

## **Bert Hellinger Family Systems Therapy**

Addiction counsellors are usually interested in their clients' families. We may believe the roots of any addiction are in part genetic and in part the clients' experience of their families (*Murray Bowen, 1974*) (9). We acknowledge that one of the tasks and benefits of recovery is the healing of family relationships. Those relationships were often unhappy to start with and almost invariably more so by the time an addict reaches treatment.

Bert Hellinger of Germany devised a family systems therapy that can be carried out on an individual basis or in workshops for anyone interested in resolving personal, relationship or family difficulties and tensions. Hellinger took his experience from extensive work with families all over the world, where he noticed that within a family system there are certain "orders" or hidden dynamics that need to be respected and put into place before tensions and "entanglements" (dysfunction, co-dependency) can be resolved. If the correct orders within the family system are out of place all kinds of problems can occur, usually affecting the most vulnerable people coming later in the family, the children.

In the 1990s this Hellinger work began to spread to the UK although I have yet to hear of it being practised in the treatment field in this country. I discovered it to be a gentle and healing way of working and resolving family difficulties.

The beauty about the work is that it is a brief therapy oriented towards resolution. The work quickly reveals dynamics that bind a person to his or her relationship system in a dysfunctional way, constraining personal development. Hellinger-work is fitting for all in recovery and their family members. We are all family members. To work on a family problem it is not necessary or usual to have your family at the workshop; it is more usual to go alone or perhaps as a couple.

Hellinger has been invited to introduce this innovative way of working world-wide. In Germany, now USA and perhaps other places in Europe this family therapy is quite regularly used in 12-step treatment centres so that families can begin to resolve their difficulties and estrangement.

The systemic guilt and shame that many German families carried following World War II took Hellinger on the path towards discovering ways of healing such painful trauma. He noted a strong tendency in us to use our strength to suffer, to hold onto our problems rather than to be able to move into solutions. Why should it seem preferable to us to suffer than to heal?

When we go down the path of destructiveness or suffering, Hellinger believes we do so with a love and strong loyalty to our family. Although we may be angry and hurt, it is this love's energy that keeps us entangled. It is the same energy that heals but the love needs to be expressed at a different level of consciousness.

Within the family there is this loyalty, a fellowship of fate, a hidden conscience. It is expressed most strongly by children towards their parents, between siblings and between partners. If someone is ill, for example, owing to this bond of loyalty one of the children may try unconsciously to hold onto the sick person and remain close by becoming ill or compensating by failing to thrive himself.

It is also felt strongly when someone has gained some advantage within the family, possibly at the expense of others. Those who have been given an advantage may feel guilt and want to share in the fate of those who are disadvantaged, sabotaging their advantages through an underlying stronger need for balance and compensation within the system, maintaining loyalty and connection with the

family. Problems, unhappiness, illness, even though painful, give us a sense of belonging with our family, so we stay entangled. If we find a solution there is a price to pay in that we no longer feel as close and we lose the sense of belonging. The result of this moving away is guilt and loneliness. This helps to explain the difficulties and longings of those in early recovery who may feel separate from their family. We feel we have abandoned those we love, those we owe. However we can learn to love by being involved but not entangled. By taking our family fully into our hearts, just as they are, we can feel free.

**Description of the work:** In a workshop participants sit in a circle and usually begin by talking about what has brought them. Initially, a client identifies a problem, a difficult issue, to the facilitator and describes what they are seeking as a resolution:

*“If you were to wake up tomorrow and found the answer, how would it be different?”*

The therapist collects information about the important people and events in the client’s life and family. Simple facts are required about father, mother, both sets of grandparents if known, sisters and brothers, position in family, as well as any former partners of mother and father. Details of how people got on with each other and what they did or did not do are not required. An important question to ask is if a family member has died young or in tragic circumstances, in other words, *“Is anyone missing or forgotten about?”* Also if there are “secrets” and things not talked about, if people are excluded, disowned, not acknowledged, somebody more vulnerable within the family system will invariably be affected, moving into positions they should not try to be in, for example a child feeling responsible for a parent, which creates a lack of personal growth, even illness. Murray Bowen (1974) likens this homeostasis with the rebalancing movement of a mobile. Bert Hellinger calls this kind of responsibility “blind loyalty” (another word for this could be “co-dependency”). The work will involve work to transform this to an “enlightened loyalty” that is healthier for all concerned.

