

About constellation work

Systemic constellations are an extremely effective technique for gaining insight regarding the core of a problem or an issue in a short amount of time. One of the characteristics of a problem is that it fixates out attention and makes it impossible for us to divert it. Systemic constellations render the inner image of the structure of a problem visible and “tangible” and through focusing on steps and changes we can put into effects ourselves afterwards help facilitate exiting the dire strait and make establishing new order through finding new resources, solutions and opportunities for action possible.

When faced with a problem, we are partly actively involved in it and partly an observer wanting to understand and solve it. Solving a problem from this double position is extremely difficult because, according to sociologist Niklas Luhmann: «An observer cannot see what he cannot see. He also cannot see that he cannot see what he cannot see. But there is a possibility of overcoming such a state, and that is – observing the observer.» To gain new insight, the observer must observe himself within the context of the problem. In systemic constellations this possibility is used.

Systemic constellations help us understand, experience and get to know ourselves within the context of a whole and establish a high-quality connection with the said whole – the relationship with ourselves and our environment is changing, our understanding is deepened, our awareness grows.

The course of the constellation

Short interview: formulating a question/ desire/ goal

The client formulates their question/ desire/ goal in a brief conversation with the facilitator. Further in conversation they together choose persons and/ or system elements detected as relevant to the issue.

Initial image and facilitator’s interventions

The client chooses representatives for persons and/ or elements agreed upon in the interview, as well as one representative for himself (temporarily named Focus within the constellation) from a group of people present. He then places the representatives in a given space one by one without conscious thought and guided by his own feeling and intuition and then assumes the position of an observer. From the position of an observer he can see the system from a perspective not possible until that moment, including himself within the context of the problem. The facilitator goes from one representative to another and asks questions about the experience of the position occupied by the representative, about feelings and needs arising in that particular spot as well as about changes following after the other representatives have been brought in. The experience of a position can be generally characterized as pleasant,

unpleasant or neutral and physical manifestations may vary greatly, from feeling of weakness, asymmetry, disinterest, rage, coldness/ warmth of the whole body or parts of it, numbness in hands or legs to feelings of joy, power, strength and firmness etc. All those “symptoms” are of transient character and change with locations. Within the constellation they serve as indicators of the quality of relationships between given persons or elements. Relocating the representatives and testing the new positions are guided by inner processes and tendencies of system transformation. Sometimes only changing the angle or the distance between two representatives is all it takes for a big step towards the solution and sometimes the only way to reach the final image is through small steps and gradual changes to the system. That is what makes the duration of the constellation impossible to predict.

Final image

Just like in a theater play, the system changes according to its own rules in front of the client’s eyes. At the end of the process the representatives are in positions in space which picture one of the possible solutions to the problems. When each of the representatives feels comfortable and relaxed and when space is filled with atmosphere of satisfaction, the client has the option to enter the system at hand replace their personal representative (the Focus) to experience and internalize the image of a possible solutions from his position. The image of the problem as a disharmonious construct of relationships between system members is replaced with a new harmonious construct of the solution and through the client’s experience it begins to live in the outside world.

The role of representatives

Constellation work was able to develop or simply be discovered anew because of human ability to experience space not only visually but physically as well (many people probably know the feeling of “tension in the air”). Just as we use words to “ paint” reality , the placement of people and objects in space creates experience and atmosphere, and their relations depict the situation. We have the ability of our body to differentiate between slightest of changes in space like the finest sensor to thank for the option to “paint” situations in space using physical sensation.

Representatives in constellations assume different roles and spend a vertain amount of time “in other people’s shoes” or in places of some abstract notions such as convictions, obstacles, goals or resources. By taking place in the transformation process (from problem to solution), representatives develop inside themselves the exact qualities used in constellations, those being physical experience, intuition and empathy, to a greater degree.

The role of the facilitator

Constellation facilitators come from different schools and concentrate on different sources, so both the repertory and work method differ somewhat.

According to Mathias Varga von Kibed, the role of the facilitator is to be a good host. The facilitator does not know what is correct and what false within a given system. They also cannot see why something works, but merely concentrate on what works. Starting from the premises that all solutions and resources are already present in the system and at the client's disposal (the autopoietic approach), the facilitator during the course of work constantly creates hypotheses about a possible next step and checks them through responses of the system to their interventions. Systems have their own "intelligence" which confirms or refutes those hypotheses, and the facilitator's mission is to abide by it.

What can be a subject for setting up a systemic constellation?

Each subject has its roots in the system, if not in any of the physical system a man belongs to (a family, a team, an organization, social, political and religious groups etc.), then in the system of one's own ideas, attitudes, convictions and values.

