

Family Constellations, Neuroscience and Epigenetics Yildiz Sethi

I am going to discuss the modality of Family Constellations in terms of Neuroscience and Epigenetics and its psychotherapeutic processes

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 and present day cutting edge methodologies. It is often referred to as Systemic psychotherapy. The process is phenomenological, brief, experiential and solution focused and may take place in groups or private sessions.

It is;

- Contextual in viewing the client in the context of their family system.
- Phenomenological.
Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that attempts to put aside the therapist's presumptions or attitudes, in order to provide an unconditional space for the client to explore their experience in the world. This involves the rule of epoch, description, horizontalization or equalization. This was adapted in more recent times and has been brought forward to the present by Ernesto Spinnelli in 2005 for psychotherapy. This is explored in my book *Rapid Core Healing pathways to growth and emotional healing* (2016) pg 86
- Brief in that for many clients only one session for each issue is required. However the Family Constellation process may also take place within a longer psychotherapeutic process.
- Experiential in that it is a body-based in involving senses and emotions that may be experienced by observing or taking part in the process.

- Solution focused in finding the best solution for the person concerned in their system.

Family Constellations was developed by the German family psychotherapist Bert Hellinger in the late 1980's. Since then it has spread through Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries (Spain and South America) and many countries in Europe. It is becoming popular in Asia and appears to be growing at a slower rate in English speaking countries such as England, North America and Australia.

Family Constellations is a process that has traditionally taken place in workshops and may also take place in private sessions. In the group process, people sit in a circle with a trained facilitator and take it in turns to look at their issue. The client sets up their inner vision of an issue, after a brief discussion with the facilitator, by using people from the group to represent those of their issue. In this way, their inner eye or unconscious image or sense is put out into the room to be seen and felt. This becomes a constellation. If necessary, further representatives relevant to the issue may be added as the constellation proceeds.

This is visual and experiential, as representatives placed in a constellation often become aware of physical sensations or emotions as they stand in the field known as the 'knowing field'. The name 'knowing field' was given to the constellation experience by Dr Albrecht Mahr (2002) when it was found that it is capable of providing information pertinent to the issue or family system being explored.

The facilitator's role is to follow and guide the process towards the best solution for the client and the system.

From an epigenetic perspective, the systemic or generational patterns are brought to light to be seen and resolved. In simplified terms, epigenetics is the study of the biological mechanisms that have the ability to switch genes on or off.

Church, D. in *The Genie in Your Genes* (2007) shows through his discussion of Epigenetics that DNA is not necessarily hard-wired and may be influenced by the environment, ecology, relationships and emotions, to name a few possibilities. This means that human beings have far more control than we previously thought, to switch DNA on or off. Hence, what we carry with or for our family system is an important part of our mental, relational and overall health.

This points to the possibility that if we can reduce stressors and resolve emotional turmoil, come out of confusion and improve wellbeing generally it can have a positive affect on mental and physical health.

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. This has been shown by neuroscience to be untrue and is significant in how we approach psychotherapy.

The power of the Family Constellation process is that it 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 several elements simultaneously is likely to have a bigger affect of the neurons involved. This means an effect on the mind, (conscious and unconscious), the perception of the family system as well as the body senses. If these are impacted simultaneously they may effect many aspects of a person's experience.

This may also include the senses (touch, smell, audio and vision), emotion and awareness. In a constellation process several, if not all of these levels of experience may be included in the experiential process, so that many aspects of the neuron system may begin 'firing' in a new way. During the process,

emotions may be released, 'unfinished business' resolved and new perspective found. The process is aided by statements suggested in the form of *Healing sentences* as empowering healing suggestions.

From the neuroplasticity perspective, experiences that trigger neural systems through audio, intellectual and emotions can assist in changing perspective. Gaining more information of oneself within the context of the system can widen perspectives.

If Norridge Doidge's (2015) idea is correct that more neurons firing result in forming new pathways, this can enable deeper changes in the mind and body in allowing a new story to emerge.

The Family Constellation process;

- Puts out the inner (unconscious) image of the issue through spatially placed representatives.
- Allows the client to look at themselves through their representative.
- Allows the client to look at themselves in the context of their family or group
- Allows emotions and perceptions to be felt and expressed as the system finds a healthier order in the process.
- Allows the client to take in the new order from the picture of the finishing of the process.
- May assist the client in finding a new story of themselves.

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

Why Look at Family?

The family-of-origin is considered a fundamental blueprint of the systemic patterns and trends that we carry at a deeply cellular and often unconscious level, according to Hellinger in *No Waves Without the Ocean* (2006).

Family Constellations is a systemic approach. This means it views the client in relation to their environment or family system. The client is not only connected by genetic material (DNA) but also social and emotional information coming from ancestral, relational and contextual experiences. From an epigenetic perspective the essence of these appear to be transferred through relational bonds generationally. This appears to take place whether a person remains in contact with or are aware of their ancestry or not.

Franz Ruppert in his book *Trauma, Bonding & Family Constellations* (2008) gives examples of identical twins who were separated at birth. He shows that even though the twins have identical DNA and some may have similar behaviours or emotional patterns they also have significant differences. It appears that lifestyle and choice also have an effect on how their DNA operate. This is where the studies in epigenetics become interesting.

Developments in neuroscience show the brain constantly repairs itself and has a neuroplastic consistency as discussed by Weinhold, B. in *Epigenetics: The Science of Change* (2016). 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 and other processes.

Weinhold, B. in *Environmental Health Perspectives. Epigenetics: The Science of Change. Methylation DNA methylation* (2016) discusses factors that can have an epigenetic influence. These may be beliefs, emotions, diet, life style, relationships, ecology, toxins and trauma as well as physical environment. This means that people can change much more than we thought, especially with good therapeutic, effective approaches, as in being able to change thoughts, feelings and perspectives may potentially 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 that enable people to reframe or change their perspectives, in essence change their story, are 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 not only to focus on test results or brain functionality, but also the quality of experience and feeling as well.

In addition, the body itself needs to be considered, as the body 'remembers' in carrying imprints of the past. There is much research into the connection of mind and body and it appears that psychological and emotional stressors also impact it, according to Babette Rothchild, 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 through which thoughts and feelings are transmitted to the body tissues.

Further, Doidge discusses in his books 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. The '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 palatable and less painful or disturbing than the original one.

Human beings are meaning-making beings. They always have a story of themselves. If that story is optimistic, successful and overcomes obstacles and shows resilience, this is a healthy story. It has 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 drives life but in a less healthy way.

Many people become stuck in their story because of its disturbing qualities because they may be suffering from personal or systemic trauma. 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. If this cannot be completed satisfactorily at the time, it often remains in the body as an interrupted movement or disturbance. This may manifest later as an anxiety or a range of mental health disorders, or traumas. These disturbances may remain in the family system until they can be dealt with appropriately.

As a psychotherapist of over 17 years and a Family Constellation facilitator of over 11 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 evidence available.

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 here.

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 that can flow to change 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, said:

“It’s never too late to have a happy childhood” Milton Erickson Foundation (cited 2015.)

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 the person had of themselves. The story is one version of an interpretation only.

Unfortunately, how we feel, is often not considered to be 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 is limited in providing and understanding of the human condition.

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 reorganize themselves in a healthier way. There is still a lot to discover. Until more is revealed I believe we need to stand up for qualitative data in listening to what our clients tell us.

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 by our children or grandchildren. 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*. So we should make sure such beliefs are strong and healthy as it can influence our DNA and our health.

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 makes the statement that, *"beliefs can become Biology."*

Hence the power of Family Constellations as a brief, therapeutic, experiential and solution-focused approach 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

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