Based on these facts, the therapist decides how to set up the constellation. She develops a hypothesis about the family dynamics and who should be represented in the work. The client will then choose people from the group to represent important family members, including a representative for themselves initially. The client places the representatives in whatever way she feels is right according to her inner image. This is done carefully and slowly but without trying too hard. The work needs to be done from the heart or feeling level rather than an intellectual level. At this point, the client sits back amongst the “holding” group circle and observes.

The facilitator then watches for any movement that may occur, however slight, and particularly where people are looking, whether at a certain person within the family, perhaps feeling drawn towards that person, or whether they are facing the other way and looking outside of the family altogether as if wanting to leave. The constellation is responding to what Rupert Sheldrake terms “the morphogenetic field” (see page5)

The facilitator will always keep in mind the original question that the person working has asked and their desired resolution. The constellation then evolves in two parts. The first part is getting to the root of the problem or “entanglement”, which may involve bringing in representatives for other family members as the work continues.

The second part of the work is to restore the correct order to the system, giving a place to anyone missing or unacknowledged and finding the good place within the constellation where representatives feel most comfortable. This is confirmed by watching the body language and reactions of the family

representatives. This allows the energy to flow in the right direction towards the most vulnerable in the family system, the children. As Hellinger says, *“Parents need to give and children need to take”*.

If the movement of energy is from child to parent, to grand-parent, or towards somebody who has been rejected, disowned or forgotten by the family system, there will be discord, lack of harmony or even illness.

The person working may have come because s/he senses a feeling of being cut-off or separate, not belonging, out of place. This could indeed be a precursor of the need for mood-altering chemicals.

As the constellation continues, the therapist will ask each representative for feedback about physical sensations, feelings and awareness. These statements lead to the therapist beginning to experiment, making changes in the constellation placements. More representatives can be added to stand in for other people who may impact the system.

Eventually the client will take their place in the constellation and the one who has been representing them will withdraw. Whatever the problem or difficulty, this constellation work gives an opportunity to gain a wider perspective of the family dynamic and a much greater understanding, a new picture of the family. This can lead to resolution, bringing physical and emotional relief that continues to have an effect over a long period of time.

Representatives are not encouraged to act out anger or to confront or put interpretations on the actions of another. It is only necessary to see where the original pain and entanglement occurred within the family which may have gone back a few generations. The facilitator will ensure that the client doing the work is given much support. No one doing the work is “over-flooded” and no one is under pressure to do more than they feel possible at any moment. People only work their constellations if they have a real desire to do it and they choose whatever they want/need to explore.

In his book, *“Love’s Hidden Symmetry”* (4) (p 282) Hellinger explains more about the way he facilitates workshops. In regular group dynamic psychotherapy every participant can confront or interpret everyone else, leaving everyone exposed and vulnerable. When this happens, those who are vulnerable or not experienced enough in group work can get caught up in group dynamics that act as a collective defence. This can be destructive. In such a group those who do not seriously desire to explore something in themselves interrupt the process of the whole group and can hinder others.

In the constellation family work, no one is attacked and no one is blamed. Instead, respect for the individual and the family and a loving and supportive stance establish an unconscious solidarity within the group that has a spiritual quality. This enables those who are vulnerable to present their themes and work with them in a safe context.

To do this work the therapist needs to have a good knowledge of the orders and family dynamics that Hellinger discovered, as well as the factors throughout the generations that impact the family well-being and functioning, for instance:

- Everyone in the system needs to belong, in the order that they belong
- Everyone needs to be honoured and be acknowledged in their rightful place
- Those who come later (i.e. younger) take from those who came earlier
- Parents give and children take
- In a relationship between parents the giving and taking needs to be in equilibrium
- Guilt and merit belong with whoever earned them

The “family conscience” operates to compensate when these “orders” are not in place. The family constellation work is therefore a tool that helps us bring to light such entanglements, suffering, hurt and pain, and opens the way to a solution.