A few examples of possible application:

- Finding one's own place in a system (a family, a team, an organization)
- Perceiving and changing behavior patterns and occurrences in one's own life or family life
- Problems in a relationship with a partner or children
- Health problems and symptom
- Resolving conflicts
- Problems with management and authority
- Problems and halts in projects
- Team development and problems
- Support in making hard decisions or hard decision making
- Support in education process
- Subjects related to personal awareness growth
- In short, any subject invoking personal interest, drawing attention or being given more time in thinking than other things in life. Even a sentence following a man in his life may result in an interesting insight (**link to the sentence**)

The subject of the constellation does not always have to have the gravity of a problem; it can be invoked by creative forces as well. Whether it is an entrepreneur intending to place a new product on the market, an artist making a logo for a company or a script writer "stuck" on some dialogue or wishing to discover the inner dynamics of the plot and matching relations between characters in a play, they all can get a wanted creative incentive from that system by setting up a constellation.

A constellation can be set up **in group or individually**. The choice depends on personal affinities and acuteness of the problem

Group work is as described above. In individual work the positions which would be taken by representatives are taken by different objects on the system board or markings on the floor. In individual constellations the client personally establishes the contact with each of the set positions and thus gains the option to experience each of them and the relations between them themselves. Regardless of which method the client opts for, the effect is the same – in a session which starts with visualization of the inner image of the problem and ends with the image of a possible solution, they pass through a cognitive process, consider new choices and actions and increase their overall awareness.

*The space in which constellations take place
is a space of discretion, consideration and mutual respect.*

Types of constellations

The classic family constellation was developed by Bert Hellinger twenty years ago and it is one of the bases from which many new forms which expand the field of application have grown and are still growing. Insa Sparrer and Mathias Varga von Kibed (SySt) transferred Hellinger's notion of family to other systems, but also discovered new principles in those. Into the foundations of Bert Hellinger's family constellations they interpolated methods of Milwaukee School solution-focused brief therapy, as well as elements of Erickson's hypnotherapy, and in that way developed system structural constellations.

The characteristic of structural constellations is being a systemic-constructivist technique and can be applied to any system, from family and organizational to philosophical and spiritual because, besides persons, abstract notions such as goals, obstacles, resources, different alternatives when making decisions, symptoms, organs etc. can be placed inside them. Structural constellations are executed in a great number of different formats such as the tetralemma (as a method of resolving a dilemma), problem-goal constellation, "invisible" subject constellation (often behind a subject another subject is "hidden" which is the actual source of the problem), constellations of universal sources of strength such as Wisdom, Structure, Love etc.

A great advantage of Systemic Structural Constellations is that they enable anonymity because they can be executed "blindly", that is, none of the people present, including the representatives, besides the coach and the client is familiarized with the posed problem nor with the real names of the set positions (the ones in the constellation bear neutral designations, which makes them suitable for application within organizations.)

Autopoietic constellations were developed by Siegfried Essen starting from the premises that systems contain everything they need for their own creation, healing and development. Representatives in those constellations have absolute freedom of movement in search for optimal positions for themselves, usually without verbal communication. Interventions of the coach are reduced to minimum, and their purpose is to stimulate the process when it enters longer stagnation.

(Autopoiesis means self-creation and self-sustaining and it was first introduced as a notion by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in 1973. Autopoiesis demarcates living creatures as autonomous, with them there is no difference between the creator and the created; autopoietic system contains everything it needs for its own creation and sustenance, and as such, it is operationally closed. An example of an autopoietic system is a living cell, which is a product of its own creation (cellular system consisting of a membrane, cytoskeleton, nucleus, organelles etc produces components it needs to maintain itself on its own). Niklas Luhmann applied the notion to social systems of the eighties.)

With respect to diversity of the subjects, constellations are often divided to family, business, organizational, spiritual, political, constellations of abstract subjects etc. The differences between them lie in execution method, but what they all have in common is following the stimuli from the system attempting to achieve dynamic balance.

Family Constellations

A family is a system we are born in and the only one we cannot exit – once conceived, we remain its members even after our deaths.

The family system is much larger than our everyday image of a family, which usually includes parents, siblings, grandparents, rarely great-grandparents, and the remaining ancestors are very rarely or never mentioned because data, images and stories about them are missing. But all of our ancestors are much more vital than you might think. They are present not only in our genes, but also in our acquired behavior patterns, inherited beliefs and prejudices (Link to the sentence) and they live on in us and our children whether we like it or not. Conflicts within families are frequently manifestations of unresolved conflicts of previous generations. More

(Every system, including family system, wishes to balance itself and maintain order. A system tries to establish equilibrium in every moment and at all cost. That is why, for example, out of love for a parent or loyalty towards another member of the family system (usually someone with a grave fate or an excluded “black sheep” of the family) a child born into the system later on intuitively and often completely unaware takes over that person’s duties or place in the

system to maintain equilibrium. By doing that it cannot take its own place and grow up in it, which in adult age may result in issues in partnership and difficulties with its own children.

