

Unraveling Family Secrets

Bert Hellinger interviewed on Family Constellations,

By Humberto del Pozo in Santiago de Chile, September 1999.
(translated from Spanish)

What is the family psyche?

We observe when we work with the family that they are driven by a common principle or force, and I call that a family consciousness. We can observe that a circumscribed number of people are subject to unconscious drives to behave in a certain way. For instance, if in a family one member has been excluded or forgotten, for example a child that died early, and is no longer counted among the siblings, then later on in that family, in the next generation only, another member takes up the same fate of that child. This person then wants to die, with nobody knowing why.

And we do a family constellation. That means that in a group, a person collects himself and selects representatives for the members of his family –including one for himself- and places them in a space in relationship to one another, following only his own intuition. And as soon as those people have taken up their places they feel like the people they represent without knowing them. So by means of the Family Constellation, we get a real picture of what is going on in the family.

How does the therapy then work for the unconscious behaviors you mentioned?

Let's say in this example, the person selects a person for his father, mother, his/her siblings and one for himself. Then he sets them up in a space, and they are all looking in one direction. That is very strange, so when we see that we know immediately somebody has been forgotten or excluded. Then they suddenly remember, "Oh Yes! ... there was a sister who was handicapped and died after three months..." Then I select a representative for the dead sister and I place her in front of the others. And they all feel relieved for she can now be included, and another

child who has become ill, for instance, of diabetes, has now a greater chance to deal with that illness in a positive way.

I have seen you require very little information from the client before asking him to set up his Family Constellation. Is that enough? How come?

Yes, for the perception is helped most by asking only for the most essential information, and for that to be done just prior to the constellation, not earlier.

The essential questions are:

1. Who belongs to the family?
2. Are there any stillborn members of the family, or any who have died early? Has there been any special fate in the family, for example someone with a disability?
3. Was one of the parents or grandparents engaged, or married before, or in a significant prior relationship?

Any further questioning usually hinders openness to the phenomenological information which emerges. This is true both for the therapist as well as the representatives. This is also the reason why the therapist declines any prior conversations with the client or extensive questionnaires. In addition, it is best if the client remains silent during the constellation, and that the representatives refrain from asking the client any questions.

How is it that somebody is selected to represent an excluded person?

The force that operates to select somebody to represent the person excluded, that is the family

consciousness and it is unconscious. You see it by its effects. This family consciousness follows certain laws.

One of them is that every member of a family has an equal right to belong. Now if one member is excluded or forgotten he doesn't belong any more. So the family consciousness has a tendency to completeness of the family. This is one of the laws. And we can actually see by its effects which member of the family is subjected to them and who aren't. Only certain family members are affected and may be entangled in the fates of other family members.

Is it the family who choose that person or the person who chooses to be a representative of the past?

Neither nor. It is the family soul or the family conscience which picks that person. And there is no one guilty of actually picking somebody. It's a force that requires that somebody does it and the weakest one - as a rule- takes it upon himself.

If it is a child, it's often the youngest one that takes it upon himself. The one that can resist the forces least. But I don't want to make that a generalization. I have observed it often, but often it is the first born, too, quite often it is, but it is always one in a weaker position, who does that.

Who are those included in the family consciousness?

A circumscribed number of persons belong to the family consciousness:

1. the children, including stillborn children and those who have died early,
2. the parents and their siblings,
3. the grandparents,
4. sometimes one of the great-grandparents and, at times, ancestors even further back, and, very strangely, people who are not relatives belong to the family consciousness too:
5. everybody - and this is most important - who made room to the advantage of the above members, belongs to the family consciousness. This includes, in particular, former partners of parents or grandparents, as well as all those whose misfortune or death brought the family an advantage or gain.
6. victims of violence and murder by any members of the family.

Can you share with us some of your experiences with former partners?

Yes, from experiences I had recently with persons who have suffered a loss in favor of somebody within the family. For instance, a former wife of the father, from which he has separated. The new wife has an advantage because the other one suffered a loss, so the latter belongs to the family. And she will be represented always.

This is one of the laws to which I have seen no exception, she will be represented by a child of the second wife. One of the daughters, for instance, of the second wife will suddenly feel like the first wife. She becomes angry with her father and nobody knows why. That is again a result of the family consciousness. This is the family consciousness.