**Background to the work:** The beginning of this constellation work was built on contributions of many predecessors including Jakob Moreno (6), Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy (1) and Virginia Satir (7). Moreno was the pioneer of systemic dramatic therapy and used improvisational theatre in an approach he called psychodrama. He brought in observers from the group as participants and attempted to penetrate levels not usually apparent. Psychodrama provided a space where clients could experiment with new behaviours, testing their fears and anxieties against reality and the role-playing facilitated changes in behaviour.

In the 1970s Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy explored structures of relationship in family histories and found repetitive, almost predictable events in the histories of thousands of families in his hospital practice. As these dynamics were not externally visible he described them as “invisible loyalties”. His experience was that these invisible loyalties have a stronger effect than actions that can be seen or learned patterns that are detected by taking a history.

Martin Buber (2) had a strong influence on Boszormenyi-Nagy’s work and the concept of balance between giving and taking within a relationship. The system has to remain in balance, which also takes in the ethic of justice and retribution that may extend over many generations.

Virginia Satir focused on communication within the system. One of her principles was that the basis of change is established when a client’s feelings of self-esteem are raised sufficiently to accept others as they are. Satir developed the technique of using family sculptures where family members were arranged to reveal the relationships in the structure of the family by using a spatial representation. This made clear how communication patterns and family rules were experienced differently by each person. Satir called them “family reconstructions”, her term for the client’s confrontation with their family history.

Bert Hellinger built on these methods, developing “constellations” as a form of group therapy. He is a very modest man who from the very start has shared his ideas and discoveries with everyone who was interested and has made no attempt to protect or license the use of his work. He is now 78 years old, and has had extensive and broad training as a psychoanalyst, psychotherapist and systemic family therapist (*see biography*).

He acknowledges several important influences on his life and work: his parents, whose faith immunised him against accepting Hitler’s National Socialism, his 20 years as a priest, particularly as a missionary to the Zulu, and his participation in interracial, ecumenical training in group dynamics.

Psychiatrists, doctors, psychotherapists, social workers, teachers, counsellors and many others in healing and helping professions are becoming interested and carry out the work.

I am a grateful follower and believer in the 12-step programme as a way of recovery and healing for addicts and alcoholics and am delighted that Hellinger’s work blends so well with the 12 steps. There is an emphasis on acceptance, gaining responsibility and maturity; acknowledging the reality of what has happened and what is, honouring the goodness and love that has been given rather than what has not been given. Some experienced family practitioners call it “Soul work”.

It is best to go along and experience a workshop rather than just read about it. Although it is more unusual, I have been to a workshop with my husband and daughter who is in recovery. She worked on a difficulty she had in maintaining an intimate relationship with a partner, wanting to discover why but more importantly to try to do some work that would help her to form a close, loving relationship.

To give other examples, a client may be prompted to work on having lost touch with a family member who has decided to cut themselves off from everyone. A parent could work on the relationships with a son or daughter who has become an addict, anorexic or ill in some other way. A daughter or son may want to improve their relationships with their parents. Someone else may be grieving for a family member who has died in painful circumstances, and find that their life continues to be affected adversely in ways that are difficult to understand. Another may want to work on improving their relationship with a partner or children. There are no limitations about what can be worked on. During one workshop I explored the pattern of alcoholism within my family system (four out of five generations of women had been alcoholic, although to my knowledge three of these generations had also had a good recovery).

Hellinger bases his work on the fact that however much pain and trauma there is within a family, there is always a source of love and healing and this is what he seeks to release to flow in the right direction.

Rupert Sheldrake (8) has suggested the idea of the existence of a “morphogenetic field” which is analogous with the field to which we gain access in the family constellation, “the in-forming field” (or “knowing field”). This becomes apparent when the family representatives stand within the “holding circle” of the group.