Systems have their own inner dynamics which has no regard for feelings and fate of the members. All family system members desire to be seen and accepted, each member wishes to be in their own place, each wishes to give and gain. No matter how paradoxical it sounds, in the basis of system dynamics lies a tendency towards establishing the order of love.)

Systemic constellations help you become aware of your position in the family as well as the causes of the imbalance and contribute in establishing its equilibrium by changing your behavior based on that perception. Besides that they offer the option of establishing contact with the extended family system in which both sources of strength and important resources are latently present, and not only problematic relations and resources.

A man stabilized (not immobilized!) in his position in the original family system achieves a high-quality partnership more easily, is faced with fewer conflicts in the family and at workplace and takes the burden off his offspring's shoulders.

Systemic constellations are not a classical medical method of therapy although they can have therapeutic effect. Since health issues, organic as well as psychological, may have their root in deep and complex relations, connections and complications within a family system, systemic constellations are used as a supplementary method in psychotherapy.

Organizational constellations and business constellations

Organizational constellations have shown themselves a very efficient intervention technique which saves time and money in business context because they enable a high degree of cognition in a very short time span. This cognition may relate to, for example, discovering obstacles within the system which may manifest as a failure, a decrease in productivity or sales, frequent conflicts within the team, management problems etc., and which have their internal causes in disrespect of basic systemic principles in present or past of the organization, but also in insufficient attention to outside factors and relations to other systems.

These constellations are also successfully used as a simulation technique for testing possible system responses, for example, when

- Choosing new coworkers or partners
- Placing products on the market
- Decision making with several options
- Development or change of strategy
- Designing company logo (elements, colors, shapes and symbols are set)
- Generating new idea or impulses

An especially interesting application of organizational constellations is with problems regarding family businesses. In family businesses the interests of two systems (family and business) often mix, and organizational structural constellations enable separating the subjects and functioning on both levels, which enhances order in both systems.

Constellations can be organized internally (within an organization) or externally (in another location). With participation of impartial representatives and can be set “blindly”, that is, none of the persons present except for the client(s) and the coach knows what it is about and who or what the representatives represent.

Political constellations

Systemic constellations in political context have a wide range of possible applications and present a very pragmatic way to problem solving. They also help in the process of solution seeking in negotiations, coalition forming and strategy development. They also help in finding resources for mobilization of interested parties, activating members of an organization or association or seeking a solution for the wellbeing of a wider community, a city, a town etc.

(Systemic constellations do not support representing positions; they offer insight into relations between positions without evaluating their contents. They can be set individually or in a group, and the setter can be a member or members of a political party or citizen initiative, a minister, a mayor as well as many others ready to get out of the vicious circle of good and bad argumentations, open to dialogue with other members of a political system and ready to seek their own interests within the context of the whole. A political constellation can be set by any individual wishing to find a good position for themselves or a project in social context (a project they wish to start or which has been halted) which depends on political factors.

System elements which will be set in a constellation are determined by questions, theses, hypotheses or vision of the setter, and those elements may be individuals and groups of individuals such as a “mayor”, a “minister”, “neighborhood denizens”, “opposition”, but also abstract elements related to the subject such as “environment”, “education”, “health”, “war” etc. The result of a political constellation is not “the one and only truth” about a set subject, but an incentive for gaining insight in predicted options.

When performed in group, the duration of a political constellation varies from a few hours to a few days because it depends on a number of factors: how concrete the question is (what it is about and what is expected in the end), what the number of interested persons is (whether the setter is one person or a group) and what the subjective value of the given subject is (what and how much depends on the optimal solution).

Just like organizational constellations, political constellations can be anonymous as well.

Spiritual and philosophic constellations

This type of constellation enables a dialogue with inner images and notions related to one’s own existence. The incentive for setting a constellation does not need to be a problem. Very

often it is a question stemming from the desire for a better connection with oneself, for better understanding of one's emotions or encouraging one's creativity. A motive for this kind of constellation can be a dream which left a deep impression or repeats itself often. It can be an image or a photo, a scene from a book or a play, a myth, a fairytale, a sentence, a symbol... In another words, everything which doesn't leave us indifferent and which causes a feeling that there is "something" there that we do not understand, but that "something" has something to do with us.

These types of constellations may be set independently or as a part of a ritual.