How do you work in a Family Constellations with such issues?

The family constellations shows the state of the family, where the problem is. In the case I have just mentioned as an example, I would bring into the family system a representative for the first wife. And then, the man, her former husband, will look at her and will tell her: "I am sorry I hurt you. I honor you as my first wife". And the second wife will tell her: "You are the first, I am the second one. And please be kind if I keep my husband and please be kind to my children". And then the daughter who represented the former wife no longer needs to do so and she can tell the woman who she represents ... that is the former wife in the Constellation: "I am my father and mother's daughter". And she can tell her father: "You are my Dad, I am only your daughter. I have nothing to do with your former wife". In such cases the daughter also becomes the rival of her mother because her father sees her as his former wife. She can now tell her mother. "You are my mother, I am your daughter, please be kind."

I have observed that in situations like this children often develop excema, which is a skin disease . It is very strange. I discovered it by chance. If there is a reconciliation between the two wives, the excema heals or is alleviated. It shows that actually many illnesses are due to the family consciousness. So if you do this work you can help many people so they can live in a better way.

Are your therapeutic methods also applicable with people who are severely ill?

Yes, specially in cases where the problem or illness is caused by systemic implications, or when it is at least a contributing cause.

What are the symptoms that best respond to a systemic psychotherapy?

We can see that certain very threatening illnesses, for example cancer, also have systemic causes. The systemic context shows in the dynamics of: "I will follow you"; that means, a persons wants to follow another member of the family who is sick or dead, by falling ill or seeking death himself too. Or a child who sees someone in his family having the tendency to follow another person in this way, and tries to hold him, saying:

"It's better that I go instead of you." So all this adds up the desire to atone and compensate a fate, seeking in turn a similar fate. Knowing these fundamental dynamics, it is possible to devoid them of their power and alleviate much suffering and pain.

Other symptoms are related to the interrupted movement towards one of the parents.

Thus, for example, heart pains or headaches are frequently expressing a retained love, and back aches develop many times when a person refuses to bow profoundly in respect for his father or mother.

You have said there are dynamics conducive to recurrent patterns of accidents or misfortune. Will you please tell us about the dynamics in such cases?

Serious illnesses, suicides or suicide attempts, or accidents are some of the things we often see in psychotherapy that are motivated by love -the love of a small child. Small children love according to a magical belief system. For the small child, love means: "Wherever you lead, I will follow. Whatever you do, I'll do," or "I love you so much that I want to be with you always." That is: "I'll follow you in your illness" and "I'll follow you in your death." Whenever someone loves in this way, he or she naturally is vulnerable to becoming seriously ill.

But how must the person feel who's loved in this way? How must he or she feel upon seeing that his or her illness or death is causing a child to become ill? How must they feel? Bad, right? Exactly!

In the constellations, we invariably observe that the deceased, the ill, and those who have suffered a difficult fate wish the survivors well. One death or misfortune is sufficient. The dead are well disposed toward the living. It's not only the child who loves, but also those who've suffered or died. In order for the systemic healing to succeed, the child must recognize her deceased relative's love and honor his fate.

I'm not clear what you mean when you say, "recognize his love and honor his fate."

When a child dies, the other members of the family tend to become afraid -in part because they also, perhaps unconsciously, feel the kind of love that makes them want to follow the child. In order to contain their fear, they deaden their feelings. They effectively shut the child out of their hearts and souls. They may talk about the child, but they've cut off their feelings. Then, even though the child is dead, he or she is still having a deadening effect on the family system, a deadening of feeling. For love to succeed, the child must have a place in the family, just as if he or she were living. The surviving members of the family must live their feelings for the child and their grief. They might put up a picture of the child, or plant a tree in the child's memory. But the most important thing is that the survivors take the deceased with them into life, and allow their love for the child to live.

A lot of people act as if the dead were gone. But where can they go? Obviously, they're physically absent, but they're also present in their continuing effects on the living. When they have their appropriate place in the family, deceased persons have a friendly effect. Otherwise, they cause anxiety. When they get their proper place, they support the living in living instead of supporting them in the illusion that they should die.

What about Aids?