Amazingly, this work can affect other members of the family in a positive way even though they have not been present. There is some important research being carried out in Germany at present to document this phenomenon. In any event, the person who has done the work will have a new perspective on the problem and will feel freer to move into a different and better position within the family. This has the effect of other family members seeing that person differently.

If I had had the chance to do this work when experiencing painful conflict and depression during my mother’s alcoholism and her early recovery it would have made an enormous difference to our lives. Sadly, I discovered it after her death. I remember feeling the “blind loyalty” and entanglement, recognising the conflict of anger that produced unbearable guilt and above all a yearning to love her and to know that she loved me. I was entangled and I could not express what I felt and wanted. I had the opportunity to work on this some years afterwards, and experienced huge relief and comfort. It’s no surprise to me today to hear other people’s similar experiences after they have worked on a particular family problem. This must be why it is called “Soul Work”.

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(3,405 words)

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#### *References:*

- (1) *Ivan Boszormeyi-Nagy, G M Spark, Invisible Loyalties, 1973, pub Harper & Row*
- (2) *Martin Buber, I and Thou, 1996, pub Simon & Schuster*
- (3) *Ursula Franke, In My Mind’s Eye, 2003, pub Carl-Auer-Systeme-Verlag*
- (4) *Bert Hellinger, Gunthard Weber & Hunter Beaumont, Love’s Hidden Symmetry, 1998, pub Zeig Tucker*
- (5) *Bert Hellinger & Gabriele ten Hovel, Acknowledging What Is, 1999, pub Zeig Tucker*

- (6) Jakob Levy Moreno, *Psychodrama Vols 1, 2 & 3*, pub Beacon House, New York  
(7) Virginia Satir, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, 1964, pub Science & Behaviour Books  
(8) Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past: A New Science of Life*, 1982, pub J P Tarcher  
(9) Murray Bowen, *Family Systems Therapy*, 1974

## BERT HELLINGER

*(Biography taken from "Love's Hidden Symmetry", 1998.)*

Hellinger acknowledges several important influences on his life and work: his parents and his childhood home, whose faith provided him with an immunity against believing the distortions of National Socialism, absenting himself from the required meetings of the Hitler Youth Organisation. He was drafted to Belgium at 17 as a soldier and experienced the realities of war but was captured and spent life with the allies in a prisoner-of-war-camp.

The second major influence was joining a religious order after getting out of the POW camp. He spent 16 years in Africa as a missionary to the Zulu, and learned the language. The process of leaving one culture to live in another sharpened his awareness of many cultural values. He had a great interest in relationships and the human commonality underlying cultural diversity. He saw that many Zulu rituals and customs had a structure and function similar to elements of the Catholic mass and became committed to the goodness of cultural and human variety; the validity of doing things in different ways.

He completed an interracial ecumenical training in group dynamics, a form of working with groups that valued dialogue, phenomenology and individual human experience. The fundamental orientation towards human relationships has shaped all his work.

After 25 years he left the religious order. He returned to Germany and completed a psychoanalytical training in Vienna, then trained under Janov in the United States. Then followed a training in Gestalt Therapy under Ruth Cohen and Hilarion Petzold before being introduced to Transactional Analysis and the work of Eric Berne. He integrated what he had already learned of group dynamics and psychoanalysis with Gestalt Therapy, Primal Therapy and Transactional Analysis before further training in family systemic therapy with Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis where he first encountered family constellations. He continued family therapy with Thea Schonfelder and training in Milton Erickson's Hypnotherapy and Neuro-Linguistic Programming, as well as Farelly's Provocative Therapy and Precop's Holding Therapy. Throughout, he was influenced by his learning from the Zulu – the fundamental need for humans to align themselves with the forces of nature.

His philosophical companion through all his journey has been Martin Heidegger, whose quest for the words that resonate in the soul have commonality with those sentences clients speak in the constellations, heralding change for the better and the renewed flow of love.

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