A ritual in this context should be understood as a rediscovered technique of establishing and strengthening a connection. Even though we do not use the word "ritual" often in our daily lives, we practice many: celebrating birthdays, holidays, births, baptisms, weddings, funerals; all these are rituals which connect us and create what philosopher Huston Smith calls the "feeling of unconditional belonging". The purpose of a ritual is improving the quality of life through stimulating the connection between outer and inner elements, strengthening concentration and focus and presence in the moment. In this sense constellation rituals can offer help in the process of grieving after separation from/ death of a beloved person, support in the process of forgiving and making peace (with other people, life circumstances and ourselves), but also give impulse for a start of a new project or the success of a new relationship. Rituals introduce a rich palette of grey tones into black and white vision of the world and through experience of completeness and connection facilitate dealing with polarities. Rituals practiced deliberately and collectedly in everyday life strengthen our inner dynamic balance.

History and sources

Systemic constellations have deep and branched roots. They were developed gradually and parallel to complex systems through many interactions of different methods of therapy and through influences from other scientific areas. That is why it is almost impossible to give a complete chronological view of all the factors and persons responsible for the development of this technique which is in itself very heterogeneous.

It was originally developed for family therapy, but has later found a wide spectrum of application in entrepreneurship, organizations and political structures as well. More information on the historical development of systemic constellations can be found at <http://www.isca-network.org> while here there is only an abridged view of the strongest influences.

Systems theory follows a holistic, encompassing way of thinking and represents a type of metatheory which aspires to determining and formalizing the principles common to different types of systems. Systems theory starts from the assumption that all elements are connected and that they influence each other, and principles such as complexity, equilibrium, vicious

cycle, self-organization etc are as applicable to social systems as they are to biological and physical. **Ludwig von Bertalanffy** introduced general systems theory to psychology and sociology of the sixties. Based on it, family therapists could have a better understanding of transgenerational family dynamics and establish a number of defined principles it is based on.

Psychodrama is the oldest example of the use of representatives in therapy. The technique was developed by Austrian physician **Jacob Moreno** (1889-1974) during the twenties and thirties, inspired by short improvised performances in Vienna and guided by the notion that a man communicates with his surroundings primarily non-verbally. The goal of psychodrama is activating and integrating spontaneity and creativity through the search for satisfactory choices of action in a play of sorts whose protagonist is the client while the rest of the group spontaneously and empathically help them in search of that choice.

Virginia Satir (1918-1988) interpolated elements of systems theory, psychodrama and gestalt into her work as a family therapist, and thus created the technique of **family reconstruction**, the first three-dimensional view of family dynamics and thus the forerunner of systemic constellations.

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement started by **Edward Husserl** (1859-1917). In therapy it can be interpreted as an approach of accepting what is, without prejudice, labeling and condemnation. It sounds simple and it is much easier said than done.

Ivan Boszormenyi Nagy (1920-2007) discovered that the actions of each individual influence all members of the system and that the influence is not limited to that particular generation, but is transferred to subsequent generations, so the notions such as loyalty, justice and equilibrium are transgenerational.

Bert Hellinger (1925) unified and “condensed” all the afore mentioned approaches and inspired by the works of **Thea Schonfelder**, **Ruth McClendon** and **Leslie Kadis** developed a technique known today as **family constellations**. Another vital influence on the creation of family constellations were his experiences and long term contact with **African Zulu tribe** and their tradition of ancestor worship.

After Bert Hellinger established family constellations as a technique available to all, there was an expansion of its use not only among family therapists, but non-therapists as well. Namely, systemic constellations turned out to be suitable for work with other systems besides family systems. *Insa Sparrer* and *Mathias Varga von Kibed*, the founders of the *SySt Institute*, developed a technique of **systemic structural constellations**, based on family constellations, but significantly expanded and enriched by SFT – solution focused therapy created by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, hypnotherapeutic methods of *Milton Erickson*, oriental phenomenology based on focus and attentiveness (Achtsamkeit) and philosophical premises of *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, *Gregory Bateson*, et al. Due to the ability of introducing symbols and abstract notions, systemic constellations can be applied to any system, spanning from family and organizational to philosophical and spiritual. To this day the SySt Institute has developed over sixty different formats.

More than twenty years ago a group of psychotherapists and organisational advisors was formed in Graz. The most prominent members of the **Grazer Gruppe** are *Christine Essen-Blumenstein*, *Guni Leila Baxa*, *Siegfried Essen*, *Ilse Gschwend* and *Michael Blumenstein*. The members of the Gruppe rely in their work on radical constructivism, whose leading representatives are *Ernst von Glaserfeld* (1917) and *Heinz von Foerster* (1911-2002). The constructivists start from the assumption that there is no objective reality and that the man constructs his reality himself, based on experience gained through all senses. Systemic constellations operate with such individual images that the client sets as their reality.

The members of the Grazer Gruppe are the initiators and co-founders of the *Austrian Forum for Systemic Constellations (ÖfS)* whose mission is establishing the quality standards for facilitating systemic constellations as well as their enactment for the benefit of the user.