To be infected with the virus or contract AIDS is not a family dynamics, not directly. Of course people who contract AIDS are mostly homosexuals, and homosexuality is a family dynamics. If I go back to the previous example, if there was a child who died early and the child was a girl, and later on in the family there are only boys, then one of the boys has to represent a girl. Now, this leads to homosexuality; if a man has to represent a woman in a family. But when there is AIDS, the main issue is that they face their destiny and fate. By what I have seen they usually have no illusions, it is easy to work with them.

With regards to the dynamics of homosexuality, first, I want to say a couple of general things about the systemic view.

Everyone is an integral part of the relationship systems in which he or she lives, and everyone has an equal value in the functioning of those systems -everyone in the family system is essential to the system.

Differences in a social system add to its durability and stability. The conscience that seeks to exclude individuals from the group because they are different operates on a different level than does the systemic conscience that seeks to balance the system as a whole by guarding the right of every member to belong to the system. It has very serious consequences for the younger members of a family system when someone is excluded from the system because he or she is different. I've seen many cases in which younger persons suffered terribly because they had to identify with an older relative who was excluded from the family because of his being homosexual.

This fundamental commitment to the intrinsic dignity and value of all persons makes it possible to view differences openly.

Having said that, there's an inescapable fact that homosexual couples face: Their love can't lead to their having children together. Procreation's insistence on heterosexuality has consequences that can't be ignored as if they didn't exist. In any partnership without children, the partners can separate with less guilt -they only hurt

one another. But when parents separate, that has enormous consequences for their children, and they must be very careful or their children will be harmed by what they do. This added guilt makes it more difficult for parents to separate, but, paradoxically, it also supports their partnership. Couples without children - including homosexual couples- don't have the support of these consequences to hold them together during crises.

Homosexual couples, like other childless couples interested in long-term, loving partnerships, especially need to make clear and conscious decisions about the purpose and goals of their partnership. Some goals are more conducive to long-term stability in relationships than are others. Wanting to avoid loneliness or the feeling of emptiness, for example, isn't a goal that supports a long-term partnership of equals.

Everyone has his or her own path in life -part of it we choose, but part of it just comes with life and isn't really chosen. That's the part that's hard to deal with. The homosexuals with whom I've worked -even those who maintain that they chose their sexual orientation freely- have been caught in systemic dynamics, experiencing in their lives the consequences of what others in their system did or suffered. They've been inducted into the service of the system, and as children, they couldn't defend themselves from the systemic pressures to which they were subjected. So that's the second thing they have to deal with, that they're carrying something for the family.

I've rarely worked with someone who wanted to "get over" being homosexual. When I work with homosexual persons, homosexuality isn't the primary issue. I merely try to bring to light any entanglements that might be limiting the fullness of life, but I have no intention of trying to change someone's sexual orientation.

What are the patterns you have observed in relationship to homosexuality?

I've observed three patterns of systemic entanglements in conjunction with homosexuality, but I don't know whether they're actually its cause:

A child was pressured to represent a person of the opposite sex in the system, because a child of the same gender wasn't available. For example, a boy had to represent one of his deceased older sisters, because none of the other surviving children was female. Or another boy had to represent his father's first fiancée, who had been treated unjustly. This is the most painful and difficult of the three patterns I've seen.

A child was pressured to represent someone who had been excluded from the family system -or who had been vilified by the system -even though that person was of the same gender. Homosexuals living in this pattern have the position of being "outsiders." For example, a boy was systemically identified with his mother's first fiancé, who contracted syphilis and withdrew from the engagement. Although the fiancé had acted honorably, he was scorned and despised by the boy's mother. The boy's feelings of being scorned were very similar to what the man must have felt -as if they were his own feelings.

A child remained caught in the sphere of influence of the gender-opposite parent, and was not able to complete the psychological movement of taking the same-gender parent.

What is the dynamics you have seen in working with addicts?

