manifest as a mental health disorder, behaviour or dis-ease. These disturbances remain in the family system until they can be dealt with appropriately.

As a psychotherapist of over 16 years and a Family Constellation facilitator of over 10 years, the effectiveness of the Family Constellation process is repeatedly reaffirmed to me by the responses and changes that occur in people who experience it. However as the process is largely experiential, emotional and deeply embedded in body sensing, it is difficult to provide quantitative data as evidence. Qualitative results are generally the only ones available.

Unfortunately, how we feel, is often considered to be not as valuable an indicator of change, as factors that can be physically measured. As we are living beings with feelings, consciousness and the potential for spirituality, such quantitative data can supply only a limited understanding of what it is to be human.

The practice of Family Constellations is embedded in phenomenological philosophy, where we bow largely to the idea of ‘not knowing’ and to providing a space where the healing forces of the family system may heal and reorganize themselves in a healthier way. I believe we need to stand up for qualitative data in listening to what our clients tell us.

Our brain, or more importantly, our mind has a major impact on how we experience ourselves and how we live. Therefore, the statement from the Baghavad-Gita:

“A man is made by his beliefs; as he believes, so he is” has great significance in understanding the mind.

In essence all counselling or psychotherapy methodologies seek to help people create better stories of themselves. If the process is successful, people may be less depressed or anxious and hence, more resilient in creating a better inner life. This may be transferred into their external reality.

Here is a statement of one person’s experience:

“Since doing my Family Constellation I walk on the ground and see the world differently.”

The importance of our story and the idea that we can change it, is not a new one. Milton Erickson, the famous psychiatrist and pioneer, master hypnotherapist who specialized in medical hypnosis and family therapy, stated:

“It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.”

He spent his life assisting people to improve their mental health through stories that sent them into a hypnotic state. During hypnosis the conscious mind relaxes and the unconscious elements of the psyche can emerge for resolution or healing. Erickson knew that the story was simply a perception and if that could change, then so could the story they have of themselves. The story is one version of an interpretation only.

However, according to Norman Doidge (2015) in his book *The Brain’s Way of Healing*, for around 400 years the predominant belief has been that the brain is ‘machine-like’ in that it can’t change. The brain was perceived to be mechanical. It was thought that if the brain was under-developed or damaged, it couldn’t evolve or repair itself. It was thought that the brain and DNA were hard-wired and couldn’t change.

Discoveries in neuroscience demonstrate that the brain is a constantly evolving organ with the ability to rewire and heal. This means that resolving emotional disturbances or trauma that is reflected in the perception a person may have of themselves the story can change and new possibilities may evolve.

The power of Family Constellations is in that the process works on many levels simultaneously. According to Doidge (2015): “*What fires together, wires together*” in terms of neurons. This means that any modality that can encompass the mind, (conscious and unconscious), the family system as well as the body senses is dealing with many aspects of the person and the system. This may also include senses of touch, smell, audio, vision and emotion simultaneously. In a constellation several, if not all of these levels of consciousness and senses are included in the experiential process, so that many aspects of the neuron system begin ‘firing’ in a new way. During the process, emotions may be released and new perspective found with new statements suggested in the form of *healing sentences*. In addition, *healing sentences* from the neuroplasticity perspective, may be considered as empowering suggestions that are available to be experienced by the audio, intellectual and emotional neural systems. If we consider what we know of neuroplasticity that: “*what fires together, wires together,*” (Doidge, 2015) more neurons fire and form new pathways. This enables deeper changes in the mind, body and soul in allowing a new story to emerge.

This neuroscience of brain plasticity and Epigenetics knowledge informs us as practitioners of the healing potential of Family Constellations when we consider the process.

The Client:

- Puts out their inner (unconscious) image of their issue through spatially placed representatives.
- Looks at themselves in viewing their representative in the system and emotions and perceptions are felt and expressed as the system finds a healthier order.
- Experiences and digests the process and takes in the new order from which they can form a new story.

It is interesting to reflect from a brain plasticity perspective on how many new neurons may be firing after such a process.

The Family system seeks balance and resolution and from my perspective, what we resolve for ourselves today, does not have to be carried into the future for our children or grandchildren to deal with. From both a neuroscience and Epigenetics perspective, firing off beliefs and emotions along the same neural pathways repeatedly, must only re-enforce the belief or feeling being expressed or felt for the person. Such a strong neural pathway may also become a possible blueprint for the next generation to take on, as shown in studies discussed by Dawson Church (2007) in his book about epigenetics and neuroscience *The Genie in your Genes*. DNA is switched on or off by signals outside the DNA molecule by many biological components including thoughts and emotions and what we receive through relationship bonds. Further, Church (2007) said that: “*beliefs can become Biology.*”

Hence the power of Family Constellations as a brief, therapeutic, experiential and solution-focused approach now has some scientific foundations from the latest findings in neuroscience and epigenetics. These findings show how a process such as

Family Constellations may actively involve the ability of the brain to rewire itself through new sensory experiences, thereby creating new neural pathways. Hence, providing the space for a new story to emerge of victory, over the odds, surviving, or better still thriving, rather than remaining a victim of circumstance.

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Bio

Yildiz Sethi is a Family Constellation facilitator, trainer and author. She provides consultations and training in Family Constellations and has been holding workshops and training in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane Australia for over a decade. She is the author of three books. Her latest book *Rapid Core Healing Pathways to Growth and emotional healing*. (2016) show how Family Constellations may be used with Emotional Mind Integration (EMI) in a powerful and seamless methodology of Rapid Core Healing (RCH) for the speedy and effective resolution of personal and systemic issues.

Her other two books were number 1 best seller books (Amazon) *Stardust on the Spiritual Path* and *Be Rich AND Spiritual* where the theory and practice of Family and Business Constellations are featured. www.familyconstellations.com.au
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