When there is addiction, for example alcoholism, we have very strange family constellations. In such a family the wife despises her husband. And she does not want that the children honor the husband or go with him and with his family, she says: "I am good, he is not good". And then the children take revenge on the mother, they prove to her that they are not good and that she is wrong. So they take revenge. As a result it has become clear that during addiction, it actually can only be taken care off by men, not by women. So the therapists for drug addicts should be men. But women who honor men, they can help, only if they are not trying to help "the poor addict" or so, for then they treat them like they were children, and the drug addict has to become a man. And he becomes a man when he honors his father. There is a very simple image to go in this direction: for instance, I set up his father – in a Constellation- and behind him I place the grandfather, and behind him the great grandfather. And then the addict leans against his father and that is a masculine strength for him and it helps.

But on the other hand, many addicts are suicidal, and this is another dynamic, one you find in families directed by the family consciousness:

A child wants to follow a dead person, for instance the mother or the father... he develops illness, is prone to accidents or to suicidal tendencies.

A child sees that his father wants to follow his own father, and he says: "I will do it in you place Dad", and he becomes anorexic... "I rather disappear"... he wants to prevent his father from dying.

This is magical thinking and completely unconscious. Only in the family constellation it comes to light, then it can be exposed and you can find a solution within the family.

How many times do you have to repeat a Constellation?

No repetitions. It is done once. The Constellation shows it and then a healing movement can start operating. But it is not so easy because if, for instance, a child wants to die instead of his father, he feels innocent and great, but if he follows the solution ... he feels small and feels guilty in a very special way ... so it needs a special development within the soul for a child to take these steps. So it is not that you can bring about a healing or a solution in the way you repair a watch. We have to support the soul and find in the family resources for the client.

What laws govern the behavior of those who belong to the family soul?

As I said before, the family members behave as if they all share a common soul, or a common conscience, and as if they are all subject to a common higher authority. It even appears that this authority follows certain laws and demands.

The Greater Love

The first phenomenon we see here is, that the members of a family are bound together by this greater soul, or common family soul. This is true even to the extent that a child, whose mother or father dies early, feels a longing to follow them into death. Even parents or grandparents occasionally want to follow their child or grandchild into death, and we can observe this dynamic between partners as well. If one dies, often the other one loses the desire to live.

Balance and Compensation

The second phenomenon we notice, is that there is an urge to balance gains and losses across generations. That means that someone who has profited at someone else's expense will pay for it with an equivalent loss to compensate. If those who benefited were also the perpetrators, their descendants are often the ones who end up paying. The family soul uses them in place of their ancestors, frequently without anybody being aware of it. And if somebody was guilty in a former generation, but he did not face his guilt then somebody from a later generation will take up the atonement for that

guilt. So for instance he will kill himself. We'll see that with the Nazi murderers for instance. And many descendants two or three generations later have a tendency to be suicidal, they want to redress that.

The Order of Precedence

In other words, the family soul favors those who came earlier over those who came later. This represents a third movement, or natural order of the family soul. Someone who is born later is prepared to die for someone who came earlier in the system, sacrificing his own life in an attempt to prevent the death of another family member. Or, the later family member may be atoning for the unresolved guilt of someone who came earlier. A daughter may represent her father's former wife, and behave towards him more like a partner than like his child. In such a case, she becomes her mother's rival. If the father's former partner had been wronged, the daughter may take over the feelings of that woman towards the two parents.

Integrity

The fourth order of the family soul attends to the integrity of the family and demands that every family member have the right to belong. Later family members represent earlier members who have been excluded or forgotten, thereby honoring their right to belong, and restoring them to the family by making a place for them. Whenever one member is excluded or forgotten, then this kind of conscience or soul picks somebody from a later generation to regress the former person. And this person then acts out the life of the former one.

This is only a brief summary of some of the movements of the family soul and its underlying orders. My books "Love's Hidden Symmetry" and "Acknowledging What Is" deals with the topic more extensively.

What kind of solutions can be found for a client? What constitutes the phenomenological approach here?

The phenomenological field of vision ranges from a narrow point of view to a spacious awareness, it extends from what is close at hand to distant vistas. This means, instead of looking only at the client, the therapist also looks at the entire family; and instead of looking only at the client and his family, he looks beyond them, to a larger field of phenomena and to the larger soul containing all of it. An individual and his family are bound together by a larger field and affected by the

forces of a greater common soul, which appears to guide and direct them. Furthermore, it seems clear that a problem may only be understood fully, and solutions may only emerge, in the context of a larger view.

If I hope to assist the client's soul, I must look at his soul as being guided by the family soul. But if I only look at the client and his family, I may recognize what may have led to entanglements, but the solution may not present itself, until a connection has been made to those forces and dimensions of soul which lie beyond the individual and his family. These dimensions are beyond our influence. We can merely remain open and receptive to them.

When we focus on the essential during a constellation, this greater soul may provide insights into a potentially healing image, a healing sentence, and a possible next step. The therapist merely makes himself open to be touched by this larger soul, by refraining from any direction on his part, and remaining deeply humble towards all that he fears, even fear itself. Then suddenly, a picture, a word, or a sentence may emerge, guiding him to the next step. But it will always be a step into the dark and the unknown. Only in the end will it be clear whether this was the right step, or if it actually helped. By taking a phenomenological stance we come into contact with these dimensions of soul, and this is more easily accomplished by non-doing than by doing.

The therapist's own focused presence assists the client in adopting a phenomenological attitude himself, and to receiving the insights and strength it offers. Often the client cannot bear what is being revealed and closes down against it. The therapist consents even to that. The therapist does not allow himself to become entangled in the destiny of the client and his family. This may seem cold-hearted. But our experience has shown, that insight gained in any other way, remains incomplete and tentative, for the client as well as for the therapist.

Can you give us examples regarding those whose misfortune or death brought the family an advantage or gain?

In constellations with the descendants of those who had acquired great wealth, what was remarkable were the particularly difficult fates of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren, which could not be explained by events in the family alone. After representatives had been added for the people who had suffered through the acquisition of this wealth, it became apparent that their sacrifice continued to have an effect in the family over several generations.

The same is the case were for instance there are laborers who died during the construction of the railroad or in oil production, whose contribution to the prosperity of their employers was not acknowledged and honored.

What if someone is murdered in a family?

I will give you an example. It was in a supervision group. A therapist set up a client. The father had killed his wife, the daughters were left and are now in the care of the wife's sister. And the two children are very upset. I set up the man, and the woman, the sister and the two children. The woman was immediately frightened. She turned to her sister for protection. The man turned away. He wanted to leave. He had actually killed himself after he had killed his wife. So I had to make them face the real issue. So I brought the wife and let her lie on the floor in order to show she is not alive, she is now dead, so she can't just go to her sister for protection anymore. So I

reestablished the reality in this point. Then I brought the man back, let him look at his wife. And he looked at her and he could not move. Then I made him breathe deeply and suddenly it broke out of him. A very, very deep pain. A tremendous pain. And then he fell down on his knees and looked at his wife and he just cried. Then, only then could he really look at his wife. And then I let him lie at the side of his wife, because that was the reality.

He was also dead. And then the two, they moved together with very, very deep love. That's the strange thing, that after that they are just united in deep love. And from this I conclude, and I has similar experiences in other constellations, even more traumatic, that at the end if both recognize themselves as dead, then the dead ... they move together. A strange movement that those dead just move together, mingle with one another, come to peace with very, very deep love.

Now this movement is for me only possible, if the perpetrators and the victims, whoever, are at the service of a false raging beyond them, far beyond them. And only if all of them look at this greater force, then the antagonism between them can cease and they become very humble in the soul of this greater force and what unites all of them I call then a greater soul and I don't have a better name for that, but it goes beyond the fields, because a field is fixed. The soul is something that steers, it directs a course of history and of personal life. And in this soul we participate. And instead of looking at the individual as having a soul, he participates in a soul.

This soul has several levels. And in the foreground there is a level of very harsh laws. And beneath it there is something quite different. For instance I can set up a family, two people, and I don't do anything and suddenly, they are driven by a force

and they face the real issue, and this force directs them towards a solution, which goes beyond the laws which operate in the foreground. If we can reach that soul, we reach the healing force.

But perhaps just one more thing about the constellation with the man who killed her wife and then committed suicide. The two daughters were very upset. And the one was full of hatred. It was quite clear, she becomes a murderer with this hatred. This one went to her father, wanted to go to her father. And the other one was very upset in a different way. She wanted to become a victim. And I let them lie beside their parents. Then they were united with them, then they could stand up; no longer with hatred, no longer with despair, and they could turn away from the dead, leave them alone and look at life. That would also be a solution in there.

What is the case when a member of the family has become a perpetrator?

With regards to perpetrators and victims, the murderers feel great very often, very strong, when faced with their victims... And then in their families the weakest one takes upon the atonement. In the constellation, when they are faced with the victims, the victims become very, very great and the murderers very, very small.

And so there

is a kind of balance achieved at that level. And then the living are no longer involved, if that can happen.

That is a kind of healing ritual.

We have seen that what causes disturbances is that the living take upon themselves something that only the dead among themselves can achieve. So the healing movement would be that the living look at the dead, let them do this movement, look at them once more, then turn away and look to the future. That would be the healing movement that goes on another level. So the interference in the realm of the dead causes for the living a disturbance.

In many constellations involving the descendants of murderers, for example the perpetrators during the Nazi Regime, it was clear that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren wanted to lie next to the victims, which implies a danger of strong suicidal tendencies. The solution was similar for both groups. The victims must be looked at and acknowledged by all members of the family, who need to bow to them and grieve for them.

Afterwards, those who originally benefited, as well as the perpetrators, need to lie with the victims, and the other family members need to let them go to that realm.

Only then will the descendants be relieved. And then those living could perhaps

look at one another in a different way.

What happens when people are involved in civil wars or the like?

A recent observation I made in family constellations, that may have a bearing on harsh historical events, is that when we allow the dead victims and the dead murderers to face each other - and in family constellations we can set up a setting where that is possible -then it doesn't need any intervention from outside. There will be a movement where they come together and all that was considered by the living as unjust or which requires atonement does not apply to the dead. They meet on a level where they are really one.

We saw this dynamics in constellations set up in our recent seminars in Spain, Brazil, the one we just finished in Chile, and in Argentina in relationship to the so called “mothers of Plaza de Mayo”. In Santiago you saw the constellation set up for the daughter of a labor union leader who “disappeared”. I asked her to choose a representative for his father and five men to represent all other victims, a representative for the chief of the perpetrators and five men to represent all the perpetrators. Then without us saying a word, we saw how much pain there is among the dead victims, and the movement –which lasted for 20 minutes or so- whereby they reached towards their perpetrators, faced them and latter came to lie together mingled with the perpetrators, all dead in peace. The last movement was notable for the chief of the perpetrators, once lying on the floor, moved and placed himself with his feet touching those of the leader of the victims, and there he remained still in peace.

In severe collective entanglements involving heavy guilt and suffering the Constellation’s work may become a deeply moving and a powerfully changing way of reconciliation.

In what other areas can your systemic method be applied?

There is a tendency at present that we extend the field away from psychotherapy and include many other areas, because it seems in them what I call orders of love -which lead to entanglements- can be applied in ways which lead to solutions. As an example I mention the work in prisons.

We were in London last year and we worked in three prisons; it was very astonishing how the work was positively received by the prisoners. In Germany there is now research being done on how to apply this work in prisons. My

suggestion was that we work first with murderers and their victims, because that seems to be the extreme case and it shows the laws best. I think if we can gather from them ways of solving these difficult issues then it can be extended more easily to other fields.

Another field is schools for instance. Teachers can do that, apply that without being psychotherapists. Or in social work it can be easily applied. And to find solutions for relationship difficulties in organizations too, as we did in the workshop here in Santiago on September 3. So we try to get away from the restrictions of psychotherapy and apply in a wider field. And I think that's quite in harmony with what you actually want to achieve.

I have seen that a 3rd International Conference on Family Constellations will be held in Germany in May 2001. What is the main focus going to be?

It's main focus will be perspectives for solutions in ethnic conflicts. Conflicts in families and communities caused by differences in religion, culture and shared history; their consequences in the unconscious of the individual, of the family and of the nation; the trans-generational transmission of these consequences; attempts for solutions which may promote the bridging between psychotherapy and political decisions: These subjects will be thoroughly investigated in lectures and in workshops.

From different nations "psycho-political" projects will be presented which have proved to be successful.

Humberto del Pozo: Thank you dear professor for the opportunity of such a moving and enriching conversation.

Bert Hellinger: Those were good questions... I was forced to tell a lot of secrets. My pleasure.